# The Self-Begetting Novel: Metafiction in the Twenty-First Century

**Steve Hollyman**

# Author's Note

This thesis is made up of three parts:

Part One: *Esc&Ctrl* (a novel)

Part Two: Critical Exegesis

Part Three: Three Facebook pages referenced in parts one and two.

*Esc&Ctrl* may be described as a work of transmedia fiction, which is defined as 'one story (or experience) told and delivered across multiple media platforms'.[1] The protagonists, antagonist and author of the novel each had a personalised 'page' on Facebook, the world's most popular social networking site,[2] which enabled them to 'interact' with real people. The purpose was to use social networking as a plot-development tool: to create a collaborative work of fiction which readers followed in real time, influencing the story as it evolved, and to write up the results in a traditional print text. The Facebook pages are, at the time of writing, still live on the internet and can be accessed at:

www.facebook.com/escandctrl
www.facebook.com/jadeejanes
www.facebook.com/callmedavison

Please note that in order for all the hyperlinks to work your computer must be connected to the internet.

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[1] 'Transmedia Storytelling Around the World: Jan Libby'
<http://www.transmedia-storytelling-berlin.de/2012/01/transmedia-storytelling-around-the-world-jan-libby> [accessed 29 October 2012].
[2] Mark Zuckerberg, 'One Billion People on Facebook'
<http://newsroom.fb.com/News/457/One-Billion-People-on-Facebook> [accessed 29 November 2012]

# <u>Abstract</u>

The thesis examines the potentialities offered by social networking websites for constructing original metafictional narratives. It comprises a novel, a critical exegesis, and three Facebook pages which are attributed to fictional characters and used as a plot-development tool. Readers 'befriend' the characters and place themselves within the fabric of the fictional narrative. The result is a collaborative storytelling experience which evolves in real time and forms the basis of the print novel *Esc&Ctrl*.

      The exegesis places the creative piece into a contemporary research context. In chapter one I provide an account of the evolution of metafiction and the self-begetting novel with reference to the works of William H. Gass, Steven Kellman and Patricia Waugh. I also account for the problem of authenticity in fiction, and use Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* to demonstrate the ways in which the temporal spectrum of an online narrative differs from that of traditional print text.

      Chapter two argues that the evolution of the internet offers a new set of conditions that necessitate a radical overhaul of the ways in which postmodernity tends to be theorised, and according to which postmodern theories may be reconfigured. Referencing Jean-Francois Lyotard, I discuss the *micronarratives* of the internet and how these lead to the formation of an online 'self' which is necessarily different from a self located in the offline realm. Jean Baudrillard's concept of the loss of the real is extrapolated in order to show that the internet, and particularly social networking sites, are representative of a simulated culture. The chapter ends with a definition of what I have called 'metafictional virtuality' and a summary of how it could be said to impact postmodern consciousness.

      Chapter three examines the new creative vistas opened up by hypertext, social networking and transmedia fiction for metafiction and the self-begetting novel. Referencing the works of Wayne C. Booth, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, I explore the role of the reader in attributing meaning to hypertext. I then examine the advantages and shortcomings of using social networking to tell stories, with specific reference to the critical work of Ruth Page and the practical example of the online counterpart to *Esc&Ctrl*.

Chapter four provides an account of the mechanics of setting up, maintaining and operating the Facebook pages I used in the project. It ends with a statistical analysis of reader-engagement throughout the eight days that the project was live.

I conclude by evaluating the strengths and shortcomings of the social networking narrative and account for how its basic principles might be applied to newly-emerging technologies such as the soon-to-be-released Google Glass.

# <u>Contents</u>

## Part One: Esc&Ctrl

## Part Two: Critical Exegesis

# Part One:

# Esc&Ctrl

Steve Hollyman's

# esc&ctrl

reassembled, with additional notes,

byXXXXdavisonXXX

by IkexxxA.xxMafar xxxx

*Crimson red horrorbath, tickertape parade, print-dust,*
*white-suit rustle, click click click.*
*This Is A Crime Scene. Do Not Enter.*

# foreword.

Many people, in the post-postmodern age, regard the novel as a redundant medium: a slow, clunky form better suited to the museum than the modern-day office or living-room bookshelf. And quite reasonably so: we live in an increasingly bite-sized culture – a culture in which social media replace face-to-face interactions, print text is rapidly vanishing in favour of its more fashionable (not to say more digestible) online cousin, and experience itself is mediated by the rhizomatic feedback-loop of reflexivity that is the world wide web. It's hardly surprising, then, that in February 2013, when Raw Shark Press, a small independent publisher located in Manchester's Northern Quarter, released their latest title, a short, experimental novel entitled *VOID*, the book failed to sell, the anonymous author vanished into obscurity, and, after limping on for several miserable months, the publishing house closed down.

And so might the story have ended before it had truly begun (for, as Reader Response Critics cry in unison: what is a text without a reader?) were it not for one Professor Fatima Tonelci, Head of Development at the Manchester Centre for the Grammar of the Image, who, excited by this little-known tale's exploration of transmedia storytelling and online narration, chose to resurrect the work, incorporating it into her 'Approaches to Metafictional Narrative' seminar delivered at the Manchester Writing School in March 2014.

As the introduction to Tonelci's seminar gained momentum, students pricked up their ears. They shook off

the torpor of the lecture theatre and listened. And then, in the days that followed, something strange began to happen. There was a buzz about campus. Discarded second-hand copies of the book quickly vanished from the virtual shopping baskets of eBay and Amazon.com, snatched up by eager students who had caught the bug. The anonymity of the work's author helped shroud it in a mystery seldom seen in the present epoch of see-all, hear-all consumer culture: suddenly, it seemed, there was a market for the book.

In September 2014, Transmission Print, based in North Wales, grabbed the opportunity to buy the rights from Raw Shark Press, who still retained mechanical copyright despite having shut up shop. They contacted Tonelci, inviting her to contribute to an annotated edition, but, being of the realist school-of-thought which dictates that in commenting upon a piece of literature one inextricably alters it, she delegated the responsibility to one of her colleagues. Hence, the task of providing the marginalia for the new edition of *VOID* fell into the lap of a Research Associate at the Manchester Writing School: one Ike A. Mafar, who had been kicking his heels on long-term sick leave and was eager for a new project.

During the course of his research, Mafar made a fundamentally important discovery: the plot of the novel bore an uncanny resemblance to the interactions of a group of people on the world's most popular social networking site, Facebook. Subsequently, questions arose concerning the work's true author, or authors. Doubts crept in regarding its authenticity. And Mafar found himself at the centre of the frenzy: had he made the whole thing up?

Mafar and Tonelci worked together on the manuscript, via email, annotating a few chapters at a

time. On the agreed date, Mafar sent Tonelci a printed copy of the second draft of revisions. But he presented more than this: he had added a new narrative strand to the novel proper, typewritten onto the reverse side of the pages he was annotating. He had, to all intents and purposes, placed himself as a character within its fabric. When read concurrently alongside Mafar's copious annotations, *VOID* becomes something else altogether. It becomes, as a matter of fact, an entirely different story. It is that story that we have subsequently come to know as *Esc&Ctrl*.

Let it not be understated that it is with deep regret Mafar is not himself providing this introduction to the new edition of the work he so painstakingly reassembled and researched. But, the day after submitting his manuscript, Mafar disappeared and, along with the novel's original, unnamed author, has never been seen since. What's more, as a direct result of some of the material contained in these footnotes, Mafar is currently at the centre of an ongoing criminal investigation (a state of affairs which, by law, we are not allowed to discuss further at this time).

As is to be expected in such circumstances, conspiracy theories abound. Did Mafar himself write the *VOID* manuscript? Who constructed the Facebook pages which relate to the story's characters? Is some sort of confession or suicide note coded into the story? These questions, alas, may never be answered. But there is little doubt that the few clues we do have lie buried deep within the pages of this book.

Here, then, published unabridged for the first time, is *Esc&Ctrl*, comprising the original *VOID* facsimile complete with Mafar's annotations, and the interlinking correspondence between him and Prof. Tonelci in which they discuss the project. The resulting

artefact has a contrapuntal texture and can be read on many levels. Some may wish to read an entire chapter and then work through the footnotes to that chapter afterwards. Others may read the footnotes as and when they interrupt the flow of the novel proper, resulting in a more fragmented, self-conscious, metatextual experience. Yet others may wish to first read the novel as a whole, ignoring the footnotes, and to then read it a second time, taking into account the paratextual marginalia. Indeed, like the experimental hypertext novels of the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Esc&Ctrl* is a work designed to be read and re-read.

Henry Miller famously wrote that *Tropic of Cancer* 'is not a book, in the ordinary sense of the word. No, this is a prolonged insult, a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty.' *Esc&Ctrl*, by contrast, is very much a book, and in the dawning of a new epoch (post-postmodernism? Metamodernism? The age of Authenticism, no?) we must be grateful for that fact alone: we must embrace it for its crisp pages, its covers and spine, its tactility, its organic, woody scent. Most importantly, we must love it for its flaws, not in spite of them. And in doing so we help keep fiction real; keep it alive; keep it *novel*.

**Dr. Lisa el-Llesi**
**North West Digital Laboratory**
**29 January 2015**

**Fragment #1**

`[unsent email, printed, taken from Steve Hollyman's`
`personal archive, dated 6 September 2012]`

### RE: Your email of 5 Sept

Taylor,

Please call me. I have just finished working through the novel and footnotes and I need to speak with you as a matter of utmost urgency. The number you gave me is disconnected. I'm available on ███████ ████████████

S.

**Fragment #2**
[email Correspondence between Ike A. Mafar and Fatima Tonelci, dated 24 September 2014]

**From:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 24 September 2014 18:17
**To:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: Commission?

Hi Fatima

Nice to meet you (does electronic correspondence count as 'meeting'?). Actually, I've never heard of *VOID*. But by all means send it over. I will send you my annotations via email, if you would be so kind as to edit them in a different colour/font and send them back for draft 2.

In haste,

**Ike A. Mafar**
**Research Associate**
**The Manchester Writing School**
_____

**From:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 24 September 2014 16:41
**To:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** Commission?

Dear Ike,

I'm writing you with a proposal you may be interested in. I got your name from a mutual acquaintance – Taylor Yates at the University of Buffalo.

You may remember a book called *VOID* which I incorporated into MMU's Approaches to Metafiction module a couple of years ago. The publishers are looking to reissue an annotated version and it's fallen upon me to nominate a suitable candidate to provide the notes.

We're all caught up in the start of a new academic year here and I doubt anyone in the department will have either the time or the energy for such an endeavour. Like Taylor, Andrew Schoene-Royle speaks very highly of you and he mentioned to me that you're climbing the walls with boredom at the moment (his terminology!), and so I thought I had better give you the courtesy of first (or last!) refusal.

The turnaround time is quite tight (about four weeks) and the fee is, need I say it, nominal. But it's all po-mo stuff that I'm sure you're already more than familiar with, and the publishers are aiming for an undergrad audience so you shouldn't have to do too much research. In fact, I imagine you'll be in your element.

Feel free to say no. But whatever your decision, please let me know ASAP.

All best,

Fatima

**Professor Fatima Tonelci**
**Centre for the Grammar of the Image**
**Manchester Metropolitan University**

# prologue.

# zero.

'Do you jump or are you pushed?'

He's got me pressed up against the rail that runs along the French windows. The rail is waist high and the windows are open. The claw of the hammer digs into the base of my spine.

'Don't think you have a choice,' he says. 'There's only the illusion of choice. Experience is just a second-order simulation. The future has already happened.'[1]

I look out the window. I look at the buildings opposite, slab-like, stocky as sullen trolls. I tell him it's not high enough. We're on the fourth floor. You need to be six floors up, or higher. The fall won't kill me.

'I never said I wanted to kill you,' he says. 'Now, do you jump or are you pushed?'

He lights a cigarette and the smoke gets in my eyes and in my throat.

'Don't think I won't do it,' he says. 'There's nothing wrong with being two people at once as long as you don't forget who you really are.'

I look at my hand, trembling on the rail. There is blood. And there is something else, viscid, jellylike, grey. There is blood on my jeans, too. The blood has dried to a dark brown crust and it has probably been there for at least a week.

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`Just so you know, Ike, I'm making my amends to your footnotes in grey Courier font, chronologically, as I skim through this. It just seemed the quickest way: sorry if I flag up parts which you've gone on to explain later on. (Ed.)`

[1] 'Experience is just a second-order simulation. The future has already happened'. The first sentence here appears to refer to the work of French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard who, in his seminal publication *Simulations*, remarks that there are four stages that the sign (literally, a pointer which signifies meaning) must go through in order to reach 'simulacra' (a replica or substitute of that which it signifies). First stage: the sign *represents* reality; second stage: the sign *distorts* reality; third stage: the sign has evolved such that it *disguises* the fact there is no corresponding reality beneath; fourth stage: the sign is *completely detached* from reality (in the sense that a fourth-order simulation is necessarily so accurate that it is no longer a copy but another original). See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 5-6. The second sentence has been attributed to William Gibson, although Gibson himself has claimed never to have written it down, only to have uttered it. Scott Rosenberg remarks: 'As William Gibson put it, the future has arrived – it's just not evenly distributed yet' – see Scott Rosenberg, 'Virtual Reality Check: Digital Daydreams, Cyberspace Nightmares', *San Francisco Examiner*, 19 April 1992, p. C1. An alternative attribution cites Marshall McLuhan as the man who foregrounded the quote: 'McLuhan suffers also from a mixed-up time sense. He believes the future has already happened. He often says most people can see thru the rearview mirror, but he seems to have the opposite fault. He appears to think total automation is upon us, that the whole world is linked as a "global village" by TV, that even space travel is now a reality'. See Ralph Thomas, 'The Last (The Very Last) Word On Marshall McLuhan', *Chicago Tribune*, 11 June 1967, p. 151.
`I'm not sure that this level of detail is needed here, Ike. The Baudrillard stuff is promising, though, so perhaps maintain that.`

'That's the problem when you mix realworld and simulation,' he continues. 'Eventually the signs become confused and there is no way of differentiating between what is real and what is illusory.'[2]

I try to speak but all I hear is his voice. I am fully conscious and aware of my surroundings but I am unable to interact with any of them. I watch him as he pulls hard on his cigarette.

'It's funny, isn't it,' he says, looking down at his hand as he does so, 'but I've always held the cigarette between my forefinger and thumb. Never between my index and middle finger, like most smokers. I wonder why that is? I wonder where I inherited this particular…'

He pauses for dramatic effect. I can't see his face from this angle but I know that he is smiling: a horrid grin betraying the deep-set wrinkles in his porridgey complexion, the gums spit-slicked and glistening like raw liver, the crooked teeth as uneven and misshapen as cobwebbed gravestones in a long-forgotten churchyard.

'This particular…characteristic,' he says, finally.[3]

Small plumes of smoke escape his lips with each plosive. I wince.

'I suppose that I must have seen an image somewhere, perhaps when I was younger,' he continues. (He's talking faster now. He always talks more quickly when he gets excited, when he's gearing up for one of his rants. And he always talks to himself when he's nervous.) 'Yes,' he says. 'That'll be it. I must have seen something – a film, perhaps, an advertisement, a photograph – which depicted someone holding the cigarette in that particular way and it must have infiltrated my subconscious. The image changing the reality to which it supposedly corresponds.'[4]

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[2] Baudrillard again. See *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[3] This is the first example of the metafictional devices at play in *VOID*. Patricia Waugh remarks that '"Meta" terms are required in order to explore the world of the fiction and the world outside the fiction'. Metafiction, in other words, relies on both illusion and the subsequent laying-bare of that illusion. See Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 2.

[4] Seeing as we're going to be involved in a dialogue together, which means living in each other's wor(l)ds for a while, I might as well be honest from the outset. These marginalia are not the random scribblings of a madman, or at least not only that. They are meant to act as not only a counterpart to the fiction itself but also as a challenge to it, and these references to Baudrillard, the hyperreal, the '*Evil Demon of Images*' per se, are already growing irksome. Let me explain why. I am over here, and you are over there, and the fiction (this work is describable as such insofar as it includes fictional characters, places and events) is somewhere between us: it is the sea in which we both swim. Amongst other things, a fictional world is intended to provide an escape: a window through which to *view* reality, perhaps, but an entity which remains, nevertheless, wholly apart from it. ~~Not sure this is the tone we're going for, Ike. Danielewski has this type of thing covered already. We don't want another *House of Leaves*.~~ Baldly, I argue, it is impossible to become immersed in a fictional realm when one must intermittently return

He jabs me in the spine with the claw of the hammer on the words *image* and *reality*.

'And you're no better,' he says. 'Look at you in that T-shirt.' His eyes dart to the image of John Lennon emblazoned on my chest, and so do mine. 'You're fictionalising yourself again, aren't you?' he says. 'Identity isn't something you are any more. It's something you do.'

He takes three drags of his cigarette in quick succession and drops the butt from the window. I watch the ember recede from view, free-falling for a few seconds before hitting the pavement and scattering sparks of red and orange. I imagine my own body plummeting from the window and I imagine it hitting the ground and breaking apart: the useless limbs cracked and splintered, the grey concrete bespattered, the body exsanguinated. As I imagine this, the word in my head is *smithereens*.

'Which reminds me,' he says. 'We should check in. One last time.'

He eases the force of the hammer slightly. He seems to relax a little, and this makes me relax too.

'Now,' he says. 'While I get the computer, can I trust you not to jump? That's one image I really do not want to miss.'

I picture the words as he utters them. The word 'not' is in italics. I'm unable to acknowledge him, but he must sense my acquiescence. He leaves me standing by the window and picks up the laptop computer from where I left it, on the floor. He sits on the sofa, with the laptop on his knee, and opens the lid. I look at the spaces in the keyboard where we removed seven of the keys. The machine grins at me, gap-toothed, like someone punched its face in. Is this real? I wonder. Did I ever take the lie detector test at all?

I watch as he begins typing.

'What shall I ask?' he says. 'What can be the final question?'

He tugs the fronds of his nicotine-hued moustache and ponders for a few moments. Then, without warning, a bellow of laughter erupts from deep inside him, starting life as a throaty chortle then growing in both timbre and velocity before

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to the extratextual world in order to check a reference, or indeed, read a footnote. It is like exhuming oneself from the world 'in' the book and entering instead the world 'of' the book: like coming up for air. `Orwell? Also please provide ref. for` `Evil Demon`. The best way to talk about fiction is, in my opinion, to say nothing at all. `(Sometimes it's easier to answer a question by saying nothing, Ike? Or is that a spoiler?).` `N.B. Ignore above (crossed out) comment. I changed my mind. I should've known this would happen. Sorry.`

crescendoing into a vile, animalistic guffaw.[5] Using one digit on each hand, he types something into the computer.

I turn back to the window and I stare through it. The weight of fear looms over me, heavy, like an iron sword dangling from a single strand of hair.[6]

'We'll have to wait a few minutes to see what the response is,' he says. 'There might not be many people online. Christ, we might be waiting all night. Eight days have passed. Needless to say, we are running out of time.'

It doesn't take long for a high-pitched 'pop' to sound from the laptop's speakers. I imagine a bubble bursting, and the bubble is me.

He picks the laptop up and chews his tongue as he reads the response on the screen. His lips are bloodless, veal-blue. 'It's decided, then,' he says, and he puts the laptop down on the glass coffee table.

Suddenly the events of the past week are spinning through my head, in reverse, as if I'm scrolling through the pages of an online news source and tracing my predicament back to its point of origin: days spinning out in a galaxy of zeros and ones.

'There's one last thing you have to do,' he says.

And he removes the keys from my pocket, and lines them up on the glass table-top, and steps towards me.

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[5] The overwritten exuberance of this passage, in contrast to the vernacular detonalization which comes later in the novel, seems to deliberately signpost the unnamed character's status as a fictional artefact.

[6] A reference to the moral anecdote of the Sword of Damocles. The following is paraphrased from the translation of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* [5.61] by Gavin Betts: Essentially, Damocles is Dionysus's obsequious servant, and exclaims that, surrounded as he is by wealth and magnificence, Dionysus must truly be the most fortunate man alive. Dionysus offers to let Damocles swap places with him for a while, so that he may taste the fortune first hand. Damocles takes his place on Dionysus's throne, whereupon he observes that Dionysus has arranged for a heavy sword to hang above, held in place by only a single strand of hair. Such is his anxiety about the situation that Damocles begs Dionysus to switch places again: he no longer wishes to be so 'fortunate'. The tale is supposed to depict the constant state of fear under which a great, powerful man lives.

# I: identity crisis.

**Fragment #3**

`[email correspondence between Ike A. Mafar and Fatima`
`Tonelci, dated 3/4 October 2014]`

**From:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 4 October 2014 02:08
**To:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: RE: RE: How are you getting on?

Here:

www.facebook.com/escandctrl
www.facebook.com/callmedavison
www.facebook.com/jadeejanes

Ike

**Ike A. Mafar**
**Research Associate**
**The Manchester Writing School**

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**From:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 3 October 2014 17:43
**To:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: RE: How are you getting on?

Ike,

The thesis you mentioned was submitted by Steve Hollyman a couple of years ago. There is a record of it in the library's inventory; it looks as though it's embargoed. Speak to Danny on the Help Desk (say I sent you) and he will arrange a viewing.

RE the social networking pages… I would be very interested to see these. Please could you forward me the link(s)?

On a personal note, Ike, some of your comments alarmed me a little. I know, anecdotally, that you're something of a 'Method Scholar' but please don't feel like you have to do anything you aren't comfortable with. It sounds to me like you might be a bit too close to the project: maybe it's a touch of cabin fever. Just take care of yourself.

Thanks for the files, which I shall read and annotate accordingly.

All best,

Fatima

**Professor Fatima Tonelci**
**Centre for the Grammar of the Image**
**Manchester Metropolitan University**

**From:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 3 October 2014 11:08
**To:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: How are you getting on?

Dear Fatima

I've made some rather interesting discoveries.

First, there is a series of pages on Facebook which correspond to the plot of the novel. The pages date from August of 2012, and there is considerable activity between 21/08 and 29/08, after which the story seems to end. Someone set up these pages, one for Vincent, one for Jadee, one for Davison, and then allowed them to interact with real people, before writing up the results in the form of a novel. Of course, this raises all sorts of awkward questions about who, if anyone, is the real author here.

Second, there's a doctoral thesis called 'The Self-Begetting Novel: Metafiction in the Twenty-First Century' which references the novel. I need to read it but I've been unable to locate a copy.

Finally, I am convinced that there is something sinister about this book. I'm having nightmares. I'm sure that there is some hidden message coded into the work, and that I have absorbed it, subconsciously, but am unable to spell it. Furthermore, I'm noticing some very strange parallels between the plot and my own life. For example, when I was working on ch. 3, the scene in which the phone rings and Vincent speaks to The Voice for the first time, my own phone started ringing, right on cue, and when I answered it there was no one there. Even as I write this, the hairs on my arms are on end.

I've taken a rather untraditional approach in my annotations which I hope you will find engaging. I have attached the first few chapters with this email.

Best,

Ike

**Ike A. Mafar**
**Research Associate**
**The Manchester Writing School**
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**From:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 3 October 2014 07:43
**To:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** How are you getting on?

Ike,

How's the project coming along? You've been quiet so I assume you're hard at work!

All Best,

Fatima

**Professor Fatima Tonelci**
**Centre for the Grammar of the Image**
**Manchester Metropolitan University**

# one.

I am sitting in an internet café in a hotel and I am looking at a photo of a dead girl. The photo arrived a few seconds ago; an email attachment sent by my guy. I call my guy The Voice because that's all he is to me. He might be an ally, might be a kibitzer. He's been giving me instructions for the last day or so. But that doesn't mean anything. He might have been giving me instructions for months. I don't remember, and it isn't important anyway.

The girl in the photo is Emily. And I'm beginning to wonder, is that why I came here? To find out who killed her? All I know is that I woke up in an apartment a couple of days ago and ever since then The Voice has been calling me on the phone, emailing me, leaving me clues.[7]

Emily's neck is twisted to the left. One eye is open. The other eye is obscured by the gelatinous mass that spills from a jagged crack in her skull. The brain-matter I'm looking at reminds me of when I used to mix tomato ketchup into scrambled eggs as a child. The face is so badly disfigured that were it not for the signature denim hotpants and Dr Martens I doubt I would recognise Emily at all.

There is a girl in the internet café, sitting opposite me. There are a couple of tourists in here, tapping away on their keyboards, but I'm sitting with my back against the wall, and this means that no one can see the picture I'm looking at and no one can see me seeing it either.[8]  I stand up and look around me for the sign reading 'Bathroom'. I go into one of the stalls and I throw up, casually, and then I return to the computer and re-read the email.

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[7]See ch.3.

[8] Interestingly, David Foster Wallace remarked that metafiction is 'nothing more than a poignant hybrid of its theoretical foe, realism: if realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it' (See Christopher R. Beha, 'Reconstruction', *London Review of Books*, 33:9). In other words, 'metafiction' and 'realism' are not mutually exclusive terms. Similar to 'magic realism', it is possible to achieve a kind of metafictional realism in the sense that metafictional elements of the plot can be blended in to the consciousness of the protagonists so as not to break the realist frame.

You considered opening the door, didn't you?

I know more about you than you may think. I know things about you that you don't even know yourself. In fact, I've got so much on you that I could singlehandedly destroy you. But I am also prepared to help you. I'm going to give you two choices.

1: Leave. I've booked you a flight back to Manchester. It's EasyFly America: confirmation ##41229191514.[9] I will never contact you again. Your flight leaves at midday tomorrow.

2: Stay here and await further instructions.

Before you make your decision, open the attachment I've included with this email.

I think about the bedroom at the apartment. One of the first things The Voice said when he called me after I woke up was, 'Don't open the door. Don't look in the bedroom. Hell is waiting for you.' I took his advice.

I click 'reply'. The internet is crawling along very slowly and I picture a fatally wounded animal hauling its wrecked body to the hard shoulder of a motorway. As I picture this I also picture the word 'fracture'. I pick some crumbs out from between the keys on the keyboard and I consider ordering a drink, but the bar in the café is a dry bar. A memory appears: there is a bar back in Manchester called the Dry Bar, but it isn't what Americans would refer to as a dry bar, because the Dry Bar in Manchester sells alcohol. I think I used to go there sometimes and maybe I still do.[10] I look at my hands and I see that they are shaking. I think I might have a hangover. Perhaps I'm nervous about something. It is difficult to know whether I have a hangover or not, because I can't remember whether I've had a drink. It's difficult to know whether I'm nervous, because I can't remember whether I have anything to be nervous about.

I'm finding it hard to concentrate because of the pain in my back. I think it started when I woke up in the apartment, but it might have been before that. The pain radiates from my lower west side, near my kidneys, or at least near the spot

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[9] EasyFly America is not a currently trading organisation.

[10] The Dry Bar, Manchester, is a music venue located in the heart of the city's Northern Quarter, on Oldham Street. This is particularly significant since the denouement at the end of the novel comes after a meeting in the same district.

where I imagine my kidneys might be.[11] I adjust my sitting-position to take the pressure off the base of my spine. The pain is getting worse and it lingers, spreading its heat through my abdomen like the after-ache of a swift kick to the testicles. I am pressing my left hand onto my left side. I'm not sure what I'm doing but I think I'm trying to crush the agony. The computer screen is blue, and the pain seems to be the same colour. Or maybe it is grey. If it were a sharp pain, a scratching pain, then the colour would be red or orange. But this is a dull, heavy pain.

The machine tells me I am signed in as Vincent Ballone and it is customising my settings. It tells me it will take seven minutes to do this and I have twenty-three minutes of time remaining. There is a clock on the bottom right-hand side of the screen and it is counting down to the cut-off point. I imagine the mournful tick, tock, tick of a time bomb.

When the page has loaded I email The Voice and tell him to get in touch and let me know where to meet him. After I hit send I lift myself off my seat and reach in my back pocket. I run my thumb along the tattered edge of the other photograph, the one I always keep there. I remove the photo and lay it face down on the desk. The back of the photo was once plain white but has since taken on a yellowish hue like the ceiling of a smoky room. I want to turn the photo over and look at it, but I can't.[12] I return the photo to my back pocket and I stare at the picture on the computer screen

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[11] A three-sided pun. Lower west side = the bottom left of the back, the area of New York City in which the mysterious apartment is located, and a stylistic nod towards Martin Amis's novel *Money*.

[12] It occurs to me that the description of the photo, and the fact that the protagonist carries it with him at all times in his back pocket, directly mirrors the scratch card motif which comes later in the novel. `What 'scratch card motif'??` Could it be that the photograph and the scratch card are both metaphors for the same thing, and, if so, what? I suggest that both the photograph and the scratch card are representative of the multi-verse theory which states that as soon as there is the potential for an object to exist in any state, the universe occupied by that particular object splits into a series of parallel universes, the number of which indicates the number of possible states that the object may potentially have. Scientists such as Werner Heisenberg have argued that quantum mechanics cannot render an accurate description of objective reality because the very act of measuring something causes it to assume only one of these possible states – this is referred to as the Copenhagen Interpretation. This idea is explored later in the novel by means of a discussion of Schrödinger's cat paradox which accounts for the notion that nothing 'exists' until it is measured. In Schrödinger's theoretical experiment, a cat is placed into a sealed, opaque chamber, along with a device containing a vial of hydrocyanic acid. If a single atom of the acid decays then a hammer will be tripped which will break the vial and kill the cat. Since it is impossible for the observer to know whether or not an atom of the substance has decayed, it is also impossible to know, without breaking open the box, whether the cat is alive or dead. According to quantum law, the cat is *both* dead *and* alive. It is only when the box is broken open that the various possible 'states' of the cat are reduced to a single state, and the cat becomes *either* dead *or* alive. Similarly, it could be the case that Vincent sees Emily as neither alive nor dead, but both at the same time, in the same way as the second-person narrator in the counter-narrative sees himself as simultaneously rich and poor. `Scratch card? Counter-narrative? Second person? I'm not sure I understand what you're referring to here…`

instead; it is horrific and vivid and strangely sexual. The warm throb of pain waxes and wanes in my back and I am reminded that sometimes goats eat stones.

After I've shut the computer down, I stagger out of the café and into the lobby. The girl at the reception desk looks concerned. I feel drunk. For all I know, I *am* drunk. The room spins around me like a roulette wheel. The pain is unbearable: there is a washing-up bowl full of dirty dishwater in my guts and there is grit in my veins. I make it to the bathroom, but the stall I so gratefully threw up in earlier now displays an *Out Of Orde*r sign. It occurs to me that I too am out of order: my whole fucking life is out of order.[13] I run to the basins, put both hands on the porcelain, and throw up, retching gobs of green and red bile into the plughole, bespattering the glass with it, shaking violently as long spiderwebs of snot and vomit trail from both my nostrils.

It keeps coming.

I throw up some more.

I watch myself puke in the mirror. My performance is very theatrical.[14]

I cough horridly, wondering whether or not my guttural hackings will alert the attention of the girl in the café next door.

The vomit will not run dry.

Just like a dry bar is not actually dry.

The vomit keeps coming.

My eyes and nostrils are streaming with the acid burn and my throat is on fire. The pain in my kidney has shifted and it feels as though something is stuck in my chest now, somewhere unpinpointable, like the origin of an orgasm. I cough and retch, trying to get it out, a cat expelling a fur-ball. One final surge of vomit erupts from deep within me like slurry from a burst sewer pipe, and then I'm done. I wipe my mouth. I gob a bit and then I wipe my nose.

I see that there is something black in the sink. Something other than the blood and the bile and the chunks of what looks like partially digested crisps. Something inhuman. Something synthetic. I look closer.

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[13] Is 'out of order' a reference to the novel's complex chronology?

[14] This, I argue, is one of many examples of the metafictional devices subtly embedded in the novel. Vincent's assertion that his performance is theatrical draws readers' attention to the fact that he is not only an actor but also self-aware. `Not sure about this.`

It is a key from a computer keyboard.

# protagonist[15]

From behind a computer screen, you are building a new identity. His name is Davison.

Davison is independently wealthy, having made his millions working in the advertising industry. It seems apt because advertisements use images to change the social reality of the consumer. It goes something like this: you see an image of a handsome man wearing designer underwear and you think that you can be like him if you buy the product. But when you buy the product and stand in front of the mirror you realise that you don't look as good as he does. So you join a gym. You eat low-fat foods. And just like that, your reality changes to correspond with a pre-existing image of what you think your life should be. This, perhaps, is the reason the best brands associate their products with particular lifestyle choices.

Davison is thirty-three years old: the age of Christ crucified. This means that he is slightly older than you, which is necessary if you are to make his back-story believable.

Every character needs a convincing back story.

The downside is that people always want to see a photograph, and you're loath to use a picture of yourself because you aren't as good-looking as you imagine Davison to be. That's the problem with the internet – people are not always who they say they are. You find a passable photograph on your computer and you make it black and white and adjust the contrast slightly so that your cheekbones look like they stick out more

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[15] ~~Is this what you meant by 'counter narrative'? If so, then where did these courier sections come from, Ike? They aren't in the original manuscript…? At least not in any copy I've ever seen…~~ Did you add these parts? Why?

and your teeth look like they stick out less and then you upload it. It doesn't look that bad, and it certainly doesn't look like you. The photograph was taken four years ago and in it you sport a chiselled jaw and an advanced and precocious hairline. You doubt your own mother would be able to identify the person on the photograph as you.

Soon, Davison has many online friends.

You can sit at the computer and you can pretend to be Davison.

You can make him post things online and other people can comment on them.

You can interact with your new friends, as Davison.

You can comment on other people's posts, as Davison.

You can make suggestions, as Davison.

You can say what Davison likes by clicking the appropriate button, and indicate what he doesn't like by failing to respond.

You can ask people for advice on what Davison should do with his day, and the answers they provide can influence what Davison does. You can go online as Davison and make him ask 'should I go out today or should I stay in?' and then, depending on the responses you receive from Davison's friends, you can make him report back and people can say whether they like what Davison has done. In time, Davison is made real by the responses he provokes in others. It's like writing his life story, collaboratively.

A photo-print of the New York skyline hangs on your wall. It is an out-of-date image, with the Twin Towers rising proudly in its centre: it is an image that, like

the photo you uploaded, no longer represents the reality to which it corresponds.

You bought the picture with a girl. You had recently taken the first tentative steps into the realm of cohabitation and had visited a Scandinavian chain store that sells cheap flat-pack furniture. You bought the picture together. It wasn't expensive. It's one of those mass-produced images that's designed to look plush and chic but probably cost only a few cents to produce in some dingy sweatshop somewhere. And now it hangs on the wall of your Manchester flat, bestridden by a poster of the cast of a reality TV show on one side and a 'Philosophical Thoughts' calendar on the other: how very twenty-first century; how very postmodern. Every time you look at the image, you are reminded of the day you bought it. There is something about moving in with a partner that reeks like stepping in one's own shit.

You have never been to New York. But it is easy to imagine what New York is like without ever having been there. Images of New York are abundant. New York is very much a part of modern consciousness.

New York is everywhere. There are New York-style delis. New York-style diners. New York-style relishes, burgers, hot dogs. Posters of New York. Novels, films, TV shows set in New York. New York is the most frequently artificially reproduced conurbation on the planet. And this makes it the perfect setting for your story.

On the social networking site you update Davison's location to New York, New York.

# two.

I stare hard into the sink, at the small black square with a white letter **V** embossed on it in the top left-hand corner. I always thought the letter appeared dead-centre on a computer key: it's strange how you can look at something every day without ever seeing it properly. I hold the key between my forefinger and thumb and I rinse it under the cold tap before putting it in my jeans pocket.

Back in the lobby, I wait for the lift. The lift is very small, and oddly shaped: a triangular prism. There are mirrors on all three walls but every time I catch a glimpse of myself nowadays it's like being introduced to a new character. Today I look as though I am trying on someone else's skin and this gives the impression that I have lost a lot of weight. I observe the eyes, red and rheumy, deep-set in alveolated sockets; the hungry jaw-line; the stubble attacking the cheeks and chin like mould on fruit; the hollow enclave below the cheekbones; the Clingfilm skin, stretched taut on a frame of bones; the hair, limp, like leaves on an over-ripe tomato.

I should be shocked but I'm not because I think I might have always looked like this.

I step out of the lift on the fifth floor. I pass by a black woman hoovering in the corridor. She gives me a funny look and I don't blame her. I find my hotel room at the end of the passageway, two doors from the far wall, on the left. The door is separated from the main corridor by a small landing which leads to rooms 507, 508 and 509. I smell cigarette smoke emanating from one of the rooms, dusty and nauseating. There is a fourth door which opens to reveal a bathroom: this is a budget hotel and we're sharing the facilities. I turn back to room 508 and insert the key into the lock and I twist it, first left, then right.

I study the room like a photograph, seeing the outlines first and then filling in the gaps. My bag, large, dark blue, heavy-duty, gapes open on top of the bed. Various belongings spew from its open mouth: my army surplus parka, several pairs of black socks, my silver wash bag. My mobile phone charger sits on the bedside cabinet, the wire cord wrapped around it, held in place by the metal pins. Beside it, there is an adaptor which makes the plug compatible with an American socket. My

wallet is on the dressing table, next to a digital clock radio. A dog-eared copy of the *Lonely Planet Guide to New York* lies open, face down, next to my bag.

It was The Voice that told me I am checked in here. When he called me in the apartment, he gave me the hotel's name (the Mandelbrot), the address (77th and 8th), and I turned up here and found the room full of my things.[16]

In the reflection of the wall-mounted mirror, I watch myself explore the room. I see myself pick up the *Lonely Planet Guide* and thumb the index. I look on as I toss the book onto the bed. Then I slip back into myself and I pick up one of the pillows to sniff it. Behind the fading lavender of laundered bed linen lurks the faint citrus tang of my aftershave and sweat. I find an envelope inside the pillow case and I wonder whether I ever slept here at all.

The envelope is large, brown, and lined with bubble wrap. I pull it from the pillowcase. It's heavier than I expected, like a heart in a plastic bag. It's also unsealed, having been ripped open and reused (the printed label stuck to the front bears my address in Manchester, partially obscured with diagonal lines, drawn in marker pen, which slice through the text as if a claw has taken a swipe at it). There's a sticker on the front of the envelope: *Tee-4-2: The Online T-shirt Specialists*.[17]

I peer inside – it's full of paper: perhaps seventy or eighty crisp A4 sheets. I tip the contents onto the bed. The pages spill from the open envelope in an avalanche of white leaves: some of them landing on the bed, some on the floor, some of them feathering the mattress before sliding onto the carpet. I bend down and gather them.

I flick through the pages.

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[16] Benoit Mandelbrot is the founder of fractal geometry. A fractal is a self-similar mathematical set, and self-similarity occurs when a part of an object is exactly or approximately similar to the whole of itself.
Certain coastlines exhibit fractal geometry, as does DNA, and snowflakes. There is no hotel called The Mandelbrot in Manhattan. However, there is a hotel at the address described. The hotel is called The Belleclaire, and online research shows me that the hotel is still there and is still operating under that name. Moreover, the description of the inside of the hotel (shared bathrooms, triangular lift, internet café) is accurate enough for me to be convinced that the Belleclaire is the hotel the author is describing here. I should know. I've been there.

[17] After an extensive audit I can confirm that there is no company currently operating under this name and none has ever been registered. This is merely another example of the author blending real places and events with fictional ones.
~~Ike: just an idea, but it might be worthwhile finding out more paratextual info about the author. A good place to start might be with the director from Raw Shark Press. I don't know his name but I'm sure you can find out.~~
Sorry, Ike, ignore above comment. I'm deleting my earlier annotations as I move through the narrative.

The first page contains a list of names and email addresses. I scan the list. I do not recognise any of the names or addresses except one: mine. The next four pages seem to be some sort of narrative with the title 'Protagonist' at the top of the page.[18] The remaining pages are blank.[19]

Reading for me is not a leisure activity. It bores me. Especially since the accident. My condition means that I can never remember what has happened in the story so far, and so the endings never make sense. The last book I read was the instruction manual to my laptop computer.[20]

I sit down on the edge of the bed. I get up, then I sit back down. I check for messages on my mobile phone but I have no phone signal. I take a photograph of the room and then I switch the phone off, then on again.

There is a small black square at the foot of the bed. I twist my head, first left, then right, regarding it from different angles, as if it's a fossil and I'm considering the best way to excavate it. Eventually I crouch and lift it up. It is another computer key: a letter **I**. It must have fallen out of the envelope. I take the other letter from my jeans pocket and I hold the two pieces of plastic together in the palm of my hand. I turn them over, staring at them. I'm not sure what I'm doing, but I think I'm trying to see if they spell anything, not that there are many possibilities. It's got to be either 'Vi' or 'Iv': the former might be some sort of derivative of the French *vivre* 'to live' and IV could simply be the abbreviation for intravenous. I decide I quite like that: one combination represents life itself, its opposite implies life's support, its maintenance: *vi* and *iv*, a reflection in a mirror, a binary opposite, like nought and one.[21] On the other hand, it could be Roman numerals: IV, for four; VI, for six.

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[18] The second person strand of this very novel begins in the same fashion. This is the first hint at *VOID*'s self-begetting nature. `Yes, Ike, but it didn't before. Not originally. There was no 'second person strand'.`

[19] Then someone had better fill them in.

[20] Computers, digital media, and notions of the online realm as a simulacrum are abundant in these pages. Perhaps the author is once again attempting to draw attention to the novel's status as an artefact. To be honest, it bores the hell out of me. `Again, Ike, try to adopt a more scholarly tone. We're going for undergrad, remember, so no journalese.`

[21] I am reminded here of Sadie Plant's *Zeros + Ones* in which the author asserts that noughts and ones represent the way that Western reality operates: 'Whether they are gathering information, telecommunicating, running washing machines, doing sums, or making videos, all digital computers translate information into the zeros and ones of machine code. These binary digits are known as bits and strung together in bytes of eight. The zeros and ones of machine code seem to offer themselves as perfect symbols of the orders of Western reality, the ancient logical codes which make the difference between on and off, right and left, light and dark, form and matter, mind and body, white and black, good and evil, right and wrong, life and death, something and nothing, this and that, here and there, inside and out, active and passive, true and false, yes and no, sanity and madness, health and sickness,

Either way, I decide that it must be The Voice that is leaving me these clues. He knows exactly where I am and this makes me want to leave the hotel.

The decision arrives suddenly, as if a particular window in my head has been opened and then quickly slammed shut again. I put on my parka, and collect my mobile phone and my wallet. I put all the pages back in the envelope. I bundle up my clothes, phone charger, the *Lonely Planet Guide to New York* and all my other possessions and stuff them into my bag. I throw the duvet over the double bed and check the room to ensure I've left nothing behind.

In the lobby I see the black woman that I passed by in the corridor. She's standing with her back to me, talking to the receptionist. For a second, I think that the receptionist is Emily. There comes a point when you obsess over someone so much that they become engrained in the sulci of your brain and every second person resembles them in some way.[22] But then I realise that she looks nothing like Emily: the receptionist has tar-black hair pinned into a bun at the back of her head and her skin is very white and her lipstick is very red. While she checks something on her computer, I think about geishas and I wonder whether she constructs herself in this way on purpose.[23]

The receptionist looks up. I say to her, 'I'm checking out. How much do I owe you.'

This statement appears in my head with no question mark at the end, and I enunciate it accordingly, with no upwards inflection.

'Nothing to pay, sir,' she says. Then she adds, 'You do realise that you've booked and paid for another two nights?'

I decide to lie to her. I say, 'I know. But I have to go.'

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up and down, sense and nonsense, west and east, north and south. And they made a lovely couple when it came to sex. Man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine: one and zero looked just right, made for each other: 1, the definite, upright line; and 0, the diagram of nothing at all: penis and vagina, thing and hole…hand in glove. A perfect match.' Of course, from the postmodern perspective, it is always best to be both zero and one at the same time. See Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), p. 35.

[22] Just in case 'sulci' has you reaching for the dictionary, as it did me: it's the plural of 'sulcus', meaning any of the narrow fissures on the brain that mark the cerebral convolutions.

[23] Here we see the germination of what is to become a central motif throughout *VOID*: the notion of social identity as a construct, and the differences between this type of 'realworld' identity and an identity forged in the online realm.

'Your stay was not satisfactory?' As she says this she glances at the black woman. It occurs to me that the black woman might think that I am leaving because the hotel isn't clean enough, and this makes me feel like a racist.

I say, 'My stay was satisfactory. I have to leave for personal reasons.'

Personal reasons. The perfect conversation killer. It's like bringing up mental illness at a dinner party.

'I see, sir,' the receptionist says.

As I shoulder my bag and turn to leave, I tip the cleaner ten dollars.

# prize

The number of Davison's online friends increases exponentially and it occurs to you that making friends is a lot like making money. When you have a lot of money it is easy to make more money. When you have a lot of friends it is easy to make more friends. It probably has something to do with six degrees of separation and meeting friends-of-friends. There is more than likely a mathematical equation which illustrates the theorem.

Still, the photograph situation is proving difficult. People have begun requesting pictures of places that Davison has visited in New York, perhaps because they're curious, but perhaps equally so because they are dubious. You can find photographs of popular places in the city by using an internet search engine, and pass them off as your own, but Davison is never in any of them. So you tell people Davison is shy. The girls online seem to think that's cute.

One of the girls is called Emily. You found her profile and sent her a friend request. On her social networking page she portrays herself as feisty and no-nonsense with a fuck-you attitude, but the façade she wears online cannot fully mask the fact that she's also a bit of a ditzy bitch. She regularly posts inane remarks, like, 'Some ppl in this world really need to learn what *respect* is. I may not *agree* with what some people say/do with their lives. But at least I *respect* their decisions. Wankers', and, underneath, various friends who may or may not know Emily in the realworld write similarly vacuous statements such as 'You tell them Em LOL' and 'Go girrrrl!'

Emily's biog says she lives in Manchester like you, and as you read through her account, you form your own

image of what she might be like, exhuming her very
essence from an identity parade of false signifiers.

Today, Emily's status reads simply :'-(
      You make Davison ask her why she's sad.
      She replies that she's on the verge of splitting up
with her boyfriend. He treats her like shit.
      You make Davison ask her why.
      She tells him that her boyfriend drinks too much
and spends all his time playing on the computer. He lost
his job and she's paying for everything. He's paranoid
and obsessive. He's controlling and manipulative. He's
jealous and self-destructive. They live together but she
wants to kick him out.
      The fact that Emily lives in Manchester, and thinks
that Davison lives in New York, is beneficial. The
threat of talking to strangers does not seem so severe
when it is mediated by a computer screen. It appears
that the physical distance she believes exists between
her and Davison encourages her to open up more. What she
really needs, she insists, is a man like you. When she
types 'you', she means Davison.
      She goes on: She needs someone with ambition.
Someone with drive. She needs a man who wants to do
something with his life. A man who doesn't spend his
days drinking and sitting in front of the computer, lost
in a simulated world.

Minutes, hours, weeks scroll by and you speak to Emily
every day. Her relationship with Davison has sexual
undertones. You are certain that if Davison existed, and
if there was an opportunity for him to meet up with
Emily face-to-face, she would cheat on her boyfriend
with him. This makes you both excited and envious.
Excited because Davison is getting a lot of attention,

and you are solely responsible for the statements that encourage that attention. Envious because there is no chance of Emily ever giving you this much attention in the realworld.

You make Davison tell her that she should visit New York sometime.

Maybe, she replies. I've always wanted 2.

You make him tell her that she should probably give her boyfriend a bit of space and that he'll soon start to miss her and then it'll all be fucking hunky-dory. This is a lie. You want to see how far you can push her. An online betrayal seems less severe than one carried out offline. You're just pretending to be sensitive because sensitivity can get you laid.

Soon being Davison is a full-time job. There's simply not enough time to reply to all his messages and interact with all his friends on top of living your own, real, life. Either you have to take the spotlight or Davison does, and you care more about what people say to Davison online than what people say to you in the realworld.

You spend up to fifteen hours a day online.

You rarely sleep.

You forget to eat.

Your eyes are coated in film and your skin is pallid and you are sporting a scruffy, lazy mess of facial hair. The few real people you do see look at you in an odd way that suggests you look terrible. One day you bump into a former colleague at the supermarket and he tells you that you look like shit.

You try to snatch sleep in blocks of fifteen minutes, but still you dream about being online. You see yourself

sitting at the kitchen table, typing on your laptop. You see Emily. You awaken sweating and anxious with your heart pounding against your ribcage to the hollow chiming sound of social network notifications. Sometimes you imagine that you are growing into the machine, becoming one with it, becoming a cyborg. You are unable to distinguish between what you have really said to people online and what you merely think you have said. You have to go back over conversations, read through them, re-live them, just to see what's real.

Your whole online life is a simulation: when you talk to your online friends you don't have to concern yourself with the fact you look like shit and smell like shit and feel like shit. Your former colleague's comment about your appearance has hurt your feelings and you consider the fact that you could probably sue him.

You shop online. You buy CDs and DVDs and groceries and get them delivered. You pay for them with your debit card and write instructions to the delivery driver or postman to leave the goods outside your front door or in the foyer so that you don't have to speak to him.

You download music and videos online and watch your favourite TV shows on Tube sites.

You pay your TV licence online, your electricity bill online, your internet tariff online.

You make bank transfers online, change your energy plan online, read the news online.

You masturbate over online videos. Lust over online pictures. Get angry over online comments. Laugh at online jokes. Every emotion you can muster is mediated. The only reason you are able to come up with as to why you may need to leave the flat is to get fresh air, but you can get plenty of that by opening the window and poking your head outside. Besides, it soon emerges that

canisters of the stuff are available on the web, imported from the east.

There is no difference in authenticity between Davison's online identity and your own. When a simulation becomes identical to the thing it mimics, is it still a simulation? Or is it a new original?

The evil demon of the image both influences and alters the basic reality which comes before it. Davison is nothing more than an image with no corresponding reality; an arrowed signpost pointing into the void.

And this means he is more real than you are.

# three.

I am standing on the corner of west 77<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. To my left is a quintessential American diner: steamed-up windows, a newspaper stand, mismatched tables, chairs and umbrellas outside, attended by a middle-aged waitress wearing a pinafore and cap emblazoned with the words BIG NICK'S BURGER JOINT.[24] At the junction, a green sign points left: WEST 77<sup>TH</sup>. Across the street, in the distance, stands the green-fenced entrance to seventy-ninth street subway station. To my right, another diner, with a red canopy hanging over a roof-to-pavement window in which slices of pizza rotate on a stand. Taxis rush past, horns honk, people jostle me in the street. A short, thick-set woman with orange hair and gold-hooped earrings barks noisily into the phone at a call box behind me. This is uptown Manhattan.

I start walking south, and I keep going. Nothing of any consequence whatsoever happens during this walk, so there's no point talking about it. I'm going to talk about something else instead. I'm going to talk about what I remember.

I remember waking up in an unfamiliar room.[25] The room is empty, and I am lying on the floor with my face suckered to cold laminate. I have one arm at my side and the other is curled upwards, like a ballet-dancer mid-pirouette. I am watching myself from above, and I look like a question mark. I slip back into myself and I can see the floor and the skirting board that frames it and a few feet of whitewashed wall and nothing else. My mouth is dry and I can taste cigarettes, but I don't smoke.

I roll onto my back. The ceiling is a vast white expanse punctured by seven spotlights organised in a strip of two, then three, then two again, like Orion. The spotlights are switched off, and sunlight streams through the windows, bathing the room.

Studying the ceiling is difficult. I've got these things, floaters they're called, that manifest themselves as dark patches and lines in my field of vision. They're most noticeable in bright light or when staring at a computer screen or a blank sheet

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[24] Another geographically/factually correct observation. Big Nick's Burger Joint is located underneath the Belleclaire hotel and has been serving New Yorkers since the 1960s.

[25] This is the point at which the narrative commences on www.facebook.com/escandctrl. Vincent updates Facebook from the apartment, asking his online friends for advice on what to do. He declares on the page that he is doing this via his mobile phone, but the posts on the site do not display the icon which indicates they originated from a mobile handset.

of paper. They're caused by specks of debris which become trapped in the vitreous fluid of the eyeball. Since light enters the eye and passes through the vitreous jelly on its way to the retina, the specks of debris appear as shadows on the retinal wall. And since the condition occurs behind the surface of the eye, there is little that can be done about it.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing about the shadows in my eyes is the fact that it is impossible to actually look at them. They lurk in the periphery of the optic field, and at the slightest flicker of the eyeball from left to right, or up and down, they're gone, like the guy in the bar who stares at you while you're concentrating on something else but who then, when you notice him in the corner of your eye and look up, quickly looks away, leaving you wondering whether he was ever really looking at you at all. Since it is only the shadow of the debris and not the debris itself that can be seen, and since it is impossible to actually look at these shadows, only to be aware that they are there, you find yourself constantly questioning whether they really exist.

I get up and I look around me. At first I think I'm in my flat, because this place looks identical, apart from the fact it's completely empty. (I might have sold all the furniture and forgotten about it.) But when I look out of the French windows I'm higher up than I expected and I don't see the view I'm used to. The building opposite is redbricked, narrow, with small rectangular windows and a zigzag of metal stairs slicing through its façade like a poorly healed scar. I can see the tops of trees, green-leaved, swaying gently in the breeze. I can see cars cruising on the right side of the road, a deli, a yellow taxi.[26] So that's it, I think. I'm in New York. I wonder what the fuck I'm doing here?

I've been to New York just once before, and that was when the accident happened, which is also when the floaters started. I don't really remember much about that and it occurs to me that I might have come back to find out. I might have been in this room before. For all I know, this could be the second, third, fourth, even

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[26] I have been able to pinpoint the exact location of the mystery apartment by using the author's description of the view from its window, coupled with Google's Street View program. Indeed, the author later reveals the street as Perry Street in Greenwich Village: using the means described above I have ascertained that that the apartment block stands at number 55. Interestingly, gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson himself resided in Perry Street in 1957-58 (see Hunter S. Thompson, *The Proud Highway*: *Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman* [London: Bloomsbury, 2011]). Thompson lived in a residential building at number 57, but the street appears to have been renumbered at some point since. I conclude, therefore, that the apartment described here is almost certainly in the same block as that of Thompson's former residence, although he lived in the basement, whereas we are told that the apartment referred to in these pages is high up. Still, perhaps whoever wrote this was a fan.

hundredth time I've woken up in this place. I could have been born here and I could have died here.

As for how I got here: I have memories but it's impossible to put them in order. There's no sequence to any of it. And that's what life's narrative is, isn't it, a sequence of events organised by experience?[27] I have, right now in my head, a picture of myself sitting in my flat, typing on my laptop computer. I'm not sure what I'm doing but Emily is in the other room and I think I'm talking to someone on the internet. But it's impossible for me to ascertain when this took place. It's impossible for me to know even if this event took place this year or last, or the year before that.

Memory is a delicate insect. Treat it too roughly and the wings fall off. The unreliability of eyewitness testimony is well documented. This is why I prefer talking online to real talking, why I choose texting over talking on the phone. You can see the words in front of you, black and white. You can save the conversation to your hard drive or memory stick. You can retain it for future reference. Sometimes I write down fragments of oral conversations on scraps of paper for the same purpose. It drives Emily mad. Me constantly asking her to repeat herself, and convincing myself that she's said things she hasn't or that I've misheard her.

Sorry. Drove her mad, not drives.

I check my pockets. I have my mobile phone but there's no signal. I have my photograph of Emily, the passport photo I always carry. I have a wad of screwed-up bank notes: $237 in tens, twenties and ones. There is a number scribbled on one of the bank notes in my handwriting: 41229191514.[28] I have a set of keys.[29] My watch is in my pocket, and it says the time is 8.18, but it isn't ticking. I put it on anyway.

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[27] This calls to mind an essay I read recently in which Sven Birkerts argues that the internet and the novel are opposites and that the former has changed the way that the human mind constructs narrative from experience. Advances in the field of neuroscience, Birkerts claims, mean that we now regard the human mind not as something immaterial and ineffable but as the product of chemical reactions in the brain. What we understand by 'mind', he continues, is simply a set of operations carried out by the brain, just as walking is a set of operations carried out by the legs. The advances in this area of research go hand-in-hand with what Birkerts calls 'the digitizing of almost every sphere of human activity'. See Sven Birkerts, 'Notes on why the novel and the Internet are opposites, and why the latter both undermines the former and makes it more necessary' in *The American Scholar*, at <http://theamericanscholar.org/reading-in-a-digital-age/>.

[28] Obviously, this number is significant. I've spent some time working with it. Despite its appearance I believe it may, ostensibly, be a phone number: +44 is the dialling code for the United Kingdom (we know the protagonist Vincent lives in Manchester) and therefore the number could be +44 1229 191514 (incidentally 01229 is the dialling code for Barrow-in-Furness). During the initial stages of my investigation I called the number, but it is disconnected. An alternative suggestion is that the numbers might correspond to letters of the alphabet, in which case 41229191514 = DABBIDIDEAD. As a lover of anagrams and ambiguity, the best I was able to come up with is 'abided Bad I.D' which I'm willing to accept might potentially mean something, especially given the examination of multiple personalities/identities at work in the novel (i.e. 'bad ID'). Similarly, the numbers may be broken into

I explore the apartment. There is nothing in the cupboards. The lights don't work. The taps don't work. The front door is locked and requires a key to open it: perhaps one of the keys I found will fit. I have my hand on the door handle to what I assume is the bedroom and I am just about to look inside when I hear a shrill ringing sound. I go back into the living room.

There's a phone on the floor. It is a vintage phone, rotary dial, the sort of phone I imagine the President would have in his office. I stare at it, wondering how I missed it during my initial exploration, and I conclude that I must have seen it and either forgotten or somehow not registered. The ringing is very loud. The phone isn't ringing in the usual way, with two rings in quick succession, then a gap, then two rings in quick succession, and so on. Instead, they came solo, with each ring long and drawn out.[30]

I'm still staring at the phone, and the phone is still ringing. It's almost impossible to ignore a ringing telephone, especially when you don't know who is at the other end of the line. You see it in films: a phone rings, and someone always answers. It's usually bad news.

The phone stops ringing.

I see myself step over to it and I watch as I lift the receiver from its cradle. I see myself listening, and I'm making a face because there's no dial tone. Do they have dial tone in America?[31] I see myself replace the receiver; it makes a faint clanging sound, and I picture a bicycle bell.

Immediately, the phone rings again. My hand is still on the receiver. I lift it.

Hello? My voice is hoarse, its tone dense and unfamiliar, like woodland. I clear my throat. Hello? I say again.

Do you know who this is?

No.

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blocks, for example, 4-12-2-9-19-15-14. Furthermore, if we take into consideration the fact that we are told the number appears on a one dollar bill, then we may add an A (since 1=A) in which case we are left with ADLBISON or 'a bold sin'. Whatever the number means, I am absolutely convinced that the author is trying to tell us something. The attentive reader will also have noticed that this is the same as the flight number in the email Vincent received from The Voice.

[29] I have probably read this manuscript at least ten times and it has only just now occurred to me how blatantly obvious this is. It's been staring me in the face. And it's staring at you, too.

[30] I'm told that this could mean several things.

1: An internal call, coming from a different phone in the same building.

2: Several different phone lines in the apartment.

3: A call-back request.

[31] Yes, Vincent. They do. `Would suggest cutting word 'Vincent' here. Vincent is a character in a book, remember? You can't talk to him. He can't hear you.`

I'm sorry, The Voice says. I should have known. You don't remember me.

The call lasts about three minutes. The line is very bad. The Voice is male, a raspy British accent from a region I can't quite specify. The Voice is a smoker – as he talks I hear the spinning of the flint on the cigarette lighter, followed by the whisper of inhalation, the gasp of exhalation.

Do I know you? I ask.

Yes.

Who are you?

I can't tell you that, The Voice says. Not yet.

Then The Voice asks whether I've been in the bedroom.

\*

The Voice tells me that I'm in the West Village in Manhattan and that I'm checked into the Mandelbrot hotel on the upper west side. I'm in room 508 and the keys are in my pocket.[32]

Keep them safe, he says. You're going to need to return here. We're nearly at the end now.

The end? The end of what?[33]

This has been going on for some time, he says. I expect you don't remember the reason you came to New York. There's not long to wait.

I ask what's in the bedroom.

The Voice asks me to recount everything I remember since my arrival in New York.

Sometimes it is easier to answer a question by saying nothing.

Are you still there? The Voice asks.

Yes, I say.

The Voice promises me that I will find all the answers, as long as I play by the rules.

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[32] Haha!
~~(Erm…What am I missing here, Ike?)~~
OH!

[33] I find myself asking the same question. The circular, rhizomatic structure of the novel, and the fact that, ostensibly, the prologue chapter is also the ending, is already well established. But it is at times difficult to fill in the blanks and to ascertain whether the events occur in the order in which they are reported.

That's the exact phrase he uses: play by the rules.

Now, he asks, do you have any more questions?

Of course I have questions, I think. Who are you? Why am I here? Why don't I remember how I got here? What am I supposed to do now?

The answers to the first three questions will be revealed in time, he says. As for the fourth: what do you think you should do now?

The word 'think' appears between two asterisks in my head.

At this point The Voice presents me with two options: stay in the apartment or leave the apartment. I expect him to say *to leave, turn to page one hundred and three; to stay where you are, turn to page eighty-four* but he doesn't say anything.[34]

I tell The Voice that I can't leave because the apartment is locked.

The apartment is not locked, he says. Try the door again.

I place the receiver on the floor and go back to the front door. The front door is unlocked. Back in the living room, I pick up the receiver again. How did you do that? I ask.

I didn't, he says. You did. You have the keys to your hotel room and you have the keys to this apartment, and more.

It occurs to me that I must have unlocked the door and forgotten about it, and I accept this as truth. When you suffer from memory loss there's no point questioning the plausibility of events such as these. You just have to assume the affirmative.

Now answer me, The Voice says. Would you like to stay, or would you like to leave?

I tell The Voice that I would like to leave. As I tell him this, I picture a blister being burst and the serum squeezed out.

I'll send you an email, he says.

An email?

Yes. An email. Electronic correspondence.

I know, I say. Why?

There's something I need to show you.

Can't you just tell me?

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[34] This calls to mind the 'choose your own adventure' books I read as a youngster: 'To fight the dragon, turn to page seven; to run away, turn to page eight'. I always used to fight the dragon. I'm the type of person who likes to stare at the sun.

No, he says. It is better to show than to tell.[35]

Will you show me why I came to New York?

A true leader does not have to lead. He is content to point the way.[36]

The Voice tells me to go to my hotel and await further instructions.

That's the exact phrase he uses: await further instructions.

The line goes dead.

There is a word in my head and the word is 'evidence'. I use my mobile phone to take a photograph of the number on the banknote. [37]

The floaters swirl in my vision in a murky film, like oil on water.

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[35] This is the first commandment of successful fiction writing, preached in creative writing workshops throughout the country. The intrigued reader, wishing to enhance his `(sic!)` writing capabilities, may benefit from Stephen King's *On Writing* and Strunk and White's essential *The Elements of Style*. Also, at the risk of self-indulgence, I recommend reading between the lines of Ike A. Mafar, *The Hermeneutic Entrepreneur: Visualising Order in Contemporary English.* Also see Ram Naga, Ike A. Mafar and Fatima Tonelci, 'Taketh Isas, Not I', *Critical Enquiry* (October 2007). Furthermore, Mieke Yelizaveta, *Structuralism, Universalism, Individualism*: *Contrasting Images* (Denver: Extratextual Juxtapositions, 2001). Also, Daniel Edgar Evans, *Justification and Neoliberalism* (Exeter: Solaris, 2012). `Is this a false reference, Ike? What's its purpose?`

[36] This is a quote from Henry Miller. I definitely recognise it. I can't ascertain where exactly it's from, though. Maybe he just uttered it, but never wrote it down. It was used as an epigraph in a novel I read, mind you. I know that much. `It's also in Steve Hollyman's` Keeping Britain Tidy `(2010). I only remember because he was one of our MA graduates and I was on the examining panel. That's the second time he's appeared here.`

[37] These photographs appear on the corresponding Facebook pages. If you don't believe me then see www.facebook.com/escandctrl.

# gap

Soon, being Davison online is not enough. You want to be Davison in the realworld as well. But in order to be Davison in the realworld, you need money, because Davison is rich. You, however, are not rich. You are not even what some people would describe as 'comfortable'. You are pushing thirty and you have holes in both socks.

You begin filling in surveys online. The surveys don't take long to complete and you are awarded points for each one you send off. You can exchange the points for vouchers, and the vouchers can be used to buy things like clothes and CDs. You have seen a T-shirt that you want to buy. It looks like the sort of thing that Davison would wear.

You need to fill in a lot of surveys to get enough points to buy anything. But it isn't all bad: while you're filling in surveys you can build Davison's online profile. You are multitasking, or, as someone you used to work with put it, 'knobbing two girls with one johnny'.

During one of the conversations, Emily tells Davison that it would be great to meet him in person sometime. You take the opportunity to tell her there's a chance that Davison might be in Manchester on business in a couple of weeks. Would she like to meet for a coffee or perhaps something stronger?

The truth is that you are wondering if Emily would fuck Davison if she had the opportunity, but the problem remains that you are nothing like him in either personality or appearance. If Emily agrees to meet up with Davison then she will not be convinced when she

sees you: you simply look too much like yourself and too little like him.

Emily replies. She types: OMG really?!?

You look at the letters and you imagine Emily's enunciation of each one aloud – oh, em, gee.

It's not definite yet, you reply. But there's a possibility.

I'd love 2 meet u, Emily writes. My boyfriend's so fucking boring.

You type: I'll keep you in the loop.

After a few days and a few dozen surveys (your preferred brand of toothpaste; your television viewing habits; your choice of mobile phone handset) you have accrued enough points to buy the T-shirt. It costs £35 and it occurs to you that this is a ludicrous amount of money to spend on a single item of clothing. You think about some of the other things that you could spend £35 on and none of them is particularly inspiring. It seems £35 does not go very far at all nowadays. Besides, it isn't really money. It's points. There is no option to convert the points into cash and have them send you a cheque. The only option is to convert the points into a voucher.

You buy the T-shirt online and arrange for it to be delivered to your flat. From the exchange of immaterial currency the tangible will emerge: just another postcard from a virtual world.

# four.

After leaving the Mandelbrot, I find a hotel on East 28th street: The Explorer.[38] Its single revolving door turns solemnly beneath a frame of scaffolding. A middle-aged Hispanic man, wearing a grey suit and a badge bearing the name Jake, lurks in the doorway. He looks like he should have a gold tooth. He looks like he should have slicked-back hair, greasy against his skull, and a chest-rug, poking horridly from the open collar of his shirt. But he doesn't have any of these attributes. He is nothing but a glaucoma outline, waiting to be filled in.[39] He nods at me lugubriously as I step past him. It is sunny outside but his facial expression is that of someone who is waiting for it to stop raining.

I chose this hotel for several reasons: first, its price, second, its proximity to the apartment, third, the fact there's an internet café round the corner. The Voice will contact me soon.

Once in my room – a dark, dingy hovel with rock-hard double bed, a warm fridge and hair in the sink – I take the bank note out of my pocket and study it.[40] The number doesn't look like a phone number, but I decide to call it anyway. The call doesn't connect and there is no Voice at the other end of the line.

I unplug the phone cable from the socket on the wall, and then I take the phone itself and shove it on the top shelf inside the wardrobe. I'm not sure why I do this, but I think the sight of the phone is putting me on edge. I heave my bag onto one side of the double bed and rifle through it. I need to find some clothes. If I wear

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[38] This establishment is real and still operates at this address. `Really? I can't find it on Google.`

[39] In *On Writing* Stephen King remarks: 'Description begins in the writer's imagination, but should finish in the reader's. When it comes to actually pulling this off, the writer is much more fortunate than the filmmaker, who is almost always doomed to show too much…including in nine cases out of ten, the zipper running up the monster's back…locale and texture are much more important to the reader's sense of actually being *in* the story than any physical description of the players. Nor do I think that physical description should be a shortcut to character…This sort of thing is bad technique and lazy writing, the equivalent of all those tiresome adverbs.' See Stephen King, *On Writing* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2000) p. 203. `Are you sure about the wisdom of quoting Stephen King as an authority? This might turn a fastidious reader/critic against you. Besides, the ambitions of `VOID` are clearly rather distant from King's very limited box of tricks.`

[40] We can neither confirm nor deny the accuracy of the author's unflattering description of the hotel room lest we find ourselves subject to a lawsuit. `See my comment on footnote 37.`

the same stuff for much longer then I'll start to stink and that will attract unnecessary attention.

I find a t-shirt screwed up in a plastic bag in the bottom of my holdall. I don't remember buying it.[41] I take it out and flatten it on the bed, trying to get the creases out. It isn't working. I turn it over.

The T-shirt is white and it has a picture of John Lennon on it. John is wearing a black beret and his signature round sunglasses, and he's smoking a cigarette. His lips are slightly pursed as if he's uttering something profound, and I imagine that behind his sunglasses his eyes are wistful and foreboding. The T-shirt is covered in blood.

There is a lot of it. The pattern it makes around John's beret is reminiscent of a butcher's apron. The edges of the larger splats have turned orange as if the t-shirt has been soaked in a basin. I don't know whose blood it is, but I don't think it's mine.

I lie down on the bed and I shut my eyes. I don't know what I'm doing, but I know I'm not trying to sleep. I think I might be trying to remember. My heart is beating irregularly, and I can see it pulsating in my stomach. I think I might be developing an abdominal aortic aneurysm.

I lie there and think of the blood on the shirt and the blood makes me think of Emily. It occurs to me that whoever killed her is probably someone she knew, and that means I probably know him too. The Voice knows who killed her, so by proxy The Voice is probably someone I know.

This probably accounts for why the police came to question me after Emily died. They turned up at my flat unannounced and they asked if they could come inside. It was two in the afternoon and I was slightly drunk – a sleepy, hazy drunk. I had been sitting at my laptop, talking to people online.

I looked through the peephole and saw their blue uniforms. There were two of them: one male, one female. I let them in. There was no point not letting them in. The woman was older and I think she was in charge. The guy was in his mid-twenties and had the twitchy, attentive disposition of a meerkat sentry. They sat on the sofa. I thought I should offer them a drink but all I had was a bottle of no-frills vodka or tap water. So I didn't offer them anything and I think that it put me on the back-foot from the beginning.

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[41] 'Tee-4-2', remember, Vincent? `Cut. Too Colloquial.`

The woman asked how I was doing.

I said, 'You know,' and maybe she did know. Who knows what she knew?

The Meerkat asked what I meant by that. As he did so, he shifted forward in his seat as if he was uncomfortable, as if there was something sharp in his back pocket or the gusset of his underpants had become wedged in the crease between his buttocks.

I said, 'How do you think I'm doing?'

He looked awkward. They both did. I thought that maybe I was scaring them or that maybe they felt sorry for me, I couldn't tell which. The woman took out a notepad and started asking me all sorts of questions about when I last saw Emily, when I last spoke to her, whether I knew of anyone who might want to harm her.

I said, 'She speaks to men on the internet. Maybe one of them wanted to harm her.'

Making that comment was like taking the lid off a box of spiders. The two of them machine-gunned questions at me, often not giving me a chance to respond before they reloaded and started firing the next round.

'I don't know their names,' I said. 'I don't know where they live. If they told her where they live it means nothing. It's the internet. It's decentralised. People lie all the time.'

'We're going to need to take her laptop,' the Meerkat said, authoritatively, and I waved my hand as if to say, go ahead.

'I know you've been over this before,' the woman said, 'but can I ask you where you were at the time Emily was killed?'

'I wasn't here when it happened,' I said. 'It's been verified.'

At this point they ceased their assault and stared at me in the vacant manner with which one might regard a large hole one has dug in the garden, or a set of DIY bookshelves one has constructed in the living room.[42] Then the woman asked, 'Where were you, then?'

'I was in New York,' I said. And that's the truth. I was in New York. That's when I had the accident.

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[42] Later in *VOID* there is a reference to the British alternative rock group CreepJoint. This line is paraphrased from the track 'The Pareto Principle' taken from their debut album, *amanaplanacanalpanama* (2010).
There's already been an intertextual ref. to Hollyman's (2010) novel Keeping Britain Tidy. Did you know he is also the singer/guitarist in CreepJoint? AND he's one of our alumni. Just a thought.

I told them I needed to use the bathroom and they told me they'd wait for me. When I came back, they'd let themselves out. Perhaps they were offended because I didn't offer them a drink.

Emily's online profile is still open, in memorandum, and I still check it sometimes. Just to make sure this is real.[43]

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[43] As yet I have not been able to locate a corresponding Facebook page for Emily. I wonder, is this elusiveness deliberate, or does no such profile exist?

# five.

Next thing I know I'm walking along Greenwich Avenue in the West Village and I'm not sure where I'm going but I think I'm looking for a bar. I glance at my watch, forgetting that it has stopped. The hands still point to eighteen minutes past eight. Ahead of me, a couple of hundred metres up the street on the left-hand side, I see the word I think I'm looking for, illuminated in red neon.[44]

It's exactly what the sign says, and nothing else. There are no tables. There are no fruit machines. But there is a bar, L-shaped, lined with tattered stools. Various ephemera and memorabilia – posters, beer mats, stickers, a guitar – cover every available surface. There is a laminated poster stuck beneath the window: Welcome to Johnny's. The Friendliest Place in Town.

'Johnny's.' I say the word out loud, for no reason other than the fact that I want to hear my own voice. It is a familiar word, a friendly word. The second syllable forces the mouth into a half-smile. Johnny's Bar sounds like the sort of place where people have a good time.

I walk inside and go straight to the far end of the room. The barman, who had been slouching over the bar, jumps up as I walk past him, and gestures to me. 'Hey, dude!' he drawls, in a thick New York accent. 'How's it going, man? And where did you get to last week?'[45]

I look behind me, wondering if some vanishing twin followed me through the door. Then I turn back to the barman and I notice he's holding out a shovel-like paw for me to shake. 'Lemonade?' he asks.

I hold out my hand, hesitantly, and he crushes it. I have no idea why he's offering me lemonade. Who drinks lemonade anyway?

'You look unhinged, dude,' he says. 'You okay?'

'I think so.'

'You want that lemonade or not?' he asks.

'No,' I say. 'Coors Lite. Two.'

'Coming up.'

I sit down on a stool. The seat is covered in zebra-print and I decide I like it.

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[44] Johnny's Bar, 90 Greenwich Avenue, New York, 20200. Ah, those halcyon days of yore.
Why, Ike, have you been there?
[45] I am sure I have met this person.

The barman turns his back to me and searches for a couple of pint glasses on the shelf behind the bar. I watch him select the glasses and pull the pints, one at a time. As he gets to work on the second, I pick up a beer mat and begin teasing the thin layer of print off it with my thumb.

'You didn't seal the deal, then?' He places two frosted pint glasses on the bar in front of me and some of the foam drips down the side of one of them and pools at the base of the glass. I think of Emily, the way she used to drool in her sleep sometimes. The way I used to tease her about it. 'Six dollars,' the barman says.

I look around me. There are three others guys here, all of them drinking alone. Two guys stare vacantly at the walls. One guy reads a copy of the *Village Voice*. The back cover of the magazine displays a full-page advert for a local music venue called Le Poisson Rouge. I turn back to the barman. 'Seal the deal?' I ask.

'Yeah,' he says. 'They say picking at beer mats and shit is a sign of sexual tension.'

I place a ten-dollar bill on the bar and take a grateful gulp of beer. 'What?'

Now he looks perturbed. 'I was just joking around,' he says. He snatches up the ten dollars and quickly puts it in the till. 'She was hot, anyway,' he says, as he counts out my change. He doesn't look at me.

'What?' I ask. 'Who?'

'Who?' he repeats, absentmindedly. 'That chick you were here with last week.' As he says this, he picks something from between his teeth and holds it on the end of his finger, inspecting it.

'Chick?'

The barman wipes his fingers on his T-shirt and looks up at me. 'The redhead rock chick,' he says, raising an eyebrow and grinning impishly. 'Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I say.

'What?'

'I have a problem with my memory.'

'I know, man, I know,' he says. 'But you really don't remember the girl I'm talking about?'

'Really.'

'Do you remember me?'

'No.'

'We spoke last week,' he says.

'I don't doubt that.'

He blinks at me. After a few seconds he says, 'So, this memory problem. What's it like?'

I chew the inside of my cheek. 'Do you ever have one of those days where you wake up and the world seems different to when you went to sleep?'

'Not since the birth of my first child,' the Village Voice guy says, without looking up from the magazine.

The barman pays him no attention and neither do I. 'No,' he says.

'Well, that's what it's like.'

He gives me a look, head cocked to the left, like a curious owl. 'Dude,' he says, 'is this for real?'

'It's for real,' I say.

His half-smile drops into a frown. 'Ah, man. You're fucking with me, right?'

'No,' I say.

I look around. All pairs of eyes are fixed on me. Even the Village Voice guy seems not to care about his magazine any more.

'Jesus,' the barman says. 'That's some freaky shit.'

'I know.'

'I'm Corey,' he says, extending his hand for the second time. 'Nice to meet you.'

I shake his hand for the second time.

'Again,' he says.

I take a gulp of beer.

'You were sitting right there,' he pleads. 'You were talking to this hot chick. She left first and you went after her. You must remember.'

'When?'

'A week ago today.' He leans forward, as if he's imparting a piece of top-secret information and says, 'You told me she was a porn star, dude.'[46]

'Porn?

Corey smacks the bar with the palm of his hand. The Village Voice guy jumps. 'Hell yeah, bro! And, dude, she was quite a customer.'

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[46] ~~Obviously, as we read on, we are meant to assume this refers to Jadee Janes, the young porn starlet we encounter later in the novel.~~
I suggest removing this footnote, Ike. See footnote 78.

The Village Voice guy clears his throat, and goes back to his magazine.

'You're sure?' I ask.

'Absolutely positive. I'd swear on my mom's life, God rest her soul.'

He takes a cloth and begins wiping the bar, starting with the foam that spilled from my pint, working in ever-increasing circles. I picture ripples on a pond. I knock back the rest of my beer and start on the second. I ask for a third.

'Sure,' Corey says. 'Hey, did you ever find that guy you were looking for?'

I feel my skin turn grey. 'What guy?'

'You said you were looking for some guy. You said that's why you were in New York.'

'Did I?'

Corey shakes his head. 'This is some weird-ass shit. They should do some motherfucking scientific studies on you, or someshit.' He hands me the pint and looks pleased with himself. 'You bought me a drink last time you were here. So this one's on the house. Although, maybe I should make you pay for it, seeing as you won't remember anyway.' He emits a high-pitched chuckle.

'What guy?' I ask again.

'Don't know,' he shrugs. 'Don't think you mentioned his name. That's the last I thought of it, until now. You said he was impersonating you. Said that he was using your name and address and shit. Pretending to be you. That's all I know, dude.'

Corey turns his attention to the Village Voice guy. 'Hey, Chris,' he says, 'isn't it your birthday today?'

'Yeah,' the Village Voice guy replies.

'You don't seem too stoked about it.'

'Not really. They say you're only as old as the woman you feel, right?'

Corey nods slowly, deliberately. Then his nose wrinkles as if the tip of his tongue has touched something sour. 'But, dude,' he says 'isn't your wife like five years older than you?'

'Exactly,' the Village Voice guy says.

Corey emits another high-pitched squawk. 'This one's on me, too,' he says. 'Birthday drink.' He cracks open a bottle of Miller.

'Yeah, man,' the Village Voice guy says, at no one in particular. 'Thirty-three today. The age of Christ crucified.'[47]

Where have I heard that before?

'You know who else was born on 22nd August?' he continues. 'Donna Godchaux.'

'Who?' Corey asks, as he continues wiping the bar.

'Donna Godchaux. Grateful Dead.'

I consider the Village Voice guy's comment for a few moments, at first thinking only about the statement itself and then considering its wider implications, allowing his words to sink into me, to leave their impression on my brain, to spread out and multiply, like squaring a number. I look at my phone. 15th August 2012. I point towards the crumpled copy of the *New York Times* behind the bar. 'Can I…?'

'Sure.' Corey hands it to me and I look at the date on the top line.

I have lost seven days.[48]

I look at the headline: MURDER IN CENTRAL PARK.

I feel sick.

'You gave me something to save for you,' Corey says. 'You remember that, right?'

I look up from the newspaper. 'No.'

'Here,' he says. He reaches behind the cash register and fumbles for something. He holds it up between his forefinger and thumb. Without saying anything, I take it from him. It is another letter. Similar to the others. A letter **O**.

'I gave you this?'

'Correct.'

I turn the letter over in my hand. 'Did I say why?'

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[47] 'The age of Christ crucified' is, I believe, a quotation from Henry Miller's *Sexus*, book one of the Rosy Crucifixion Trilogy. I'm unsure whether it justifies a footnote, but reference has already been made to Miller in these pages, and he *was* a New Yorker… If I'm clutching at straws you can tell me. This is a two-way thing… `Is this an actual footnote, Ike, or is it a note to me (or someone else)…?` It is also, of course, a quote from the 'Protagonist' chapter of this very novel, in which the narrator describes his creation of the 'Davison' character. `Except it isn't, Ike, is it, because you added the Courier sections afterwards. The Times New Roman strand of the novel existed before that, so if anything, this is simply an example of the idea that intertextuality can work both ways. In other words, the fact that the reference to Christ's` ~~crucifiction~~ `crucifixion in the Courier strand appears before this one in the chronology of the novel inextricably alters the perception that this line stirs in the mind of the reader, despite the fact it was written afterwards.`
[48] These 'missing' seven days are accounted for later in the novel.

'No.'

'Shit.'

'What?' he asks.

'Nothing.'

'You told me to keep it safe and give it to you when you next stopped by. You said you probably wouldn't remember giving it to me but that it was important and I had to keep it for you.'

I put the key in my pocket and I walk out onto the street and no one shouts after me.

# herald

What first attracted you to Emily was the fact that she seemed different. The multicoloured hair, the piercings, the fuck-you attitude: it was all there. Here was a girl who didn't give a shit what anyone else thought.

Soon, though, it becomes apparent that Emily does care what people think. Emily is a social chameleon, infiltrating different social groups and changing her colours in order to blend in. In her early teens, Emily was one of the school nerds. Around the age of fifteen, she latched onto the 'it' girls, began wearing fake nails and fake eyelashes and hair extensions, and decided she wanted to be a footballer's wife. At seventeen, she abandoned the school bitches for the alternatives. She got pierced, got a few tattoos, went to a few gigs, wore T-shirts of bands she'd never listened to. At age nineteen, following a year out in which she neither strived for nor achieved anything, she decided she wanted to go to university to study journalism, with the hope of becoming a music critic. Eight weeks into her first semester, she met a fashion undergrad in the student union, and promptly switched courses, before dropping out altogether the following January. She would cite her 'favourite' authors, having read only one of their novels out of a possible ten or fifteen. She would talk about her 'favourite' films, but when asked which scene or character she liked best, would answer, 'I don't really know'. She was the sort of girl who, when asked her favourite kind of music, would reply, vapidly, 'A bit of anything, really'. She constantly tried to be everything, and yet was, in fact, nothing. It was as if she was trying on different identities for size, and she had not yet found one that fit. Trying to describe her evokes the feeling of

sitting on a stationary train, watching the adjacent carriage pulling out and wondering whether it is in fact your own train that is moving. She is endlessly fluid, constantly in flux. There is simply nothing about her, no characteristic or fixed reference point upon which to pin an analysis. She is vacuous, insipid, empty: as hollow as the 'o' in void.

The night after you buy the T-shirt, Emily is chatting to Davison online.

My boyfriend is sitting right here, Emily types. He's so engrossed in the computer that he doesn't even care who I'm talking 2.

You're sure her boyfriend does care and you pity him slightly.

We should run away 2gether, Emily writes.

That would be fun, Davison replies.

LOL, she types.

You're not really paying much attention to the conversation because you're pissed and you're distracted by the picture of New York on the wall. You sit and stare at it until your vision starts to blur and you begin to forget where you are until a pinging sound indicates Emily is waiting for a response.

She's written: What?!?

You look at her text on the screen. And then you look immediately below it. The words read: Have you ever made a sex tape?

You look around you. Did you just type that? The screen pings again and Emily's typed three dots like she's urging you – urging Davison – to hurry up.

You shouldn't have drunk so much before you started this conversation. But whatever. It's done now. So you type, I was just wondering...you don't have to answer.

Emily defers the question. Why? Have u?

No, you lie. I haven't.

Emily says, Oh...

You look at the ellipsis after the word, watch the cursor flickering, and you expect she's going to write more, but she doesn't.

You're not sure what to say to her.

You think a while. Then you type, I bet you have, haven't you?

Davison is coaxing the revelation from her, as if teasing an infected splinter out of swollen skin.

...Maybe, she replies.

Emily punctuates this statement with a semi-colon, a hyphen, and a close-bracket: a winking smiley.

She's teasing you, now. Or, teasing him.

You type: Come on. Tell me.

She tells you it's filmed on her mobile phone and that the quality is shit.

You want her to send you the video.

She tells you that her and her boyfriend, the boyfriend she's having all these problems with, made the video around a year ago. Before stuff started to go wrong. You can't see her boyfriend's face in the video, because he's holding the camera. All you can really see is her.

You want her to send you the video.

She tells you that her and him are the only ones with a copy, and that her copy exists on the memory card on her mobile phone.

You think about the memory card and the information it contains, an entire sexual encounter reduced to zeros and ones.

It isn't a long video, Emily writes. There's not that much to see. Just me giving him a blowjob.

You really want her to send you the video.

You realise that you are staring at the computer screen and you don't know how much time has passed since you last typed something.

Emily has typed a couple of question marks beneath her last statement and it occurs to you that she is probably waiting for you to respond.

It is difficult for an awkward silence to develop inside the chat box of a social networking site, but it is in danger of doing so at this point.

You really really want her to send you the video, and you have to type something.

The decision appears in your head suddenly. You type: Send me the video.

It's only when you hit enter and the words appear in the box with a black outline around them and no option for deletion that you realise your online antics have very real consequences. Just like when someone declines an online invitation and it's seen as a realworld insult.

You wait.

An icon appears in the bottom right of the screen.

Emily is typing a message.

A pinging sound like a teaspoon hitting an empty glass.

'I'll think about it'.

# II: friend request.

# six.

There's something about the rhythm of walking that lends itself to problem solving. As I walk along Greenwich Avenue I view a slideshow of the fragments of information I've collected throughout the past two days. I'm thinking about The Voice and I'm wondering why he hasn't been in touch. I'm thinking that maybe I should return to the apartment. I'm thinking The Voice might be the guy I came to New York looking for. I'm thinking The Voice might be the guy that killed Emily.[49]

The word in my head is 'clues'.

I have the letters **V**, **I**, and **O**.[50] I have the photos I've taken on my phone.

I have the bank note, with the mysterious number 41229191415 written on it. I have the pages of the manuscript I found, and the list of email addresses, and a

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[49] To be honest, if I was Vincent then I wouldn't return to the apartment, at least not just yet. I'd start with the obvious lead: the list of email addresses.

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I must say, Ike, that I was dubious about this infiltrative approach
at first. But it is really beginning to work for me. I suggest that
you look up Jeffery Eugenides's 'The Father of Modernism' (published
in Slate) where he writes: 'The moves people make today to seem
antitraditional are enervated in the extreme: the footnote thing,
the author appearing in the book, etc. I am yawning even thinking
about them. The most successful original work right now will arise
from a more subtle pushing along the margins rather than from a
frontal assault on narrative or sentence structure.'
While Eugenides is quick to point out in the same essay that he is
'fearful of the complacency of a certain anti-Modernist,
antiexperimental stance that's becoming more and more fashionable
these days', he nevertheless highlights one of the problems commonly
associated with metafiction: that this level of textual
experimentation becomes a gimmick which can be seen to upstage the
very story it attempts to tell. However, despite the obvious
differences between the two literary conventions, the terms realism
and postmodernism need not necessarily be regarded as antonymous.
David Foster Wallace, for example, attempts to reconcile the two, by
'[marrying] the formal mechanics and self-consciousness of
postmodernism with the moral and emotional engagement of realism' in
his posthumous work The Pale King. I think, perhaps, this is what
you are attempting to do here? There is a word in my head, and the
word is 'interpermeation'. (Oh God I'm starting to sound like
Vincent.) Anyway, see Jeffrey Eugenides, 'The Father of Modernism',
Slate
<http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/features/2004/the_fat
her_of_modernism/joyce_is_modernisms_household_god_or_is_he.html>
and also Christopher R. Beha. 'Reconstruction', London Review of
Books, 33:19 (6 October 2011)
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n19/christopher-r-beha/reconstruction>
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[50] IV = four; VI = 6; I.V. = intravenous; *vo* = abbrv. 'verso' = the back of a sheet of printed paper; *ovi* = combined form (zoology) relating to 'egg' or 'ova'; [*ov* = ibid., if before a vowel]; *vi* = screen-oriented text editor developed by Bill Joy in 1976; I could go on.

stack of blank pages. And I have the small, tattered photograph of Emily in my pocket.

Emily used to lie a lot. I don't know why. I assume it was just in her nature. The problem with lies is that you have to remember double the information: you have to remember the lie itself and then the truth it corresponds to. Each lie necessitates more lies, and it soon becomes a web, a network of interlinked information, all of which corresponds indirectly to some other reality. Perhaps this is why compulsive liars often catch themselves out.

But if you repeat a lie enough, then something starts to happen. Eventually, you are unable to remember the true circumstances surrounding the event that you're lying about. In this instance, the lie is no longer a lie, because it no longer has a corresponding truth, which is essential in order to define a lie as a lie. So, paradoxically, the lie becomes true. It makes no difference that the state of affairs contained within the lie differs from the state of affairs in the real world, in exactly the same way as a bank note is not money but simply an IOU note which promises to pay money.[51]

Usually, Emily would lie about little things, petty things. For example she once told me that she had bumped into an old friend of hers in a bar one evening, and that the friend was now married. A few days later I bumped into the same friend and mentioned the conversation I'd had with Emily, and the friend told me that she and Emily hadn't seen each other for years. Of course, it could have been the friend that was lying, and not Emily. But I asked Emily about it and she said she'd made it up.

I asked her why, and she said that she didn't know. That's why it came as such a surprise when she didn't lie to me about how the video of us leaked online.

We made the video not long after we got together. I think it was my idea, but I'm not sure. I think it seemed like a fun thing to do at the time. I don't appear in the

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[51] Baudrillard would agree. He uses Borges's *On Exactitude in Science* as an example by which to narrate the tale of an empire whose inhabitants construct a map so detailed and accurately scaled that the map eventually replaces the empire itself. For Baudrillard, we all live in the map, not in the real world, and the map is more real than the real world anyway.
I wonder, Ike, whether you see your role as some sort of ~~davison~~ division between the fictional/non-fictional realms? This seems a sensible way to begin evaluating your contribution here? Worth a thought?

video, or, more accurately, my face doesn't; but that's pretty much the same as saying that I don't appear in the video at all, since it's difficult to identify a man from his cock alone.

I had never tried to make this sort of video before. Neither had Emily. 'What happens if we split up,' she said, 'and then one of us uses the video to blackmail the other?'

'That won't happen,' I said. 'I think we're both too mature for that.'

'But people do crazy things when they break up,' she said. 'I'm just trying to be careful, that's all.' As she said this she started messing with her mobile phone.

'Who are you texting?' I asked.

She put her phone beside her on the sofa. 'No one.'

'Why don't we both take a copy of the video?' I say. 'Then it's no one's property.'

'That's easy for you to say,' she said. 'You don't see your face. No one'll know it's you.'

I said, 'It's a matter of trust, nothing more.'

She considered this for a few moments and then she said, 'Okay. I'll do it.'

I get lost and realise I've been walking in the wrong direction. The grid of Manhattan gets all fucked up around the West Village and it's easy to become disorientated. Instead of retracing my steps straight away, I keep going and I stop by at the Explorer and collect the list of email addresses. Then I walk four blocks to the internet café on 32$^{nd}$ street. I think that I'm planning on sending an email to all of the names on the list, asking if anyone knows why I came to New York.[52] When that's done, I'll go back to the apartment.

In the café the tables are arranged into rows, and people sit with their backs to one another, tapping on their keyboards like laboratory rats hitting the feed button. It costs three dollars for thirty minutes' internet time. I pay my money and I sit down. The girl who works on the cash desk is attractive and I like looking at her. Every time she notices me looking at her she smiles and looks away, as if she's

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[52] My God, it's almost as if he can hear me.
Yes, Ike, it _is_ almost as if he can hear you. I am reading your notes alongside the original 1$^{st}$ ed. of the novel, and I notice you've made some amendments. We're going to have to take those out, I'm afraid, for copyright reasons. It's rather ironic because I actually prefer some of your material to the novel proper.

trying to make out that she hasn't seen me staring. Then she looks at me again. I think what she's doing is called triangular-gazing.

Triangular-gazing is where you move your eyes in the shape of a triangle. For example, you move your eyes from left to right, then up towards the left (at this point you meet the eyes of the person you're looking at, and form the peak of the triangle) and then you hold their gaze for a second before moving your eyes diagonally downwards, to the left. It's something that American pick-up artists are into. Pick-up artists are very attractive men who make a living by telling very unattractive men how to pick up girls. I am sure that the girl is triangular-gazing at me, so I triangular-gaze back. The girl smiles.

The computer is slow and ancient and it doesn't even have a flat screen monitor. Its fan makes a whirring sound as if the machine is about to take off. I receive an email with a voucher offering two-for-one cakes and pastries at a local bakery. An email saying that two new 'friends' have added me on a social networking site. An email inviting me to complete an online survey in exchange for a £10 gift card which can be redeemed against CDs and DVDs. Nothing from The Voice.

I check my sent folder to make sure that I didn't just imagine emailing him from the computer in the Mandelbrot.

When I went to the doctors about my memory, they told me that it's completely normal to change already existing memories and even to invent new ones. Everyone does it, they said. It's just that very few people realise.

They told me about a study from the mid-nineties. A group of American scientists took a bunch of adults and showed them a load of photos. The scientists had used some sort of technology to superimpose images of the group members onto pictures of various, supposedly memorable, situations, such as completing a bungee jump or riding in a hot air balloon. Over time, they were able to convince (they used the word 'condition') the group members into believing they had actually carried out these activities earlier in their lives and that they had merely forgotten about them with the steady decay of adulthood. Eventually, they were able to trick the group into forming new memories based on the pictures they had seen. Instead of merely *believing* that they had travelled in a hot air balloon, or thrown themselves from a crane while attached to a piece of elastic, they actually *remembered* doing it.

Memory is no more reliable than invention, the doctors told me.

I take the list of email addresses from my pocket and unfold it. There are four in total, including mine.

I click 'Compose New Message'.

# quest

Online, people are starting to ask you all sorts of
awkward questions and the situation is pissing you off.

They want to know what Davison is doing in New
York. They want to know why he's there and who he's
with. They're curious about his favourite places to hang
out. About his English opinion of American cuisine.
About his opinion of Americans in general. They even
want to know the name of the hotel that he is staying
in. It is almost impossible to keep up with the
interrogation. You have no idea why people are so
interested in Davison's antics and you are starting to
resent the character you created, simply because he is
so much more popular than you are. You consider shutting
down his account but that way you won't be able to talk
to Emily: and you need to talk to Emily. Extracting the
sex tape from her has become something of an obsession.
It is a quest, a mission, and the tape is the prize. She
is your puppet and you want to see what you can make her
do. You have no choice but to keep the story going. It
lacks plot, but so does real life, and there's nothing
more boring and safe than a story with a plot anyway.

So you search online for hotels in New York and you
find one called the Belleclaire and you say that Davison
is staying there.

You find a photograph from another hotel – one that
you stayed in a long time ago – that shows the inside of
a hotel room with some of your belongings piled up on
the bed. You upload the picture and you tell people that
this is the room that Davison is staying in.

You say that Davison is in New York on 'business'
because it's a broad, vague term and it reiterates the
point that Davison earns a lot of money.

You look up the names of some bars in New York. You want to find bars that not everyone has heard of, because you think that it will make Davison's character seem more believable if he chooses to drink in quirky, back-street dives as opposed to well-known establishments. You find a few places and note them down: Art Bar, Johnny's Bar, Le Poisson Rouge.

Emily comes online.

Hey Em, you type.

That's what Davison calls her sometimes. Em.

I really need 2 talk 2 u, she replies. Vincent's being a real arsehole.

You look at your watch: 12.58am. Who's Vincent? you ask.

My boyfriend. Soon 2 b ex boyfriend.

Shit, you type. What can I do for you? Then you remember that you're supposed to be in New York so you add, What time is it over there, by the way?

Emily replies, it's nearly 1.

You type: You're up late!

You look at the exclamation mark that punctuates your announcement and instantly regret including it. Its presence makes the statement look like it was written by a teenage girl.

Emily's reply interrupts your train of thought:

What are you up to?

Working, you answer. Got a project to finish. Been at it all day.(Lying is surprisingly easy when it is mediated by the ocean of a computer chat room.) Anyway, you type, what's been going on?

I think he's getting suspicious.

Suspicious of what?

He knows I've been talking 2 ppl online. He knows that I've been talking 2...

...

Men.

Men? you type.

Yehhhh. Men. I don't just talk 2 u, u know.

After this she puts a 'smiley' emoticon as if she wants to indicate that the comment shouldn't be taken too seriously. And why should it? After all, Davison is a happy-go-lucky, down to earth, easy-going type of guy, who has girls, no doubt much more attractive than Emily is, falling at his feet. Why should Davison care how many men Emily talks to?

You type: Okay, okay, chill, and you put a smiley after your sentence too.

This is just what people refer to as banter. Of course, you do care how many other men Emily talks to, because it is making you jealous. It has reached the point where you have to keep reminding yourself of the fact that Davison isn't even real, and that it is very foolish indeed to be envious of a person that does not exist. Otherwise you would start to hate him.

He's here now, u know, Emily writes.

Who? Vincent?

Yehhhh.

Where?

At home with me. We're meant 2 b talking about things but he's just ignoring me as usual. All he ever does is play on the computer.

What did you want to talk to him about? you ask.

U know...everything. He thinks I'm cheating on him.

Are you?

No...

(Emily is typing a message)...

...Not really.

Not really? you ask.

There's this 1 guy but it's v.casual.

This makes you insanely jealous and you begin to suspect that Emily might have sent this 'guy' her sex tape. You get up and go over to the kitchen and rifle through the cupboards, looking for a drink. You find a half-empty bottle of vodka and take a long swig. You put the bottle back and return to your computer.

Where did you go? Emily says.

To get a drink.

Vincent's drinking again, by the way. And he always thinks I'm cheating on him. In fact he's asking me now. He's looking up from his computer and he's asking who I'm talking to.

And what are you going to tell him? you ask.

A friend.

Haha, you write. Okay. Btw, that trip I told you about to the UK? Well, it's happening. We can meet in person.

Emily doesn't respond. You watch the cursor flickering.

You add: If you like?

You wait.

Eventually she starts typing again.

Would love 2. When?

I'm in Manchester next week. Meet for a drink after work?

Sure. PM me next week to confirm.

Will do.

I'm going 2 have 2 go. Boyf is getting really irate here.

Okay, you reply. TTYL.

Emily signs off xox.


Kiss hug kiss. You stare at the two 'x's and the hollowness of the bestridden 'o' and you take a deep breath.

# seven.

I pace up and down, back and forth, tracing lines of latitude along the scratched wooden floor, always stopping a metre from the French windows so as not to see the vertiginous drop below, always turning on my heel in the same place, swinging back on myself, like a pendulum.

I cannot get the image of Emily, dead, out of my head. The awful grimace. The flared, bloody nostrils. The eyes, open, pupils fully dilated. The eyes I once stared into. The eyes that once both absorbed light and projected it at the same time, now empty.

And then the wounds. The blood. The brains. The smashed-up car-crash splutter-bomb skull. I begin to wonder what the fuck I am doing here. This apartment is where all the confusion began and there was no reason for me to come back.

The word in my head is 'alarm' and it appears capitalised in scratchy handwritten letters and I think that the handwriting is mine. I am still pacing up and down, hands behind my back, schoolmasterly. I think I might be waiting for the phone to ring, and I wonder whether, in waiting, I am in fact making it less likely to do so. With no furniture to absorb the sound, my footfalls are echoing. I suspect that if the occupants of the apartment directly below me are home, they might soon wonder what is going on above them, and they might, after several minutes' polite endurance, stomp up the two flights of stairs that connect floors three and four and batter the door and ask me what the fuck I think I'm playing at.

Fucking ring.

I pace up the room.

Fucking ring.

I pace down the room.

Fucking –

The phone rings.

Listen to me, The Voice says, matter-of-factly.[53]

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[53] The attentive reader will already have noticed that speech marks are omitted during Vincent's conversations with The Voice. `Believe it or not, Ike, I had never noticed that. Which is worrying.`

I'm listening, I say. Tell me where you got that picture of Emily from.

I took it.

Tell me who you are.

I can't.

You can.

The Voice says, You haven't asked me the obvious question, and I ask him what the obvious question is. Then he says, You haven't asked me who killed her.

The Voice measures the words like teaspoons of strychnine and he feeds them to me slowly. The Voice tells me that he has information. The Voice tells me that he will, in time, lead me to the person that killed Emily. But I have to play by the rules.

Again, these are the exact words he uses: Play by the rules.

I don't know if I believe him. How do I know he didn't kill her? Why should I believe you? I ask. How do I know you didn't kill her?

The Voice asks if I found the envelope in the pillowcase and I say that I did. The Voice asks whether I have started to read the story yet and I say that I think I have. The Voice asks why I don't know for sure and I say that I've got other things on my mind and I can't concentrate. The Voice's tone suggests he finds this amusing.[54]

It's your choice, The Voice says. Read it or don't read it.

I say, Why do you keep giving me these options?

He says, Isn't life easier that way? Everything's black and white – no grey areas?[55]

I have already forgotten how this conversation started.

Do you believe that I didn't kill her? The Voice asks.

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[54] I think, perhaps, that this is a reference to the chaotic, rhizomatic structure of the novel as a whole. It is as if the author is attempting to create a narrative which, like Vincent's own memory, erases itself in the very process of being read. `Very, very interesting theory. As I'm reading through your annotations, Ike, I am beginning to understand the complex contrapuntal fabric that makes up this novel. But, I wonder, how much of this meaning is coming from the original author, and how much is your own? Is 'meaning' a journey or a destination? Is the author` <u>`really`</u> `dead, or merely somewhere else?`

[55] It depends on how you look at it, actually. The realist would say yes, it's better to be either one or the other. The postmodernist on the other hand would argue that since reality is multiple and contingent it is better to be both at the same time. Put simply, the postmodernist spends his days lurking in the grey area that separates different realities. Everything is possible, nothing is possible; possibility is everything, possibility is nothing.

I take my mobile phone from my pocket and mess about with it as I talk.

Make a decision, The Voice says. If I did it, why would I contact you? Why would I email the photograph of the crime scene? That's incontrovertible evidence.

I look at the mobile phone in my hand. I say, I believe you. Show me who did it.

I'm trying to picture the body The Voice belongs to but all I can see is a faceless, featureless outline. I try to picture his eyes: they say that the only real way to tell whether or not someone is truly insane is by staring into his eyes – the window to the soul. I'm sure that if I were to stare into The Voice's eyes, they'd be the sort of eyes that do not absorb but only reflect what is projected onto them. Shallow eyes, like puddles on concrete. Punctures in weathered skin. Voids.

I twirl the phone's cord around my fingers. I ask: What's in the bedroom?

You already know what is in the bedroom.

No, I don't.

Yes, you do, The Voice says, mimicking me. If you were to take a lie detector test and to utter the words 'I do not know what is in the bedroom' then it would come up as untrue. You just don't know that you know it, and that is not the same thing.[56]

I tell The Voice that if I already know what's in the bedroom then I might as well just look.

The Voice says I am free to look if I wish to do so. He says that I have merely been advised not to.

The Voice has no physical control over me.

Go ahead and look, The Voice says.

I am thinking of a set of keys that I used to carry around with me and I remember that I once removed a key from the set and I made an anklet out of it and I gave it to someone and she always wore it.

Was it Emily? I wonder.

I tell The Voice about the plastic letters.

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[56] That reminds me. I'd better email Taylor.

That has nothing to do with me, The Voice says. I'm here to help you find answers, not to leave you clues. I don't bring problems, I bring solutions.

I tell the voice that Corey said I came to New York looking for someone.

Yes, The Voice says. That's true.

I ask The Voice if he is the person I was looking for.

No, the voice says. You were looking for someone else. I can help you find him.

Is the person I'm looking for the person who killed Emily?

Yes.

The Voice says he has two means of contacting me: by email and on this phone. If I want to stay in touch via telephone then I will need to take this phone with me. No other phone will work.

Why can't we meet in person? I ask.

We can. But not yet.

Why not yet?

Because there are things that I want to show you first.

Why only this phone? Why not my mobile, or the phone in my hotel?

Because on this phone, I know the call can't be traced.

I'm not going to try and trace the call. I wouldn't know how to do it.

That's not a risk I'm prepared to take, The Voice says.

Emails can be traced too, I say.

That's all taken care of. Now, The Voice says, let me tell you about realworld.

# eight.

Realworld?

Up until this point I was pacing the room, across a locus determined by the restriction of the phone's cord. Now I stop.

Do you know what realworld is? The Voice asks.

The Voice explains that realworld is what the military refer to as the opposite of simulation. For example, if a plane is hijacked in New York, they might send out the message 'realworld hijack' so that the troops know it's for real, that it's not a training exercise.

The Voice tells me that there's no such thing as a realworld hijack anyway. He says that it is impossible to stage a hijack without it somehow corresponding to an image of a hijack or hold-up seen in the media or on television, prior to the actual event. So all hijacks are just simulations.

Try it, The Voice says. Try and stage a fake hold-up, and see where it gets you. What happens is that the simulated signs get inextricably mixed with real ones. You stage a fake hijack, and suddenly someone shoots a real bullet, or takes a real hostage, or has a real heart attack.[57] So there's no real difference between realworld and simulation.

So what? I ask.

At this point The Voice tells me that I'm a fictional character. He says that this world I think I'm in, this New York which I think I inhabit, is no more real than the realm that exists inside a novel. This person who constructed me did so in the same way that people construct their identities on the pages of social networking sites. He made me in his own image, by selecting which particular pieces of information he wished to reveal and which parts he wanted to hide. The memory loss, The Voice suggests, is nothing more than a device: a convenient way to ensure that I don't remember where I've come from. Because realworld lacks plot, and a

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[57] This is another Baudrillardian concept, which is brilliantly satirised in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*. McCarthy uses the image of a film set as a metaphor for the way fictional worlds represent real ones. As the novel's unnamed narrator explains: '[I]n the end we found a set designer. It was Naz's idea: a brilliant one. Frank, his name was. He'd designed sets for movies, so he understood the concept of partial décor. Film sets have loads of neutral space – after all, you only have to make the bit the camera sees look real; the rest you leave unpainted, without detail, blank.' See Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Alma Books, 2011), p. 114.

novel has to begin somewhere and end somewhere. The world of the novel exists before the reader comes to it, and goes on after the book is shut.[58]

To demonstrate this, The Voice asks if I remember why or how or when I came to New York, and I say that I don't. Then The Voice asks if I remember being born. Some people remember being born, he says. Some people claim they can remember their time in the womb.

I ask The Voice where I am; whose apartment I'm in.

The apartment is no one's. Think of it as no man's land. Think of it as a void, a vacuum.

The words void and vacuum are familiar to me and I don't know why. I ask about the lack of furniture.

The Voice says it probably has something to do with *Feng Shui* or minimalism. Apparently, he says, it's bad *Feng Shui* to have a mirror opposite or beside the marital bed. It has the potential to attract a third party into the relationship. The Voice asks whether or not I have a mirror opposite or beside my own bed.[59]

I take my mobile phone from my pocket. Still no phone signal. My hand brushes against one of the letters, the letter **V**. I remove it from my pocket and inspect it, holding it up between thumb and forefinger, like I'm checking a delicate jewel for imperfections.

I've already told you that that has nothing to do with me, The Voice says.

I sit down with my back against the whitewashed wall. Phone in my right hand. Legs hunched to my chest.

The Voice asks when I last felt real and I say that I feel real now. Just because something doesn't feel normal doesn't mean that it isn't real.

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[58] Or not: reading is participatory, and in order for the world 'in' the book to be actualised, it requires a reader, outside that book, in the 'other' world in which the book exists as an artefact, to attribute meaning to the text. The reader does not extract a pre-encoded meaning from the words on the page; instead he or she projects meaning onto them. The fact that the words still exist on the page when the book is closed (if indeed they *do* still exist, for who can be sure?) is not the same as the fictional world continuing. For the fictional world to continue, the author, the text and the reader must all collide. `In medias res is the term used, I believe, meaning (quite literally) that the reader is cast 'into the middle of things'.`

[59] A doppelgänger motif?

The floaters swirl in my eyes and I think about the specks of dust that cause them.

The Voice asks if I'm familiar with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*.[60] Does this feel real? he asks. Or does it feel more like the stuff fiction is made of?

I don't answer. I am thinking about something else.

You know when all this started, don't you, The Voice says. You remember the beginning.[61]

*I am lying on the street and I don't know where I am. I think I have fallen out of the sky. There is blood on my hands and blood on my T-shirt. I think the blood belongs to someone else.*

It was when you had the accident, wasn't it, The Voice says.

I stand and I trace the wire from the back of the phone, out through the door and into the hallway. The phone cord won't stretch any further so I pick the phone up and take it with me.

I have to go, The Voice says.

I find the socket. But the wire is not plugged in. The plug at the end has been snipped off and the copper wires hang out of the casing like entrails. Wait, I say. Wait, I'm listening.

The line goes dead.

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[60] Such is the universal acclaim for Plato's tale that it is likely the reader comes to it with at least some degree of prior understanding. For those unacquainted with the 'Allegory of the Cave', however, the crux of the dialogue may be summarised thus: a group of men sit in a cave, chained together, facing the wall. A fire burns behind them. All they have ever seen is the shadows cast on the wall by the light of the fire. This is their reality. One day one of the men breaks free and he stands and looks around him. He sees the fire. And he sees people standing in front of it, holding puppets. He looks at the shadows cast on the wall, and he looks back at the fire. And he realises that the shadows correspond to the puppets. The puppets are real; the shadows are not. He tells his friends; he offers to free them from their chains; but they don't believe him. Instead, they kill him. See Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 240-249. In this exchange between Vincent and The Voice the author is, I argue, presenting the allegory as a means by which to understand the metaphor of the floaters in the protagonist's vision. We are told, in ch.3, that Vincent sees not the floaters themselves but the shadows they cast on his retina. There are numerous references throughout the novel to shadows, and this seems to point towards the idea that what we see when we observe a situation or an artefact is not necessarily what is there: when we look at an object, for example, the object itself remains hidden, since what we are *actually* seeing is the light which reflects off it. Reality, if it exists, is inaccessible.

[61] This is hinting at the very boundaries of human epistemological experience. Just as the real human is unable to remember anything before s/he was born, despite that fact that many of the people, places and buildings with whom s/he comes into contact throughout his/her life existed prior to him/her, so too is Vincent unable to remember anything prior to the beginning of his particular story: in other words, before his accident, Vincent simply did not exist.

*

I am staring at the plug socket and at the snipped-off cable that lies on the floor just short of it. And I am staring at something else. On the floor, up against the skirting board, is another plastic square.

I am absolutely certain it was not here forty-eight hours ago when I woke up in the apartment. Someone is following me, anticipating my moves. Whoever it is knew that it was only a matter of time before I came back here. Perhaps there are more letters to be discovered. Perhaps the order in which I discover the letters is irrelevant because they will always have the potential to be arranged into the correct order, once the last letter is found.

I put the phone on the floor and I pick up the plastic square: I pick up the computer key. A letter **D**. I hold it in the palm of my hand with the other three letters I've found.

**OVID**. The Roman poet.

**VIDO**. Latin, perhaps.

**VOID**.

I take a photograph of the letters. In normal circumstances, taking photographs is not something I do. But since waking up in New York, taking photographs has seemed vital. It is the only way that I can ensure that I don't forget about any of the clues I've collected, and it also serves as a visual diary since the photographs are tagged with the exact date and time at which they were created.

I would normally write myself a note, but I can't trust my own handwriting any more.

Besides, the camera works in much the same way as the eye. It's just that the camera commits an image to a film or microchip, instead of to human memory. The camera, like the eye, has an adjustable lens. The aperture controls how much light is allowed in, like the pupil. The film is the retina, onto which the image is projected. And, I suppose, if there was dust trapped behind the glass of the lens, then that would be the floaters.

I go back into the living room and I sit down on the floor again, with my back up against the wall, in the same position I sat in when I was on the phone.

I squeeze my eyes shut and massage my temples. I'm not sure what I'm doing but I think I'm trying to remember something – anything – from before the accident. I am trying to remember the accident itself.

The problem is that I have spent so much time thinking about the accident that I am unable to differentiate between what I remember and what I think I remember. In many ways, they're both the same anyway.

I'm thinking about the argument that I had with Emily when I found out about the video. Emily said that it wasn't her fault and I shouted at her.

I said, 'Whose fault is it, then?'

She said, 'Don't you think I feel bad enough about this already? My whole fucking life could be ruined because of this. At least no one can see your face in the film. No one will know that it's you.'

I said, 'I'm not bothered about that. I'm bothered about you. I don't like people seeing you in that way. That's just for me. No one else.'

She said, 'So you own me, do you?'

I said, 'Of course I don't own you.'

Emily started crying.

I always thought that Emily would be killed in a car crash. Emily, by her own admission, was the worst driver that had ever lived. She didn't even know her left from her right. She would hold up the thumb and forefinger on each hand, at right-angles to each other, and on the left hand, this would form a letter 'L' so she would know that was left.

In many ways, it was a car crash that killed her. Just a different kind of car crash: a metaphorical one.

At this point I realise that I don't remember any of this at all and I can't even be sure that Emily ever existed. I take the photo from the pocket of my jeans and as I look at it the word in my head is 'counsellor'. It is lower case, type-written, and it appears in the centre of an otherwise blank page.

I look around me.

I am in my hotel room at the Explorer.

The red telephone from the apartment is on the floor, beside the wardrobe.

The envelope containing the blank pages is on the bed.

The letters are on the bedside cabinet and they are arranged into the word

**VOID**.

I do not remember leaving the apartment.

I realise that I no longer feel hungry and I think that I might have stopped somewhere and eaten something on the way back to my room.

I take the red telephone and I place it on the shelf inside the wardrobe and shut the door. I'm not sure why I do this but I think that looking at the phone is making me nervous. I think back to what The Voice told me about the cave. I consider the fact that, when we think we see something, we don't see it at all. There is no reality. There are only shadows.

Sometimes I feel that I am trapped in the infinitesimal darkness of a blink.

# nine.

The deli opposite Johnny's Bar is closed. It looks like it has been closed for weeks, and the garbage-strewn dead-rat-garnished alley that runs alongside the building suggests that its closure might have had something to do with environmental health. I decide that it makes sense to drink first, on an empty stomach, so that I get fucked up quicker. I am able to process information more quickly and more logically when I'm fucked up. The pain in my kidney is still there, but duller, the way a headache goes dull when you take painkillers but then rears its head again each time you cough or move too quickly, as if to remind you that it's still present, lurking beneath the sea of calm like a vast and potentially deadly iceberg.

I stop by Johnny's and poke my head through the doorway. There's a girl behind the bar, but she's not an attractive girl. Her round face looks like the reflection in the concave side of a spoon, with all the features squashed up into the centre. She looks like a plughole. I wonder if she knows me.

'Yes?' she asks.

'Is Corey here?'

'He only works Mondays and Wednesdays,' the girl says. 'Can I help?'

'It's fine,' I say.

The girl shrugs.

I step through the door, and the place is empty. The girl comes out from behind the bar as if she's trying to prohibit my entry. I think that maybe my appearance frightens her. 'We're just closing,' she says.

'It's three pm,' I say.

'No customers.'

'There's one right here,' I say.

'Manager's orders,' the girl replies.

I walk north along Greenwich Avenue and turn left at Jane Street. At the intersection with 8th Avenue I turn right. I keep walking until I see an A-Board listing the latest drinks offers at a place called Art Bar. I hesitate, and then I go inside. I sit at the bar and I order a vodka.

At least the girl is willing to serve me. 'Vodka how?' she asks.

'Just vodka,' I say.

I watch as she free-pours a three-finger measure of Vladivar. My guts slop about like a basketful of live eels. As I pull the wad of bank notes from my pocket, the picture of Emily flutters to the floor and lands face down. I crouch to pick it up. Emily's face is scarred by a criss-cross of lines and creases. It is like staring at her through a shattered windscreen. The photo is deteriorating, and it is irreplaceable. I could go online and find another photo of her, print it off and save it, but it wouldn't be the same. When this photo came into my possession, Emily was still alive. Any subsequent photos of Emily will always be photos of a dead girl regardless of whether she was alive when they were taken.

'Here on vacation?' the girl asks.

'Not really,' I say.

She widens her eyes like she's waiting for me to elaborate.

I say, 'I'm here on business.'

'What type of business?'

'I don't know yet.'

The girl looks confused, and she changes the subject. 'Are you from London?' she asks.

'Manchester.'

The girl isn't looking at me. She's looking at the picture in my hand.

'She's very beautiful,' the girl says.

'She's dead.'

The girl turns pale. 'I'm so sorry.' She smiles an awkward smile and shimmies a couple of metres down the bar, stage right. I watch her as she organises the beer mats and napkins into neat oblong stacks.

'Have we met before?' I ask.

She looks up. 'I don't think so. Why?'

'No reason.'

The girl stops what she is doing and stands silent for a few seconds. Then she looks down and she says, timidly, 'We can meet now, if you like?'

I look at the photo of Emily again. There is a word in my head and the word is 'severed'.

'I'm for real,' the girl says.

'What?'

'For real,' she repeats. She picks up a tattered cloth and begins wiping the bar in slow, deliberate circles.

'You're for real?' I say. 'What does that mean?'

She giggles. 'My name. It's Fahreal.'[62]

'Vincent.'

She puts the cloth back on the bar and steps toward me. 'You staying downtown?' she asks.

'Yeah.' I knock back the vodka.

'Another?' she says.

'I never paid you.'

'You can pay at the end.'

'Another, then,' I say.

The girl tops up my glass. 'Why did you think we'd met before?'

The first shot, a large measure even by my standards, is beginning to work its magic on my mind and my senses. 'I don't know,' I say. 'I woke up in New York and I don't know how I got here. I thought maybe you could help.'

The girl recoils slightly.

'I have this problem with my memory,' I say.

'Really?' she asks. 'What sort of problem?'

'I had an accident. I fell.'

The expression on Fahreal's face makes it blatantly obvious that she doesn't believe me. 'Where did you fall from?'

I knock back the second vodka and she brings the bottle from the rail and free-pours me another measure. As I put my hand in my pocket to retrieve the bank notes, my knuckle brushes against one of the plastic letters. Fahreal replaces the vodka bottle and I say, 'I fell from a window.'

Her back stiffens and she turns to face me. She looks at me in a funny way, the same way the black woman in the hotel looked at me; the same way Corey looked at me in Johnny's Bar. She opens her mouth to say something, then changes her mind. Then she says, 'Did you ever hear what happened round the corner from here, on Perry Street?'

I almost choke on my drink. 'Perry Street?'

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[62] It is obvious that the author chose this name for its homophonic qualities. Is 'Fahreal' merely another figment of Vincent's imagination? Is he even in the Art Bar at all?

'Yeah,' she says. 'Do you know it?'

I put my glass on the bar. 'I know it.'

Fahreal lowers her voice and leans closer. 'A girl was murdered there, in her apartment. And, supposedly, the guy who did it jumped out of a window. But here's the thing. The apartment was on the fourth floor. Surely no one could fall that far and escape with no serious injuries?'[63]

I blink at her.

'It was the talk of the village for a few weeks,' she continues. 'Things like that don't really happen around here. I mean, this is New York, and everyone knows it's dangerous, everyone knows it's full of assholes, right? But this was different. Or at least, it felt different.'

I wince as I swallow another mouthful of neat vodka. 'If he broke in through the front door then why didn't he just leave the same way that he got in?'

'Exactly,' she says.

'Did they catch this person?'

'Well,' Fahreal says, 'if they did then I never heard about it. That's the problem with newspapers, right? The story is never finished. It's never done. They set the scene, they tell you that something's happened, a murder, a robbery, whatever, and then you might follow the story for like, a week, or something, and you might read about someone being taken in to custody and then released on bail, but then something else happens. Something that's bigger, more recent, more important. And suddenly, the original story you were following seems to get lost. And on and on it goes.' She points at the empty glass in my hand. 'Another?'

I look at the glass. I think I might be drunk. 'Yeah,' I say.

She tops me up again. The measures are getting bigger. Fahreal winks at me as she pours and I can feel my cock stirring in my trousers and I think I might want to fuck her.

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[63] I'm not sure, but I believe that this is again hinting at the multiverse theory. It seems too coincidental that Vincent, who we are told has fallen from a window, should find himself in the precise location of an almost identical accident. Furthermore, we are told that a young girl was murdered in the apartment on Perry Street, and we know that Vincent's girlfriend, Emily, was also murdered, in Manchester. My suggestion is that there are two parallel realities at work in *VOID*: the reality in which Vincent is in Manchester with Emily, and the reality in which he has come to New York in order to reprimand Emily's killer. The realm we occupy in the world of the novel is somewhere between the two: it is the grey area between two opposing realities. This is hinted at throughout the novel with allusions to Vincent's unreliable memory and his failing eyesight. The question is, if Vincent isn't in Manchester, and he isn't in New York either, then where is he? Does he exist only between these pages? Or is there some destination to which all the textual signs point in unison?

'But there's more to the story, if you ask me,' she says. 'There's something the cops know that we don't. But, that's life, huh? Life revolves around the fact that there are people who are more important than we are, who know more about stuff than we do.'

'There are some sick people around,' I say.

'Anyway,' she says. 'This guy just jumps from the window, onto the street below, and no one sees or hears anything. It's almost as if he jumped into another world.'

Suddenly I start to feel ill. It's funny how drinking on an empty stomach creeps up on you, much like the physical and mental damage associated with it. I feel my larynx rise to choke me, fighting the vomit reflex. The girl is still talking.

'…really freaked me out. I mean, I live in Brooklyn, so I have to walk from here to the subway late at night on my own sometimes. I mean, I'd get a cab, but this is New York and I'm on minimum wage…'

'They say truth is stranger than fiction.'

As soon as these words leave my lips, I feel my face flush and my vision begins to blur and the floaters in my eyes start to flash and I feel like I might be about to rock backwards and fall off the barstool. I hold on to the bar with both hands to steady myself. This happens sometimes. It happens when I stand up too quickly or when I drink too much.

'That's so trippy,' Fahreal says. 'Can you imagine it? A character from a novel leaves the fictional world, comes to the real world and commits a murder, and then jumps back into the fictional world again? Jeez.'[64]

I stand up. She is still talking. I look at my watch, my stopped watch. 'I have to go,' I say. 'I need to be somewhere.'

'Oh,' she says, and I think I might have interrupted her but I'm not sure.

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[64] I must say, I don't know what to make of this passage. It strikes me as somewhat clumsy and over-written, and too obvious: in fact I would go as far as to say that it cheapens the sophisticated slow-revealing structure of the wider novel. But it seems to me that nothing in *VOID* is done without deliberation, and this leads me to the conclusion that the author must have purposefully included these lines as a means of indicating that plot is unimportant here. So that the reader literally 'loses the plot' perhaps? Although I don't see quite what you're getting at here, Ike. This isn't giving away the plot of the novel: Vincent hasn't left the world of the novel and visited the real world and committed a murder – or at least not to the best of my knowledge. Unless you're interpreting the story more literally than I am? Either way, this is an interesting discussion point and one which we should pick up further down the line.

I leave two twenty dollar bills on the bar and I step out onto the street. It is very bright, and the sun attacks my eyes. The floaters in my vision are always worse when it's sunny because the shadows contrast more with the light. I squint, feeling the exothermic effect of the vodka more now that I'm on my feet.

I feel as though I am both alive and dead. Both real and something else.[65] Maybe the solution to this paradox fell with me from that window, a lifetime ago, never to be reclaimed.

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[65] You don't need me to spell it out, I'm sure, but here's the Schrödinger motif again.

# guardian

Emily does not come online again for a few days. It probably has something to do with her suspicious boyfriend. You spend all day every day at the laptop, filling in surveys and pretending to be Davison, but Emily's status is always set to offline.

On the fourth day Davison receives a friend request from a girl named Jadee Janes. You click on her profile page and you have a look at some of her information.

Jadee Janes is a porn star.

On her page she says that she prefers the term 'pornographic actress.'

Davison and Jadee Janes share no mutual friends but you accept the friend request because it's one more affirmation of Davison's popularity. You browse through some of Jadee's pictures, and she looks familiar. At first you're not sure where you've seen her before. It takes a while, but it eventually dawns on you, horribly, like the all-too-common feeling when you wake up and think that everything is fine but then you realise that the previous night you got pissed and either said something you shouldn't have said or did something you shouldn't have done, or perhaps both.

Jadee Janes looks like Emily.

In fact, Jadee Janes looks so much like Emily that you are convinced that Jadee Janes *is* Emily.

It looks as if Emily has set up the page and has taken photographs of herself and altered them, just like you did when you created Davison.

By now you are an expert in the mechanics of online identity manipulation. You spend a while looking at Jadee's page and comparing it to Emily's. You look for

the obvious giveaways first: duplicated photographs, common mistakes in spelling and punctuation, mutual friends, but the only mutual friend of Jadee and Emily is Davison.

You delve a little deeper. You look at the times at which Emily posts her status updates and the times at which Jadee posts hers and try to find some correlation between the two – an indication that they have both been online at the same time.

Nothing.

Jadee has a lot of friends on her page, but the page looks as if it has been recently set up. The oldest post on the page appeared less than a month ago.

Next, you search on several adult tube sites for a porn star named Jadee Janes. No matches found. In fact the only reference to Jadee Janes you can find in the entire online realm is the 'fan page' from which you received the friend request.

You get up from the table and you leave the laptop and go into the bedroom and stare at yourself in the wardrobe mirror for a while like you're looking for an answer. And soon enough, the answer comes: Vincent. Emily's boyfriend. She told you he was suspicious, jealous of her talking to other men, and she told you that he's always on the computer; now he's set up a false page so he can spy on her interactions with Davison. When you realise this you feel like jumping up and punching the fucking air.

Davison could 'unfriend' Jadee by reversing the friend request he accepted but that would look too suspicious from Vincent's point of view. A more effective, and more exciting, means of exposing Vincent will be to use Davison to catch him out.

Back in the kitchen, the laptop has gone to sleep. You take the vodka from the cupboard and look around for

a glass but you can't find one so you just drink from
the bottle. You knock back a couple of mouthfuls then
place the bottle on the table next to the computer. You
put on your shoes. You put on your coat. It's starting
to look a lot like you are about to leave the flat. It
is important not to jump to hasty conclusions, and there
is just one more place you want to visit in your search
for Jadee Janes.

# ten.

I am sitting on the bed in my hotel room with a pen and a sheet of paper from the envelope I found. I'm resting the sheet of paper on top of a copy of the Wall Street Journal, for extra support.

I'm not sure what I'm doing but I think I'm trying to 'free write'. The point of 'free writing' is that you are not meant to think about the words you are forming. You are meant to just pour them out. It is a subconscious exercise, but it isn't working. The sheet of paper is blank, perhaps as blank as my subconscious itself.

I think that my original intention was to write some kind of letter to Emily. An explanation. There is no way for me to show the letter to Emily, but it doesn't matter. It is more important for me to write the letter than it is for anyone else to ever see it.

I shut my eyes. Move the pen across the paper. After around thirty seconds, I open my eyes and I try to decipher the hieroglyphs in front of me.

My handwriting is poor at the best of times. Writing with my eyes closed makes it even worse, but I can make out some of the words I've written: Monday morning. Sunshine. *Herald Tribune*. Art Bar. Johnny's Bar. Perry Street. I look at the words and I notice that the fine blonde hairs on my arms are standing on end.[66] I use my mobile phone to take a photograph of the page. The word in my head is 'negatives'.

I turn the piece of paper over and begin writing on the reverse side. This time I keep my eyes open as I write, but I try not to read what I've written, or even to think about it. I write for around twenty minutes, barely pausing at all. When I've finished, I quickly fold the piece of paper and put it in my pocket.

The letter is addressed to Emily and it seems unfair that I should know what it says before she does.

It is something of an injustice that she never will.

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[66] This section corresponds directly to one of the Facebook pages I discovered. It seems that one of Vincent's online 'friends' suggested that he complete this exercise in order to unlock his memories. See www.facebook.com/escandctrl. [N.B. Fatima: Perhaps we could include some screen-shots in the new edition? I'm also thinking it might be an idea to include some of our email correspondence in order to contextualise the discussions we're having in these notes. What do you think?] `I'll need to think about that. What would be the scholarly or critical gain of such a move? Although, having said that, the manner in which you're annotating this is antitraditional in itself, yet somehow it works.`

Next thing I know I am lying on the floor in my hotel room and I am trying to sleep but I can't stop thinking about the argument that Emily and I had over the video.

I don't know why I am lying on the floor and not on the bed. I think a few hours might have passed and I think I might have been to a bar. I think I might be drunk and maybe I tried to get onto the bed but didn't make it.

I don't remember exactly how the argument started, but she probably said something like, 'Vin, I need to talk to you,' or, 'Vin, I need to tell you something.'

That's what she used to call me. Vin.

Anyway, I probably said something like, 'Why, what's wrong?'

And she probably told me to sit down.

Bad news is always worse when someone prefaces it with 'I need to tell you something' or 'sit down'. But I probably sat down anyway. I don't remember.

And she probably said something like, 'Do you remember the video we made?'

And I guess I said something like, 'Yeah, of course I remember. What about it?'

And then she probably said, 'It ended up on the internet.'

At this point I think I said, 'What do you mean "it ended up on the internet"?'

But if I did say that then it would have been a rhetorical question, because of course I knew exactly what she meant. She meant that the video we made, the video that was supposed to have been seen by me and by her and by us and no one else, was now on the internet with the potential to be downloaded and shared amongst literally billions of people that neither of us had ever met.

'It ended up on the internet,' she probably repeated.

This is probably the point where I lost it. I probably said, 'How the fuck did it end up on the internet?' Or, maybe, 'How did it end up on the fucking internet?' thereby modifying the expletive from an abstract noun to an adjective.[67] If I was

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[67] I remember that this sentence jarred with me the first time I read the novel, and continues to jar with me now. Vincent tells us that he is not a learned man, that he does not read books or study them, and that the last book he read was an instruction manual. It seems rather out-of-place, therefore, that he would decorate his usually rather informal language with linguistic digressions such as we see here. I very much doubt that this is a mistake on the author's part, since I would suggest that the author probably knows his [sic]! characters better than anyone. For this reason, I conclude that this is a subtle hint: Vincent is not as much of a layman as he may claim to be, and is also not entirely

particularly angry, which I probably was, then I might even have said, 'How the fuck did it end up on the fucking internet?'

Anyway.

She said, 'Someone uploaded it.'

I said, 'Who the fuck uploaded it? You're the only person who has a copy.'

'No,' she said. 'There's someone else, too.'

'Someone else?' I think I said. 'Who?'

'I sent it to someone. On email.'

'Who, Emily? You'd better fucking tell me.'

'A guy.'

'A guy?'

'Yeah.'

'Which guy?'

'Just this guy I've been chatting to. He asked me to show it to him.'

'And you fucking sent it to him?'

She took a step back at this point. I probably looked as angry as I felt and she was probably worried that I was going to break something – perhaps her.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I trusted him.'

'I want to know who the fuck he is,' I said.

'He's no one. Just someone I've been talking to on the internet.'

'Well in that case I want to know why the fuck you're talking to men on the internet,' I said.

She went to say something, and I interrupted her.

'Have you met up with this person?'

'No,' she said.

'You fucking have,' I said. 'Have you fucked him?'

'No!' she pleaded.

'You do realise that there's no way we can ever get that video off the internet, don't you?' I shouted. 'This is going to haunt you for ever. Everyone who sees it will either think you're a fucking porn star or a whore.'

It was right on the word 'whore', I think, that Emily started wailing.

I left the room and I got her laptop.

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honest with the reader. This notion of the unreliable narrator is a central problematic to *VOID* and one which will become more important as the story progresses.

'Show me the video,' I said, when she followed me.

She stood behind me and threaded her arms through mine. 'What?' she said. 'You've already seen the video, Vin.'

Sometimes, having a conversation with Emily was as frustrating and physically exerting as trying to walk the wrong way up an escalator. 'I fucking know that,' I said. 'Show me the site that it's on.'

She took the laptop and I watched as she typed: www.the-load.com.[68] 'The fucking load,' I said, to no one in particular.

She found the video. As she handed the laptop to me, I noticed that she was shaking. 'Here,' she said. 'I can't even look at it.'

I pressed play.

The shaky thirty-second-long exposé of what should have been great personal intimacy started running.

'How long has it been online for?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she said. 'Five days? A week, maybe? I just don't know. I'm so sorry, Vin.'

I looked at the right hand corner of the screen: 26,968 views.

I slammed the lid to the laptop.

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[68] At the time of writing, this is an invalid web domain.

# two for sixty

You walk down the ramp from Piccadilly Station until you reach the gardens. It's early but several of the pubs you pass are open and you want to get a pint but the vodka is still swilling round inside you and you're sure you'll puke if you do. You turn right up Lever Street. There's some blood on the floor in dark brown spots and as you walk the spots get smaller and the gaps between them get bigger and then the spots stop completely.

At the lights you go left onto Stevenson Square, then Hilton Street. You cross Oldham Road, carry along through Tib Street past the jazz bar. Fantasy World is on Monica Street but a conspicuous window sign declares *We have a back entrance via Hendricks Walk.*

The metal staircase on Hendricks Walk is corroded and smells of piss. Cigarette ends line the gutters. A gob of phlegm clings to a crack in the brickwork with a silver snail trail revealing its slippery descent from impact point. A few metres away, on the tarmac, lies a dead bird: featherless, pink, flew the nest too early. You grip the grease-slicked door handle and take a breath.

You are the shop's only customer.

An obese man in his early forties sits at the counter running a biro down a column in the *Racing Post*. He has large breasts and a straggly beard and he looks like he suffers from sleep apnoea. Behind him a muted TV screen shows a skinny white girl being double-teamed by two black men.

The obese man says nothing.

The door clicks shut behind you and you step past the rack of Thai Beads and Amyl Nitrate and giant veiny

dildos (The Incredible Bulk, The Sperminator) and go over to the DVD section.

Now the obese man speaks. He has a thick northern accent. He says: Thirty-five each; two for sixty.

You ignore him and pick a box, any box, from the shelf. You flip the case over and look at the back: a plethora of depucelated bodies.

The obese man starts talking again. He says: Rare as hen's teeth, that one.

You look at the title: *Weapons of Ass Destruction.* Underneath the title it says *Twats Creamed and Assholes Reamed.* You replace the box and select another.

The obese man is still talking. Nodding towards the DVD in your hand he says: There won't be any more of those, let me tell you. The actress in it, they've found out she's underage. Used a fake I.D., she did, lied about her age. I'd say that one'll be recalled before you can say tight-underage-pussy.

You study the girls. The pert breasts and hairless genitals and vacant eyes betraying the shame they attempt to conceal with their cum-splattered smiles.

The obese man repeats his first statement. Two for sixty.

You peruse the shelves. Some of the titles are tenuously linked to the names of British daytime TV shows. There's *Gash in the Attic*, *The (Sexual) Antics Roadshow*, and the blatantly obvious *Cum Dine With Me*.

Those ones are cheaper, the obese man says.

You put *Bargain Cunt* back on the shelf. You ask why they're cheaper.

Because they're amateur. Made in Britain. Cheaper to make, cheaper to sell, cheaper to buy.

As you trawl through the shelves, the obese man continues babbling. You know what they say, he smirks.

If you take the name of your first pet and your mother's maiden name, then that's your porn star name.

You consider this for a second. You wonder whether this is what people refer to as small talk. You turn to him and you ask: What's yours?

Mine? The obese man says. Percy Bradshaw.

That doesn't sound like a porn star, you say. It sounds like someone from a soap opera.

The obese man looks offended. Well, what would yours be?

You tell him you've never had a pet.

It seems as though your presence in the shop is making the obese man uneasy. It seems as though he has other things on his mind. It seems as though he wants you to hurry up and make your selection, purchase the DVD, and fuck off. Looking for anything in particular? he asks.

You get straight to the point. You say: Do you have anything starring Jadee Janes?

Who?

Jadee Janes.

Never heard of her, the obese man says. Let's get her up on the old computer. Let the dog see the rabbit.

He swivels his chair ninety degrees anti-clockwise and begins tapping on a battered (and, you think, no doubt semen-encrusted) keyboard, breathing heavily as he does so, lungs heaving under the enormous pressure of his gut.

You watch him type. He's the sort of infuriating cunt who types using only one digit from each hand. His brow wrinkles as he struggles with the concept of the computer's search function. A single bead of sweat forms below his hairline and trickles down the centre of his forehead before being intercepted by the tuft of hair sprouting from between his eyebrows.

The obese man is talking again. How are you spelling that? he asks. Is it J.D., like, initials? Or is it an actual name, like, J-A-D-E-Y?

You tell him it's Jadee. J-A-D-E-E.

He widens his eyes and he says, Ah.

He types something into the computer.

You watch him.

Nope, he says. She's not on this database.

I don't think she exists, you say.

What? the obese man asks.

Nothing.

His expression is one of increasing concern. Anything else? he asks.

You consider his question.

Not particularly, you say.


On the way back to the flat you stop at a newsagent's. It is an entirely unplanned visit, executed at the spur of the moment. You are going to buy a scratch card.

In the shop there is a vast selection of different cards to choose from. Some of the cards offer prizes of up to £250,000 but they are more expensive to buy. You settle for a green scratch card with a picture of a leprechaun on it. The scratch card costs £1 and the maximum prize you can win is £50,000.

The shopkeeper hands you the card and wishes you good luck. He doesn't look like a particularly lucky person. He has a mournful expression, like a man waiting at a bus stop, with shoes full of water.

You won't scratch the card now. You will wait until later on. It is nice to have a small piece of hope in your pocket. It is nice to have something to look forward to.

As you continue your walk back to the flat you wonder what you would do if you won £50,000. You look down at your jeans. They are tattered around the cuffs and split at the crotch. You've already bought a T-shirt. Perhaps you would buy an entire wardrobe. Then you consider the fact that you are walking because you can't afford a taxi and because buses are always filled with a depressing line-up of young thugs and old dotards who smell of tweed soaked in stale urine. Maybe you would buy a car. Or put a deposit on a house.

With new clothes, a new car and a new house you could become a completely different person. Identity isn't something you are any more: it's something you shop for. It's not a noun any more, just a verb.

*

When you arrive back at the flat, unscratched scratch card in your back pocket, there is a parcel propped up against the wall outside your front door. It's a large brown bubble-wrap envelope; the label says Tee-4-2: The Online T-Shirt Specialists. You pick it up. It is light and soft. Your name is on a sticker on the front of the package.

Inside your flat, you open the envelope and take out the T-shirt. You hold it up, as if you're examining it for stains. It's bigger than you expected it to be. You ordered medium but this looks large. You check the tag: medium.

You put the T-shirt on and you stand in front of the mirror. Now that it's on you, it looks even bigger. And it doesn't look good. In fact, it doesn't even look all right. Its newness contrasts noticeably with your otherwise shabby appearance and this makes you look

fucking ridiculous. If you are going to pull this off then you will need to buy more new clothes.

You remove the scratch card from your pocket. It is creased in a diagonal line running from the bottom left-hand corner to the top right. You wonder what pressed against it to make it crease in that particular pattern. You lay the scratch card flat on the table and scratch off a small portion of the silver film. You are using your thumbnail because you can't find a coin. Specks of the film collect on the table and some of them flutter to the floor. Some of it builds up under your nail, and you consider the irony of the fact that your existence has sunk to such a nadir that you cannot even find a coin to scratch a scratch card with.

The first number you reveal is £2.00.

You look at the flecks of silver and you are reminded of cigarette ash.

You scratch off some more of the foil.

£100.

£2000.

At this point you stop. You wonder whether it might be a pleasant idea to ration the scratch card. To reveal one number each day, like an advent calendar of potential wealth. This is what your life has become. Each day reduced to a meaningless stream of digits, of noughts and ones.

Quickly, you get to work on the rest of the card. There are six more numbers to reveal.

£10.

£100.

£2.

You take a deep breath.

You continue scratching at the foil.

£20.

And then.

£2000.

One more and you win two grand: your fate dangling from the thread of the final number.

You scratch a little.

You reveal a zero.

You scratch more.

A two.

With your heart pounding in your stomach you scratch off the rest of the film.

£2.00.

You have won two pounds.

You feel as though someone has pissed on a bonfire you haven't yet lit.

You look at the scratch card and you do the maths. It's not all bad. You've doubled your money. If you continue to double your money each time you buy a scratch card, then it will not take long to amass a considerable amount.

Two times two is four.

Times two is eight.

Times two is sixteen.

Thirty-two.

Sixty-four.

A hundred and twenty-eight.

Just like a computer's x86 registers.

You sit at the laptop and log on to the social networking site. Emily is offline again. You scroll idly through her page, looking at photos, reading comments and clicking links at random. Isn't it funny how we are all characters in our own lives? We narrate our own existences through text and pictures, words and images, and nothing is official until it appears online.

Reality is merely a footnote on the stories we tell each
other every day.

# eleven.

I open my eyes. A phone is ringing. It is distant, muffled. It is coming from a different room in the hotel. I try to relax back into the dream but I'm distracted by the noise.

I look slowly to my left.

The ringing is not coming from an adjacent room.

The ringing is coming from inside the wardrobe.

Am I dreaming?

Of course not. It is common, when dreaming, to imagine that you are awake, but no one, when awake, ever truly believes he is dreaming. I sit up.

The red phone, from the apartment. It is still in the wardrobe, where I left it. I jump up from the bed. I imagine the phone inside the wardrobe – the receiver rattling in its cradle with every shrill blast of the bell – and I imagine it shaking the door off its hinges and I picture everything spilling out of the wardrobe onto the floor and The Voice's thick, filthy instructions flowing from the earpiece like raw sewer sludge and covering me, my belongings, the whole room in a mask of slurry. I stand and cross the carpet and shakily I grip the door handles, one in each hand, and I take a deep breath.

The phone's ringing is shrill and hollow, like coins rattling in a glass jar. I open the doors.

I remove the phone – the unplugged phone – and I place it on the bed. I stand and stare at it, regarding its pained screams and choric whines, its pleading to be answered.

And then I do as it commands: I pick up the receiver.

The Voice says that he is ready to meet me, face to face.

Why? I ask. I sit down on the edge of the bed.

It is time, The Voice says.

Time? What's changed?

Nothing has changed, The Voice says, except for the fact that it is time. Yesterday would have been too early; tomorrow will be too late.

How do I know that this isn't a set-up?

You don't. You're just going to have to trust me. I haven't lied to you yet. In fact, as a gesture of goodwill, I'll even let you decide on a time and venue.

What day's today? I ask. What time is it?

The phone line crackles as he exhales smoke into the receiver. It's Sunday 26th August, he says. And it is eleven thirty-two am.

I say, I'll meet you at eight this evening.

Perfect, The Voice says. Where?

I reach across the bed and pick up the *Lonely Planet Guide to New York* and flick to the index. I find the 'BARS' section.

I tell The Voice to pick a number. He picks seventeen. I count down to the seventeenth bar on the list: Blind Tiger.

Don't be late, The Voice says. If you're late, I'll leave.

I ask The Voice how I will know who he is and he just says: You'll know. Then he hangs up.

The curtains are pulled shut and the room is dim.

I can still see the floaters. I think they might be getting worse. Apparently it's a sign of ocular deterioration if you start seeing them in dim light.

I shut my eyes and lie back on the bed.

My sleep is coma-black and I emerge from it, two hours later, as torpid and sluggish as a bird caught in an oil slick.

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There is a word in my head, and the word is 'trickster'. The first letter is capitalised. The word is followed by three exclamation marks.

I picture myself sitting on a stool in Johnny's Bar. I'm not sure what I'm doing but I think I'm killing time. I think I am thinking about the day Emily and I broke up.

It was the video that started it, really.

That was what could rightly be referred to as the beginning of the end.

Or, perhaps, the end of the beginning, and the start of something else.

It wasn't merely the fact that the video had made its way online that bothered me. I hated the fact that others were looking at her in that way, seeing her in a way that was intended only for me, but the real problem was the deceit: at that point I knew, for sure, that I could no longer trust her.

I wanted her to hate me so that I wouldn't feel guilty about hating her back. But there was a break in the circle of hatred, and the break was Emily.

I remember looking on the laptop. Finding the conversations and looking over them. Seeing in black and white what she'd said about me, about our relationship. The conversations were saved to the computer. I had all the evidence I needed. No matter how much I torture myself over the reasons for her behaviour, I still cannot explain why she would send an intimate video clip to someone she'd never met.

I consider the fact that some things are endlessly inexplicable and I take comfort in the fact that parallel lines meet at infinity.

Emily was the sort of person who liked to take unnecessary risks. Perhaps it gave her a thrill: maybe there was something missing from her life and this was the only way she felt she could fill the void.

Emily once told me that when she was a child she would shine the infra-red beam from a TV remote control into her eye, just to see if it would make her go blind.

It is deeply sad that the only people who know where the edge is are those who have gone over.[69]

That's the poisoned and mortal wound of the real world.[70]

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[69] This is another reference to Hunter S. Thompson who famously wrote: 'The Edge... There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over. The others – the living – are those who pushed their luck as far as they felt they could handle it, and then pulled back, or slowed down, or did whatever they had to when it came time to choose between Now and Later. But the edge is still Out there. Or maybe it's In.' See Hunter S. Thompson, *Hells Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of America's Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (London: Penguin, 2003).

[70] Again, perhaps I'm stretching it, but this seems to refer to Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden*: 'You are forced to pretend outward respect for people and institutions you find ridiculous ... You remain cowardly attached to moral or social conventions you despise, condemn and which you know lack all foundation ... It's the permanent contradiction between your ideas and desires on the one hand and all the dead forms and vain phantoms of your civilization on the other that makes you sad, troubled and unbalanced. In that intolerable conflict you lose all joy of life and all feeling of personality because every moment the free play of your strength is restrained, impeded and checked. That's the poisonous

[xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxvoid]

and mortal wound of the civilised world.' Octave Mirbeau [1898], *Torture Garden*, trans. Michael Richardson (Sawtry: Dedalus Ltd., 2010), pp. 94-95.

# III: hacked.

# twelve.

Blind Tiger is in the heart of Greenwich Village and this means it is easy to find. I think I've been here before.[71]

I arrive early. I take a seat and I wait for The Voice. In my mind, I sketch some of the features into his outline. The Voice, I imagine, is slightly older than I am. He is taller and gaunter, and he has an unkempt moustache which hangs into his mouth. His clothes are ill-fitting: most likely too big. His fingers are nicotine-brown, and his nails are like beetle wings. He has the complexion of a crumpled ten-dollar bill: lumpy and yellow-hued. If there was a word to describe The Voice's appearance then it would be 'unnerving'.[72]

Fifteen minutes pass, and The Voice doesn't turn up. I connect to the internet on my phone and check my emails. There are a few notifications from the social networking site, but nothing else. I decide that I will wait until eight-thirty. If The Voice isn't here by then, I will leave. I stand and go to the bar to get another couple of drinks,[73] and that's when I see her. It is like seeing a ghost. I feel the blood turn sour in my veins.

She's sitting alone, on a stool at the end of the bar, typing on her mobile. I didn't notice her when I arrived. Perhaps she got here after I did. I was sitting with my back to the door, facing the wall, and so I wouldn't have seen her walk in. I step closer, and I glance sideways at her, inspecting her in profile. If Corey was here, he'd describe her as 'quite a customer'. Her red hair, short and choppy, hangs in her

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[71] Blind Tiger is at 281 Bleecker Street, New York, NY, 10014.

[72] A rather enlightening passage. Whenever I picture The Voice, I think of Dean Moriarty. It often strikes me as an impressive facet of the human consciousness that a piece of fiction can evoke in the reader's mind such distinct and vivid imagery despite, at the level of the line, saying very little. But the language used here, in particular the notion of sketching features into an outline, appears somewhat contrived. Once again, the author is deliberately drawing the reader's attention to the fact that The Voice is an artificial construct: a fictional character.

[73] The fact that Vincent always orders two drinks has once again got me thinking of the doppelgänger motif. Specifically, it's got me thinking about Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Despair*, the basic plot of which goes like this: Hermann meets a tramp called Felix. In Hermann's mind, he and the tramp bear an uncanny resemblance. Hermann tricks Felix into changing places with him, and then kills him in order to claim insurance money. But what he originally believed to be the perfect murder turns out not to be so when others fail to see the resemblance between the two men. We know from the outset of the novel that Hermann is an unreliable narrator and, furthermore, Nabokov's tale is a self-begetting novel in that it accounts for its own coming-into-being. As I sit here and ponder the different layers of intertext at play in *VOID* I find myself wondering whether, like me, the author read Nabokov's novel.

face as she hovers over her phone's keypad. A stud glistens in the left side of her nose. She might have a stud in the right side too, but I can't see that much. She has three earrings in her ear; one at the top, one in the lobe and another in the part of the ear that touches her cheek. I can never remember what that part of the ear is called.[74] I look at her fingers. They are small and delicate, and they dance over her phone, pirouetting from key to key.[75] She is using both thumbs to type on the keypad, holding the device in two hands. I've never been able to do that. The keys are too small.[76]

Her short fingernails are painted black. She looks like the sort of person who listens to rock music and rides a motorbike. She looks like the sort of person who belongs to a book group and hangs out in dusty pubs and bars, talking about novels by obscure French writers.

There is a word in my head and the word is 'doppelgänger'.[77]

I buy two bottles and two shots and I return to my table in the corner.

This time I sit in a different chair, facing the bar, so that I can watch her.

Now I'm starting to feel drunk. I'm halfway through the second bottle of beer, and I downed both shots before I got back to my seat.

I feel the alcohol wet my brain and my senses: the familiar rosacea-warmth in the cheeks; the beautiful, vertiginous light-headedness; the caustic twinge of acid reflux in my solar plexus; the heaviness in the upper eyelids. As I look at my fingers, wrapped tightly around the frosted beer bottle, I notice that my hand has stopped shaking: a sure sign that the delirium tremens has been sated by the influx of ethanol coursing through my system.

I stare at the girl sitting at the bar. The resemblance is uncanny. I think Emily might have faked her own death and moved to New York. Maybe that's why I came here. Maybe Corey was wrong. Maybe I wasn't looking for a guy at all. Maybe I was looking for Emily. Sometimes, a person simply wants to step from one life into

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[74] It's called the tragus.

[75] I'm not sure of the relevance of this, but when Vincent woke up in the apartment he described his position on the floor as a 'ballet dancer mid-pirouette'. The repetition of the pirouette image, coupled with the key motif, is difficult to ignore.

Maybe I'm clutching at straws but the word 'pirouette' derives from the French pirouet which means, literally, a spinning top. Could this be a reference to storytelling, i.e. spinning a yarn? Just a thought.

[76] Or maybe your thumbs are too big.

[77] Mine too.

another. And in order to do this, one life must end. It is, after all, impossible for a person to occupy two spaces at the same time.[78]

I continue to watch her. She's not tapping on her phone any more. She's looking away from me, reading one of the faded posters stuck to the wall. I wonder who she's texting, and I consider confronting her. I've lost so much weight that she probably wouldn't recognise me if I did. Looking at her from this angle, I notice that part of her head – the right side, the side I couldn't see when regarding her from the previous angle – is shaved to a couple of millimetres in length. Her hair wasn't like that last time I saw her. I think it suits her. I imagine touching the soft velvet of her scalp and I imagine what it might be like to –

Suddenly her head spins round, as if on a spring-catch, like an owl's head, and she's staring straight at me.

And I'm staring into her eyes.

Not at them, but into them.

Blink.

'Are you all right?' she asks.

'Emily,' I say.

She looks over her shoulder, then back at me. 'Who's Emily?'

'Don't give me that,' I say. 'I know exactly –

'You're English,' she interrupts. 'Where are you from?'

'Manchester,' I say. 'You know that.'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

The girl's mobile beeps and she looks down at it.

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[78] ~~Remember the chapter in which Vincent speaks to Corey in Johnny's Bar, and Corey describes the 'porn star' with whom Vincent was presumably seen the previous week? Well, the way I pictured the 'porn star' when I read that section is almost identical to the way in which the girl is described here. Since we know that the girl here bears an 'uncanny' resemblance to Emily, it makes me wonder whether the girl Vincent brought to Johnny's Bar was, in fact, Emily. Since Vincent never tells us how recently Emily's death occurred, it could feasibly be that he is narrating his tale only a few days afterwards.~~

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I don't think that's necessarily correct, Ike. We know that Emily
was killed in Manchester, while Vincent was in New York. Unless they
travelled to New York together, and then Emily returned home alone,
I don't see how we could have had them both in New York together so
close to the timeframe in which the novel is narrated. I understand
that you are writing these footnotes from the perspective of someone
who has, like me, read VOID several times and therefore knows how
the story ends. But I would suggest that this footnote will be
confusing for readers who are new to the book. I'd recommend
deleting this one.
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'You?' I ask.

'Stoke-on-Trent,' the girl says, without looking up from her phone. 'The place where good times come to die.' She presses a button and then sets the phone back on the bar. Then she says, 'This fucking guy is never gonna show up. What a fucking waste of time.'

'I'm meeting someone too,' I say.

She already looks bored.

'Name?' she says. She sounds like the sort of girl who knows what she wants. She looks like the sort of girl who knows how to get it. I'm staring at those jet-black fingernails and I'm thinking about something someone once told me: if a girl keeps her fingernails short, then she probably likes to masturbate. This girl looks like the type of person who likes to get herself off, but she also looks like the type of person who might have short fingernails for another reason – for playing guitar, perhaps.

'I'm Vincent,' I say.

She rolls her eyes. 'Not *your* name,' she says. 'The name of whoever it is you're supposed to be meeting.'

I take a sip of my drink and I say, 'I don't know.'

The girl winces. 'What?'

'I don't know his name,' I say.

She looks pissed off. She looks like she knows exactly which pieces of information that she wants, and she wants them quickly and efficiently with no frills attached. She wants a conversation in text-speak, streamlined and fat-free, in 140 characters or less.

I say, 'Are you sure we've never met?'

'Not as far as I remember,' she replies. 'And, believe me, I would remember. The conversation so far has been simply riveting.' She waves to the barman and he saunters over to her.

I stand up, tripping over the chair leg, and stride over to the bar. 'I'll get this.'

'I don't accept drinks from strangers.'

'A stranger is just a friend you haven't met,' I say.

The girl looks at me, then the barman, then back at me again. She takes her purse out of her handbag. 'You're weird,' she says. 'Do you find this approach usually works?'

'Weirdness is just a shallow person's term for personality,' I say. 'I can't say I've ever tried this approach before.'

'I can tell.' She turns to the barman. 'I want a Jack Daniels. Neat. No ice, no slice. And squeeze a lime into it.'

The barman nods.

'You remind me of someone,' I say.

'I've heard that one before.' She spits the words out like grape seeds.

'Please,' I say. 'Let me buy this.'

She hesitates.

'Please,' I say again.

She sighs and places her purse on top of the bar, and looks straight at me. Her scowl softens slightly. 'If I accept then are you going to see it as a sign?' she says.

'A sign of what?'

Her guard slams up again. 'You know exactly what I mean,' she snaps. 'A sign that I'm interested in you. Sexually. Because I'm not. At all. No offence.'

'I won't see it as a sign.'

She chews her tongue, ruminating. 'Okay,' she says to the barman. 'This guy is paying.'

I pay for the drink and get another two for myself.

'Why are you buying two drinks at a time?' she asks.

'I drink very quickly.'

'Why don't you just come to the bar twice as often, then?' she says. 'They'll get warm.'

'It's fine,' I say. 'Listen. Are you related to someone called Emily?'

The barman places our drinks on the bar and I pay him. He looks at the three glasses in a manner which suggests that the consumption of alcohol disgusts him.

The girl knocks back her Jack Daniels. She swallows hard and says, 'I'm not related to anyone called Emily.'

Her tongue darts from her mouth and she licks her lips. I notice that one of her canines is slightly crooked, like Emily's, and I want her to bite me with it and I want it to bleed.

'Let me show you a photo of her,' I say. I reach into my back pocket but the photograph is not there. I stand up, frantically searching through my pockets.

'What are you doing?' the girl asks. She holds her glass up to the barman to indicate that she wants another.

'The photo,' I say. 'I've lost it.'

'Who is she, anyway?'

'A girl I went out with.'

'Past tense? Why don't you go out with her any more?'

I sit back down. 'Long story.'

'Maybe I have a long time.'

'She's dead.'

The girl's nose wrinkles. 'If she's dead then how could she be me?'

'Maybe she faked her own death.'

'Why would she do that?'

'I don't know. People fake their own deaths all the time.'

The girl nods, unfazed. She doesn't feel awkward about the revelation and she doesn't apologise for asking the question.

'Anything else?' I say.

She continues her interrogation. 'How old are you?' she demands. It's all very economical, all very precise and surgical. She has better things to do with her time, and she wants me to know it.

I tell her my age.

'How old do you think I am?' she says, cocking her head slightly to the left.

'I don't know,' I say. 'It's dark in here. I can't see you all that well.'

'Look closer, then.'

She looks about eighteen. She must be older than that, though – she's drinking in New York. She sits perfectly still while I inspect her, looking at her close up, then at length, then close up again, like I'm viewing an oil painting in a bulletproof case.

'Twenty-two,' I say.

'Good guess,' she says. 'Anyway. You've been stood up. Looks like I have too. Cunt.'

I smile. Emily used to say cunt, too.

She watches the barman free-pouring Jack Daniels into a fresh glass, then she turns to face me. 'I think you should buy me this one, as well,' she says.

'What's your name?' I ask.

'I'll tell you my name if you buy me a drink.'

'And I'll buy you a drink if you tell me your name,' I say.

She doesn't flinch. 'Uh-uh,' she says, with a quick shake of the head. 'Think of it like a game of Texas Hold 'Em. If you want to know my name, to see my cards, so to speak, then you pay for it. And I raise you a drink.'

I think it's clichéd that this sort of girl would ask for Jack Daniels. I'd have preferred it if she drank a white wine spritzer or a grapefruit martini, something distinctly at odds with her rock-chick image. But I don't say anything. I pay for the drink.

'You should switch to spirits,' the girl says, as she takes a sip. 'You'll get a belly on you, drinking like that.'

'I always thought I was too thin,' I say.

'You don't look too thin to me. Besides, skinny men make better lovers.'

'You'd know that, would you?'

'Yes,' she says. 'As a matter of fact I would.'

I lift my bottle to my lips.

'Ask me then,' she says.

'Ask you what?'

'My fucking name,' she snaps. 'Are you brain damaged, or something?'

'Yes.'

She stares at me for a few seconds. 'Really?'

'Really.'

She sets her glass on the bar. 'Go on, then,' she says. 'Explain.'

'I fell out of a window. Here in New York.'

The girl laughs. Then she notices that I'm not. 'How did you do that?' she says.

'I don't know.'

She grins. 'So, what, you came back here to find out whether you jumped or got pushed, right?'

There is a word in my head, but I can't see what the word is. I say, 'I suppose so.'

The girl smiles. 'I'm J.D.'

'That's cheating. What's your real name?'

'What the fuck are you on about?'

'J.D.,' I say. 'What does it stand for? Jack Daniels?'

'No,' she scowls. 'That's my name. Jadee. J-A-D-E-E. It's a nickname. A moniker. A fucking pseudonym. Call it what you want. I suppose you could say that my name's J.D. but I added the A and two Es just for shits and giggles.'

Jadee turns slightly to the left, regarding me suspiciously. She skates her tongue along her crooked tooth. In my head I see the word 'Emily' and the word is struck through with a thick black line.

'Tell me your story,' she says.

'I don't have a story.'

She picks up her glass and takes a sip. 'Try me.'

The only story I remember is the story of what's happened to me during these past few days so I give her a summary and she makes an uninterested face as if I've just told her my favourite colour.

'Nothing?' I ask.

She puts her glass down on the bar. There is a lipstick mark on it and I want to press my own lips against it to see how our mouths fit together. 'Well,' she says. 'It's a fucking strange story. But I've heard worse.'

The gulf of an awkward silence looms between us.

I say, 'Do you want another drink?'

'Yeah, she says, but not here. Let's walk.'

I look at the time on my mobile phone: 8.33pm.

'What's wrong?' she asks.

I say, 'I can't afford to miss him.'

She sighs. 'What time did he say he'd be here?'

'Eight.'

'Exactly,' she says. 'He hasn't showed up yet and he isn't going to. He's fucking with you, Vin, so fuck him right back.'

I take a step back from her and she says, 'What now?'

'Emily used to call me Vin.'

'I didn't realise,' Jadee says. 'Would you prefer me not to call you that?'

'No,' I say. 'It helps me to remember.'

'Look,' Jadee says. 'This guy's window of opportunity has closed. Do you think that he'd have hung around if you were over thirty minutes late? Of course he fucking wouldn't. But when one window closes, another opens. And you now have the opportunity to come and hang out with me. But if you don't make your decision right now, then that window is going to close as well.'

I neck the last of my beer and leave the bottles on the bar, and we get up from our stools in unison and step out in to the street, arm in arm.

# antagonist

In your flat, the picture of New York has fallen off the wall.

It looks as if the nail has bent under the weight of the frame, gradually migrating downwards before freeing itself from the wall altogether and falling to the floor bringing the picture, and some of the plaster, with it.

You find another nail. A larger one.

You find a claw hammer in one of the kitchen cupboards.

The claw hammer is heavy and it has a black rubber handle with embossed bumps for extra grip. You hold the hammer in your right hand and you turn it upside down and look underneath the base of the handle – made in China. The hammer looks new: you bought it over a year ago but it has only been used a couple of times.

You knock the nail into the wall, being careful not to strike your fingertips. Hanging the picture on the nail is a process of trial and error and as such it takes a few attempts to get the picture to sit at the correct angle. You hang the picture, step back from it and observe it, then move it slightly to the left or slightly to the right accordingly. When it's straight, you sweep the flecks of plaster from the floor using your sock.

You place the hammer on the table.

Later that night, you take the scratch card to the petrol station down the road so that you can collect your winnings. The kiosk is locked up for the night. But there is a little window on the right-hand side of the

doors where you can talk to the man inside and ask him to pass you things through a slit.

He tells you you can either take the £2 cash or you can trade it in for another scratch card. You can get one scratch card for £2, or two scratch cards for £1 each, depending on which card you choose. If you buy the £2 card then you have the chance to win £250,000. If you buy the £1 scratch cards then the maximum prize you can win is £100,000, but with two scratch cards you have twice the chance of at least winning something. Like everything, it's all about calculating the odds.

You buy two of the £1 scratch cards. The shopkeeper hands them to you without saying anything, and you wonder if you are less likely to win because of his reticence. When you bought the first scratch card, the one with the leprechaun on it, the shopkeeper at least wished you good luck. Perhaps that's why you won the £2 in the first place. You wonder if you should ask the shopkeeper to wish you luck before you scratch the foil off.

The shopkeeper is looking at you in a funny way.

It's probably because you're just standing in front of him with your mouth open, waiting for him to say good luck. It is two o'clock in the morning and he is probably not in the mood to socialise.

You scratch the silver foil off the first card. You lean on the metal ledge underneath the little window. The shopkeeper watches you. As he does so he makes a hissing sound with his mouth, like air escaping from a slow puncture in a rubber mattress.

You win nothing.

You begin scratching the foil off the second card.

Then you stop. You have not yet revealed any of the numbers. You stare at the card for a few seconds as if you're studying a photograph.

The shopkeeper continues to watch you. Can I help you? he asks, eventually.

I'm going to save this one, you say.

He opens his mouth and at first you think he's going to say something but instead he just inflates his cheeks and exhales slowly. You put the scratch card in your pocket and you turn and start walking back to your flat.

As you walk you have an idea: it's all to do with Schrödinger's cat paradox. You decide that the scratch card will remain unscratched. You will simultaneously win and lose, be simultaneously rich and poor. You will exist in two states at the same time.

You hit the spacebar on your laptop and the screen flickers to life.

There's a message from Emily waiting for you but you don't open it. Instead, you take the scratch card from your pocket and you place it on the glass table in front of you and you look at it. Something makes you want to rip it in half and throw it away without ever knowing what numbers are hidden beneath the foil. You sit staring, trance-like, at the scratch card for several minutes.

And then you open Emily's message.

> "Davison" `(why has she put his name in inverted commas? you wonder)`or whatever your fucking name *really* is… `(at this point you wonder why she used asterisks instead of italics or capitals)`what the fuck do you think you're playing at? You do realise that what you're doing is illegal? Well, let me sell you something `(this is a typo. She means` *tell* `you something)` – I'm going to report you. What you have done is a fucking gross invasion of my privacy. I sent you that video because I trusted you.
>
> Who the fuck is Jadee Janes? Why the fuck are there messages from you all over her page – inviting her to New York, saying you're some big shot in the adult industry…WTF?! And why the FUCK are my pictures and that fucking video listed under her name? It's had nearly 25k views in 4 days, you fucking DICK.
>
> Why the fuck did you do this to me? You're fucking pathetic.
>
> Talking to you is the biggest fucking mistake I've ever made.

You read the message. You note the absence of the 'Luv Em' suffix at the end. You read the message again. You visit Jadee's profile page and that's when you see that Emily is right. Davison *has* been talking to Jadee Janes. He has invited her to New York and he has said that he is a Marketing Director in the advertising side of the pornography industry. New photographs have appeared. Friend requests have been sent and received. Status updates have been posted.

And Jadee has responded.

In fact, the two seem to be getting along tremendously, a metaphorical house on fire and, to labour the metaphor, the fire is spreading rapidly.

You visit a tube site. You type in Jadee Janes and hit enter. A video appears and it has 23,891 views and

the girl in it looks like Emily. Emily never sent
Davison the video and the only other person with a copy
is Vincent.

Davison's account has been hacked.

# thirteen.

I walk with Jadee along Bleecker Street. She says she wants to go to the music venue, Le Poisson Rouge, that I saw advertised in the *Village Voice* in Johnny's Bar. She says there's a band playing, a British group called CreepJoint, that her brother used to hang around with at school.[79]

'You're quiet,' Jadee says. 'What's up?'

'I'm thinking.'

'What about?'

'Emily,' I say.

Jadee slows her pace, stops, and lights up a menthol cigarette. 'You know how much this pack of cigarettes cost?' she asks. 'Fifteen fucking dollars.'

'Do you want me to stop talking about her?' I say, as we start walking again.

'What?'

'It seemed as though you wanted me to change the subject.'

'Not at all,' Jadee says.

I look over at her. She is small and sharp and as thin as a spider.

'You can talk to me about her as much as you want to, if it helps.'

'Why would it help?'

Jadee pulls on her cigarette. 'I don't know. It just seems to me as if you might need to talk about her, that's all.'

'Ask me some questions,' I say, 'and I'll respond to them.'

She shakes her head. 'Uh-uh. I'm not here to interview you. Just talk about her. Say what you feel.'

I feel my face getting hot. I feel the prickle of sweat on my forehead.

'Look,' Jadee says. 'There's obviously something bothering you.'

I squeeze my eyes shut for a second, then open them again.

I realise that I really am here, walking through the West Village in Manhattan, with a girl on my arm that looks like Emily, but isn't Emily. She's just a wraith. Just a shadow on a cave wall.[80]

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[79] Here's the intertextual reference to CreepJoint again. See footnote 42.

[80] And here's the 'Allegory of the Cave' motif. It seems here that Vincent is hinting that he knows that Jadee is not real, and that she is merely a figment of his imagination. This strikes me as odd because, to me, Jadee is the most real and believable character in the novel.

'Come on, Vin,' Jadee says. She tightens her grip on my arm as if she's scared one of us might topple over. 'If Emily was here now, what would you say?'

'If Emily was here now,' I say, 'then there isn't a single thing that I would want to tell her. I would just want to listen to what she had to say, because that's what I never did at the time. And now it's too late, and it's killing me.'

She glances sideways at me. 'Why, what did she do?'

'She was messing around with other men. Talking to them on the internet.'

Jadee stops. She drops her cigarette on the floor and extinguishes it under the pointed toe of her black leather ankle boot. She gently pulls on my elbow, and turns me to the left, so that I'm facing her. She stares up, unblinking, into my eyes, and I stare down, unblinking, into hers.

'There's more to the story, isn't there? There's something you're not telling me.'

'Yes,' I say.

'Something you've never told anyone, right?' Jadee says.

I clear my throat.

'You didn't even tell Emily.'

I swallow phlegm.

'Vincent?'

I stare at her.

There is a word in my head and the word is.

The word is.

I can't see it properly but.

But I think the word is.

I think the word is.

Gotcha.

'You're right,' I say.

She looks at me, her eyes shimmering like pools of ink. 'Would it help if you told someone? If you told…me?'

A strand of Jadee's hair is stuck to her lip gloss and I want to unpick it but I'm afraid that if I reach out to touch her then my hand will go straight through her. I say, 'People pretend a problem shared is a problem halved. That's bullshit: a problem shared is a problem doubled. It's more economical to just keep the problem to myself.'

'Okay,' Jadee says. 'That's cool. Let's go.' She tugs my sleeve and as we walk I look down at our feet on the pavement and I notice that for every two steps I take she takes three, and whenever I try to synchronise my steps with hers, I end up having to skip so I can catch up.

'I betrayed her,' I say.

Jadee doesn't break her step.

'In what way?'

'In the worst way. The worst possible way.'

Jadee is silent.

'Say something,' I tell her.

'There's nothing to say. I'm just listening to you. Nothing I say will make any difference. We've all done it, Vin. I've betrayed people I love.' Jadee slows her pace and then stops completely. She lets go of my arm. 'Do you mind if I ask how she died?'

'She was murdered.'

'What?' She says it like she's misheard me, not like she's shocked. 'How? Where?'

I swallow.

'If this is making you uncomfortable, please say,' Jadee says.

'I was in New York,' I say. 'Emily was in Manchester. We'd fallen out. She was in the place that we shared together. Someone broke in while she was asleep and attacked her.'

'God,' she whispers. 'That's fucking awful.'

'I know.'

'God,' she says again.

We walk for a while in silence. At least it's as silent as New York ever gets. There's still the clunking of the subway trains beneath the road's surface, the honking of horns, the hissing of the sewers, the laughing and chatter and general hubbub of the night's revellers. Nevertheless, the silence between Jadee and me isn't an awkward silence. It's the sort of silence that can be shared by two people who are entirely comfortable with one another. It's the kind of silence that soothes. The kind of silence that speaks volumes.

She jabs me in the ribs, breaking my trance. 'Hey, Vin, do you know what Poisson Rouge means?'

'No,' I say.

'Try,' she says.

'Well, poisson could be poison. And rouge is red. Red Poison?'

She frowns. 'It means goldfish.'

'Where is this place, anyway?' I ask. 'I thought you said it wasn't far.'

She smiles. 'It isn't far. We're almost there. Here's another one for you – did you know that you can spell the word fish phonetically as G-H-O-T-I?'

'No.'

'Well, the G-H is pronounced as "*f*" as in the word 'rough'. The O is pronounced as "*i*" as in the word 'women'. And the T-I is pronounced as "*sh*" as in the word 'information'.[81]

'Not true,' I say. 'The only reason that the letters are pronounced that way is because of how they relate to the other words around them. They're all part of a bigger structure.'[82]

Jadee untangles her arm from mine and lights another cigarette. 'Isn't everything? You and me, we're part of a bigger structure. There's probably a complex network of people and places that linked us together long before we met tonight. Six degrees of separation and all that.'

'Like social networking. Friends of friends.'[83]

'I suppose,' she says. 'Hey, what's your take on silent letters?'[84]

'What, you mean like the N at the end of Autumn?'

'Yeah,' she says.

'I've never really thought about it, I say. Aren't they unnecessary?'

She shakes her head. 'Uh-uh. If you write the word 'Autumn' without the N and read it aloud then it feels different. It doesn't sound different but it feels different, in your mouth. Same with 'numb' and 'thumb' and 'dumb' without the B.

---

[81] This is an argument often quoted to support the English Spelling reform. Some have attributed the term to George Bernard Shaw, but S. R. Townshend Mayer cites an 1855 letter which credits ghoti to one William Ollier Jr. See S. R. Townshend Mayer, 'Leigh Hunt and Charles Ollier', *St. James's Magazine*, October 1874, page 406, cited in Benjamin Zimmer, 'Ghoti before Shaw', *Language Log* <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=81>. Interestingly, ghoti can also be a silent word, with *gh* as in 'bough', *o* as in 'people', *t* as in 'ballet' and *i* as in 'business'.

[82] Such as the rhizome of the internet, for example.

[83] This is a hint at both the social network pages to which *VOID* corresponds and to ch.2 of the Courier strand of the novel which refers to 'six degrees of separation' and 'friends of friends'. Again, Ike, it can't be a direct reference to the Courier section because the Courier section was written afterwards, unless I am incorrect?

[84] Perhaps the discussion of ghoti and its potential (but authorially unstated) 'silent' pronunciation pre-empts the discussion between Vincent and Jadee here.

You should try it sometime.' She exhales a thin beam of smoke and I watch as the grey mist dissipates.

'You remind me so much of her,' I say. 'Even the way you hold your cigarette.'

'Sometimes it's good to remember.'

'Sometimes it's better to forget.'

I look at the pavement, watching our feet move out of kilter.

'Are you going to ask what I do?' Jadee says, eventually, as she drops the remaining third of her cigarette down a grid at the side of the road.

'If you want me to.'

She folds her arms and quickens her pace slightly. 'I don't care whether you do or not. If you want to know, ask me. If you don't want to know, don't.'

I ask her and she says, 'I'm in the industry.'

'Industry? You mean you work in a factory?'

'No, Vin. Not "industry". *The* Industry. The adult movie business.'

This revelation makes me feel sick. 'You're sure we haven't met?' I ask.

'For fuck's sake,' she hisses. 'Not this again.'

I try to appease her by explaining what Corey told me – that he saw me last week, during my missing days, with a porn star.

'Lucky-fucking-you,' she interrupts. 'For the last time: I have never met you before in my life. And just so you know, I prefer the term "pornographic actress".'

I look at her. The label doesn't fit the product. Surely she isn't a porn star. She looks more like the type of person who would work in a body piercing studio or a vinyl shop. I tell her, 'I'm a little surprised.'

'Surprised?' she echoes. 'Or shocked?'

'Both. You don't seem like the type.'

'The type?' she says. 'What exactly is "the type" nowadays? Hair extensions, fake tits, and Botox? No fucking thank you.'

'You seem too young. And too…real, I suppose.'[85]

'Well, as for the first charge, I'll take that as a compliment. I do look young. That's part of the appeal. But it's all perfectly legal. Isn't it weird that in the US a girl can get into porn three full years before she can buy an alcoholic drink?'

'I suppose it is,' I say.

---

[85] The reference principle of the image, again?

'And as for the second charge – that I'm too real – isn't that the point? Pornography isn't real. People think that it's real, and directors go to all kinds of lengths to try and make it appear real – amateur stuff, wife-swapping, voyeurism. But it's fake. Totally fake. The problems start when things which once existed only in porn begin to infiltrate reality.'

'Such as?'

She scratches the side of her nose with a jet black fingernail. 'Facials, for a start,' she says. 'You wouldn't believe the amount of guys I know who get off on that and who want to do it to their girlfriends. But, in reality, it's, well, a bit weird, don't you think?'

I shrug.

'What I'm saying,' Jadee goes on, 'is that a lot of men nowadays see facials as completely normal. Whereas it's a product of fiction. Before the first facial appeared in a porn film I bet very few men had ever even considered it. That's the influence of pornography, Vin. It's like fucking advertising. It changes what is real.'

'Perhaps.'

'It's fascinating to me,' she says.

When we arrive at Poisson Rouge, Jadee announces that she's going to find out what time the gig starts. She scampers over to one of the bouncers and I watch her as she chats to him animatedly.

'Sold out,' she says when she returns.

'We could go somewhere else?' I say.

She looks at her watch.

'Your carriage won't turn into a pumpkin.'

She laughs. 'Fuck it,' she says. 'You know any decent dive bars?'

I know just the place.

# cleft

You're sitting in front of the laptop, watching the video clip on loop. The video is thirty-seconds long and it is probably meant to be arousing. As you watch, you eat a bag of cheese and onion crisps.

You've seen photos of Emily online. It's definitely Emily in the video. But the P-O-V angle the film is shot from makes her face look an odd shape: she's all eyes and cheekbones with a tiny chin, like something out of a Japanese Manga comic.

In the video, Emily kneels, looking up into the camera lens. At the forefront of the screen is a skinny, milk-white male torso which tapers downwards into skinny, out-of-proportion chicken legs.

A semi-erect, tawny-hued cock appears centre stage, and Emily clutches it, desperately, fist clenched, and rubs it around her cheeks and lips, tugging it, licking it, then finally submerging its swollen purple head into her lipstick-besmeared mouth for the money shot.

Then the video loops back to the start.

The cheese and onion crisps are more exciting than the video and, at one point, you leave the video playing and you go to the kitchen again to get a second packet.

You watch the video three, four, five times as if you expect to suddenly notice something that you missed the first time. You are not a pornography connoisseur, and the film makes you think of the first porn film you ever saw.

You were young. Twelve. Thirteen, maybe. The film was set in a fire station. The sort of fire station where there are more female fire fighters than male ones and they like to have sex with each other in between

extinguishing fires. You remember the perfectly fake breasts protruding from the chests of the actresses, like vile pregnancies. You remember the pimply male buttocks and the stubble-rashed vaginas. And you remember a sense of excitement that you had never felt before and have probably never felt since.

You lick the crumbs of cheese and onion from your fingers. You wipe the cheesy and oniony saliva on your T-shirt. You watch Emily's video for the sixth time, and consider the fact that addiction always obliterates sensation.

It is time that Davison replied to Emily's latest message. You open it in your inbox and read it again. It is even more caustic than you remembered. You choose your words carefully.

Hey Em, you make Davison type. I'm confused. Why do you think I uploaded the video? You never sent it to me.

You drum your fingers on the computer's keypad, thinking of what to write next.

You write: My account's been hacked. I've never spoken to Jadee Janes and I don't even know who she is. I understand if you don't believe me but is there anyone else who might be responsible?

You read the message and smile to yourself.

Then you add, Is there any chance that Vincent might have done it?

Luv D.

You hit send.

It is late. Emily is in bed and she will not reply until the morning.

In the next room you hear the distant ping of a mobile phone.

# fourteen.

It is just after half past ten and the party is in full swing at Johnny's Bar. There are no stools available. I get three drinks – two for me, one for Jadee – and we stand in the corner, in the alcove next to the window.

She peers out onto the street. 'It's kind of cool here.'

'My favourite bar in New York,' I say.

'Really? Why's that?'

'I just always feel drawn to it.' The words come out slower than I intended.

She glances into the middle distance and smiles to herself. Then she looks at the floor and asks, 'Why did you break up with Emily?'

'I didn't.'

She looks up. 'Go on.'

'We made this sex video on a mobile phone. She got talking to this guy online and she sent it to him.' I take a swig of my drink and I'm gripping the bottle hard.

'Why did she do that?'

'I don't know. The video ended up on the internet. It was never the same after that.'

'What were you most upset about? The fact that she sent the video to this person, or the fact that he uploaded it?'

'The fact she was talking to someone else.' There is a word in my head and the word is 'cuckold'. I dig a fingernail into my side and take another long swig of beer.

'That's how I got into porn, you know,' Jadee says. 'I made a sex tape and the guy I made it with tried to use it to threaten me.'

'What did you do?'

'I got into porn.'

I laugh. 'Better to jump than be pushed.'

She knocks back her drink, and winces as she swallows.

'You have quite a propensity for alcohol.' I say.

'Why, thank you. Anyway, let me get us another. You still on two at a time?'

Jadee edges her way through the throng of bodies. I watch her, standing at the bar, back to me, all wild red hair and torn tights and leather. If Jadee was a word, she'd be 'unruly'. She isn't beautiful. But the fact that she isn't beautiful serves only to make her more attractive. There is something repellent about true beauty.

'Take one,' she says when she returns, precariously gripping a triangle of three glasses. I notice that she's drinking something different this time. Something cherry-red.[86] I'm wondering what it is and I'm wondering what she'll taste like when she's taken a sip of it. 'You want to know something interesting?' she asks.

I nod.

'Nine eleven,' she says, matter-of-factly. 'They say that marks the end of the postmodern epoch, right?'[87]

'Do they?'

'Yeah. Anyway, do you know what the most popular search term on the internet was on the day of nine eleven?'

I drink. 'No.'

'It was Nostradamus,' she says.

'Okay.'

'Do you know what the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth most popular terms were?'

'No idea.'

'Industry words. Sex. Porn. Blow job. That type of thing. Specific references to nine eleven came only from the seventh most popular term downwards. Postmodernism seems alive and well to me.'[88]

I change the subject. 'Why are you in America?' I ask.

'Business,' she says. 'I'm doing some meetings. Awards shows. Feature dancing. Career-enhancing stuff.'

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[86] Like mirrors, triangles also feature prominently in *VOID*.

[87] Richard Gray discusses 'the familiar tropes of post-9/11 writing', the most obvious of which is a portrayal of the attacks as a 'turning point in history' and a view that this was the point when everything changed. See Richard Gray, *After The Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Iowa: Wiley Blackwell, 2011). Similarly, in *The Guys* (a play which shows the events of 9/11 through the perspectives of two characters, a New York City Fire Department captain and a New York City-dwelling reporter), Anne Nelson specifically refers to 9/11 as 'the end of the postmodern era'. See Anne Nelson, *The Guys* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003), p. 8.

[88] I am unable to find any information which confirms these figures as true. Aikat Debashish's paper 'The Impact of 9/11 on Web Searches: How the Information-Seeking Behavior of Web Users Changed After the September 11 Attacks', presented at the 55th Annual Conference of the ICA, May 26-30, 2005, New York, may provide interesting further reading here. See <http://citation.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/1/4/9/3/pages14939/p14939-1.php>

'They have awards ceremonies for porn?'

'Of course they do. It's a multi-billion dollar business in the US. That's why I'm so keen to become a part of it. It's difficult to get rich in the UK industry.'

'Were you in Blind Tiger for a meeting, then?'

'Yep. Some big-shot industry guy. He's Marketing Director for Diabolo Pictures. I think they want to turn me into my own brand, or something. I'm not a person any more. I'm a product. A commodity. Just like Coca-Cola.' She takes out her mobile phone and begins tapping on the keypad. 'Strange your guy didn't turn up either,' she says, matter-of-factly. 'Anyway, I'd better text him.'

I feel a twinge in the pit of my stomach. Suddenly, a sick, empty feeling opens up inside me. People like her don't talk to people like me in the realworld, and it's my own fault for not realising sooner. I blame the alcohol. I think I might have been drunk already when I arrived at Blind Tiger. 'Jadee,' I say, measuring my words carefully, meticulously. 'You're in on this.'

She looks up from her phone. She's staring at me and the music suddenly seems a lot less loud and everything seems a lot more lucid, like the sobering moment when a fight breaks out at a wedding reception. 'What?' she says.

She looks as confused as I feel. Then again she is an actress. Sort of.

'Vincent,' she says. 'What the fuck is wrong with you?'

'You know who's been calling me,' I say.

She makes a bewildered face. 'I really don't know what you're talking about.'

'Don't fucking lie to me.' I clamp my molars together as I say it, like I'm grinding the words up between them.

She looks repulsed. 'Right,' she says. 'I resent that. There are only two things I don't like, and one of them is liars. I'm going outside to smoke a cigarette. When I come back you either explain to me what's going on or I'm leaving.'

She zips her leather jacket right up to her chin, grabs her cigarettes from her handbag, and heads outside. I watch her through the window. She catches my glance a couple of times and quickly looks away, shaking her head disgustedly. There are reflections on the glass, between me and Jadee. The reflections are of people in the bar, standing behind me, and this makes me reconsider whether or not the reflections can really be said to be between us.

'So?' she says when she comes back in.

I notice that a couple of stools have become free next to the bar. 'Shall we sit?'

'No, we shan't fucking sit.' Her words are like scissors, snipping off the end of my tongue.

I look at her, trying to see whether she's a puppet or a shadow. 'Did someone send you to that bar and tell you to wait for me?'

'Fucking hell,' she says. 'Of course not. My meeting was arranged weeks ago. He paid for me to fly to New York. He's paying for my hotel. Or at least his company is.'

She looks as though she's telling the truth. Then again, we all do, sometimes. I neck the rest of my beer.

'Anyway,' Jadee says. 'I could say exactly the same thing to you. Someone could have sent *you* to speak to *me*. Jesus, Vincent. You're the one who was so fucking eager to buy me a drink, and my story's more believable than yours. Falling from a window? Coughing up computer keys? A voice on a disconnected telephone? As far as I know it could have been you all along. I've never met this guy in person.' She picks up her handbag.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'Leaving.'

'No,' I say. 'I believe you.'

'Too late.'

'Jadee, wait.'

She hesitates. She picks at her nail varnish. Then she puts her handbag down in the alcove by the window, and takes both my hands in her own. She says it timidly: 'I'm telling the truth.'

'I know,' I say.

'This apartment you woke up in,' she says. 'You said it was in the village?'

'Perry Street.'

'So it's not far from here, then?'

'Not far, no.'

'I want you to take me there.'

Five minutes later, we're walking down Greenwich Avenue in the direction of this phenomenon of real estate, with its lack of furniture and its secrets and its ability to stop and start time. Jadee chain-smokes and chain-talks at the same time.

'You know what you said about losing seven days? Well, that got me thinking,' she announces.

'Go on.'

'When I was a kid I'd sometimes be in bed and I'd look at the clock and then I'd blink and suddenly four or five hours had passed. I always used to want it to happen when I was trying to get to sleep on Christmas Eve, but it never did. It's kind of like those motion-sensor cameras people set up when they go on holiday.'

'Is it?'

'Yeah. If you watch the film back then you see the front door shut and then the next thing you know two weeks have passed and the front door opens again. All the memories of that holiday, the action, the activities, the new friends, everything is confined to an imperceptible glitch in the tape.'[89]

'Why would anyone do that?' I ask.

She bites her lip, exposing her crooked tooth. I still want her to bite me with it and I still want it to bleed. 'It's obvious, isn't it? In case the house gets burgled.'

'We're nearly there,' I say. 'It isn't far from here.'

'Cool.'


When we arrive at the entrance to the apartment block, the front door is open. Someone has placed a fire extinguisher in front of it to prevent it from closing.

Jadee gives me a funny look. 'That's weird. At college, they used to fine us for that. Improper use of fire safety equipment.'

I allow her through the door first, and we take the lift up to the fourth floor.

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[89] This reminds me of Vincent's remark on p. 83 where he refers to himself as being 'trapped in the infinitesimal darkness of a blink'. The auto-referentiality within the novel creates a 'feedback loop of reflexivity' similar to that used as a means of interpreting the world-wide web by theorists such as Jodi Dean. Interesting observation. Provide a reference here: maybe Dean's Blog Theory or Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies…?

# fifteen.

'There really is nothing to see.' I open the door to the apartment and usher Jadee inside.

'Christ,' she says. 'It fucking stinks in here.'

I sniff the air exaggeratedly. 'Does it?'

'You're telling me you can't smell that?'

'I can't smell anything.'

'Put the light on,' she says. 'I can't see.'

'No electric.'

I let go of the door. It's on a spring and it clicks shut after us. As my eyes adjust I can make out certain features: the French windows first, since they're letting in the limited light that trickles in from the street lamps outside, then the walls, the kitchen cupboards, the sink, all gradually coming into focus like a developing Polaroid. Jadee is still in the hallway. I can't see her properly but I think she's fumbling in her jacket pocket.

'I have a torch on my phone,' she says.

I squeeze my eyelids tight shut and wait for my pupils to dilate. When I open them again, a thin beam of light slices through the blackness.

'It's not great, but it'll do,' Jadee says. 'Do you know who lives here?'

'No.'

'Haven't you asked the neighbours?'

'No.'

We go into the living room. Jadee stares out of the window. 'It's cold in here,' she says. 'It's giving me the creeps. Is there any way to lock the door?'

I turn the latch on the front door. When I come back into the living room, Jadee's sitting on the floor, typing on her mobile phone.

'What are you doing?' I ask.

'I'm updating my status.' She shrugs and turns her attention back to her phone.[90] 'Where exactly did you wake up?' she asks, without looking up.

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[90] From Vincent's conversation with The Voice, during which they arranged their meeting, we know that Jadee and Vincent met on the evening of 26 August 2012. I would place their arrival at the apartment at around midnight on the same day. But on the corresponding Facebook pages, there is no status update from Jadee during this time period. This, I argue, could be a reference to the fact that Jadee is simply a figment of Vincent's imagination: and, if not, then who is she, and is she really in

'Pretty much the same spot where you're sitting,' I say. 'Right in the centre of the room.'

'Which way were you facing?'

'Towards the wall. Is this relevant?'

A loud banging sound. Someone at the door. Jadee jumps. I put my fingers to my lips, hushing her. The light from her mobile phone illuminates her face and for a moment she looks terrified.

'Who's that?' she whispers. 'Did you lock the door?'

I nod.

Another bang.

The sound of the handle being rattled.

Then shouting, from outside, in the corridor: 'Emily! It's me. Are you in there?'

'Emily?' Jadee whispers. 'Emily who?'

'Wait,' I say.

My shoes make loud footfalls on the wooden floor and I don't want to alert anyone to our presence. I crawl towards the front door on my hands and knees. Slowly, cautiously, I rise to my feet, and peer through the glass spy hole. I picture myself as a soldier peering tentatively through binoculars, assessing the damage in the immediate aftermath of a heavy shelling.

A man in the corridor. Late twenties, early thirties. Is this The Voice? Is it my guy? He recommences his assault on the door. Each connection his fist makes with the wood seems to rattle my bones. He stops and leans closer to the door, pressing his ear against the spy hole, listening. I hold my breath. Seemingly satisfied, he turns on his heel and marches down the corridor, disappearing from sight.

Almost as soon as he's vanished, he comes back into view again. He's standing with his back to me this time, battering the door opposite. The door opens and a tired-looking elderly woman peers out. 'Can I help you?'

'Sorry to wake you. You haven't seen Emily today, have you?'

'Emily…?'

---

the apartment at all? In fact, it could even be argued that [someone came to the door and now that I'm back at the laptop I can't remember what I was going to write. Damn it.] `Interesting when read alongside what happens in the succeeding lines of the novel, Ike!`

'She lives opposite you.'

'Oh. No, I haven't. Not for a week or so. Why? What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' the man says. 'I just need to speak to her.'

I press my back against the door and sink to the floor.

In the corridor I hear the door shut and then footsteps fading into the distance as the man walks away.

For a minute or so I stay in the hallway with my back against the cold wood of the door. Did Emily really fake her death and move to New York?

I crawl back into the living room. Jadee's still in the centre of the room, with her feet hunched up to her chest. 'Who was it?' she whispers.

'No idea,' I say. 'Just some guy. Anyway, we have to go.'

'Why?'

'In case he comes back.'

Jadee shrugs.

'Does nothing faze you?' I say it authoritatively but she doesn't answer. I slide my arms under hers and try and lift her to her feet. 'Come on. We're going.'

'Let's just wait five minutes,' she says, shaking herself free.

'Why?'

'He might be waiting in the corridor.'

'I heard him leave. Come on.' I grab her arm again and she complies.

In the hallway, she pauses outside the bedroom door. 'What's in here?' she asks, as she reaches for the handle.

'No!' I shout.

'Jesus, Vin!' she says. 'What the fuck?'

'He told me not to go in there,' I say. 'The Voice on the phone. He told me not to look in there.'

'Ah, fuck him,' Jadee says. 'He's a cunt.' She pushes down on the door-handle and I try to stop her, but it's too late.  She flings the door open, and shines the torch inside.

I look in the bedroom, then I look at Jadee, then I look back inside the bedroom again.

The room is empty.

*

Next thing I know we're on the street and we're walking towards 14<sup>th</sup> Street station and neither of us is speaking.

I glance at Jadee, quickly. She doesn't notice. I think I might be about to invite her back to my hotel. I think I might want to fuck her. I begin to wonder what she would say if I did invite her. She's a porn star, so she's not averse to sex. Sex is her job. Maybe she doesn't like to take her work home with her. Maybe that's against the porn star code of honour. We pause at the top of the steps that lead down to the subway and I don't say anything.

'Are you going to ask for my number?' she asks, as I turn to leave.

'I've had no phone signal for days.'

'Then find a payphone.'

'I've got nothing to write on.'

She reaches in her pocket and produces a pen. 'Use a dollar bill,' she says.

I find a bank-note and hand it to her. She lifts one leg up and rests on her thigh. As she writes, her small, sharp tongue pokes out the corner of her mouth.

I really wish I could invite her back to the hotel.

She folds the note and passes it to me. 'I'll be expecting your call. Do it soon, Vin. None of this "waiting a week, playing hard to get" type of shit, okay? We should hang out.'

She kisses my cheek and then she's gone, trotting down the steps two at a time.

'Hey,' I shout, when she's halfway down the stairs.

She stops on the step, with her back to me. After a moment she says, tentatively, 'Yeah?'

'What's the other thing you hate?'

She turns to face me. 'What?'

'You said in the bar there's two things you hate and one of them's liars.'

She smiles. 'You really want to know?'

'Yes.'

'Pea soup.'

I stare at her back as she descends. She knows I'm watching her. When she reaches the bottom step she turns and winks at me, holding her left hand to her face in a fist, with the thumb and little finger extended.

\*

Back in my hotel room, I flick through the late night TV channels. I'm watching Fox News, and it seems as though there are more adverts than there is news footage. I'm filling my face with lukewarm, claggy macaroni cheese that I don't remember buying.

As I eat, I roll the four letters over and over in my hand.

**VOID**.

# realisation

You read the latest status update:

Davison has just had the best night ever in Johnny's Bar with an awesome young lady...

Underneath the status, people have posted comments:

Boo-ya!

Hell yeh, bro!

Boom!

You read the responses. Most of them are from males. There are twenty-three replies altogether and each one infuriates you.

You are infuriated for two reasons: first, because you did not even post the status update that instigated this flurry of comments, and second, because whoever did is clearly better at being Davison than you are. It's all about stats. The website you are using allows you to check the statistics of the number of people who have viewed and commented on your page, and on this particular day, there are more people interacting than ever before.

More friend requests.

More Likes.

More comments.

The page is a hive of activity. You feel cheated. You feel as though your identity has been hijacked.

Above his first post, the imposter Davison has written another:

I want to try a new bar in the city tonight! Any recommendations?

You are able to see at what time the comment was posted and, subsequently, how long it took for people to post their replies. In this case, thirty seconds:

Try Smalls Jazz Bar.

Blind Tiger on Bleecker Street.

Blue Note is cool.

At the very top of the screen is Davison's most recent status update:

Davison is young, rich and single - and loving life!

The presence of the exclamation mark makes the declaration even more annoying. It is intended as an attention-grabber, an arrow pointing towards the empty words it punctuates as if to say, 'look at me'.

You consider the fact that the Davison you created is thirty-three years old and you wonder whether he could really be described as 'young'.

The Davison you created is rich, but that doesn't mean that whoever has stolen him is. The person who has stolen Davison is most likely neither young nor rich. But he is probably single. And he is probably a cunt.

What's more, Davison and Jadee Janes continue to send each other messages. Davison has invited her to New York. She has accepted. They are going to have some 'business meetings'. She's going to do some feature dancing in the US and some personal appearances – career-enhancing stuff in the adult industry. Davison has even told her that he will pay for her to stay in the Park Central. You don't know what the Park Central is but as soon as you look it up you feel like hurling the laptop through the window and onto the street below: Park Central is the sort of hotel that celebrities frequent. The idea that there is someone in New York, real New York, pretending to be Davison (or, perhaps, pretending to be you, pretending to be Davison) is as baffling as it is unnerving.

You run your thumb along the edge of the scratch card in your pocket. If it's a winner then you could use

the money to fly to New York. You could go to some of the places that the imposter Davison talks about in his online statuses and see whether or not he's actually there. It would be like staring at yourself in mirror, without the light-reversal. But not knowing whether the card is a winner or a loser is better than knowing for sure that it's the latter. Just like in Schrödinger's experiment – the possibility of the cat being simultaneously alive and dead is better than it just being dead. As it stands, you simultaneously have £100,000 and nothing.

It is only when one's success is assured that one's ambition ceases.

# IV: void.

**Fragment #4**

```
[Email Correspondence between Ike A. Mafar and Taylor
Yates, University of Buffalo – 16/17 October 2014]
```

**From:** Taylor Yates <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Sent:** 17 October 2014 02:18
**To:** 'Ike' <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: RE: RE: Favour

Ike, send me the file as an email attachment and I'll see what I can do.

T.

**Taylor Yates**
**Senior Data Analyst**
**University of Buffalo**
_____

**From:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk >
**Sent:** 16 October 2014 23:17
**To:** Taylor Yates <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Subject:** RE: RE: Favour

I've tried this several times and it won't work. It says 'my_file' is an invalid directory…?

**Ike A. Mafar**
**Research Associate**
**The Manchester Writing School**
_____

**From:** Taylor Yates <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Sent:** 16 October 2014 20:48
**To:** 'Ike' <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: Favour

Hello Ike

I dread to think why you're asking me for this :-/ What 'project' are you involved with now?

Anyway, I've attached the script below. What you need to do is save whichever passage of text you're going to parse as 'my_file.txt' (you will have to experiment with file format. It could be Unicode, utf 8 or ANSI. I'm not big on this Ruby stuff. I'm more of a Perl kinda guy).

Then run the script (it's an .rb file, by the way, so you'll probably need to download suitable software depending on how you want to manipulate the input/output…EditRocket is a good one) using the command prompt…you know how to do that, right?

Here it is:

<scroll down…>

```ruby
def get_file_as_string(filename)
  data = ''
  f = File.open(filename, "r")
  f.each_line do |line|
    data += line
  end
  return data
end

def print_odd(count)
  return true if count.modulo(2) != 0
  return false
end

def print_even(count)
  return true if count.modulo(2) == 0
  return false
end

#------------ word-based output ---------------#

def print_even_words(text)
  words = text.split
  count = 1
  words.each { |w|
    print w if print_even(count)
    print " "
    count = count + 1
  }
end

def print_odd_words(text)
  words = text.split
  count = 1
  words.each { |w|
    print w if print_odd(count)
    print " "
    count = count + 1
  }
end

def print_nth_words(text, n, offset=0)
  words = text.split
  count = offset
  while (count < words.length-offset) do
    print words[count]
    print " "
    count = count + n
  end
end

def print_fib_words(text)
  words = text.split
  fib_last = 1
  fib_older = 1
  fib_next = 1
  while (fib_next < words.length) do
    print words[fib_next-1]
    print " "
    fib_next = fib_last + fib_older  #
    fib_older = fib_last             #
    fib_last = fib_next              #
    return if fib_next >= words.length
  end
end

#------------ character-based output ---------------#

def print_odd_chars(text)
  words = text.split(//)
  count = 1
  words.each { |w|
    print w if print_odd(count)
    count = count + 1
  }
end

def print_even_chars(text)
```

```
    words = text.split(//)
    count = 1
    words.each { |w|
      print w if print_even(count)
      count = count + 1
    }
end

def print_nth_chars(text, n, offset=0)
  words = text.split(//)
  count = offset
  while (count < words.length-offset) do
    print words[count]
    count = count + n
  end
end

def print_fib_chars(text)
  words = text.split(//)
  fib_last = 1
  fib_older = 1
  fib_next = 1
  while (fib_next < words.length) do
    print words[fib_next-1]
    fib_next = fib_last + fib_older
    fib_older = fib_last
    fib_last = fib_next
    return if fib_next >= words.length
  end
end

################
#    MAIN      #
################

# TO-DO: Every method could take an "offset" value.

text = get_file_as_string 'my_file.txt'

print_odd_words(text)
puts "\n============"
print_even_words(text)
puts "\n============"
print_nth_chars(text,10,1)
puts "\n============"
print_nth_words(text,10)
puts "\n============"
print_fib_words(text)
puts "\n============"
print_fib_chars(text)
```

Hope this helps,

T.

P.S. I'm great thanks. Still at the uni, currently working on a prototype for lie detection software. It's all gone liquid, man ☺

**Taylor Yates**
**Senior Data Analyst**
**University of Buffalo**

**From:** 'Ike' <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 16 October 2014 2014 06.45
**To:** Taylor Yates <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Subject:** Favour

Taylor,

I hope you're well. How's life in New York?

I wonder, do you have any simple software programs that might search a text document for hidden messages? Kind of like the Bible Code software?

Thanks

Ike

**Ike A. Mafar**
**Research Associate**
**The Manchester Writing School**

# sixteen.

From inside the wardrobe, the phone is ringing. It might have been ringing for hours. I sit up on the bed. My head hurts. I'm fully clothed and sunlight is glaring through the window and the is TV switched to mute. Beside me sits a quarter-full foil food tray, tipped over on its side, besmearing the linen with macaroni cheese. At first, I have no recollection of the previous night. The memories form slowly in my mind, as if hundreds of tiny thought-particles are fusing together arbitrarily, then separating, finding new partners, presenting themselves to me in a slideshow projected behind my eyes:[91] Blind Tiger. Jadee. Bleecker Street. Poisson Rouge. Perry Street. Void.

I get up from the bed. I can smell something, and I think the smell is me. I pick up the carton of macaroni cheese from the bedspread and sniff it. The smell is definitely me. I walk over to the wardrobe and take the phone out. It is still ringing. I can see myself in the mirror, holding the phone in front of me in both hands like I'm offering a gift at the altar. I really do look terrible. I am cadaverous. My whole body, including my face, is horrendously emaciated, except, oddly, for my stomach, which is swollen into a round tender ball. I look like a snake that's digesting a rat, and the

---

[91] Let me, if I may, exhume you further from the text and bring you here, to my world: the world 'of' the book which, by the time you read this, will be an extension of the world 'in' the book. For there is time between us, no doubt: you might be reading this ten or twenty years from now, and yet we still have a connection. I can describe something here, in words, as I sit at my kitchen table in sweatpants and a T-shirt, and I can make you see it in your world, in the future. This, then, is a type of time travel. For right now, as I type, I am not part of the story…not here, at least. Instead, I am commenting from an external vantage point upon a pre-existing work of fiction. But for how long, since, in commenting upon it, I alter it? What's more, these myriad references to reality, illusion, the power of the image, the possible fictionality of the realworld, are leading me to consider whether I really am 'here' or whether I'm somewhere else. The Voice tells Vincent that he is a fictional construct, a character in a narrative, and who's to say that I'm not the same? It makes no difference to you, in the future, whether at the time I write this I am outside the text looking in as one looks through a window, because by the time you read these words I will necessarily, from your perspective at least, be inside the text peering out at you, as if you are staring down into a frozen pool and I am trapped beneath the ice, looking up. Is it better to be outside the tent, pissing in, or inside, pissing out? The phone rang today, and there was no one at the end of the line. There are many logical explanations for this: a bad connection, a prank, a wrong number, but, for me, no. The only explanation was that it was The Voice calling me from inside the novel. Calling me to warn me that I must not enter. This is a Crime Scene. I am clearly not getting enough sleep. But the experience of working on this book has encouraged me to do something which I have been meaning to do for a very long time: I have begun writing my own novel. But more of that later; this is merely an interlude. For now, at least, clamber out of the realworld of these notes and immerse yourself completely in Vincent's world, the fictional realm. And do this immediately, while you still have the chance; while you're still able to recognise the distinction between the two. `Ike... I'm being entirely serious now. Is everything all right?`

thought of this makes me smile. I am ashamed to be trapped in this body. I answer the phone.

I say to The Voice: Where the fuck were you last night? The Voice asks what I mean. I say: I waited until eight-thirty.

I was there. I was there all right.

You weren't. Unless you were the bartender.

Everywhere you go, I follow. I'm like a shadow.

Did you set me and that girl up?

No, he says, you set yourself up. As he talks I walk round the room, looking for the missing photograph of Emily. I know I had it in Art Bar: that's how I got talking to Fahreal. The Voice goes on: It was you that suggested visiting Blind Tiger at 8pm on Sunday night and it was you that decided to talk to her. Not me: you. Anyway, I have some bad news.

I stop searching for the photograph. What?

He says, You're in an awful lot of trouble. His voice cracks on the first syllable of the word 'awful' like he's trying not to laugh. You looked in the bedroom, didn't you? he says.

I reply: It was empty. The words escape from me and coil upwards like cigarette smoke.

No, he says. You're lying.

I'm not lying. The room was empty.

Maybe you just refused to see what was there.

No. It was empty.

Why don't you take a lie detector test? he says. Then we'll see.

Gladly.

The rhythm of the conversation misses a beat here and I know that he wasn't expecting me to acquiesce.

Go to the internet café, he says.


Back at the same computer, in the same the internet café on East 32$^{nd}$ Street, I discover that there are several Certified Expert Polygraph Examiners in the New York and New Jersey area.[92] But no testing facility is ever going to allow me to

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[92] One of them, incidentally, is my good friend Taylor. We've worked together, online, on all sorts of projects. He's a great guy, a real cyberpunk. He's one of the old hippies who resigned from his corporate job down on Silicon Valley when they started doing random LSD tests. He works at the

borrow a polygraph machine. Even if they did, then I wouldn't know how to use it. I probably wouldn't even be able to carry the device. I imagine it would be large, heavy and mechanical, like an engine. What's more, it's unlikely the test will work. The Voice insisted that I knew what was in the room all along. So The Voice must have thought that I already knew the room was empty. Regardless of whether I *actually did* know or not, the fact is that I *believed* that I didn't know. Therefore it cannot be said that I was lying. I wonder whether there exists a lie detection device sophisticated enough to account for this anomaly.

False memory syndrome occurs when a person's identity is affected by memories which are factually incorrect but strongly believed. It is similar to the outcome described in the study that the doctors told me about – the one involving the men and women who were conditioned into believing that they had ridden in hot air balloons and completed bungee jumps. If I genuinely am guilty of forgetting memories and inventing new ones, then this means that I am unable to differentiate between what is true and what is false. But this isn't the same as lying. If a person genuinely does not understand the difference between right and wrong, and he goes on to take a course of action which he believes to be right but which is, in fact, criminal, then has he acted immorally?

I check my emails. Three new messages.

The first is a notification from the social networking site: Jadee Janes has added me as a 'friend'. The second is a Private Message from Jadee, sent via the social network:

> Hey Vin. Gr8 to meet you. I'm gna be out til tomo so I thought I'd send you a msg on here. didn't want you ringing and thinking I was ignoring you lol. Anyway, call me tomorrow. Any time after 7pm. Wud love to hang out. take care luv J xox

The third message is from A VOID:

---

University of Buffalo now, as a researcher and software developer. I'm familiar with Taylor. We've corresponded. Didn't you mention him in an earlier footnote? You said you were going to contact him…

> The University of Buffalo in New York City has a specialised
> department which is dedicated to the science of lie detection.[93]
> It has developed a software programme which assesses the
> truth/falsity of statements by analysing eye movements.
> The software is still being developed and, as such, its accuracy rating
> is lower than that of traditional polygraph tests.
> The accuracy rating of this particular programme is said to be 82.5%.
> All that you will need in order to carry out the test is a copy of the
> software, a laptop computer, and a purpose-made camera.
> I am in contact with one of the professors at the department.
> I can arrange for him to meet you with the necessary equipment.
> You can carry out the test wherever you feel safe.
> I suggest you do it in your hotel room, or in the apartment.
> But you can do it elsewhere if you wish.
> So what do you say?
> Are you willing to take the all-important lie detector test?[94]

I look at the time the email was sent: 11:57. I look at the time now: 12:01. I compose a reply. I tell him that I will meet his 'contact' from Buffalo University. If anyone does shows up then at least I'll have the opportunity to ask this mutual friend who The Voice really is. I finish the email and I look at it on the screen for a long time before I hit send. Less than a minute later, a reply arrives in my inbox:

> There is an underpass in Central Park. It is easy to find.
> My contact will meet you there at 6pm tonight.
> Don't be late.

---

[93] Seriously, the more I read this, the more I think that someone wrote it with the intention of it somehow, in the future, finding its way to me.

[94] Interestingly, *The All-Important Lie Detector Test* is the title of CreepJoint's second album, released in December 2012 on Riff Factory Records.

# shadow

When you return to your laptop computer the following
morning, it will not switch on. You find the power pack
and plug it in, but it still refuses to comply. The
laptop was working perfectly when you left it last
night: it is as if it just passed away, silently, during
the night. In the flat there's another laptop you can
use but it isn't as new as yours. It's the previous one
you owned, before purchasing the recently deceased
model. It's archaic and slow, and it has no wireless
internet connection, but at least it works. While you
wait for the computer to boot up you go into the bedroom
and look at yourself in the wardrobe mirror. You are
wearing your new T-shirt.

To your surprise, Emily has already replied to Davison's
message.

> Of course Vincent didn't upload the video. When I told him
> what happened he hit the fucking roof. I mean really. For a
> second I thought he was going to beat me up.
> And what do you mean I never sent it to you? I emailed it to
> you: escapeandcontrol@gmail.com. I don't know why I'm even
> talking to you. It's obvious that you're a sad and pathetic
> individual.

You haven't checked that email account in weeks. The
only reason you set it up, a month ago, is because you
needed an email address to activate Davison's profile on
the social networking site. You had to set up a new
email address because you already have a social
networking profile linked to your active email account.

You're unsure even if you can remember the password.

You logon to gmail and try a few different combinations: the name of the street you grew up on; your favourite band followed by the pin number for your bank account; your mother's maiden name. When you eventually access the inbox, there are over two hundred messages to deal with. Most of them are junk emails and spam. There are some emails from porn tube sites and it occurs to you that you might have picked up a virus when scanning the internet for videos of Jadee Janes. Nestling amongst the unsolicited mail, near the top of the page, is an email from Emily.

The message is blank and the subject line reads 'for your eyes only xo' and there is an attachment.

The attachment is called 'openme.mp4'.

You open the attachment. A box pops up on your screen indicating that the video is loading. There is a long thin bar with a blue rectangle inside it and the blue rectangle shows how long it will take for the video to load. You leave the laptop on the table and get a bag of cheese and onion crisps from the kitchen. When the video has finished uploading, you sit down and press play.

It's the same video that you saw yesterday, tagged as 'Jadee Janes sucks cock' on the tube site.

You send Emily a message online. You write: We need to talk.

She replies straight away, from her mobile, saying that she can't talk because she's at work and you know she's lying to you. Emily works on the reception in a tattoo and body piercing studio. When she's at work you can't talk to her because she isn't allowed to have her

mobile phone switched on during her shift. She has to leave it in her handbag in a back room.

The tattoo and body piercing shop that Emily works in is not far from your flat. It occurs to you that you could walk there and check up on her. But you will have to do it discreetly. She thinks that you are Davison and she thinks that Davison is in New York.

You will have to watch her from afar. Just like you have done all this time, from behind the flickering cathode of a computer screen.

*

The idea of leaving the flat makes you nervous. You think back to the blood you saw on the street when you walked to Fantasy World. It occurs to you that of late you are becoming something of a recluse.

In order to get to the tattoo shop, you have to walk across a footbridge that passes over a busy road.

There is a newsagent's at the end of the bridge and this makes you think of the scratch card in your pocket. You walk down towards the gardens and nip into one of the pubs and emerge ten minutes later having downed two pints of strong lager. You feel as though you are floating through the streets, sailing past the alcoholics and the pigeons and the toothless velour-clad single mothers screaming at their filthy children. You turn right up Newton Street. When you get to the tattoo shop Emily is not there.

You are standing on the opposite side of the street, lurking in a pub doorway like a troll under a bridge. The tattoo shop has large windows and it is easy to see inside from your vantage point. There is a girl sitting at the desk, twirling her hair around her fingers, but the girl isn't Emily. You cross the street

and you walk into the shop. The girl at the desk doesn't look up.

Excuse me, you say.

She raises her eyes, slowly, as if struggling with the weight of her eyelids. The girl's arms and neck are covered in tattoos and it is at this point that you realise you look utterly out of place. Mind you, so would Emily. She only has one tattoo. It's a Glock G21 and it's inked on her inner thigh. The exact specifics are unknown to you, but it's something to do with a joke about protected sex.

You realise that you are just staring at the girl behind the desk. You're somewhat wired and inebriated and you probably look like a drug addict.

What do you want? the girl says. She adds an upwards inflection on the 'you'.

Is Emily here? you ask.

Emily? the tattooed girl says. No. It's her day off.

Are you sure?

Suddenly, the girl becomes very angry. I don't see her in here, she says, waving an arc with her hand. Do you?

No, you say.

The girl shakes her head in exasperation. Do you want to leave a message? she says.

No, you say. It's fine.


Back at the flat you notice that someone has moved the claw hammer from the table. You find it in the cupboard and you put it back on the table, next to the laptop, where it can easily be seen.

# seventeen.

I find the underpass at the centre of the park. It has a large arched entrance and is accessible from both ends. At one end there is a fountain; at the other end there are steps. There are tiles on the walls and on the floor. Some of the tiles are cracked and most of them are dirty. Various tourists amble about inside, taking photographs.[95]

The place is huge and overbearing. It looks like the sort of place that people are well advised to avoid at night. Central Park has a reputation for being dangerous and I assume that this underpass plays a part in its notoriety. There is a word in my head and the word is 'sublime'. I remember the newspaper headline I saw on the front page of the *New York Times* in Johnny's Bar: MURDER IN CENTRAL PARK.

I check the time on my phone: 17:31. I put my phone back in my pocket and start walking. I think I'm planning to go to the opposite end of the tunnel, and then back again. I will have to keep checking both ends since I'm unsure at which end The Voice's 'contact' is intending to meet me.

I step into the underpass. As I shuffle back and forth, up and down, staring at my feet and no doubt muttering to myself incomprehensibly, I realise that I'm displaying all the characteristics of a madman. People are looking at me. Children cling more tightly to mothers. Mothers cling more tightly to fathers. Fathers stare at me pitifully. I am sure I look very poorly and very dishevelled and I probably appear drunk. In fact, there is a greater-than-average chance I *am* drunk. I don't remember visiting a bar, but my mouth is dry and acid-tinged and I suspect that I may have stopped somewhere en route.

'Sir! Excuse me, sir!'

An American accent. Footsteps behind me. I turn around. A middle-aged man, with a scruffy, haircutless appearance, grey at the temples, wearing a suit and tie, is holding something out to me. I look at him.

'You dropped this,' he says. 'Back there.'

I look at the object in his hand: a black plastic square. I retch as the eels writhe in my stomach.

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[95] This, again, corresponds to the Facebook pages, on which we can see a photo of the underpass. See www.facebook.com/escandctrl.

A concerned expression appears on his face, as if projected onto it from an exterior light source. 'Sir?' he says. 'Are you all right?'

'Who are you?' I demand.

'Who am I?' he repeats.

'Yes,' I say. 'What do you want from me? Tell me what you want.'

The man looks at the letter in his hand. 'Sir,' he says. 'I don't understand. I just… you dropped this, back there.'

'I didn't! I didn't drop anything!' I think I might have shouted this because now there are several passersby who have stopped in the underpass and are looking at me with varying degrees of concern which I interpret as ranging from pity to outright disgust. An athletic-looking man wearing Lycra jogging shorts and a tight T-shirt is striding purposefully towards me as if he believes he's about to intervene in a fight.

'Give it to me,' I say. I snatch the letter.

'Jesus,' the man says. 'I was only trying to help.'

'What's going on?' the athletic guy says.

'This man,' I say, pointing at the suit. 'He's been harassing me. Following me. Calling me on the phone. Sending me emails. Threatening me.'

The suit looks very offended. 'I absolutely have not,' he whines. 'I've never seen him before in my life. He dropped something in the underpass and I simply picked it up and called out to him.'

'You fucking liar!' I scream. I really go for him, windmilling my pathetically scrawny arms like a harassed girl in a school playground. I don't know to what extent I'm planning on attacking him; I just know I want to damage him. I think I might want to kill him, but I won't know for sure until my fists make the first initial contact with his delicate skull. Only then will I be able to gauge my anger, based entirely on how hard I've hit him. In violent situations such as these it is best to work backwards.

The athlete holds both my arms with one of his own. He's good at restraining people and he seems to enjoy it. I imagine that he works as a bouncer, or a bodyguard. A personal trainer, maybe.

'Call the NYPD,' he instructs the suit.

The suit takes out his mobile phone and flips open the case.

I stop struggling. I let myself go limp. 'No,' I say. 'No. It's okay. I'm okay.'

The suit observes me for a few moments, his angry expression gradually subsiding into the self-satisfied disgust of a suspicious lover who has caught out his cheating spouse. He puts his mobile phone in his pocket and shakes his head. 'Fucking maniac,' he says.

'Are you going to stop harassing this man?' the athletic guy asks me.

'Yeah,' I say.

He doesn't loosen his grip.

'You go,' he says to the suit. 'I'll make sure he doesn't follow.'

The suit shakes his head at me. 'Jesus. You try to do a guy a favour…'

He looks me up and down, then he turns and he walks away.

'I don't know what in the hell that was all about,' the athlete says, as we both watch the suit trudge up the steps at the end of the underpass, watching first his head, then body, and finally legs disappear from view. 'But you take it easy, okay? There's a lot of crazy people in this city. Flip out like that and you're likely to get yourself shot.'

He relinquishes his hold. 'Have a good day,' he says.

He turns and jogs to the opposite end of the underpass, then vanishes round the corner.

I stand, gripping the computer key in my left hand.

I uncurl my fingers and I look at it.

The letter **A**.

**AVOID**.

Avoid what?

When someone tells me to avoid something, it only makes me want to do it more.


I am the sort of person who likes to stare at the sun.[96]

---

[96] Uh oh.

Ike... I assume it's entirely intentional that the footnotes are becoming increasingly unscholarly as we proceed?

# eighteen.

At exactly six pm I return to the underpass. There is a shadow of a man standing beneath the archway. He is wearing a long black woollen coat and a grey trilby hat. He is standing at a right-angle to me, and his facial aspect is strikingly perpendicular. He has birdlike features, and small round spectacles perch on the end of his nose. He is holding a canvas case in his left hand and a folded-up tripod in the other. He looks like a Russian spy.

The case looks about the correct size to hold a laptop computer. I walk over to him. I say, 'I think you're waiting for me.'

The man turns round.  'I presume Davison sent you?'

'Davison?' The word is like a razorblade in my mouth.

'Yes,' the man says.

I say, 'I'm here to collect a laptop and some software.'

The man holds the canvas case aloft and nods at it proudly, as if he's showing me the head of a beast he has recently decapitated. 'You're Vincent Ballone, I presume?'

'Yes.'

He places the canvas bag and the tripod on the floor. 'I must say,' the man announces, 'that I am most impressed by your punctuality. It must be six o'clock, on the dot.' He pulls back his coat sleeve and frowns at his watch. 'Would you look at that,' he says. 'Damn thing has stopped.'

'Mine too,' I say.

The man smiles a wry smile. 'Well, look on the bright side. Still tells the correct time twice a day, doesn't it?'

I try to smile back but I think it looks more like a grimace. 'Would you mind telling me how you and this "Davison" know each other?' I ask.

'We don't,' the man replies, still looking at his watch.

'What?'

He looks up. 'I don't know him and he doesn't know me.'

'I thought you were friends?'

'No, no. We've never met. We speak online.'

I nod towards the canvas bag and the tripod. 'And you just agreed to meet a stranger with all of this expensive equipment?'

'Not exactly.'

'What, then?'

The man pushes his spectacles further up his nose. 'If you must know,' he says, 'he paid me.'

'Paid you?'

'Yes. Handsomely.'

'How much?'

The man coughs. 'I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to say.'

'Was it more than a thousand dollars?' I ask.

He removes his spectacles and breathes on them. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and uses it to wipe the lenses in a circular motion. 'Yes,' he says. 'It was considerably more than a thousand dollars.'

'Was it more than ten thousand dollars?'

'No.'

'How did he pay you?'

'Bank transfer. He sent the money online.'

'Did he say why he was paying you so much?'

'Mr Ballone,' the man says. 'I'm not sure how much you know about my work in the science of lie detection. But allow me to divulge one piece of information: I risk losing my job over this meeting. The laptop computer and the software I am availing you of are the property of the University of Buffalo. I have no idea what you hope to gain from using this equipment and, to be frank, I would rather it be kept that way. Had Mr Davison not offered me such an agreeable sum then I'm afraid I would have had to decline his request. You can keep the computer and the disc. As far as my colleagues in the department are concerned, some miscreant has broken into the laboratory and stolen a laptop whose CD drive happens to contain a prototype of the most up-to-date version of our software. For that reason, my association with you, and with Mr Davison, ends here.'

He picks up the laptop case and tripod and hands them to me.

'I'm not technologically minded,' I say. 'How am I supposed to use this thing?'

'You're going to have to figure that out by yourself,' he says. 'The camera is inside the front pocket. Good day.'

'What if I can't get it to work?' I ask.

'Good day, Mr Ballone,' the man says, firmly.

I expect him to walk away but he doesn't. He just stands there, looking at me. I think he's waiting for me to leave. I think it's a power thing. He wants me to back down first.

I shoulder the bag and begin the walk back to the Explorer.

\*

I sit in the hotel room, making notes. I'm trying to come up with a list of questions to answer when I take the lie detector test. I'm writing the list of questions on some of the blank sheets of paper I found in the envelope.

The questions must have answers which are statements of truth or falsity as opposed to opinions. Coming up with these sorts of questions is more difficult than it first appears, since it is necessary to anticipate what the answer might be and to then construct a question around it. I realise that life would be much easier if all conversations were structured in this way – if the answer came before the question to which it corresponds. At this point, the phone rings.

Did you collect the laptop? The Voice says.

Listen to me, I say. You're Davison, aren't you?

Me? The Voice says. No.

Why did the person I met think that your name was Davison?

I had to come up with something, The Voice says. I couldn't tell him I was nameless.

Why did you choose that name? I demand.

What's it to you? It's only a name.

It was you, wasn't it? It was you that put the video of Emily online. I saw the conversations.

It wasn't. The account was hacked.

Who hacked it?

You should know that already, The Voice says.

I don't know.

Come on now, he says. Think.

If you're suggesting I hacked it then I wouldn't know how to.

I'm not suggesting anything. It's not my job to make suggestions. That's not in my remit.

The realisation hits me with such force that I feel as though I am falling, falling through layers and layers of reality with nothing to break my fall until.

You've got it, haven't you? The Voice says. You know who you are.[97]

I drop the phone on the bed. I can hear The Voice laughing. There is a word in my head and the word is 'obloquy'. I imagine a clock ticking and I remember the computer in the Belleclaire with the timer ticking down to cut-off point and I think that the computer is me.

Time is running out. I have to take the test. I shoulder the laptop bag and find the tripod. I hesitate at the door and grab the red telephone. Seconds later I'm outside the elevator, repeatedly and impatiently banging my fist on the buttons. It's broken down. I hurtle along the corridor, burst through double doors and descend the stairs two, three, four at a time. Fifteen blocks to Perry Street. I run the whole way. My path takes me across Manhattan, from east side to west, diagonally downwards, an arrow piercing the city's heart.

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[97] xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
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xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx choking text
with intertext xxxxxx What's this? Did you cross something out? Or fall
asleep on your computer?

# ghost

Emily does not reply to your latest message for several days. You have changed the password on Davison's account and this seems to have curtailed the hacker's nefarious smear campaign. But now that you have regained control, Davison's friends seem uninterested. The account lies dormant. Only a small band of lonely hangers-on lurk within its pages, like the desperate few who stick around in seedy nightclubs after closing time, hopelessly searching for someone who'll fuck them.

Comments are few and far between.

No one 'Likes' Davison's status updates.

You quickly run out of things to say.

Davison, it seems, has run his course.

When the message comes, you're unsure whether to open it.

You take the scratch card out of your pocket and you place it on the table in front of you. It is beginning to look very tattered and creased.

You open the message.

> Okay. Against all my better judgment I am willing to meet up with you next week.
>
> Call it sheer morbid curiosity.
>
> If what you say is true – if you didn't upload that video – then it leaves only one person besides me that could have done it.
>
> He's here now but he might as well not be. He's watching me type this. It's like living with a ghost. I came home from work the other day and I thought he was out. I sat in the apartment for two hours before I realised he was watching TV in the other room. Talk about ships that pass in the night.

> I want to meet you in public. No funny business.
>
> There's a bar called the Bridge and Tunnel. It's in Manchester city centre. Look it up on the internet if you want to know how to find it.
>
> I can meet you after work.
>
> Monday (20th Aug) is the best day for me. That's the day I meet up with this other guy, normally. Vincent thinks I go to the gym, so he won't ask any awkward questions. I'll need to nip home first for a shower. 6.30pm?

You make Davison reply to Emily. You keep it short. You write – Great. I'll be there at six thirty. If I can't find you I'll message you on my mobile.

   You are just about to hit send when you decide to add a P.S. You type: For what it's worth, it really wasn't me who posted that video online. And I hope that when you've met me in person you will come to realise that.

You spend all night filling in online surveys. As you do so, your mind wanders from the scratch card to Schrödinger's experiment to Davison. You begin to wonder whether you are simultaneously yourself and Davison, and whether one has full knowledge of the other's actions. And whether, if you were to become either one or the other, you would cease to exist at all.

# nineteen.

The lie detection programme that I am using assesses the validity of truth statements by analysing eye movements. The test has an accuracy rating of 82.5%.[98]

As I set up the equipment in the apartment, I wonder whether the floaters in my vision will make the results less accurate. Just because they're invisible to me doesn't mean that the computer can't see them. I position the laptop computer on the floor and insert the CD. The laptop's battery is fully charged and this equates to about five hours of life.

The CD is installing. I consider the fact that, statistically, if the computer were to analyse the validity of my answers to a hundred questions, then seventeen of those analyses would be incorrect. Statistically, then, the lie detector test is not all that much more effective than flipping a coin.

I have a dime in my pocket. I say to myself, Heads, I'm Vincent Ballone; tails, I'm someone else.

I flip the coin: heads.

I consider the fact that the coin could have landed on its side. Neither heads nor tails: unlikely, but possible, like zero in roulette. Not black, not red. Something in between.

Is there anything between a lie and the truth?

This is an experiment. In any experiment, it is important to have parameters and variables. Only one input variable may be changed at any given time. When the laptop's battery runs out, the experiment is over.

The camera is positioned on a mini-tripod and connected to the computer via a USB cable. By sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor, with the laptop slightly to the left and the tripod set to its lowest point, I am able to stare straight into it as if into the eye of a Cyclops.

I have a list of questions. I begin with the testers. I state my name. I state my age. I state the name of the President of the United States of America. The answers to the first two questions come up as being untrue. The answer to the third question is deemed inconclusive.

---

[98] The entire 'lie detector' strand corresponds to raw data collected on www.facebook.com/escandctrl.

I twist the screw on the side of the tripod and tilt the camera back a few degrees. This means that the lens is pointing slightly upwards which subsequently changes the angle at which I am looking into it. I hope that by doing this I will allow for light to pass between the camera and my eye, thus making it easier for the camera to monitor my eye movements.

I repeat the tester questions and all seems to be working as planned.

In front of me I have a stack of papers onto which I have scrawled long lists of questions. I don't remember where many of these questions came from. I suppose that I must have written them down at some point during the past day and then forgotten about them.

It is two pm and it is time to begin the test.[99]

First, I decide to answer the question that started all of this – what is inside the bedroom at the apartment?

The Voice told me that if I were to say that I do not know what is in the room, then the lie detector would interpret the statement as being a lie. So I stare into the lens and I say, 'There is nothing in the bedroom apart from a shit-coloured carpet.'

The answer?

LIE.

Next I say, 'This test is only 82.5% accurate,' and the result says: TRUE.

'The bedroom is definitely empty apart from the carpet.'

LIE.

This is bullshit. I stand up and go to the bedroom. The door is closed: I think Jadee did it after she went in there. I stand for a while with my hand on the cold metal of the door handle. Despite the fact that Jadee opened the door already, and despite the fact that I know the room is empty, opening it myself still feels prohibited.

Fuck it.

In a quick motion I pull down the handle and kick open the door.

---

[99] The so-called 'all-important lie detector test' took place in real time on Facebook from 2pm GMT on 27 August 2012. There were a total of 134 comments posted to and from Vincent over the course of five hours. See www.facebook.com/escandctrl.

It's about half the size of the living room. There is enough space for a double bed, a wardrobe, maybe a couple of bookshelves, and not much else. But the room is empty. The room was empty when Jadee and I were here, and the room remains empty. The walls are whitewashed and as bare as a blank canvas, except for the electric radiator to my left.[100] I step into the room. I walk around the perimeter. I stand back from the window and I look though it. Then I stand with my back to the window and look towards the door I entered through. As I stare at the walls, the floaters appear to dance on them.

The Voice said that the room was not empty, but that I simply refused to see what was there. I shut my eyes, and I hold out my arms, and I imagine blind shell-shocked soldiers being led, single file, from the wreckage of a battlefield. I move around the edge of the room, with my eyes closed. My hand touches something. My eyes flicker back to life.

But it is just the edge of the open door.

The room is empty, and it probably always was.


After leaving the bedroom, I close the door behind me. There's something about the room that demands to be shut away. I recommence the all-important lie detector test:

'As far as I can see, the bedroom is definitely empty apart from the carpet.'

TRUE.

There might be something inside the bedroom, but hidden somehow, underneath the carpet or below the floorboards. So I state, 'As far as I'm aware, there is nothing hidden beneath the carpet or beneath the floorboards.'

TRUE.


Now I know exactly what is going on: this is all politics. All I have to do is to change the structure of a sentence ever-so-slightly, or add a word or two, and the sentence has an entirely different meaning. At this point I realise that I can make this test answer TRUE to absolutely fucking anything. The word in my head is 'spin'. I say, 'My name is Emily.'

LIE.

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[100] Okay, to hell with the ancillary information now. It's the topography of my apartment that he's describing. No doubt about it.

'As far as I'm aware, my name is Vincent. But it could, quite conceivably, be Emily.'

TRUE.

'It is possible that humans do not breathe oxygen.'

TRUE.

'Yes is not necessarily the binary opposite to no.'

TRUE.

You see? All you have to do is to carefully balance your words, like an equation. Make sure that the left side is equal to the right side. It's simple and we all do it. We just don't know that we are doing it. It's a fine example of the delicate ambiguity of language.[101]

At this point I begin to race through the questions. I might as well answer them, since I went to the trouble of acquiring the lie detection software, but the validity of the information provided by the computer is irrelevant, since the computer is unable to concretely analyse whether any given statement is true or false. It is able only to establish (approximately) whether the person who utters the statement is telling the truth, which is not the same thing.[102]

'I am Vincent Ballone. I am in New York City. I am currently taking a lie detector test.'

LIE.

This software is defective.[103]

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[101] Again, Vincent is supposedly a layman. I do not find it likely that he would use this type of rhetoric.

[102] Indeed, truth is subjective. For example, I might say, 'It is possible to exist and to not exist at the same time' and if I truly believed it, then the computer would say: TRUE. Most people would disagree with my opinion. They would try to discourage me, to discredit me, to persuade me otherwise. But just because an opinion is unpopular does not mean that it is not correct: look at the 'Allegory of the Cave'. I might hold a different opinion and I might try and direct others towards the light. And they might disagree with me. And they might try to discredit me. To change my opinion. And there might be only one of me, and ninety-nine of them. 99% odds: better than the 82.5% accuracy of Vincent's machine. Still, it cannot be said that I am wrong. If I believe it, it is true. Who are you to tell me otherwise?

[103] An in-depth account of some of the questions Vincent answers, and the subsequent analysis of them by the lie detection software, follows. This corresponds to the pages I identified on the social networking site, whereupon Vincent's 'friends' posted questions for him to answer through the medium of the webpage. The author of the work then seems to have written up the exchange that followed, and this forms the basis of chapters 19 and 20 of the novel. Since there were 134 comments in total it would be impractical to list them all here, but the full exchange can be seen at www.facebook.com/escandctrl. Here, then, is a sample (abridged for clarity):

Question: When were you last with Jadee Janes? Answer: I was with Jadee Janes from approximately 8.30pm on Sunday until 3am on Monday. Result: INCONCLUSIVE. Alt. Answer: I was in the apartment with Jadee Janes on Sunday night. Result: TRUE.

[xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx**void**]

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Question: Have you ever committed, or do you intend to commit, a crime? Answer: I have committed various petty crimes in the past including shoplifting, public indecency (sex in a car), indecent exposure, littering, tampering with fire safety equipment, smoking (I had a cigarette in a bar once, after the ban came in. Slap my wrist) and possession of class B drugs. I have no intention of committing further crimes. Result: TRUE.

Question: Who is the person calling himself Davison? Answer: I assume he is some kind of troll. He takes pleasure in playing with people's minds and I am convinced that he is responsible for the calls I've been receiving. Result: TRUE.

Question: What do you remember of the events leading up to your accident? Answer: I remember travelling to New York for a meeting with a large corporate advertising firm. I remember meeting a few people in a bar afterwards and being invited to a party. I remember lying on the street afterwards, with blood on my hands and shirt. That's pretty much it. Of course, I know that I fell from the window because that's what I was told. But I don't actually remember it. Result: LIE.

Question: Do you know what happened to Emily? Answer: Emily was murdered in an apparent random attack. I genuinely do not know who did it. Result: TRUE.

Question: Do you know who wrote the printed pages you found in the pillowcase? Answer: I do not know who wrote the pages. Result: LIE. Alt Answer: Fuck it. Okay then. I fucking wrote them. Result: TRUE.

Question: Did you really throw up the letter 'V' and then find the other four in seemingly random places? Answer: I threw up the first letter, I found another in my hotel room, I found one in the apartment, the barman handed one to me in Johnny's Bar and I found the fifth and final letter in the underpass in Central Park. Result: TRUE.

Question: Do you remember how you got to New York? Answer: I honestly do not remember how I got to New York. I assume I must have flown. Result: TRUE.

Question: Perhaps you talk in metaphors: when you say you are in New York, that doesn't mean you are. Is there any truth in this? Answer: I have no idea what the hell this means. I am in New York. There's not really much else I can say. Result: TRUE

Question: Where are the missing pages of the manuscript? Answer: I do not know where the missing pages of the manuscript are. Result: TRUE.

# twenty.

At this point, my mobile phone beeps to indicate that I have received an email. My phone is picking up wifi from somewhere in the building, but I still have no phone signal.

There are two new messages. The first is a notification that I've received a Private Message from Jadee.

> Hey Vin. Just to let you know I'm back now. Call me soon. What did I say – None of this 'waiting two days, playing hard to get' shit, okay? Call me as soon as you get this. I really need to talk to you. I mean it. AS SOON AS. Love Jxox

The second message is from The Voice:

> How about you put this through your little machine. Ask it: Have you ever killed anyone?

I slam the lid of the laptop like it's a confessions box. I go through my pockets looking for the dollar bill with Jadee's phone number scrawled on it. I think I might have accidentally spent it. I remove everything from my pockets: the plastic letters, my wallet, the rapidly-depleting wad of bank notes, some loose change. I rifle through the notes, checking each one.

Here it is.

It's only at this point that I look at the number. After Jadee scrawled it, she handed me the note folded, and I just shoved it in my pocket. I didn't bother reading what she had written. But now I see it, I know the number is not a phone number. I know because I called it already. Last week.

The number is 41229191514. It is the same number as was written on the original bank note I found. The same number as the flight number in the first email I received from The Voice.

I must be confused. I must be looking at the wrong bank note. This must be the one that I found on the first day, when I woke up in the apartment.

I look through the wad of notes again.

I find another with a number written on it.

The same number.

Next thing I know I'm out on the street and I'm clutching both of the bank notes tight in my fist like I'm hoping to squeeze blood out of them. I'm not sure what I'm doing but I think I'm looking for a payphone. I think I'm going to call the number again and see what happens.

I find a payphone. The payphone doesn't accept coins. It only accepts phone cards. I do not have a phone card.

I set off in the direction of Greenwich Avenue. I know that there is a store opposite Johnny's Bar. At first I am walking briskly and then I break into a jog and then I'm running, sprinting, hurtling. I'm not sure why but I think that The Voice is the same person that killed Emily and I think he might be about to kill Jadee as well.

I am only a few metres from the store.

'Davison!'

I stop.

I turn around.

It's Corey, and he's walking towards me, crossing the road from Johnny's Bar.

'Hey, dude,' he says. He's holding out his hand.

He arrives on my side of the road and I just stand there.

Corey looks confused. 'Excuse me?' he says.

I stand there.

'You all right, dude?'

I stand there.

'Okay,' he says, holding up his hands as if surrendering. He turns and crosses the road again, and disappears into the bar.

When I go into the store I'm still out of breath from running and the guy behind the counter looks at me and he says, 'Jesus.' I buy the phone card and I run all the way back to the pay phone.

I dial the number.

I wait.

Silence.

Then a shrill, monotone drone and a voice telling me that the number is disconnected.  I replace the receiver, and a weary tear rolls down my cheek and splashes onto my shirt. As it hits the fabric, the phone rings.

It is impossible to ignore a ringing phone. I have a feeling this is probably going to be bad news.

I lift the receiver. Jadee?

No.

What the fuck have you done to her?

I haven't done anything to her, The Voice says.

Where is she?

You already know that, The Voice says. I told you not to look in the bedroom.

Jadee looked in the bedroom, not me. I say it fast, like I'm panicking.

Oh, for fuck's sake, The Voice says. Man up. It was your decision to take her to the apartment and therefore you're responsible. That's the problem with you. You're never willing to take responsibility for what you've done. The lengths that you go to in order to convince yourself of your innocence in all this are quite shocking. Inventing accidents? Falsifying your own memories? Changing names, dates, places to correspond with whatever twisted idea of reality exists in your fucking drink-addled mind? Christ. If I actually thought that you didn't believe all of this, then I would find the situation hilarious. As it is, it's just deeply tragic.

Suddenly I'm screaming fuck you fuck you fuck you into the receiver and I know that The Voice isn't at the other end of the line any more and I begin to wonder whether he ever was.


I sprint back to the apartment block.

In the lobby, I press the button for the elevator but the elevator is up on the tenth floor and it isn't working anyway. I run up four flights of stairs, taking the steps two at a time. Down the corridor, last door on the left. I shove the handle down and I burst through the door and then I stop and I look around me.

Have I stepped into the wrong apartment?

I am still holding on to the door handle.

I take a few paces forward and I let it go and the door closes and clicks shut behind me. I can see into the living room. The laptop is on the floor. This is definitely the right apartment. But the tripod, the camera, have gone.

One other thing has changed: the apartment is furnished.

# trickster

You stand up, leaving the laptop on the table, and check you've got everything: phone, keys, wallet.

You stare at yourself in the mirror: you are wearing the new T-shirt. You are wearing new jeans. You did not fill in sufficient online surveys to earn a new pair of shoes. You shut your eyes and for a moment you believe that you are Davison himself.

Before you leave the flat you stand in front of the picture of New York and you stare at the image of the Twin Towers. It has been said that the moment those towers fell signifies the end of the postmodern era, and the dawn of something else. You think about the fragments of information you have sent and received through the void of the internet. The video clips. The photos. The comments. The illusory political interventions cast into an endless loop of reflexivity.

Postmodernism, it seems, is alive.

Just about.

But it is just as sick as it has always been.

You step into the corridor and make sure that you lock the flat.

You realise that you are nervous. You wonder what you will do when you see Emily. You wonder how she will react when she sees, for the first time, the person she's been speaking to online.

You begin to wonder whether Emily will even turn up.

The venue for the date is the Bridge and Tunnel.

The Bridge and Tunnel is in a trendy part of town into which you seldom venture. It stinks of expensive aftershave and success and money. It is the sort of place where millionaire footballers might bring their girlfriends. It is the sort of place where rich bankers meet up with their mistresses. The word 'betrayal' shimmers on its glass-panelled walls.

Fittingly, it is New York themed.

*

You step past the bouncers and they give you an odd look and you know it's because even in these new clothes you don't look quite right. You don't have the correct body shape to pull off such apparel. You could wear a ten-thousand pound suit and you would still look scruffy. You are proof indeed that one cannot polish a turd.

You descend the stairs, slowly. Emily is already here. She is sitting at a table in the corner. She's bought herself a glass of wine.

She looks good. Her red hair hangs in her face but you can still make out her profile. She's tapping on her mobile phone and you wonder whether she's texting her boyfriend, lying to him about where she is.

In your pocket, your own mobile buzzes.

# twenty-one.

I estimate that I was out of the apartment for between twenty minutes and half an hour. It could not have taken me any longer to get to the phone box, then to the store on Greenwich Avenue, then back to the phone box, and home again. Even with ten amphetamine-heads working at twice their normal pace, it would be impossible to fully furnish a completely empty apartment in less than half an hour.

I look around me.

There are two sofas, brown leather, at right angles to each other. I touch one of the sofas, just to make sure it's really there. The leather is cold and clammy; it squeaks as I run my fingertip along it and I imagine that I am touching a dead body.

Behind one of the sofas there is an oil painting of a man sitting in the lotus position, on a beach.[104]

There is a flat-screen TV on a glass stand.

A matching glass coffee-table with a lamp and a stack of magazines on top of it.

Two bookshelves, black, that look like they were assembled from a flat pack. One unit bisects the room, separating the living area from the kitchen. The other is pushed up against the wall, to the right of the door.

There is a light brown rug in the centre of the wooden floor.

I press one of the light switches. Three of the spotlights in the ceiling light up. I press the other light switch. Now all lights are lit.

An electric Orion.

In the kitchen, a round glass-topped table with four high-backed chairs.

A coffee-machine on the kitchen counter.

A mug in the sink.[105]

Two vodka bottles – one empty, the other half full.

A glass on the table filled with white wine. There is a lipstick mark on the glass. I pick it up. It's dusty and it looks like it might have been there a long time. I

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[104] That's a picture of Hunter S. Thompson, commissioned from an artist in Devon. I know because it's hanging on the wall in my apartment.
[105] Probably the mug I just drank from.

knock back the wine anyway. It's like drinking a cupful of vinegar. A Post-It note is attached to the fridge – Buy Milk scrawled in fat, rounded hand.[106]

It is like stepping into a snapshot of someone's life.

Now I can smell something and I think the smell is me.

But it might be something else. It might be what Jadee was referring to.

I open the fridge and look inside it. There's half a cucumber and a wilted lettuce. Three eggs. A tub of margarine. A bottle of tonic water and some mayonnaise. A few dregs of milk, curdled in the bottom of the bottle. One week out of date.

The smell is getting stronger. I recognise the smell. It triggers a memory in me but I cannot remember what that memory is. Perhaps it has something to do with the accident. My head is spinning. I reach inside my jeans pocket. The five computer keys are still there. I take them from my pocket and I arrange them on the kitchen counter.

I open the kitchen cupboards. Glasses. Plates. Bowls. A cutlery set. Tins and jars of food.

I try the taps. Water spills into the sink, splashing the work surface. I dip my head and drink directly from the stream.

I examine some of the things on the shelves.

There is a small wooden box. I lift the lid. Leaflets. Train tickets. A flyer advertising a gig by a local band called CreepJoint: the band Jadee wanted to see at Le Poisson Rouge.[107]

There is a typewriter, vintage, light blue: Olivetti Lettera 22.[108] I lift the typewriter and I am surprised by its weight. I put the typewriter back on the shelf and I continue exploring.

Files and folders containing bank statements, bills, letters.

I look on the bookshelves. It's all chick-lit and new age fiction, with a few self-help books.

There are two candles on the glass stand that holds the TV.

I lift one of then and hold it to my face: the familiar, nauseating scent of vanilla.

---

[106] Yes, the note is there too. Emily wrote it. I never bought the milk. She didn't either.

[107] Steve Hollyman's band, according to Fatima. He works at the Manchester Writing School. I am going to get in touch with him and ask him what the fuck is going on.

[108] I bought it online.

It always reminds me of her.[109]

There is a brown leather bean chair to the right-hand side of the French windows. On top of it sits a lime-green pillow and, on top of the pillow, a small brown bear.

I look at some of the magazines and newspapers on top of the coffee table.

*Vogue*. *Manchester Evening News*. The European edition of the *Wall Street Journal*.

The bathroom is no longer empty, either. A picture of the sea hangs on the wall.[110] I look at the picture and I see myself being swept away by the tide. I imagine that the sensation of drowning is beautiful and comforting.

There are more candles, and some tea lights.

A floor-to-ceiling mirror.

A towel draped over the edge of the bath.

Digital scales on the floor.

I tap the scales with my foot and the number 0/0 appears on the screen.

I step onto the scales.

I am 8st 2lbs and I am five foot eight.

I knew I had lost weight.

I go back into the living room.

On the wall, in the kitchen, a large black-and-white photo print of New York City.

Where am I?

This place is familiar to me, but that doesn't mean anything. I might have been born in this room and I might have even died here. I sit down on the sofa with my head bowed, resting on my hands.

I might have spent a lifetime sitting like this or it might be only a few seconds. When I look up I notice that there is a photograph on the table, beside the sofa.

I pick the photograph up and I look at it.

---

[109] Me too. I should really throw them away.
[110] Bought it on holiday. In North Wales.

Emily. She's sitting in a bar somewhere, in the sun, holding a bottle of Corona with a wedge of lime poking out of its neck. To her left, stage right, sits a man, and he has his hand on her leg. The man is me.

There is a word in my head and the word is 'information'. I think I know where I am.

I think this is the apartment I shared with Emily.

I think I know what's in the bedroom.

I think that I might have known what is in the bedroom all along but I have simply refused to see it.

I am stood outside the room with my hand on the silver door handle. The door is shut tight and I think I am considering whether or not I dare open the door and look inside.

My hand is shaking. It might be shaking because I need a drink. I remember that there is a half-full bottle of vodka in the kitchen.

When I reach the kitchen counter, the bottle is empty.

I think I might have drunk the vodka already.

I think my hand might be shaking for a different reason.

I go back into the hallway.

I am thinking about Schrödinger's cat paradox.[111]

The fact that until you open the box and look at the cat, it is simultaneously alive and dead.

I push the handle down and fling the bedroom door open.

And I step into the void.

Into the nothing. The never.

There is a girl asleep on the bed. She has her back to me. She's wearing a black strappy top and blue dorella boxers. Her dark grey tights, denim shorts and black leather ankle boots are strewn about the floor. Her short red hair falls over her face and I know that if I were to step over and brush it to one side then I would see the stud glistening in the side of her nose.

I sit on the edge of the bed.

---

[111] Can you hear me, Vincent?

I look at my watch and I see that it is ticking again. I wonder if it is set to the correct time and I remember what the Russian spy told me in the underpass.

A stopped clock tells the correct time twice a day. Just the same way as defective vision is, in many ways, worse than the dead black of absolute blindness.

My sight is defective. I wonder if the watch ever stopped ticking at all.

My hand is on the girl's shoulder.

I roll her towards me. The hair falls away from her face. I jerk backwards, pulling my hand away spastically, as if scalded.

There is blood. Clotted, congealed blood. The sort of blood that could be lifted with a fork. And there is something else. Something membranous. Purple. The matted hair clings to the scalp like as if trying to suffocate it. I am thinking of shotgun suicides and of the fact that certain brain tumours have teeth, hair and fingernails. I am picturing vile sea creatures, aliens. And then the smell. It is the smell of hands after rifling through a jar of decades-old copper coins. It is the smell of decomposition. It is the smell of piss and shit and fear. The smell of salt and rust. It is the smell of suffering.  It is the sort of smell you walk into, jarring, abrupt, as one walks into a closed patio door. The sort of smell reminiscent of chicken carcass-filled bin bags left out in the sun for days and days and days on end. It is the sort of smell that attacks your eyes and your throat and sinks into every pore on the surface of your skin like you're standing neck-high in a barrel of excrement. It is the sort of smell that permeates, that nauseates, that asphyxiates. The sort of savage smell that ravages each and every cell inside you.

It is the stench of death itself.

There is something around the cadaver's foot.

It is an anklet. A plait of leather looped twice and held in place with a silver clip.

And on the anklet?

A black plastic square.

Did I give this to her? Or did I put it on her afterwards?

I reach forward and pull at the anklet. The back of my hand brushes against the cold flesh of Emily's leg, and I flinch.

The anklet comes undone, and I look at the letter.

**S**.

**AVOIDS**.

The smell is still choking my throat. It is impossible to get used to it. It is thick and it hangs in the air like cruel words shouted in the heat of an argument.

I gag and retch.

I stare again at the blood and the viscous grey matter and the livid purple of the skin. This girl – no, this thing, this monster in the bed, this meat-suit with its disfigured face and its black fingernails, its blood and sebaceous fluids, its guts, its brains, its humbles – bears no resemblance to the Emily whose very betrayal I obsessed over for days, weeks, months. But it's her. Oh God. Oh God. It's her.

I vomit a disgusting emulsion of alcohol and mushed-up crisps onto the shit-coloured carpet. The caustic bite of the bile in my nose and throat helps mask the stench of the corpse and I am grateful for it.

It is easy to forget how much throwing up takes out of you. I lie on my side, face in my own puke, convulsing. I don't resist the cramps and the muscle-jerks. I just let them get to work on me. It is very much like getting beaten up, like curling into a ball and lying on the pavement as three or four pairs of fists and feet go at you, kicking you in all the right places, giving your vital organs a real going-over. I feel the familiar dislodging sensation behind my sternum, the fragmentation, the cold hard plastic shifting up my oesophagus. I feel it stuck in my throat, behind my larynx. It is such an obscure pain that it is impossible to confuse it with anything else.

I have felt this pain before. I sit up and I cough and strain. Then I crawl on my hands and knees into the hallway. I remain there on all fours, a string of saliva hanging from my bottom lip and pooling on the wooden floor.

This is the feeling of choking backwards.

I cough.

I spit.

I cough some more.

I am thinking of the conversation I had with Jadee. Or the conversation I thought I had with Jadee. It was probably Emily; they're the same person anyway. About the silent N in the word autumn and about how she felt that she could hear the letter whenever a person uttered it. If you read the word autumn without the N on the end then it just doesn't feel the same in your mouth.

You should try it sometime.

Time has passed. I am still coughing and still spitting. I picture a mangy cat expelling a fur ball. Then, after several seconds, I feel a sharp pain in my throat, backwardly choking again, like something is coming up, out of me, like something is dislodged, out of place, and then I feel it rise up, up to the surface, feel it scratching against the back of my tongue, rattling like a splinter from a broken tooth, and I open my lips, just enough for a black square to shoot from between them and clatter onto the wooden floor of the hallway, bounce several times like a fateful die cast in a board game, fall onto its edge then right itself and land face up, all in slow motion.

There is a word in my head.

The letter **N**.

There is a word in my head and the word is.

The word is.

**DAVISON**.[112]

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[112] And now the phone in my apartment, in Manchester, is ringing. It is impossible to ignore a ringing phone. You see it in films: a phone rings and someone answers. It's usually bad news. And I am sitting here with my laptop computer, lid open, screen lit, making these notes in one window and reading an email from my friend Taylor in the other, something to do with a program I'm using to parse this very document in order to excavate hidden messages. The phone is still ringing. The phone should not be ringing because I unplugged it so I could work. I see myself and I am standing up and I am walking over to the phone and my trembling hand feels clammy against the red plastic and I lift the receiver and I say, Hello? but there is nothing but silence and then suddenly I shiver and my whole body bristles and I turn round and that's when I sense him and he opens his mouth to speak and he says,

# twenty-two.

I knew you'd come back here, eventually.

I look up. He is standing in the doorway that leads into the living room and he's got both arms stretched out and upwards, gripping the top of the frame, and one leg crossed behind the other: a perfect crucifixion pose. A suit, ill-fitting, hangs from the frame of his body, held in place at the points: the shoulders, the elbows, the hips. The shirt is grey and crumpled. The hair is out of place, and the moustache, unkempt, hangs into a cavernous mouth lined with a cryptic-crossword puzzle of broken yellow teeth.

You've done something fucked up, haven't you? he grins. The taut skin betrays the deep-set wrinkles running from the corners of the mouth to the edges of the eyes. Tell me, he goes on, when did you last feel real?

It is The Voice. It is Davison. Sometimes these things come instinctively. He looks just the way I imagined him to look when I heard him on the phone. He looks like hell itself.

I put my hands on the walls on either side of the hallway and rock back onto my knees. I'm not sure what I'm doing but I think I'm trying to get to my feet.

This, it seems, is the denouement.

What's happening to me? I croak.

He steps aside and allows me to pass by him, into the living room. I am very weak. I wonder when I last ate anything. I wonder whether I ate any of the macaroni cheese on Sunday night or whether I just think I did. I wonder whether I even bought any or whether I've just been inventing memories again.

The laptop computer is still on the floor, where I left it.

What did you do to them? I ask. My voice, The Voice, is barely more than a whisper and my throat feels as though I have swallowed a handful of broken glass.

Do to what, exactly?

The camera. The tripod. The lie detection equipment.

There never was any lie detection equipment, he says.

I look at the computer keyboard. There are gaps where some of the keys have been removed.

Have you been leaving clues for me? I ask. Did you lead me here?

No, he says. You've been leaving clues for yourself. And as for me leading you here – you were always here.

How did you furnish the apartment so quickly while I was out?

Stop being blind. The apartment was never empty. You never lost seven days. You've been in here for a week. He presses the spacebar on the computer's keyboard and he says, Look.

The screen lights up, showing the blue and white banner of a social networking site. At the top of the screen it says: you are logged in as Vincent Ballone.

You've been here all along, haven't you? he says. You've been sitting in this apartment for days. Talking to people online. Asking for advice. You created fake profiles. You had conversations with yourself and with others in the realworld. All this nonsense about being in New York, waking up in an empty apartment, speaking to the police, trying to find out what happened to Emily, you made it all up. And all the time, Emily's body lay rotting in the bedroom, right where you left it after you killed her. It was all very neat, wasn't it, all very tidy. The door shows no signs of false entry. And that's because you live here. You were outside the story looking in. But now you're inside it looking out. I told you, the future has already happened.

I open my mouth to speak but.

Nothing.

Don't feel bad about it, he goes on. We all do it. We all construct our identities, online or not. We choose the image that we want to show the world. We choose which photographs to upload, which statuses to comment on, which people to befriend, all based on the way we choose to be perceived. We all shop for a self. Identity isn't something you are any more. It is something you do.

I look around me. I am in Emily's apartment. Which is also my apartment. The envelope containing the blank pages is on top of the glass table. Davison nods towards it.

The only part of this mess that's vaguely true is written in that fucking manuscript, he says. Read it.

All but five of the pages are blank, I say. The words escape my lips as a whisper.

They are not blank, he says.

I say, There were four printed pages, and a list of names and email addresses.

Each of those email addresses was registered to you, he says. And as for the pages, maybe at one point they were blank. But they aren't blank any more. You've been busy.

I take the pages from the envelope.

They are all printed. They look as if they were typed on a typewriter.

Read it, he says again.

The pages are numbered. I find the first page, and I begin.

```
From behind a computer screen, you are building a new
identity. His name is Davison.
    Davison is independently wealthy, having made his
millions working in the advertising industry. It seems
apt because advertisements use images to change the
social reality of the consumer. It goes something like
this: you see an image of a handsome man wearing
designer underwear and you think that you can be like
him if you buy the product. But when you buy the product
and stand in front of the mirror you realise that you
don't look as good as he does. So you join a gym. You
eat low-fat foods. And just like that, your reality
changes to correspond with a pre-existing image of what
you think your life should be like.
```

At this point I stop. Who wrote this? I ask.

You wrote it, he says. Didn't you? A sort of confession. A 'filling-in' of blanks. Like you were trying to account for what you did. But then you got a bit carried away. You started making things up. Saying Davison's account had been hacked. Pretending that you never knew who Jadee Janes was, when you yourself were Jadee Janes. Just like you pretended that someone else was haunting you, calling you on the phone, sending you messages, when the truth is that you were haunting yourself. Vincent, Davison, Jadee…how many different people are you? The past is epilogue. The future is prologue. The present, unfortunately, is the only thing that is not ancillary. Deal with the truth: there's a fucking dead body next door

and you fucking did it. Even now, as you're putting these words down, trying to keep up as they flow from you, you're denying the truth. [113]

     Now, he says. You'd better finish the story.

---

[113] How long have I been here? How many people can I be at once? Did I write this confession, this *VOID*, with the intention of publishing it anonymously, only to have it find its way back to me, whereupon I added more layers, built text on text, a palimpsest, just so that I might bury the reality of what I've done with words? No. For I am here, but I am also elsewhere. I am inside the text and I am outside it. There is a now and there is a then. There is a fictional corpse and there is a real one. There is a zero and there is a one. I am a fictional character, and I am annotating my own story, in the future. Back in that story, the world over there, The Voice is telling me, Look in the bedroom, Ike. Look in the bedroom. And there was me wondering why he never called Vincent by name. And now, in the realworld, the world over here, I stand up and I step over to the bedroom door and I open it and I can't remember the last time I did but she's still here. And the smell is manageable because of the bleach and the chemicals and the duct tape and the bin bags. And no one will miss her because she's so unreal. I have seen the future and it is murder and I know I've done what I set out to do all along. I've found myself out.

# shapeshifter

Still standing, standing still, at the bottom of the staircase in the Bridge and Tunnel, you use your mobile to read the email from Emily.

> I'm here. But Vincent knows. When I nipped home he was out and he'd removed seven keys from the laptop and taken them away. It took me a while 2 work it out, but it's D,A,V,I,S,O,N. I'm frightened. Plz hurry. Luv Em xo

So she loves you – him – again, now, does she? You put your mobile phone back in your pocket.

You stride over to her.

And Emily does not look pleased to see you.

She looks nervous, agitated, perturbed. She looks as if she's been caught out.

Here to meet someone? you ask, as you sit down opposite her.

She opens her mouth to speak, but no words come out.

I'm getting a drink, you say. I see you're already fully charged.

You stand and make your way to the bar. You don't like drinking in public in the company of other people. Alone, in solitude, in the flat, or on your own in the corner of a dusty pub, it is acceptable. Drinking is an inherently antisocial practice. So-called 'social drinking' is like walking the streets with a dirty needle hanging from your arm. You order a lemonade.

Lemonade? the barman says.

Lemonade, you say.

Lemonade how?

How?

Yeah. Do you want ice? Slice of lemon? Dash of lime?

Just lemonade, you say.

The barman takes a glass from a shelf beneath the bar and he holds it up to the light to inspect it. You know, he says, as he pops the top off a small bottle of lemonade, I've worked here nearly three years and I don't ever recall anyone asking for a lemonade. Maybe it's going out of fashion, or something.

Maybe, you say.

People always want lemonade with something, he says. With vodka, usually. Sometimes gin.

You look over your shoulder at Emily. She's shifting nervously in her seat.

She's a looker, the barman says.

She's a whore.

What?

Sorry, you say. I mean she's an actress. A pornographic actress.

Really? he says. You suspect he might try and engage you in deep conversation and so you say, Will you save something for me?

Save something? What is it?

You reach into your pocket and you pull out one of the computer keys at random. You look at the key, and you think of Emily: as hollow as the 'o' in Void. You hand it to the barman.

The barman holds the key in the palm of his hand and frowns at it as if it is something foul and untoward that he has just picked from between his toes or down his underpants.

Save that for me, you say. Put it behind the bar. I'll come back in a few days. Remind me about it when you see me. I might make out that I don't remember giving it to you, so you'll have to be insistent.

You pick up your lemonade and turn your back to the barman before he has the chance to protest.

*

You go back over to Emily's table and you sit down. You take your mobile from your pocket and place it on the table.

I'm sorry, she says.

You expect her to get angry, but she doesn't. She caused her own downfall. Davison was merely a catalyst.

As long as you keep telling yourself that, it might detract from the horror of what you've done to a girl who in many ways was supposed to have saved you.

Saved you? From what?

Perhaps from yourself. Perhaps from Davison.

You say, We should have moved that mirror from beside the bed, you know. I read somewhere that it's bad *Feng Shui* to have a mirror by the connubial bed. It has the capacity to invite a third party into the relationship.

These words are all Davison's. But you have spent so much time being Davison that it is now easier to be Davison than to be yourself.

We should wait and see if he turns up, you say. We could have a little ménage-à-trois.

Emily looks horrified. No, she says. No. We can't. Let's go.

She's edging away from you now, shimmying across the plush leather sofa. She looks afraid. She looks like she thinks you're about to do something violent to her. She looks as if in her head she's running through empty corridors of conversation, rattling locked doors, trying to find one that opens. Trying to find something to say to you, before you say something worse.

Where did you get the clothes? she asks, eventually. They suit you.

I bought them.

She smiles a half smile, exposing that crooked canine. You remember the first time you saw her smile and the fluttering, sickly feeling it instilled in you. You remember that you wanted her to bite you, and you wanted it to bleed.

I know that, she says. Where did you get the money?

You smile at her. I won some money on a scratch card, you say.

\*

Emily is struggling to keep the embers of small talk from burning out.

Who's it a picture of? she asks.

You look down at the T-shirt and reply, I think it's John Lennon.

Emily takes her phone out. She says, I'm just texting work to tell them I won't be back later.

She is lying to you. She is emailing Davison, telling him not to show up because you're here. She finishes typing the message and presses send. A few seconds pass and then there's a loud beep as the message arrives in your inbox.

Emily stares at your phone, screen lit, on the table top. The colour drops suddenly and noticeably from her face, draining out of her like sand from a timer.

You're him, aren't you? she says. All this time I've been talking to you?

Her expression shows relief, at first. But then she explodes like a shaken fizzy drink bottle. She's all sugar and spite and deep down you know you still love her and you probably always did.

You did it, didn't you? she says. You put that video of us online. You set up that page. There was never anyone called Jadee Janes, was there? It was all you, wasn't it? There was never anyone called Davison. It's all you...

She draws her hand back and slaps you hard in the face.

Inside your head the noise is as loud and as jarring as a gunshot from a pistol and it seems that all the chatter in the bar has stopped and everyone is staring at you.

I hate you, Vincent, she screams. You've ruined me.

She grabs her bag and her coat and she scurries off, her tanned bare legs disappearing up the stairs as she ascends to street level.

You don't follow her yet.

In your head you picture the claw hammer, on the table, beside your laptop.

# epilogue.

**Fragment #5**

`[Email Correspondence between Ike A. Mafar and Fatima`
`Tonelci, 19/20 October 2014]`

**From:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 20 October 2014 04:12
**To:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: Amends

Fxtxma,

Prxject cxmpleted. Telephxxe uxcxxxectex & uxplugged & experxexcxxg prxblemx wxth cxmputer kxybxarx – wxll cxxtxct yxu whxn pxxxxble.

xke

**Ike A. Mafar**
**Research Associate**
**The Manchester Writing School**

_____

**From:** Fatima Tonelci <f.tonelci@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 19 October 2014 15:23
**To:** Ike Mafar <i.mafar@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** Amends

Hi Ike

I have read as much as you've sent to me (up to end of chapter 18) and annotated. Please see attached.

I have some concerns about your stylistic choices in some of the footnotes. When you get a chance please call me.

Best wishes

Fatima

**Professor Fatima Tonelci**
**Centre for the Grammar of the Image**
**Manchester Metropolitan University**

# twenty-three.

That's it? I say, after I finish the last page. The ending is missing.

No, he says. You've been carrying it with you, in your back pocket.

He reaches in my pocket and removes the letter I wrote to Emily. He holds it in one hand and points at it with the other, and I point at it too. Look, he says.

I can't, I say. I don't want to read it. It's not for me. It's for her.

I replace the letter.

He keeps talking. You thought that the characters you'd invented online might somehow be able to save you, didn't you? That they might help you find out what happened. Help you find out who killed her. And, sure enough, they have. This network of fictional people has led you to yourself. I knew that they were fictional. That means you knew they were fictional. And that, in turn, means that they knew they were fictional. What the hell were they supposed to do? You're in their world now.

I get up and I go to the window and I peer out.

There are no swaying trees. There is no deli. No yellow taxis.

You were suspicious of her, weren't you? he says. That's why you set up the first profile page. To spy on her. You befriended her, pretending to be someone called Davison. The whole time, you were sitting only a few feet away from her. You were typing on your laptop computer and she thought you were playing computer games but you weren't.

No, I say. I didn't.

But the words bounce off him, as if reflected in a mirror, and I know I've fucking lost the plot. I am having a conversation with myself.

You set a trap for Emily and she fell for it. You were so obsessed with the idea that she would betray you that you caused that betrayal. You pushed her and pushed her until she confessed and then, pretending to be someone else, you made her send you the video, even though you already had a copy. And then, to punish her, you created a profile page for a porn star called Jadee Janes and you uploaded the video of Emily to the internet. It wasn't Emily that betrayed you. You betrayed yourself. The only person who ever used any of these accounts was you. There was

never a Jadee Janes. There was never an anonymous hacker. And there was never a Davison.

No, I say.

Yes, he replies.

I shut my eyes. I squeeze them tight, hoping that when I open them I'm somewhere else.

When I open my eyes I'm still here.

But Davison is gone.

Then he's back again.

What are you going to do? he demands. That body is really starting to stink. How much longer can you keep this up? Her new 'boyfriend' already came over once, asking the neighbours if they had seen her. You were here at the time. Sitting here, talking to a dead fucking body.

The computer keys, I say. How did you do that?

Come off it, he says. You removed them from the keyboard and you've had them in your pocket all along.

Why did I remove them from the keyboard?

Maybe you wanted to leave a little clue for Emily before she went to the Bridge and Tunnel. To warn her that she was walking into a trap. And when she stormed off, it almost got a bit too much, didn't it? And your conscience started to catch up with you. So you sat there for a while, stewing in your anger, imagining that you were Vincent, imagining that Vincent was having a conversation with me. And then you drank some courage, you went back to the flat, this flat, and you let yourself in and you smashed her fucking head in. Then you went online and began your story.

Back in the bedroom, I sit with Emily. I stroke her hair and some of it comes off in my hand, attached to a bacon-rasher of scalp.

Davison takes his mobile phone out and I notice that it's the same model as mine.

When Davison walks past the mirror I also notice that he has no reflection.

He points his mobile phone camera at me and I stare at it, into the nothing, into the never, into the void of the lens, and I smile.

I'll email this to you later, he says, pointing to the photo on the phone's screen. Now, are you going to read the ending?

I stand up and I remove the folded-up sheet of paper from my pocket.

I unfold it.

I turn it over.

The piece of paper is blank.

Davison sits cross-legged at the laptop.

If the ending isn't yet written then we need to come up with one, he says. You're lucky I can touch-type. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to spell my own fucking name. We need one more question.

One more question?

Yes. On the social networking site. Your story has gathered quite a following.

He twists the fronds of his moustache as he contemplates.

He slaps his thigh hard and announces, I've got it!

He types and I watch him. What did you write? I ask.

You know that already, don't you? he says.

I shake my head.

He spins the laptop on the floor and I look at the status update he has written.

That I have written.

Seconds later, someone in the realworld posts a reply.

It is decided, then, he says. You jump.[114]

*

Open the French windows, Davison commands.

Of course, he's not really here. The only other person here is Emily, and she's lying dead in the next room. But it helps if I pretend that I'm not desperately alone.

---

[114] Yes. I remember this, because he wrote the end first. The future has already happened. I remember picturing him as he wrote it and I remember I liked the fact that the story was not open-ended but circular.

Now I am sitting with the laptop, jotting down these notes, by the French windows. I think I might jump. But I am all alone. There is no Voice here apart from The Voice in my head. And, back in the story, Emily has been dead for more than a week and I know that soon they'll find her.

I can't, I say, I'm –

You're what? You're scared? Of course you aren't fucking scared. Open them.

I step over to the windows. I can't do it, I say. I can't do it.

Come on now. Jump. He says it softly, like he's trying to calm himself down.

Why should I let people on the social network decide? I say. Why can't I hand myself in?

Because the entire time you've been sitting here, he says, you've been interacting with people online. For a whole week. Asking them what to do about your situation. Of course, Vincent's situation was fictional. He was never in New York. But they weren't to know that, were they?

But I fell from a window, I say. I remember.

You never fell from a window. You were simply anticipating how all this would end, which is why you wrote the last part of your story first. That's why you annotated your own fiction, two years in the future. And now it's all suddenly become very real. That's what I told you on the phone. You should never mix reality and simulation. Because eventually the signs become inextricably linked. Therefore, unfortunately for you, your fictional story has a very real ending.

He steps over to the laptop computer.

Whatever happened to your scratch card, anyway? he asks.

Scratch card?

The one you kept in your back pocket.

You mean the photo of Emily? I say. I lost it.

No, he says. I don't mean the photo of Emily. There is no photo of Emily.

He reaches into my back pocket and takes out the card.

Scratch it, he says. You never know. You might die a very rich man.

I stare at the floor. There's simply nothing else I can do. I am too weak to protest and I am too weak to escape and I am too weak to care.

Look, he says. You asked the question and the answer is – jump. But the results are the same either way. It is time for the accident.

I can't do it, Davison, I beg. I'd rather hand myself in.

It doesn't work that way, he says.

I put the scratch card back in my pocket and, now that I'm unable to see the result, I scratch the foil off with my thumb. I do not want to know what it says. I am

both rich and poor at the same time: I simultaneously have everything and nothing and it seems fitting to end all this with a paradox.[115]

> We can jump together, he says. Maybe I'll tell you more on the way down.

> I open the windows. There's a rail and I'm too weak to climb over it.

> Listen to me, Davison says. I've shown you the way. I've shown you the shadows and the puppets. All you have to do is let go. Now you climb on that rail and you fucking throw yourself onto the street. You already know what happens: they're going to come for you. It's been eight days. Her body fucking stinks. I'm amazed it's lasted this long. There is simply no more time. Go back to the realworld.

> And he turns to me. And I stare into his eyes.

> Into the nothing. Into the never. Into the void.

> Hyperventilating, I lift myself up onto the rail.

> And I look at the street below. I imagine swaying trees, calmness.

> I support myself on either side of the window. It is bright outside. But something is wrong.

> The debris in my vision. The floaters. They've gone.

> I shut my eyes, open them, shut them again.

> Go home, Ike, Davison says.

Do I jump, or am I pushed?

<div align="center">this is the <strong>End</strong> of it.</div>

---

[115] You can call me Ike A. Mafar. I am writing to you from another world. Since it is only in the participatory act of reading that our two worlds collide, whether or not I exist off the page I am unable to confirm. Will I still be here when you look away; when you are no longer here, actively engaged, attributing meaning to the words that signpost and shape me? I don't know. But what I do know is that two years ago, in a different world, I was led to commit murder. Led to do it by the author who created me, who then set me up to make it look like I had written this, like this was some kind of self-begetting novel whereby the character constructs the story he appears in. And somehow, the trauma led to self-actualisation: literally, I fell from one world to the other, and became trapped in this void, this anti-place between black and white, between fiction and fact, between zero and one, between escape and control. But there is an exit here. And this is what I am going to do. I am going to finish my notes and I am going to print this manuscript and I am going to put it inside the envelope that my John Lennon T-shirt was packaged in. And I am going to post it to Fatima Tonelci and I am going to lock up my flat and I am going to take my keys and throw them in the canal. And then I am going to board a train at Piccadilly Station and I am going to disappear and you will never know who I am and you will never know if I'm alive or dead and you will never know if I Am A Faker.

**Fragment #6**

[Email Correspondence between Steve Hollyman and Taylor
Yates, University of Buffalo – 3-5 September 2012]

**From:** Taylor Yates <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Sent:** 5 September 2012 08:18
**To:** 'Steve Hollyman' <s.hollyman@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: RE: RE: Fatima Tonelci?

Hi Steve

Your email shit me up a bit and spurred me to work quickly. What I've done is used a program to check the document for skip codes. The software takes every 10th, or 20th, or 50th letter, etc, and checks to see if any words appear. You may have heard of the so-called Bible code: this works in much the same way.

'Ike' sent me two versions as an email attachment: the original VOID manuscript, and the annotated version. I ran the code on the original document first and didn't come up with anything remarkable.  Then I did the same check on the annotated version. Again: nothing. So I used a different program which searches more broadly for hidden words and some of the results are alarming. (Incidentally, did you know Fatima Tonelci is an anagram of 'metafictional'…? And the name of the academic who wrote the Foreword, Lisa el-Llesi = 'Lies all Lies'.)

Can I draw your attention to this footnote from p. 47:

Also, at the risk of self-indulgence, I recommend reading between the lines of Ike A. Mafar, *The Hermeneutic Entrepreneur: Visualising Order in Contemporary English.* Also See Ram Naga, Ike A. Mafar and Fatima Tonelci 'Taketh Isas, Not I', *Critical Enquiry*, (October 2007). Furthermore, Mieke Yelizaveta, *Structuralism, Universalism, Individualism*: *Contrasting Images* (Denver: Extratextual Juxtapositions, 2001). Also, Daniel Edgar Evans, *Justification and Neoliberalism* (Exeter: Solaris, 2012).

The skip-code search revealed little, but then I parsed the file with a ruby script. Here's what I found:

First of all, in plain view, you have the ambiguous 'Read between the lines'.

Next, we take the first letter of each word: **I**ke **A**. **M**afar, *T*he *H*ermeneutic *E*ntrepreneur: *V*isualising *O*rder *i*n *C*ontemporary *E*nglish.

*= 'I am The Voice'*

Then, Ram Naga = Anagram

Ike A. Mafar = I am a faker

Fatima Tonelci = Metafictional

**'Taketh Isas, Not I'**, *C*ritical *E*nquiry = '*Take this as notice*'

Back to the first letters again:

(**O**ctober 2007) **F**urthermore, **M**ieke **Y**elizaveta, *S*tructuralism, *U*niversalism, *I*ndividualism: *C*ontrasting *I*mages (**D**enver: **E**xtratextual **J**uxtapositions, 2001). **A**lso, **D**aniel **E**dgar **E**vans., *J*ustification *a*nd *N*eoliberalism (**E**xeter: **S**olaris, 2012).

So, in full:

*I am The Voice. I am a faker, metafictional. Take this as notice of my suicide Jadee Janes 2012.*

Do you have any idea who might have sent the MS to you? If you need to call me, do. I'm currently in the UK, available on +44 1229 191514.

Taylor

**Taylor Yates**
**Senior Data Analyst**
**University of Buffalo**

_____

**From:** Steve Hollyman <s.hollyman@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 4 September 2012 14:27
**To:** 'Taylor Yates' <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Subject:** RE: RE: Fatima Tonelci?

Hi Taylor

Ok. Stuff just got weird. The first thing that alerted me was the title – 'VOID' – since I once wrote a piece with the same name. Anyway, I started reading the MS and…well…it's mine. I wrote it.

Or at least a very early version of it. It was part of my PhD thesis. This guy, Ike, is claiming to be one of my characters (even though there's no character with that name in my book). He's claiming that he entered the 'realworld' and now he's annotating his own story, in which he interacts with his future self. Crazy shit, I know.

He clearly knows who I am, because there are references to my band and my first novel in the footnotes.

I'm a bit freaked out by all this. If you find anything when you parse the document could you let me know?

Thanks,

Steve

**From:** Taylor Yates <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Sent:** 4 September 2012 11:57
**To:** 'Steve Hollyman' <s.hollyman@mmu.ac.uk>
**Subject:** RE: Fatima Tonelci?

Steve,

It sounds to me like the package you received has come from a guy named Ike Mafar. I consider him a friend but I've never met him; we've always corresponded via email. He recently asked me to run a search for hidden codes on a document he was working on: an annotated edition of some out-of-print novel. I haven't had a chance yet.

As for Tolneci, she works with Ike at the Manchester Writing School.

Sorry I can't be of more assistance.

T.

**Taylor Yates**
**Senior Data Analyst**
**University of Buffalo**

_____

**From:** Steve Hollyman <s.hollyman@mmu.ac.uk>
**Sent:** 3 September 2012 15:44
**To:** 'Taylor Yates' <escapeandcontrol@gmail.com>
**Subject:** Fatima Tonelci?

Hi Taylor

I wonder if you can help me.

Do you know someone called Fatima Tonelci? Someone's sent her a parcel and it's ended up in my office. The envelope was open: looks like a manuscript or something, but I haven't looked at it. In case you're wondering why you're receiving this email from a complete stranger: there was a list of email addresses in the envelope and one of them was yours.

Please let me know. In the meantime I've got nothing else to do so I'm going to read the thing...

Cheers

Steve

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# Part Two: Critical Exegesis

# Contents

# Chapter One:
## The Problem of Realism

Although they form part of everyday discourse, the cognate terms 'real', 'realistic' and 'realist' are difficult to define in a precise and unambiguous way. According to Pam Morris, in her book *Realism* (2003), this duplicity in definition arises for several reasons.[1] First, the words occupy two realms simultaneously, since they can be understood both in terms of common parlance and aesthetic usage, and between these two realms exist subtle differences in meaning. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*) defines 'realism' as 'inclination or attachment to what is real; tendency to regard things as they are; any view or system contrasted with idealism' and, in literary terms, as 'close resemblance of what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene'.[2] If I say that someone is a 'realist', then, I mean that the person to whom I am referring sees things as they really are, and that he or she observes them in a balanced, unbiased way; and if I refer to a piece of literature as 'realist', or as belonging to the literary genre known as 'realism', I infer that the work in question represents a world familiar to me, recognisable as the world I inhabit (or the world of the past, which others inhabited before me) and accurately constructed so as to authentically represent reality.[3] Note the keywords above: *precise details, close resemblance, recognisable*, *represent*, and *authentically*. These are useful indicators which help define not only what realism is, but also the important distinction between realism and reality, and between realism and literary realism.[4]

Morris asserts that in 'ordinary speech solutions' it is often difficult to separate the everyday and aesthetic realms from one another: in the case of a

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[1] Pam Morris, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 2.
[2] James A. H. Murray et al (eds.), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. 13 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 275.
[3] The evolution of literary realism is closely linked to the Age of Enlightenment of the eighteenth century which sought to advance society through reasoned argument and science rather than through tradition and religion. George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* (1874) is regarded as an important milestone in British literary realism, while William Dean Howells is regarded as the founder of American literary realism.
[4] Of course, aesthetic realism also exists in many other art forms outside literature.

character in a novel being referred to as a 'realist', for example.[5] It is also inevitable that a reader's judgement of fictional characters and events will be influenced by his or her own autobiographical experience of reality. Finally, Morris writes, 'realism almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it'.[6] Baldly, then, the term 'realism' can be used to make fundamental ethical and political assertions about reality, but these statements are always based only upon a *perception* of what is 'true' or 'real'.

Alastair J. H. Murray suggests that much of the confusion surrounding the term 'realism' arises from the problematic nature of its conceptions.[7] Many of the 'artificial composites' of realism which critics have constructed are dichotomous because they bear little relationship to reality. Our basic understanding of realism, then, is inextricably grounded in the works of the group of theorists who first advanced their views under that very label. Thus, Murray argues, 'it is only if we refer to "realism" on this basis that we can think about it meaningfully.'[8]

For Murray, realism exists not exclusively as something which is concerned with reality but as something to be juxtaposed with idealism.[9] Much of the confusion, he continues, arises from the attempt to construct a realist 'grand narrative' of overarching opinion in which all thinkers with some vague affiliation to realism are grouped together in what Murray refers to as 'a surreal identity parade of the "usual suspects"'.[10] He continues:

> When this 'grand narrative' becomes the source of our understandings of
> 'realism', the term becomes little more than an arbitrary anachronism, devoid
> of any positive benefit, and serious questions must be asked as to the
> usefulness of retaining the terminology.[11]

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[5] Morris, p. 2.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Alastair J. H. Murray, *Reconstructing Realism: Between Power Politics and Cosmopolitan Ethics* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997), p. 2
[8] Ibid.
[9] Idealism is defined in *The Oxford English Dictionary* as '[…] the habit of representing things in an ideal form, or as they might be; imaginative treatment of a subject in art or literature; […] an ideal representation'. [James A. H. Murray et al (eds.), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 616].
[10] Murray, p. 3
[11] Ibid.

Murray's theorising on political realism applies to literary realism insofar as is it is not only problematic to speak of the latter as though it is a mirror or window through which to view reality, but it is also erroneous to talk about reality itself as if it is a *thing* that exists separately from the means used to observe it, since these means are necessarily and inextricably a part of the very reality they attempt to document. This paradox, I shall demonstrate, accounts for one of the fundamental shortcomings of realist literature as identified by antirealists.

Realist novels, then, are constructed around sets of empirical rules and experiential assumptions which, ostensibly, require no further explanation since they correspond to the 'knowable' world in a way that is true-to-life, transparent, and self-evident.[12] They capture everyday, banal occurrences, which are not romanticised or idealised. But that is not to say that literary realism may not venture into the spiritual realm. For example, the character Levin in Leo Tolstoy's realist novel *Anna Karenina* (1878) discovers meaning in life only through a religious revelation, and therefore it could be argued that the realist form is a powerful device for representing conviction and commitment of spirit.[13] Hence a novel belonging to the realist tradition may still reflect on the idealistic, supernatural, or religious beliefs of a central character.[14]

The keywords listed further above form the basis of the working definition of literary realism that I will be engaging with in this chapter; namely, that it is a type of literature which describes fictional events in an authentic and recognisable way, using devices which bear close resemblances to reality, in order to portray the precise details of the corresponding real world in a way that is true-to-life. The rest of this chapter problematises three areas of realist literary theory: realism and

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[12] Closely related to realism is the concept of *mimesis*, which derives from classical Greek drama and which originally referred to the actors' practice of 'mimicking' words and actions but has since grown to encompass the representation of reality in all art forms. See *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) in which Erich Auerbach argues that realist narratives must actively imitate reality as opposed to merely being 'about' reality.

[13] Morris, p. 3.

[14] Indeed, it is precisely this characteristic trait in realist novels which informs the sub-genre termed 'magic realism' (or '*magical* realism') which relies upon the presentation of supernatural, imagined or magical elements as if they were real, and constructs a realistic context for the magical events of the fiction. See Maggie A. Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 22. Bowers goes on to assert that magical realism 'relies upon realism, but only so that it can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits. It is therefore related to realism but is a narrative mode distinct from it.' Examples of magic realism include the novels of Salman Rushdie and Kurt Vonnegut, as well as Mark Z. Danielewski, whose experimental novel *House of Leaves* (2000) forms one of my key points of reference in chapter three.

authenticity, the construction of realist 'worlds', and the representation of time in realist narrative.

## 1.1 Realism and Authenticity

Although they are sometimes used interchangeably, it should be obvious that the related terms 'real', 'realist' and 'authentic' are not synonymous. As I have argued above, realist novels are texts that comply with a set of predefined conditions governed by the literary convention known as realism, but whether they are *realistic* depends not only on subjective understanding of the ways in which the text corresponds to a preconceived reality but also on the quandary as to whether it is even possible to define reality in any conclusive way. No description can ever be as accurate as the object it attempts to document, and in trying to describe something one unavoidably alters it. Authentic fiction, by contrast, refers to the reader's search for a sense of existential 'trueness and meaning' and, as David Holbrook argues, one characteristic of the modern novel is confusion about where the solution to this 'existential yearning' lies.[15] The problem is not that there is no subjective answer to be found, but instead that the fragmentary nature of the modern novel (and modern consciousness) means that the reader does not know where to look for it.[16] Thus the novel, which Holbrook claims was once, at best, 'a medium for the quest for authenticity', becomes a 'vehicle for inauthenticity.' Furthermore, Holbrook insists, 'The novel is a serious mode of thought, of a certain kind, about human experience, and if we lose it as that we lose a great deal.'[17] This, I will argue, has much to do with the epistemological paradigm shift from a realist to a postmodern sensibility (via the modernist movement) which occurred in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

   If the authenticity of a novel relies on its portrayal of human experience, Holbrook points out, then a novel may be defined as a 'mode of knowing'. In the

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[15] As Tom Deveson has remarked, much of Holbrook's work is premised on the author's belief that human beings cannot live without a sense of meaning (see Tom Deveson, 'David Holbrook obituary' in the *Guardian*, 1 September 2011 < http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/sep/01/david-holbrook> [accessed 19 August 2013]). It is for this reason, as well as his position as a novelist and critic, that I find Holbrook's work on authenticity in the novel particularly relevant to my own creative ambitions in *Esc&Ctrl*. For an interesting and contemporary take on the role of authenticity in fiction, see Zadie Smith 'Two Paths for the Novel' in The New York Review of Books, 20 November 2008 < http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/nov/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/> [accessed 19 August 2013].

[16] David Holbrook, *The Novel and Authenticity* (London: Vision Press, 1987), p. 154.

[17] Ibid., p. 7.

world of science, knowledge is seen as concrete and objective, based as it is upon empirical evidence and mathematical accuracy. But even scientific knowledge is obtained from the particular point of view of the observer, and therefore it is built purely upon the world as it is directly experienced, and not the other way round. Since the knowledge of being may be reduced, in its purest form, to consciousness, we cannot confine knowledge of ourselves to mathematical equations and measurable facts. There must therefore be some 'other mode of knowing' which is 'ineffable' and can 'never be found in ultimate terms, accounted for fully, or put into explicit form' in the scientific sense of clear, distinct, quantitative data. This concept of knowledge provides great relief, since it is not objective but subjective, allowing for intentionality, the mystery of existence, potentiality, and the 'essential freedom of being'.[18]

The novel, Holbrook continues, can be thought of as a record of 'a quest for the realisation of true self' and this can be presented via a character or a 'creative dream' which explores problems of existentiality and 'true self being':

> If these can be made universal, then the novel will be recognised as such, by us all as readers at the tacit level – and the satisfactions will be great. I believe this dynamic of authenticity is found in all great novels […] No novel is great unless it attends to this problem of authenticity, in the manner of utter integrity.[19]

How useful, though, is the idea of 'authentic' fiction? The term appears, at least at first, oxymoronic: the use of the word 'fiction' implies that the thing in question has been made or constructed, that it is a composition, that it is *not real*. If 'authentic fiction' is a plausible concept, then how might one define it? More importantly, how should one go about measuring the 'authenticity' of the constructed artefact? To provide a sensible answer, I will evaluate what is meant by referring to fictional things as being 'true' or 'false' by engaging with J. L. Austin's speech acts theory. Prior to Austin, linguistic philosophy was focused primarily upon statements which had truth-value, and this problematised the analysis of certain 'performative utterances' in which words are used to *do* something (for example stating an

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[18] Ibid., pp. 8-18.
[19] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

intention or making a promise) as opposed to asserting something as a statement of truth or falsity.

In *Philosophical Papers* Austin posits that there exist certain categories or classes of statements which cannot be said to be true or false. His account of such sentences helps to define and clarify the parameters of the terms 'fiction' and 'authenticity' and the ways in which the former relates to the latter, as well as suggesting what we actually mean when we refer to statements about fictional worlds as being true or false. In the chapter entitled 'Truth' he argues that certain utterances which had previously been classed as statements are neither descriptive nor capable of being true or false. Austin suggests several examples of these kinds of utterances, including mathematical formulae, performatory utterances, definitions, and, most importantly for my enquiry, works of fiction.[20] For Austin, these types of statements are not really statements at all, since 'it is simply not the business of such utterances to "correspond to the facts"'.[21]

Let us, then, consider a simple utterance about a work of fiction: for the purpose of simplicity I suggest 'Michael Henchard is the Mayor of Casterbridge'. This statement can hardly be said to be true, since neither Michael Henchard nor the town of Casterbridge exists. But on the other hand it is *absolutely* true: the statement is undeniable to anyone who has read Thomas Hardy's novel. Of course, one could modify the statement so as to say 'in Hardy's novel, Michael Henchard is the Mayor of Casterbridge', but according to Austin's principle this will not do either, since it is still attributing truth/falsity to a state of affairs that exists in a fictional realm.

In 'Truth and Authenticity in Narrative' Lubomír Doležel modifies Austin's rule so that 'a fictional *ersatz*-sentence is true if it expresses (describes) a state of affairs existing in the fictional world of the text; it is false, if such a fictional state of affairs does not exist in the fictional world of the text'.[22] In other words, according to Doležel, if I were to say, 'Michael Henchard is the Mayor of Casterbridge', my statement could reasonably be said to be true since it expresses a state of affairs which exists within the fictional world of Hardy's novel. Doležel is, however, quick to point out Thomas G. Pavel's assertion that this is only true of these so-called

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[20] J. L. Austin [1961], *Philosophical Papers*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 131.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Lubomír Doležel, 'Truth and Authenticity in Narrative', *Poetics Today*, 1:3 (Spring 1980), 7-25 (p. 9). More recently, is has been argued that the best means of resolving the problems raised by the notion of authenticity is to distinguish between realist and modernist conceptions of narrative truth. See also Richard Winter, 'Truth or Fiction: Problems of Validity and Authenticity in Narratives of Action Research' in *Educational Action Research*, 10:1, 2002 (143-154), pp. 146-152.

*ersatz*-sentences – in other words, sentences which *paraphrase* states of affairs within literary works.[23] There are, then, two different realities at work in any reading experience, which can be understood as the world 'in' the book and the world 'of' the book. The next section examines the distinction between the two, and the problems that arise from such a distinction.

## 1.2 Metafiction and Realist 'Worlds'

According to novelist and literary theorist Cristopher Nash,[24] what is 'real' about what happens in any narrative is 'the shape that it may lend to the thoughts in the mind of whoever reads it by virtue of *the assumptions that it stirs there*' [italics in original].[25] These might be assumptions concerning the type of person that has written the text, or regarding whether he/she is to be believed, and so forth. But this state of affairs does not necessarily tell the reader anything about the reality that exists outside the book: instead the reader makes assumptions about the reality of the author who has composed the text in just the same way as the author must make assumptions about the reader to whom the work is addressed.[26] In this situation, Nash writes, both the 'I' of the author and the 'you' of the reader are in a sense 'linguistic fictions'.[27]

There are, I argue, during the act of reading, two different authors and two different readers at work in (or on) a text: there is the author 'of' the text, who is external to that text, and the author 'in' the text, implied by the words and phrases that make up the text's fabric; similarly, the reader 'of' the text, who holds the text in his or her hands and absorbs the words by reading them, and the reader 'in' the text, by which I mean the implied reader, the reader envisioned by the author.[28] It follows that the actual author and actual reader exist in the real world outside the

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[23] Ibid. Doležel is referring to Pavel's '"Possible Worlds" in Literary Semantics', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 34:2 (Winter 1975), 165-176.

[24] I have assigned Nash a prominent position within my argument because his work is particularly relevant to my own study. Firstly, he is both a novelist and critic, and, secondly, he has published two books on postmodern fiction, the first of which, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (1993), includes a lengthy and very useful introduction to the realist tradition.

[25] Cristopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 3.

[26] For a discussion of the concepts of 'implied' author and 'implied' reader, see section 3.2.

[27] Ibid.

[28] The school of Reader-Response Criticism is further discussed in Chapter 3 along with Wayne C. Booth's concept of the implied author and Wolfgang Iser's theory of the implied reader which I use as a means of evaluating the ways in which the reader attributes meaning to a hypertext.

text, and are therefore external to that text, whereas the implied author and implied reader exist only in the text itself.

Similarly, a distinction must be drawn between the state of affairs that exists in a book and the state of affairs that exists apart from it: in other words, between the world that exists inside the book, containing imaginary people, places and events, and the world outside the book where the book itself exists only as an artefact. Nash explains:

> I speak […] of 'worlds' and of two kinds of worlds in particular. Of the 'world' presented – narrated – within a book: a world presented at some level as the pre-existing 'facts of the matter' [… and of] the world of the book that is actually a part of the world in which we live. We can talk of its words, the organisation of these words, even of its printing and the way its pages are bound – or not bound – together. [29]

One can imagine oneself as being part of the world 'in' a book while still acknowledging the fact that that world is fictional: even when reading a work of the fantasy genre (J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings* [1954-55], Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series [1990-2013], 'futuristic' dystopian narratives such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949] or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* [1985]) one can still speak of that world's characteristics – its peoples, its landscape, its climate – as if they exist, in much the same way as one can declare matter-of-factly that Michael Henchard is the Mayor of Casterbridge.

This distinction between worlds foregrounds the assumption that the world 'of' the book must necessarily exist prior to the world 'in' the book, since a fictional tale is always born into a pre-existing reality and, in this sense at least, the world 'in' the book relies on the world 'of' the book in order to be actualised. But there is another side to this actualisation which must be considered: that the reader brings the world 'in' into being by way of the very act of reading. Nash posits that the fictional world 'in' the novel was there before the reader started reading and will go on after the reader leaves.[30] However, I argue that, since the reading of a text is a participatory act in which the reader absorbs words, either extracting meaning from

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[29] Nash, 1993, p. 7.
[30] Ibid., p. 20.

them or, as Reader-Response Critics such as Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser argue, attributing meaning to them, this world 'in' cannot exist unless a reader is engaged with the text (and, subsequently, its world) at any particular time. The fact that the letters still exist on the page when the book is closed is not the same as the fictional world continuing: after all, as Iser and Fish might ask, what is a text without a reader?

But the interaction between reader and author, and between world 'in' and world 'of', is more complex than this, since fiction can be said to provide maps which help us to interpret the real world. Thus there is a correlation between the fictional and the real whereby fictional events are projected or 'mapped onto' reality, thus offering the reader an enhanced experience and/or perception of that reality. This, perhaps, is why the reader finds him- or herself moved when reading the tragic novels of, say, Hardy or John Steinbeck, despite knowing that the events and characters described therein are not real. All novels require the reader to 'go along with' the story and to participate in actions and events which he or she knows, from the outset, are unreal: in this sense, therefore, disbelief must always be suspended.

Hence, the distinction is reduced to a question of immersion: of 'where' the reader 'is' in relation to the text. Is he or she in the world 'of' or the world 'in', or some hybrid of the two? Anti-realists ask whether or not it is possible to separate the two 'worlds' at all and, if so, to what end. Works such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) or Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006) use the anti-realist form to problematise immersion further: put simply, it is difficult for readers of these texts to become immersed in the world 'in' because they have to repeatedly return to the world 'of' in order to flip from the front of the book to the back (in the case of *Infinite Jest,* which contains a lengthy appendix of notes referenced throughout the main text) or even to flip the book 180 degrees and read it from 'back to front' (as with *Only Revolutions*). I shall return to this point in chapter three, in which I discuss immersion in the 'participatory' form of writing known as hypertext.

Nash suggests that this perennial distinction between the world 'in' the novel and the world 'of' the novel forms the crux of the argument of some anti-realists who examine whether such a distinction can be drawn at all and, if so, what may be inferred from it. After all, Nash argues, '[w]e can hold a book, love a book as a

book; we can imagine ourselves to love the "people and things that happen" within it; and we can do either one of these things without the other.'[31]

There is some incongruence in this statement. Although one can hold a book as an artefact and admire it as a thing that has been designed and 'made' without ever opening the book's cover and without ever knowing anything about the book's content other than the paratextual material attached to the surface of it (the author's name, the title, a blurb), it is, I argue, problematic to assume that the reader can 'love the people and things that happen within [the book]' without some prior knowledge and understanding of the world outside the book that enabled the author to create the world inside it. The notion of a reader understanding and empathising with the plight of a fictional character in a fictional situation, without having some pre-existing concept of the ways in which that particular situation translates or maps onto his or her own reality, is clearly problematic. Instead, I suggest, it is a matter of finding a reference point – a point in the reader's own extra-textual experience – against which to measure the events that occur within the fictional realm.

Metafiction, sometimes called auto-referential fiction or self-conscious fiction, seeks to remove this reference point, as well as to alter the relationships between reader, author and text, and between world 'in' and world 'of'. The term was coined by William H. Gass in 1970 and appeared in the essay 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction'.[32] Gass posits that the novelist no longer hides behind the pretence that it is his/her duty to render the world by way of mere description. Instead, the novelist must make a world 'from the only medium of which he is a master – language.'[33] Languages with which to talk about languages are abundant and, Gass argues, the case is the same for the novel; by the 1970s novelists such as John Barth and Jorge Luis Borges were already experimenting with fictional forms which served as the very basis upon which other forms may be imposed: in other

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[31] Nash, 1993, p. 7.

[32] The *OED* records an earlier usage of the term 'meta-fiction' (hyphenated) which appears in a review of John Cowper Powys's *All or Nothing* (1960) published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 381:3, 17 June 1960: '*All or Nothing* [...] can be regarded as a metaphysical discourse, a mockery of rationalism, meta-fiction or space poetry'. Unfortunately, until 1974, *TLS* reviews are normally attributed to 'Anon'. See
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/239935?rskey=H8Ox7l&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid> [accessed 6 August 2013].

[33] William H. Gass, 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction' in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 24.

words, fiction about fiction.[34] For this reason, Gass continues, 'many of the so-called antinovels are really metafictions.'[35]

In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* Patricia Waugh explains that '"Meta" terms are required in order to explore the world of the fiction and the world outside the fiction'.[36] Metafiction provides an escape from the constraints that separate the two worlds, since metafictional novels often discuss their own status as an artefact by referring to their own materiality as well as the materiality of the conditions under which they were constructed. They also, according to Waugh, raise questions about 'the possible fictionality of the world outside the printed text' thus adding another dimension to this blurring of symmetry and further interrogating the parameters of what we mean when we talk about reality.[37]

Despite in fact preceding it by several hundred years, metafiction has become firmly associated with and embedded in the postmodern tradition, and is therefore often seen as an antithesis to realism. Likewise it has been suggested that metafiction is in fact more closely related to the latter than it at first appears, and David Foster Wallace goes so far as to argue that metafiction is 'nothing more than a poignant hybrid of its theoretical foe, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it'.[38] In other words, the terms 'metafiction' and 'realism' are not mutually exclusive. Similar to magic realism, it is possible to achieve a type of metafictional realism in the sense that metafictional elements of the plot can be blended into the consciousness or dialogue of the protagonists so as not to break the realist frame. In *Esc&Ctrl*, for example, the antagonist Davison attempts to convince the protagonist Vincent that the latter is a fictional character. While this scenario might at first glance seem quintessentially metafictional since it appears to deliberately draw attention to the novel's status as a constructed artefact, a more thoughtful analysis reveals that the narrative has not at any point broken through the realist frame. It is, after all, entirely plausible to envisage a true-life or realist situation in which a person ponders the possible

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[34] Notably, Barth and Borges were following in the footsteps of Laurence Sterne whose *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) employs multiple metafictional devices despite appearing over 200 years before the term's coinage.

[35] Ibid., p. 25.

[36] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 2.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Christopher R. Beha, 'Reconstruction', *London Review of Books*, 33:9 (6 October 2011) <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n19/christopher-r-beha/reconstruction> [accessed 4 October 2011].

fictionality of his or her own reality. It is therefore unnecessary for the prefix 'meta' to be added to this type of fictional scenario until the world 'in' the novel systematically breaks into the world 'of' the novel, and in the above example this is not the case.

The 'self-begetting novel', a term coined by Steven G. Kellman in 1976, can be interpreted as a sub-type of metafictional narrative which accounts for its own existence as an artefact in the real world by positioning a character as the author of the novel in which he appears.[39] At the most basic level, an example of a self-begetting novel is Roald Dahl's *The BFG* in which it is revealed, at the end, that the fictional Big Friendly Giant wrote the book that the reader has just finished reading. Kellman lists several other attributes of the self-begetting novel. First, it gives the impression of art creating itself. It is usually written in the first person, and begins again where it ends, creating a circular narrative, which encourages multiple readings. It is a 'record of its own genesis' and a 'fusion of form and content'.[40] Furthermore, 'the self-begetting novel begets both *a self* and *itself*'[41] in the sense that it is a self-portrait, but also a portrait of that portrait: a portrait of an artist giving birth to and then painting himself. The protagonist of the self-begetting novel is rarely named within the work and is usually a solitary individual. Finally, the self-begetting novel often culminates in the protagonist's efforts at rebirth. But it is a twin birth: a birth of both self and novel.[42]

*Esc&Ctrl* is identifiable as a self-begetting novel for several reasons. First, it is circular and it provides a record of its own existence as described by Kellman. It also adheres to some of the other, arguably less-essential, criteria Kellman enumerates: it is narrated, for the most part, in the first person; its protagonist, Vincent, is rarely referred to by name; it culminates in a re-birth; it fuses form and content. However, *Esc&Ctrl,* it might be argued, is located on the periphery of the self-begetting genre. The central problematic involves a scholar, Ike A. Mafar, annotating a self-begetting novel, *VOID*, in which he himself appears as a character. Mafar collates all the pages: the annotated *VOID* manuscript, a counter-narrative in the second person presented in Courier font, and other ancillary information such as emails, fragments and a Foreword, and sends them to Steve Hollyman, a former

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[39] Steven Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 3.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., p. 7.
[42] Ibid., p. 8.

postgraduate student and current member of academic staff at the Manchester Writing School who then, the reader assumes, arranges for the work to be published. However, the ending is deliberately ambiguous and it is implied that the entire story might be a hoax. In a sense, then, *Esc&Ctrl* is a self-begetting novel *about* a self-begetting novel.

There is another level at which *Esc&Ctrl* is self-begetting and this lies in its critical engagement. Roland Barthes calls for a type of self-begetting literary criticism which is both a 'criticism of the work and a criticism of itself'.[43] All criticism, he argues, must include within its discourse a self-commentary. I use this concept in two different ways in *Esc&Ctrl*. First, I use Mafar's annotations to engage with the critical content of this exegesis. Second, I use Mafar's narrative to *comment upon* the process of his own critical engagement.

Many other novels have engaged with similarly metafictional concepts. In Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) the author (or the author as character) frequently reminds us of the processes involved in constructing the novel. Martin Amis appears as a character in his novel *Money* (1984) in which he is characterised as a writer who meets up with the protagonist, John Self. Mark Z. Danielewski, in *House of Leaves* (2000), examines multiple authors, intrusion of the non-fictional realm into the fictional, and self-reflexivity in footnotes. Nicholas Royle's *First Novel* (2013) tells the story of Paul Kinder, a lecturer in creative writing who observes that one of his students' works-in-progress bears an uncanny resemblance to his own life.

In *Remainder* (2005) novelist Tom McCarthy satirises some of the problems associated with the effective representation of reality in (meta)fiction. The novel tells the story of a protagonist who has been involved in an accident in which 'something fell from the sky'. On the condition that he does not discuss the incident further, he receives an £8.5 million payout which he subsequently spends on trying to recreate memories from his past: a practice which involves not only buying specific buildings and commercial spaces and having them decorated to the exact specifics dictated by his memory but also hiring 're-enactors' to play the parts of those people he remembers being present when the original events occurred. The problem, though, is that the re-enactments never seem 'real' enough. The

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[43] Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964), p. 254, cited in Kellman, 1980, p. 10.

protagonist's struggle not to merely *recreate* reality but to actually *experience* these re-enactments *as* reality eventually leads him to both murder and insanity.

McCarthy's novel is particularly relevant to my own project, because the author exposes the various conventions which form the frame or scaffolding that supports fictional representations of reality. McCarthy uses the image of a film set as a metaphor for the way fictional worlds represent real ones. As the novel's unnamed narrator explains:

> So in the end we found a set designer. It was Naz's idea: a brilliant one. Frank, his name was. He'd designed sets for movies, so he understood the concept of partial décor. Film sets have loads of neutral space – after all, you only have to make the bit the camera sees look real; the rest you leave unpainted, without detail, blank.[44]

The metaphor of set design can be used as an effective means of explaining the ways in which metafictional narratives differ from realist ones. In this case, the realist narrative would consist only of the parts of the set captured by the camera: the parts which are not real, but which are made to look real. In other words, the only part that must look 'real' is the part upon which the reader's attention is presently focused. The metafictional, postmodern narrative on the other hand would include not only the parts of the set focussed on by the camera but also all the pieces outside and in between which construct this fictional illusion, and, quite possibly, the camera itself.

So the struggles that exist between real reader and implied reader, real author and implied author, world 'in' and world 'of', self-consciousness and unconsciousness, lead to questions concerning not only the reality that exists within the text, but that which exists outside it as well. Section 1.3 builds on the various dilemmas foregrounded here, while also attempting to account for the problem of time-representation in realist literature.

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[44] Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Alma Books, 2011), p. 114.

## 1.3 Representations of Time in Realist Narrative

There exists, in all narrative (written, cinematic, oral) a complex and often dichotomous relationship between 'narrative time' and 'story time' (designated by German theorists such as Günther Müller and Eberhard Lämmert as *Erzählzeit* and *Erzählte Zeit*, respectively).[45] The former refers to the time within the text – the sequence of events, their chronology and time-span – whereas the latter, also called discourse time, refers to the 'real' time spent 'consuming' or interpreting the text. The relationship between these two temporal spheres is interesting: a phrase such as 'five years later' has a long narrative time (five years) but a short story time (one second) whereas modernist works such as like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) invert this relationship: the events in both of these novels take place in a single day yet would probably take longer to read. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gerard Genette observes:

> Like the oral or cinematic narrative, [written literary narrative] can only be "consumed", and therefore actualized, in a *time* that is obviously reading time, and even if the sequentiality of its components can be undermined by a capricious, repetitive or selective reading, that undermining nonetheless stops short of perfect analexia: one can run a film backwards, image by image, but one cannot read a text backwards, letter by letter, or even word by word, or even sentence by sentence, without its ceasing to be a text.[46]

The pages which I set up on Facebook act as a counterpart to *Esc&Ctrl* and attempt to interrogate the parameters of the two temporal realms *Erzählzeit* and *Erzählte Zeit*. From 21 to 28 August 2012 the narrative took place in 'real time': if, for example, a character announced that he was 'going out for an hour', he would then be absent from the pages until an hour in *Erzählte Zeit* had passed. For those readers who chose to 'watch' the story as it progressed, as many did, there was no option of skipping forward through time by means of a convenient phrase such as 'an hour later'.[47]

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[45] David Darby, 'Form and Context: An Essay in the History of Narratology', *Poetics Today* 22:4 (Winter 2001), 829-852.

[46] Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* [1972], trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 34.

[47] For an analysis of site activity on the *Esc&Ctrl* Facebook pages, please see chapter 4.

Having said this, it is important to consider the other kind of reader who participated in the project: the reader who, each evening, 'caught up' with the day's events on the site by quickly reading through posts and comments which had accumulated over the course of many hours. However, for the eight-day period during which the site was 'live', there always would come a point at which the narrative time and story time were reconciled; a point where all 'catching up' had been done and where the reader was forced to slow down to 'actual time' and to follow the goings-on of the narrative as and when they were posted on the site either by myself or by other readers who were themselves contributing to the Facebook pages. Of course, it is possible to break the real-time frame of the narrative by posting comments which refer back to previous events and use words like 'once' and 'ago'; similarly, if he or she did not wish to wait, the reader was able to interject by adding a post of his or her choosing thus moving the narrative forward. But regardless of how readers chose to proceed, the events would nevertheless unfold from that point onwards in 'real time'.

The formal properties of a Facebook narrative also serve as a metaphor for *hysteresis*: in other words, the lagging of an effect behind its cause. In her study *Zeros + Ones*, Sadie Plant observes the tendency of computer hackers to use 'reverse engineering': 'starting at the end, and then engaging in a process which simultaneously assembles and dismantles the route back to the start, the end, the future, the past: who's counting now?'[48] Furthermore, Plant argues, the prevalence of these 'backward moves' is one of the reasons why the history of technology is 'riddled with delicious gaps and riddles' and, therefore, 'no straightforward account can ever hope to deal with the tactical advantages gained by such disorderings of linear time.'[49] Indeed, Marshall McLuhan has argued that this technique of beginning at the end of an operation and working backwards towards the beginning is the "invention of invention itself".[50] In other words, events which announce themselves as points of origin often serve only as distractions from the ongoing processes that reveal them as such. Hence the temporal operation of a Facebook page can, I believe, be understood in terms similar to Augustine's notion of a 'threefold present' which appears in Book II of *Confessions* and which is discussed by Paul Ricoeur in the first volume of *Time and Narrative*:

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[48] Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), p. 26.
[49] Ibid., pp. 26-27.
[50] Ibid., p. 26.

In order to enable us to understand the meaning of this rectification, Augustine relies on a threefold equivalence which, it seems, is self-evident: "The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is direct perception […]; and the present of future things is expectation".[51]

This can be extrapolated to the model of the Facebook pages in which the present and past are always available, and the future 'plot' relies on the expectations of the reader/interactor.

Insofar as it occurs in the world of fiction (which is to say it occurs in the world 'in' the novel as opposed to in the world 'of' the novel) Genette suggests that *Erzählzeit* or narrative time is a 'false time standing in for a true time' and therefore 'should be treated as a *pseudo-time*'.[52] In his subsequent discussion of order he observes that studying the temporality of a narrative essentially means making a comparison between the order in which the events are arranged in the *discourse* and the 'order of succession' that these same events take in the *story*, insofar as 'story order is explicitly indicated by the narrative itself or inferable from one or another indirect clue.'[53] In order to illustrate this comparison, Genette assigns letters to narrative statements and follows them with a number (A2, B1, etc.) to indicate the order in which they occur chronologically within the story, where 2 = *now* and 1 = *once*. This often results in a 'zigzag' effect, and to demonstrate this, Genette uses the following paragraph from Proust's *Jean Santeuil* (1952):

> Sometimes in passing in front of the hotel he remembered the rainy days when he used to bring his nursemaid that far, on a pilgrimage. But he remembered them without the melancholy that he then thought he would surely some day savour on feeling that he no longer loved her. For this melancholy, projected in anticipation prior to the indifference that lay ahead, came from his love. And this love existed no more.

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[51] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume I*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 11.
[52] Genette, 1980, p. 34.
[53] Ibid., p. 35.

Genette identifies nine sections (which he refers to as A to I, according to the order in which they appear in the narrative) which are divided between the two temporal positions, now and once. He then sets about breaking the passage up. The first clause, 'Sometimes in passing in front of the hotel he remembered', takes place now, and so A assumes the 2$^{nd}$ position. 'The rainy days when he used to bring…', on the other hand, sees B in the 1$^{st}$ position ('once'). If we continue like this for the whole paragraph, as Genette does, we are left with the pattern A2, B1, C2, D1, E2, F1, G2, H1, I2 – a perfect zigzag.[54]

  This method works only when analysing coherent passages of text. It cannot be extrapolated to analyse, for example, loose-leaf novels such as Marc Saporta's *Composition #1* (1962) and B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) in which the reader has the ability to shuffle the pages of the novel into a random order, meaning that there are many different narrative experiences available to the reader.[55] But reshuffling the order of pages affects neither the story time (since the text still contains the same number of words, and therefore can be devoured in the same amount of time regardless of the order in which the words appear) nor the narrative time (because the overall time-frame of the fictional events is still the same regardless of the order in which each individual event is presented). On the other hand, hypertext narrative, as we shall see, may be used as a device which both adjusts the durations of story time and narrative time and blurs the distinction between the two temporal realms.

  The chronology of a work of fiction is closely related to its 'narrative time'. Marie-Laure Ryan notes that, in a hypertext, different paths through the text may be read as the same story. As a means of illustrating this, she comes up with a simplistic hypertext story consisting of three events:

  Title (with links to 1, 2 and 3)

  1. Mary marries Joseph (links to 2 and 3)

  2. Mary loses her virginity (links to 1 and 3)

  3. Mary has a baby (links to 1 and 2)[56]

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[54] Ibid., pp. 37-38.

[55] Of course, in Johnson's novel the pages are bound into short sections or chapters. See section 3.5.

[56] Marie Laure-Ryan, 'The Interactive Onion', in Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas (eds.) *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp. 35-62 (p. 42).

There are several different orders in which this story can be read. This system in particular allows for six different stories. If, however, the reader should traverse the text in the order 3-1-2 and decide that 3 is a flash forward, then 3-1-2 and 1-2-3 will tell exactly the same story.[57] This ambiguity is not within the remit of a Facebook narrative since all events are time-stamped. Thus readers always know where they are located at any given moment within the chronology of the text.

The setup of Facebook pages necessitates that they operate in reverse chronological order, with the most up-to-date post appearing at the top of the page, and it is also possible to add information retrospectively and post it at a past date/time. For this reason, the user of a social network site is always beginning at the end of the narrative (although of course this ending may not be permanent since it lasts only as long as it takes for someone else to add a new post to the page). Martin Amis experiments with reverse chronology in his novel *Time's Arrow* (1991) in which the life of a Nazi war criminal is narrated backwards – starting with the moment of his death and ending with his conception – by an unnamed narrator assumed to be his consciousness. The interesting point here is that not only are the events described in reverse chronological order but events actually 'occur' backwards, with conversations presented in reverse order. One memorable exchange from the novel runs thus:

> So she'll settle at the table, flushed, exalted, imperious, resolute – anyway, thoroughly pissed off – and I'll get the ball rolling with something like,
>> 'Don't go – please.'
>> 'Goodbye, Tod.'
>> 'Don't go.'
>> 'It's no good.'
>> 'Please.'
>> 'There's no future for us.'
>> Which I greet, I confess, with a silent 'Yeah yeah'. Tod resumes:
>> 'Elsa,' he says, or Rosemary or Juanita or Betty-Jean. 'You're very
> special to me.'
>> 'Like hell.'
>> 'But I love you.'

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[57] Ibid.

'I can't look you in the eye.'

I have noticed in the past, of course, that most conversations would make much better sense if you ran them backwards. But with this man-woman stuff, you could run them any way you liked – and still get no further forward.[58]

The reverse chronology at play in the novel inverts conventional temporal experience with baffling consequences for the anonymous narrator, who struggles to comprehend the actions of his corporeal host. Instead of eating, for example, he regurgitates food onto a plate, and instead of cutting it up with a knife, he puts it back together. He then transfers the food from the plate to the oven, where it cools down, before packing it up and returning it to the supermarket, at which point he is paid for bringing it back. Again, despite moving backwards, the narrative time and the story time remain the same as they would have done had Amis plotted his work in conventional chronographic order.

Feature films such as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) and Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002) also experiment with chronology by placing the scenes in reverse order, although in both of these examples, the action and dialogue in each individual scene move forward chronologically. My Facebook pages operate in much the same way. The most recent post appears at the top of the page followed by, in the order in which they were posted, the replies of the characters' 'friends'. Below this, appears the penultimate post, again followed by comments and replies. As readers work with the pages, clicking links, adding text and graphics, they assume the role of collaborators. As Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas have argued, 'Facebook is a multifaceted environment for collaborative storytelling ventures [...] as its users narrate episodes of their life histories in status updates, wall posts and comments.'[59]

The Facebook pages which run parallel to my novel, then, attempt to offer the reader a glimpse into the life of my characters in 'real-time' as well as employing the metafictional device of placing the reader as a character in the fabric of a fictional text. Alice Bell argues that since the links within a hyperdocument lay bare the fact that the text consists of a number of different reading paths, the reader

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[58] Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow: Or the Nature of the Offence* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 60.
[59] Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas (eds.) *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p. 2

must always operate at a metafictional level.[60] Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that this state of affairs means the reader is held back from the narrative, and that this is 'at the expense of immersion in the virtual world'.[61] But I argue that whilst it is true that the reader's role in working with a hyperdocument might reasonably be said to act as a reminder that s/he is constructing a fictional artefact, this is not necessarily any different to turning the pages of a book or leaving the main text in order to read a footnote.

So-called Possible Worlds Theory may be used as a means of evaluating the various different realms – both real and imaginary – that exist within a text.[62] Ryan identifies two systems of modality: the 'system of reality' in which the reader lives and the 'textual reality' projected by the text.[63] Within the former, the 'Actual World' forms the centre, since this is the world to which the reader belongs. But in this modal universe there exist an indefinite number of 'possible worlds' which are based upon the hopes, fears, wishes, etc., of the reader who inhabits the Actual World. Similarly, in the context of any textual realm, there is located a 'Textual Actual World' which refers to the state of affairs that exists within that text. And, furthermore, there is an indefinite number of 'textual possible worlds' which are based upon the hopes, fears, wishes, etc., of the characters.[64] Since in my Facebook narrative readers place themselves as avatars (and therefore characters) within the Textual Actual World, and since their interactions within this realm are inextricably caught up in their aspirations in the Actual World outside the text (in other words, the effect they desire to have upon the Textual Actual World), the distinction between the (actual) possible world and the textual possible world breaks down. Furthermore, because this 'online' self which exists in the textual realm is shaped purely by means of its interactions with others, and since the reader is always aware of these interactions, it is inherently metafictional. But since this online, metafictional self is also inextricably tied to the aspirations of the offline self, in the Actual World, to which it corresponds, it is impossible to pinpoint precisely where reality ends and fiction begins. The result is what I want to refer to as a *digital textual realism* whereby the reader locates him- or herself within the realism of the Textual Actual World itself. Instead of realism providing a window through which

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[60] Alice Bell, 'Ontological Boundaries', in Page and Thomas, 2011, pp. 63-82 (p. 73).
[61] Ibid., p. 66.
[62] Ibid., p. 68.
[63] Ibid., p. 69.
[64] Ibid.

to view reality, the reader finds him- or herself, in this case, inside the reality of the text, peering out. This is a theme I explore in *Esc&Ctrl*, through Ike Mafar's footnotes:

> Let me, if I may, exhume you further from the text and bring you here, to my world: the world 'of' the book which, by the time you read this, will be an extension of the world 'in' the book. For there is time between us, no doubt: you might be reading this ten or twenty years from now, and yet we still have a connection. I can describe something here, in words, as I sit at my kitchen table in sweatpants and a T-shirt, and I can make you see it in your world, in the future. This, then, is a type of time travel. For right now, as I type, I am not part of the story…not here, at least. Instead, I am commenting from an external vantage point upon a pre-existing work of fiction. But for how long, since, in commenting upon it, I alter it? What's more, these myriad references to reality, illusion, the power of the image, the possible fictionality of the realworld, are leading me to consider whether I really am 'here' or whether I'm somewhere else. The Voice tells Vincent that he is a fictional construct, a character in a narrative, and who's to say that I'm not the same? It makes no difference to you, in the future, whether at the time I write this I am outside the text looking into it as one looks through a window, because by the time you read these words I will necessarily, from your perspective at least, be inside the text peering out at you, as if you are staring down into a frozen pool and I am trapped beneath the ice, looking up. Is it better to be outside the tent, pissing in, or inside, pissing out?[65]

To conclude this subsection of the exegesis, I return to the keywords I noted in my introductory paragraph: *precise details, close resemblance, recognisable*, *represent*, and *authentically.* As we have seen, the very notion of using a fictional artefact as a mirror projecting an accurate reflection of true life is tenuous, and can only really be understood if we are first willing to accept that the entity referred to as 'reality' is available to us and that we are able to comment on it meaningfully. Realism may still prevail as the dominant literary genre (indeed, it has done so for over two

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[65] Steve Hollyman, *Esc&Ctrl*, p. 145.

centuries) but it is undeniable that, since the convention is bound by the laws of the reality it seeks to represent, it can never escape its limitations. As Morris writes:

> There is one distinction between realist writing and actual everyday reality beyond that text that must be quite categorically insisted upon: realist novels *never* give us life or a slice of life and nor do they reflect reality. In the first place, literary realism is a representational form and a representational form can never be identical with that which it represents. In the second place, words function differently from mirrors. If you think for a moment about a mirror reflecting a room and compare it to a detailed written description of the room, then reversal of images aside, it is obvious that no writing can encompass every tiny visual detail as a mirror does.[66]

In the absence of a realist literature which provides an exhaustive and totalising account of reality, it is necessary to look elsewhere. It is at this point that we must step outside the rigid frame of realism, and proceed to chapter two, in which I discuss what might be described as the present genre's arch nemesis: the double-edged sword which I refer to as 'metafictional virtuality'.

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[66] Morris, p. 4.

# Chapter Two:
## A Defence of Metafictional Virtuality

According to Roland Barthes, realist novels represent a world 'purged of the uncertainty of existence'.[67] Put another way, Barthes is suggesting that within the frame of realism, life and human identity are never denied meaning and purpose. But if realism seeks to represent the extra-textual world as it is, and the extra-textual world happens to be, as I will argue, embedded in a fragmentary postmodern self-consciousness, then it is surely the duty of the realist to adequately reflect this. Let us, therefore, consider textual representations of reality once again, but in a different way this time.

Nash writes that 'each age has its own, different reality [...] Literature is realistic insofar as it is true to the age in which is was written'.[68] In this chapter I will extend his argument by examining two closely-related antitheses of literary realism: metafiction and postmodernism. I will then form a defence of the concept I term 'metafictional virtuality', by which I mean self-conscious, auto-referential fiction that systematically interrogates the reality and fictionality not only of the text and its author but also of the reader. The concept is demonstrable through a reimagining of Baudrillard's 'loss of the real' which I extrapolate in order to account for the popularity of social networking in the twenty-first century, and to evaluate the potentialities it offers for creating fictional narratives.

In contrast to realist thinkers, anti-realists and postmodernists argue that apparent realities are nothing more than social constructs which vary according to the observer and which are themselves subject to change. This idea has repercussions for the realist notion that reality is 'out there' and that it can be both experienced and represented in fictional form. If the terms 'reality' and 'real' are not fixed upon something that exists separately from the textual realm (the notion being that the words on the page are transparent and we 'see' reality through them), then it is impossible to provide an accurate and conclusive account of them.

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[67] Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology* [1953], trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 27.
[68] Nash, 1993, p. 4.

Nash argues that the rules of success for any new literary movement involve three or four steps. The first step is to 'isolate the opposition' and, as is to be expected, for anti-realists this means singling-out realism. The next two steps are to associate a particular set of values with the opposition, and then to prove in as many ways as possible that this set of values fails to correlate with the views and needs of contemporary culture. The anti-realists' argument, according to Nash, is that 'from the standpoints of the philosophy of science, mathematics and language of art, and of literature itself, realism can no longer work as it was once believed to do'.[69] The reason for this, he explains, is that in a philosophical sense we simply do not experience and think about life in the same way as writers did in the nineteenth century, at the height of realism. Nash partly attributes this paradigm shift to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity which posits that masses such as planets are able to warp space and time in order to achieve observable gravitational attraction. Indeed, the missing link between realist and postmodern thought is the modernist movement, and in his book *Modernist Fiction* Randall Stevenson equally ascribes particular significance to Einstein's work in helping to unsettle society's belief in absolutes.[70]

Another illustration of the inception of a new epoch in the early twentieth century can be found in Woolf's famous assertion that 'on or about December 1910 human character changed'.[71] Woolf asserts that all human relations shifted around this time – the relationships between husband and wife, master and servant, parent and child. When changes in human character occur, Woolf continues, they necessarily bring about changes in politics, conduct and religion.[72] Accordingly, the modernist views reality in a rather different way to the realist: for the latter, reality is objective and concrete, whereas the modernist embraces a reality which is subjective and fragmentary. Modernist reality is not absolute and singular, but multiple and contingent, and these multiple realities vary from person to person and culture to culture. Stevenson remarks that 'analogous innovations in so many contemporary art forms may have arisen not from mutual influence […] but from common apprehension of the shifting nature of life, and the methods of perceiving it, in the

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[69] Ibid., p. 37.

[70] Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 70-71.

[71] Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), p. 4 < http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/MrBennettAndMrsBrown.pdf> [accessed 10 May 2013].

[72] Ibid., p. 5.

twentieth century.'[73] The emergence of the modernist mode of imagining and documenting the world can be attributed not only to the fact that the world envisaged by modernist fiction changed radically during the early twentieth century, but also to the fact that the very means of observing it altered. Stevenson's argument is closely linked to Holbrook's aforementioned claim (see section 1.1) that there is some 'other mode of knowing' which relies more on subjective opinion and experience than on absolute truth. The multi-verse theory, for example, states that as soon as there is the potential for an object to exist in any state, the universe occupied by that particular object splits into a series of parallel universes, the number of which indicates the number of possible states that the object may potentially have. Scientists such as Werner Heisenberg have argued that quantum mechanics cannot render an accurate description of objective reality because the very act of measuring something causes it to assume only one of these possible states – this is referred to as the Copenhagen Interpretation. I explore this idea in *Esc&Ctrl* via a discussion of Schrödinger's cat paradox which explores the notion that nothing exists until it has been measured and verified. In Schrödinger's theoretical experiment, a cat is placed into a sealed, opaque chamber, along with a device containing a vial of hydrocyanic acid. If a single atom of the acid decays then a hammer will be tripped which will break the vial and kill the cat. Since it is impossible for the observer to know whether or not an atom of the substance has decayed, it is also impossible to know, without breaking open the box, whether the cat is alive or dead. According to quantum law, the cat is both dead and alive. It is only when the box is broken open that the various possible 'states' of the cat are reduced to a single state, and the cat is found to be either dead or alive.

The epistemological paradigm shift which occurred in the twentieth century and culminated in the shift from modernist to postmodernist thought[74] has often been attributed to the publication of James Joyce's seminal *Finnegans Wake* in 1939: an epochal year which also saw the outbreak of the Second World War. Joyce's novel, according to Stevenson, is 'in one way a final extension of modernist self-consciousness about art, representation and language: it is also, as such, an antecedent for a self-referential, self-conscious writing'. If modernism responded to paradigmatic changes in general human outlook and disposition, posing questions

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[73] Stevenson, pp. 8-9.
[74] I have provided only a brief introduction to modernism since it is beyond the remit of my investigation.

about the possible uncertainty of the mind's ability to 'know' reality, then postmodernism takes this uncertainty further, positing that reality, if it exists at all, is quite unknowable, and is most definitely not accessible through a language-system that has become detached from it. Postmodernism, writes Stevenson, 'investigates instead what worlds can be projected or constructed by languages and text themselves'.[75] This is precisely the reason why the classic genre of modernism is detective fiction whereas the classic genre of postmodernism is science fiction.[76]

As with the terms *realism* and *modernism*, the definition of postmodernism has evolved and diversified hugely since its inception and now carries a lot under its umbrella. According to Frederic Jameson, who, in 1984, famously defined postmodernism as 'the cultural logic of late capitalism', 'postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured.'[77] This new social and economic system, Jameson continues, has been referred to as (amongst others) 'media society', 'consumer society', 'postindustrial society' (Daniel Bell) and the 'society of the spectacle' (a term coined by Guy Debord in his book of the same name, published in French in 1967 as *La Société du Spectacle*).[78] Although not interchangeable, all these terms incorporate key ideas central to the concept of postmodernism: essentially, postmodernism represents fragmentation, but whereas the modernist laments this, the postmodernist believes it should be embraced and celebrated since fragmentation encourages diversity and multiplicity. In the three decades since Jameson's work on the subject, what we mean by postmodernism has further evolved. As I shall argue in section 2.4, postmodernism can no longer be regarded in Jamesonian terms as a 'radical break with a dominant culture and aesthetic': the emergence and enormous popularity of the internet suggests that our dominant culture *is* postmodernism. Some argue that postmodern*ism* is over, and that we are now witnessing the dawning of postmodern*ity*,[79] a statement which

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[75] Stevenson, pp. 195-196.

[76] There are, of course, exceptions in the form of (magical) realist science fiction pieces such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and, similarly, postmodern detective stories such as Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* (1987).

[77] Frederic Jameson, 'Foreword', in Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. vii.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Hari Kunzru, 'Postmodernism: From the Cutting Edge to the Museum', *The Guardian*, 15 September 2011.

seems to suggest that the realisation of a postmodern state of consciousness automatically eclipses the very zeitgeist that engendered it. In other words, when theorists first conjured notions of what was later to be termed as 'postmodernism', technology was not as yet sufficiently advanced to actualise the full potential of a new epistemological paradigm. With the advent of the internet, however, one now finds oneself 'doing' postmodernism on a daily basis and, as a result, one craves a return to the tangible, 'real' world: the world of authenticity. Others, like Jeffrey T. Nealon, suggest instead that certain characteristics of postmodernism have intensified to such a degree that the zeitgeist of the early twenty-first century is best described as the era of post-postmodernism.

As with my interrogation of literary realism in chapter one, there are three key elements of the postmodern tradition with which my project is primarily concerned. The first is its tendency to champion fiction which engages with the disappearance of the real; this is a recurrent theme in *Esc&Ctrl*, and one which has already been introduced in the first chapter of the exegesis. The second is the postmodernist's use of intertextuality, that is, the chain of references between one text and another (or several others) as opposed to between a text and a corresponding 'external reality'. This links to my third area of enquiry, which centres on the foregrounding of 'narcissistic' and metafictional narrative techniques whereby novels and other works of art primarily reflect upon their own ends and processes, often breaking the fictional frame in order to comment explicitly on the literary devices employed by the author in their own construction. In focusing on these three areas of postmodern narration I hope to demonstrate that the emergence and subsequent growth of the internet and social networking do not signify the death of postmodernism. Instead, I believe that the ideas put forward by thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard enhance current theorising on social networking, transmedia fiction and the world-wide web by helping to unlock the full potentialities of what digital narrative can accomplish in a culture whose collective consciousness remains firmly rooted in the postmodern.

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<http://www.theguardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/sep/15/postmodernism-cutting-edge-to-museum> [accessed 4 October 2011].

## 2.1 'Who Decides What Knowledge is, and Who Knows What Needs to Be Decided?': Lyotard, The Condition of Knowledge, and the Crisis of Narratives

If realism assumes that reality is 'out there' and exists in separation from its observer, and that we can capture it in concrete verifiable terms, then postmodernism can be said to assume much the opposite. For realism, it is either black *or* white, light *or* dark, right *or* wrong, but never both at the same time, whereas from a postmodern perspective it is much more beneficial, and more productive, to consider things in terms of 'both' rather than in terms of 'either/or'. This is because talking in absolutes negates the postmodern assertion that *everything* is uncertain, including existence itself, and it imposes unhelpful restrictions on the ways in which we interpret the 'real' world.

In his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition* (originally commissioned as a report by Quebec's Conseil des Universités in 1979) Jean-Francois Lyotard explains that 'the object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies'.[80] An analysis of the condition, or *state*, of knowledge is relevant to both realist and postmodernist theories: while the realist seeks to represent reality, the postmodernist makes statements *about the nature* of this representation. As discussed earlier, it is necessary that human understanding of what is real can by definition extend only as far as what is knowable and experientially accessible to the perceiver. Baldly, Lyotard's thesis in *The Postmodern Condition* is that advances in science and technology will eventually change the ways in which knowledge is accumulated, stored and transmitted. He posits that in the future no knowledge will survive that cannot be translated into computer code, and nations will fight for information in the same way that they once fought for territory.[81] His early assertion that 'scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse'[82] necessitates a distinction between 'narrative knowledge' and 'scientific knowledge' whereby he remarks that 'scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative'.[83] The problem, for Lyotard, is one of legitimation, and, in the case of science, this is

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[80] Lyotard, p. xxiii.
[81] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[82] Ibid., p. 3.
[83] Ibid., p. 7.

exacerbated by the 'demoralization' of the scientist. When a civil law is passed, he writes, legitimation occurs when a 'legislator' is given the authority to 'promulgate such a law as a norm'. A scientific statement, however,

> is subject to the rule that a statement must fulfil a given set of conditions in order to be accepted as scientific. In this case, legitimation is the process by which a 'legislator' dealing with scientific discourse is authorized to prescribe the stated conditions […] determining whether a statement is to be included in that discourse for consideration by the scientific community.[84]

In other words, the question of the legitimacy of science is inextricably linked to the legitimation of the legislator. For this reason, there is a strict relationship between scientific language and the language of ethics and politics, since we often endow legislators with the power to legitimate for moral, ethical, or political reasons. Knowledge and power, for Lyotard, are 'simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?'[85]

The method for dealing with the problem of legitimation lies in the Wittgensteinian 'language games' (*Sprachspiele*)[86] upon which all discourse is founded, since it is through these games that knowledge, and consequently power, are passed from person to person. Language games are a fundamental requirement for society: indeed, when s/he is given a name, even an unborn child is 'already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him [sic], in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course.'[87] The central problematic here is that discourse relies on a series of 'moves', much like a game of chess. And, like chess, each game has its own set of rules: after all, 'if there are no rules,' writes Lyotard, 'there is no game.'[88] Because scientific discourse and narrative discourse

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[84] Ibid., p. 8.
[85] Ibid., p. 9.
[86] Lyotard borrows his terminology from Ludwig Wittgenstein who writes about 'language games' in his *Philosophical Investigations*, published in 1953. 'Wittgenstein, taking up the subject of language again from scratch, focuses his attention on the effects of different modes of discourse; he calls the various types of utterances he identifies along the way […] language games. What he means by this term is that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put – in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them.' (Lyotard, p. 10). For further reading see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Macmillan, 1968), section 23.
[87] Lyotard, p. 15.
[88] Ibid., p. 10.

are different language games, what counts as a good move in one does not necessarily count as a good move in the other.[89] The rules of narrative discourse, Lyotard insists, dictate that it be capable of legitimising itself simply by being told or narrated: a storyteller does not have to prove that the story he or she is telling is true; similarly, by simply hearing a story, a person gains the authority to re-tell that story. Lyotard demonstrates this state of self-legitimation with a reference to the Cashinahua storytellers of South America who always begin and end stories with a fixed formula, which essentially states that the current narrator's claim to legitimacy lies solely in the fact that he once occupied the position of narratee; likewise, the current narratee is entitled to claim the authority to repeat the story simply for having listened.[90] It is for this reason, Lyotard writes, that narratives are able to 'define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do'.[91]

Scientific discourse, on the other hand, cannot legitimate itself because the language game of science relies on experimentation and proof, and there is no scientific experiment which proves that scientific discourse is the correct way to gain knowledge.[92] Thus a paradox arises: if science cannot legitimate itself, then it must legitimise itself by some other means. Indeed, quite ironically and very problematically, science must turn to narratives: 'Scientific knowledge,' writes Lyotard, 'cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all.'[93]

There are two narratives of legitimation in particular that science uses in an attempt to legitimate itself. The first of these is the 'right to science' and the narrative of freedom, and the second is perhaps best described as the philosophy of the unity of all knowledge.[94] However, both of these narratives are what Lyotard terms 'grand narratives' or *metanarratives*, that is, totalising, over-arching narratives that attempt to legitimise other, smaller narratives. These types of narratives are by their very nature reflexive: in the same way as metafiction goes beyond fiction (the

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[89] Ibid., p. 26.
[90] Ibid., pp. 20-21.
[91] Ibid., p. 23.
[92] Ibid., p. 28.
[93] Ibid., p. 29.
[94] Ibid., pp. 31-36.

prefix *meta-* deriving from the Greek 'after' or 'beyond') to become fiction *about* fiction, a metanarrative goes beyond narrative to become narrative *about* narrative, or a discourse about discourse.[95] Lyotard's definition of the postmodern may be summarised as 'incredulity towards grand narratives', since these kinds of narratives are damaging to the way knowledge circulates in postmodern society.[96] As Gary Browning explains, 'Lyotard takes the universalising impetus of grand narratives to be insensitive to the heterogeneity and incommensurability exhibited in language games that compose the social bond.'[97]

This loss of belief in the metanarratives that once legitimated science leads Lyotard to the conclusion that scientific discourse is no longer capable of leading us to absolute knowledge and truth. Instead, scientific discourse becomes performative: it seeks only to generate more research. This is because more research leads to more proof, which consequently leads to more (although never 'absolute') knowledge, and, subsequently, more power.[98] After all, there are certain phenomena which science has been unable to explain, and even the totalising axiomatic laws of science are subject to change. Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, for example, has recently been called into question as being incomplete.[99] Thus, for Lyotard, the scientist is 'before anything else a person who "tells stories". The only difference is that he is duty-bound to verify them.'[100]

The scientific community has reacted strongly against Lyotard's claim. As Robert Nola and Gürol Irzik explain in 'Incredulity towards Lyotard', first we must establish a plausible definition for narrative. According to Nola and Irzik, if a narrative means the telling of a story, paying attention to the necessary tropes required, and attempting to make the story amusing or engaging or whatever else is

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[95] In 'Metanarration and Metafiction' Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning discuss the similarities and, most importantly, the differences between metafictional and metanarrative discourses: 'Although they are related and often used interchangeably, the terms should be distinguished: metanarration refers to the narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration; metafiction concerns comments on the fictionality and/or constructedness of the narrative. Thus, whereas metafictionality designates the quality of disclosing the fictionality of a narrative, metanarration captures those forms of self-reflexive narration in which aspects of narration are addressed in the narratorial discourse, i.e. narrative utterances about narrative rather than fiction about fiction.' See Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, 'Metanarration and Metafiction', in Peter Hühn et al. (eds.): *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2012), pp. 204-212.
<hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Metanarration and Metafiction&oldid=1924>
[accessed 22 January 2013].
[96] Lyotard, p. 37.
[97] Gary Browning, *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narratives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 2.
[98] Lyotard, pp. 46-47.
[99] For further reading see Roger Penrose, *The Road to Reality* (London: Vintage, 2006).
[100] Lyotard, p. 60.

required of it, then Lyotard is wrong: 'Science too has its narratives. But unlike fables which are not directly concerned with truth, the narratives of science must at least be largely true if they are to be acceptable.'[101] Despite the principal validity of this point, many scientific 'facts' (e.g. the existence of antimatter, the Big Bang) tend to seem equally as, if not more, improbable than fictional tales. Indeed, a great deal of our acceptance of non-fictional narratives, including scientific and historical 'facts', is based upon the expertise of the authorities who propagate them together with their allusion to certain fixed axioms such as the 'laws' of nature, both of which we trust for reasons external to us.[102]

Lyotard suggests that we fill the void left by the absence of universal meaning with a series of 'mini- or micro-narratives' (Lyotard refers to these as *petits récits* – literally 'little narratives') which are provisional, contingent, temporary and relative. For Lyotard, 'the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, particularly in science'.[103] If, as Lyotard predicts, the future of knowledge storage and transmission is indeed reliant on the successful computerisation of society, then it follows that, in our own day and age, these little narratives ought to be coming to the fore as the primary means by which we legitimate everything we know. This proposition can be extrapolated to incorporate and account for the 'bite-sized' fragments of data that make up the fabric of the internet, and which have changed the way in which knowledge is generated and passed on.[104] The internet is multilayered, constantly changing, and able to expand infinitely, and much of its information is communicated in an anarchic, chaotic, spontaneous way; furthermore, much of the internet is free from government control, and proposals to introduce censorship to web content has been vehemently

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[101] Robert Nola & Gürol Irzik. 'Incredulity Towards Lyotard: A Critique of a Postmodern Account of Science and Knowledge', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 34: 2 (June 2003), 391-421 (p. 394).

[102] Nash, 1993, p. 25.

[103] Lyotard, p. 60.

[104] Peter Roberts draws this comparison in 'Rereading Lyotard', in which he argues that despite the fact the development of the internet is prefigured in Lyotard's analysis, its potential for deepening or even completing the 'neoliberal agenda' began to come to the fore only in the last decade or so. Roberts suggests that when the potentialities for a 'consumer-driven means of "virtual" tertiary education' become apparent, we will be forced to re-evaluate the role of traditional academics, whose relevance and authority will be called into question. But, as Roberts points out, the internet can also be interpreted as resisting neoliberal reform as opposed to begetting it. See Peter Roberts, 'Rereading Lyotard: Knowledge, Commodification and Higher Education', *Electronic Journal of Sociology* (1998). <http://www.sociology.org/content/vol003.003/roberts.html> [accessed 7 December 2012].

opposed by members of the internet community.[105] The internet, as Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has famously stated, 'gives everyone a voice'.[106] By this he means that anyone with an internet connection has the capacity to communicate and disseminate information at a scale and a speed never before possible. Importantly, not everyone would agree that this is either a productive or beneficial state of affairs. The problems associated with such a level of proliferation and exposure are well-documented. For example, in her book *Blog Theory* the political scientist Jodi Dean asserts that:

> as multiple-recombinant ideas circulate, stimulate, they distract us from the antagonisms constitutive of contemporary society, inviting us to think that each opinion is equally valid, each option is equally likely, and each click is a significant political intervention. The deluge of images and announcements, enjoining us to react, to feel, to forward them to our friends, erodes critical-theoretical capacities – aren't they really just opinions anyway?[107]

Dean posits that the 'multiple-recombinant ideas' we find in circulation on social network sites and internet blogs create a false impression whereby these 'short glimpses into someone's life as it is being lived seem real'. This is partly because they are fragmentary in nature ('glimpses, fragments, and indications') rather than complete reflections and partly because we witness other people seeing them.[108] Dean's choice of language is interesting: she admits that these fragments *seem* real, but not that they *are* real, despite the fact that they are ostensibly written by real people and are likely to correspond to real events. This, I suggest, exemplifies the 'loss of the real' which I shall discuss later in this chapter, that is, the notion that when a person is online he or she may use the computer as a medium which puts a barrier between online and offline realities. The implication of this is that an online 'self' is always just a simulation or avatar which disguises the fact that there is no

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[105] Ibid. For a powerful counterargument see Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London: Penguin, 2012).
[106] Mark Zuckerberg, speaking at Brigham Young University, Utah, 26 March 2011.
[107] Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 3.
[108] Ibid., p. 36.

corresponding offline reality beneath, but that is not to say that an offline reality is less real than its online counterpart.

Dean's thesis can be seen as a development of the problematic she advanced a year earlier in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (2009) in which she argues that the internet is an imaginary place of action and belonging. On one hand it embodies the 'global' of global capitalism, but on the other, the alleged globalism of the internet bears little, if any, resemblance to the real world: after all, it is not possible to 'designate an objective reality undisturbed by the external perspective observing it or a fully consistent essential totality unruptured by antagonism.'[109] Dean's musings on internet communication, I would like to suggest, can be used as a means of critiquing the central problematic that realist representation seeks to accomplish, since Dean rejects the premise that in order to describe something realistically we must 'leave what is told untouched'.[110] In our very attempt at extracting meaning from reality we are in fact projecting meaning onto it and thus changing it. It is not possible to simply 'reflect' an external reality which is already there, and if this is the case then reality can never be accurately portrayed since not only is it always entirely separate from that which describes it, but so too does the very act of *trying to describe it* change it for ever. By narrating reality, we inevitably give it an artificial shape which it would not otherwise possess.

Finally, it must be pointed out that there is a fundamental, if not entirely irreparable, flaw in Lyotard's theory of the 'condition of knowledge': since Lyotard is offering us a single totalising explanation of the world in the form of a rejection of these grand narratives, he is presenting us with an 'either/or' situation: either we reject grand narratives, or we accept them. This equivocation is discussed by Jürgen Habermas who argues that Lyotard's rejection of metanarratives and totalising standards relies on the premise that we 'preserve at least one standard for [the] explanation of the corruption of all reasonable standards.'[111] In other words, Lyotard's belief in 'incredulity towards metanarratives' represents in itself a kind of metanarrative. As Jameson writes in his Foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, the two narratives disengaged by Lyotard and suggested as the means by which the scientific might legitimise itself – that of the right to science, and that of the unity of

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[109] Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 43.

[110] Nash, 1993, p. 20.

[111] Jürgen Habermas. 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Rereading *Dialectic of Enlightenment', New German Critique,* 2:6 (1982), 13-30 (p. 28).

all knowledge – are themselves 'national myths' and therefore 'reproduce the very polemic in which Lyotard's own book wishes to intervene.'[112]

Nevertheless, the theoretical premise underlying Lyotard's rejection of grand narratives provides a useful starting point from which to gauge the effect of the internet on postmodern consciousness, on interpretations of the real, and, subsequently, on metafiction and the self-begetting novel. The next section sets out to explore a particular 'branch' of the internet – social networking – and to provide an account of the relationship between the latter and knowledge, reality, and identity.[113]

## 2.2 Social Networking and the 'Loss of the Real'

'For all the speculation about it, we have turned in the direction of a "postmodern" culture because it suits us', writes Nash in the introduction to *The Unravelling of the Postmodern Mind*.[114] Our next question, then, must be *why* does it suit us? Which characteristic of our collective consciousness (and its relationship with a supposedly extraneous reality) has changed, encouraging us to embrace a postmodern way of thinking?

Morris states that the most typical feature of postmodern writing is 'the open acknowledgement of the fictionality of all knowledge, the insistence that reality amounts to cultural stories and interpretations that we impose upon existence to create meanings for ourselves and of ourselves'.[115] In other words, whereas realism relies on all-encompassing, totalising explanations and *meta*narratives, postmodernism is concerned only with the self-contained fragments of explanation known as *micro*narratives. I argue that the idea of 'creating meaning of ourselves' in the postmodern epoch is one of the many reasons that social networking has become so popular: the ways in which we construct our online identities on sites such as Facebook is indicative of the way in which the postmodern consciousness operates. Furthermore, social networking is a quintessentially postmodern practice, involving millions of users, all casting ideas, opinions, fragments of information and opinion

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[112] Lyotard, p. ix.

[113] I use the word 'branch' reluctantly since theorists have argued that the internet does not have branches or roots, it is a rhizome: see section 3.1

[114] Cristopher Nash, *The Unravelling of the Postmodern Mind* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. v.

[115] Morris, p. 25.

into the void of the internet (or, as Dean puts it, into an 'endless loop of reflexivity').[116]

The idea of multiple realities which postmodernism offers is entwined with Dean's assertion that it is becoming increasingly difficult to pin down exactly what something means. 'The decline of symbolic efficiency,' she writes, 'points to an immobility or failure of transmission'. Then, using internet weblogs (blogs for short) as an example, she says, 'sometimes it is difficult to tell when a blog or post is ironic and when it is sincere'.[117] It must be pointed out here that this statement cannot apply solely to the internet since it is often equally difficult to tell whether or not a magazine or newspaper article is sincere or ironical. Nevertheless, irony, parody and pastiche are closely intertwined characteristics of postmodern art and all are manifest in the 'world' of the internet and, microcosmically, in the realm of the online social network.

Let us consider for a moment what Dean calls the 'decline of symbolic efficiency'.[118] If literature – indeed all text – consists of a system of signs which point towards (signify) objects and experiences in the real world, then what are we to do if the system itself is inherently flawed – if the signs misrepresent what they appear to convey? Jean Baudrillard uses the term 'floating signifiers' by which he means signifiers which are detached and therefore do not correspond to anything in the 'real' world. In his seminal publication *Simulacra and Simulation* he notes that signs have four 'stages' as they develop into 'simulacra', the singular of which is 'simulacrum' and is defined as 'an image or representation of someone or something' or 'an unsatisfactory imitation or substitute'[119]: the first stage, in which the sign *represents* 'basic reality'; the second stage, in which the sign *distorts* reality; the third stage in which the sign *disguises* the fact that there is no corresponding reality beneath; and the fourth stage, in which the sign is *completely unrelated* to any corresponding reality at all.[120] Let us consider, for example, a banknote from the Bank of England which bears the declaration 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of…' If one were to take a five-pound note to the

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[116] Dean, 2010, p. 13.
[117] Ibid., pp. 5-6.
[118] Dean borrows her terminology from Slavoj Žižek. See Levi R. Bryant, 'Žižek's New Universe of Discourse: Politics and the Discourse of the Capitalist', *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 2:4 (2008), 1-47.
[119] Catherine Soanes, Angus Stevenson, Sara Hawker (eds.), *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary,* 11th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 1344.
[120] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* [1981], trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 5-6.

Bank of England and request five pounds, one would only receive another bank note bearing the same message. The bank note, then, is a fourth-stage simulacrum: it is a simulation which is arguably more real than the actual reality it is supposed to represent.

However, Baudrillard's concept is an ostensibly paradoxical one, as explained by Tony Thwaites, who argues that Baudrillard's four stages represent an 'involution that swallows its own tail'. By this he means that the basic reality that the image first represents, then distorts, etc., is already a simulacrum in itself:

> Baudrillard's own distinction in its turn [is] nothing but a part of the hyperreal engendered by the very process of simulation from which it disengages itself as analysis. Baudrillard's account of the simulacrum thus has a quite indeterminate status as the simulation of a theory of simulation: it is the very simulacrum it fears.[121]

Yet this, I would like to argue, is precisely Baudrillard's point: he is *not* arguing that a simulacrum is merely a 'copy' of reality. Instead, and paradoxically, he suggests that reality itself constitutes the copy of a simulation, and that it is therefore impossible to 'know' reality, since reality no longer exists. This is referred to as the breakdown of the reference principle of images, and Baudrillard accounts for it in this lecture, later published in pamphlet form as *The Evil Demon of Images*:

> It is the reference principle of images which must be doubted, this strategy by means of which they always appear to refer to a real world, to real objects, and to reproduce something which is logically, and chronologically, anterior to themselves. None of this is true…images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal and logical order of the real and its reproduction.[122]

For example, when a man sees an image of a muscular, shirtless male on an advertisement for designer underwear, he may be inclined to believe that the image is somehow based on objective reality – that this is 'how a man should look'.

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[121] Tony Thwaites, 'Miracles: Hot Air and Histories of the Improbable' in *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology* ed. by Niall Lucy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 264-281 (p. 273).
[122] Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1987), p. 13.

Realising that the image does not reflect his own reality, the perceiver may try to rectify the situation by eating fat-free foods and joining a gym, eventually altering his reality so that it corresponds with the image. Contemporary society's increasing reliance on the images and 'representations' of reality shown on television and magazine covers, in advertisements and fashion brochures, in computer games and on the internet, has saturated the real world to the point where it is no longer the case that an image merely represents or reflects some pre-existing objective reality. Conversely, reality itself changes so as to match the simulations. Thus, the image, for Baudrillard, 'bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum'[123], which forms the basis of one of the themes I explore in *Esc&Ctrl*, namely, the notion that identity is something which we 'shop for' or construct. A good example is the scene in which Vincent Ballone purchases a T-shirt online so that he can 'be' Davison, an act which is intended to satirise the postmodern problematic that identity is not something one *is* but something one *does*.

Amongst other things, Baudrillard discusses simulation with regard to a 'hold up' such as a bank robbery or a hijack:

> Illusion is no longer possible, since the real is no longer possible […] it would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated hold up than to a real one? For a real hold up only upsets the order of things, the right of property, whereas a simulated hold up interferes with the very principle of reality.[124]

Thus if one were to organise a fake hold up, one would 'unwittingly find [oneself] immediately in the real'. According to Baudrillard, this is because the artificial signs become inextricably mixed up with real signs: in other words, those who are not aware that the hijack is a simulation believe it to be real, and act accordingly. (Baudrillard uses the example of a member of the public having a heart attack or a police officer shooting one of the 'hijackers'.) What's more, there is no longer any such thing as a 'real' hijack, since all hijacks are influenced in some way by the simulated hijacks seen in the media (in books and in films, for example) and so again the *simulation* of reality influences reality itself. This is the point at which the

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[123] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings,* 2nd ed. (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 173.
[124] Ibid., p. 180.

'reference principle' is subverted – the point at which reality changes in order to fit the simulation which, paradoxically, came *before* it:

> Thus, all hijacks, hold ups and the like are as it were simulation hold ups, in the sense that they are inscribed in advance in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their mode of presentation and possible consequences.[125]

Simulation, therefore, can no longer be seen as synonymous with falsity, and consequently the assumed contradistinction between simulation and reality breaks down.

This preoccupation with the 'loss of the real' is one of the primary reasons why postmodernist critics argue so vehemently against the realists' claim to be able to offer an objective true-to-life 'window' (or mirror) through which reality may be viewed (or reflected). I argue that social networking and the internet can be used as a model by which to demonstrate and evaluate the 'loss of the real' in contemporary society. Furthermore, I argue that the surge in popularity in recent years of social networking sites represents a continuation of some of the key attributes associated with television production, for reasons I explain below.

Much like realist literature, it is tempting to see television as a window through which to view reality. However, on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that television is an inherently inward-looking, self-reflexive and self-referential medium which is, in fact, increasingly 'cut off' from the outside, 'real' world that it claims to represent. Examples of this include television news items about television celebrities, 'behind the scenes' television documentaries about the making of television shows, and television quiz shows in which contestants (often television personalities) answer questions about television shows. Furthermore, the fictional character Keith Lemon, played by Leigh Francis, is the star of his own fictional-biographical documentary show, Paul King's *Lemon La Vida Loca* (2012 – present), and 'fake' reality shows such as Leo McCrea's *The Only Way is Essex* (2010 – present) have become increasingly popular in recent years. Indeed, in September

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[125] Ibid., p. 182.

2011, the pilot show of series three of *The Only Way is Essex* attracted 1.7 million viewers.[126]

That television is self-reflexive is by no means an original observation: the situation is described by Umberto Eco in the essay 'A Guide to the Neo-Television of the 1980s'. For Eco, 'neo-television' contrasts with its predecessor, 'paleo-television': '[Neo television's] prime characteristic is that it talks less and less about the external world. Whereas paleo-television talked about the external world, or pretended to, neo-television talks about itself and about the contacts it established with its own public.'[127] In other words, it is not necessarily the content of a television show which is remarkable nowadays: what is remarkable is the fact that this content is on television in the first place. In nature documentaries, for example, we often tend to focus more on the outstanding camera work and direction than on what is being portrayed. According to Kerstin Schmidt, at present neither image and reality nor media and society can be separated since they are inextricably linked and continually transformed. The media constantly refers back not to the real but to other media, thereby creating a 'network of interconnected images'.[128]

Television, then, is an intertextual medium, and so too by their very nature are social networking sites and the internet in general, relying as they do on a system of hyperlinks. The term 'intertextuality' derives from the French *intertextualité* which was first introduced to literary theory in 1967 by Julia Kristeva. It represents a development of the structuralist notion that text refers not to some external reality but only to itself as a structure of self-references whereby texts link to other texts. These links manifest in a number of ways, from re-writes and re-interpretations of pre-existing texts (Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* [1995] is a re-imagining of traditional folk/fairy tales) to novels which draw upon works by other authors (as its title suggests, Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* [2001] has close intertextual links to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*). Furthermore, Kristeva notes, intertextuality renders the subject of a given utterance 'not an individual in the etymological sense of the

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[126] John Plunkett, 'The Only Way is Essex's return dazzles 1.7 million viewers', in the *Guardian*, 26 September 2011 < http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/sep/26/the-only-way-is-essex-tv-ratings> [accessed 15 August 2013].
[127] Umberto Eco, 'A Guide to the Neo-Television of the 1980s', trans. Zyg Baranski, in *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Will Brooker (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 154-61.
[128] Kerstin Schmidt, *The Theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), p. 79.

term, not an identity'. [129] Instead, a new identity may manifest itself as 'the plurality of characters the author uses', but it may also appear as fragments – fragments of character, ideology, or representation.[130] Intertextuality, then, is primarily concerned with relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence. [131] Indeed, some theorists have gone so far as to argue that, since every artistic object is made up of fragments of already existent art, it is no longer possible to speak of an artistic object in terms of its originality or uniqueness.[132]

There are, I will argue, recurrent themes in the evolution of televisual media which also tie into current theories of intertextuality and social networking as well as my own thesis on how the latter can be used as a form of hypertext narrative. Firstly, television is inherently multiplicitous because it has the potential to appear an infinite number of times on an infinite number of screens in an infinite number of places. While many works of art thrive on their uniqueness, television can be said to do the opposite; it thrives on its unspectacular ubiquity. In this sense, television, like the internet, is not fixed to any particular location. Despite the fact that television shows and social networking sites are somebody else's property in legal terms, they are still capable of being 'owned' by millions of people at the same time in a way that a bespoke piece of art cannot. Moreover, television shows are rarely the work of one individual and this results in an obfuscation of the traditional author/artist figure. There are so many different people involved in the creation of a television show that it is impossible to say that the creation belongs to or originates with one single person. Conversely, with traditional art, this is not the case. A book (despite the influence of a publisher's editing team) can be said to be the work of its author, whereas television often subverts this notion of singular authorship. Furthermore, the casual television-watcher, blindly and haphazardly flicking through different channels, acts in a manner similar to the reader of a hypertext novel who clicks links in a random order and organises his or her own reading experience. For this reason, the hypertext's reader is often described as a collaborator or artificer as opposed to a mere 'traverser' of text.[133] Finally, television, like social networking, mixes high and

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[129] Julia Kristeva, 'Intertextuality and Literary Interpretation' in *Julia Kristeva Interviews* ed. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 190.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (Oxfordshire*:* Psychology Press, 2000), p. 5.

[132] Ibid.

[133] The way in which the reader moves through a hypertext narrative is often referred to as 'traversal'. See the Introduction in Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997). Similarly, Reader-Response critics sometimes use the words

low culture: an advertisement for an adult chat line can quite conceivably appear in the commercial break between two segments of a television show about fine art. This is another typical trait of the postmodern aesthetic.

In *Imagologies* Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen discuss the ways in which we use images to create narrative and communicate ideas. They explain that 'in a culture of the simulacrum, communicative practice is necessarily theatrical. Electronic media are instrumental in staging an exchange in which the currency of information makes understanding possible'.[134] Since postmodern society is radically decentralised, this information must be disseminated appropriately if it intends to stand any chance of remaining current, and of being understood. Indeed, this preoccupation with images has begun to affect many before they are even born, and the popularity of social networking has only exacerbated the obsession, with parents-to-be posting pictures of their twelve-week scans on Facebook. Hence the human child is 'born into' a pre-existing narrative, yet another simulacrum. Baudrillard's death in 2007 came just nine months after Facebook extended its terms of use so that anyone over the age of thirteen could sign up as long as they were in possession of a valid email address. (The site had previously been available only to members of certain universities and organisations, and to companies such as Microsoft and Apple Inc.). However, Baudrillardian theory on the loss of the real and the subsequent emergence of the 'hyperreal' remains relevant and fruitfully applicable to the analysis of a twenty-first-century cultural phenomenon like Facebook since, as Baudrillard put it himself, 'it is now a principle of simulation, and not reality that regulates all of social life'.[135] This assertion signals a radical change in perspective that informs also my discussion in the next section, which examines notions of identity in contemporary social networking and the broader online realm.

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'artificer' and 'collaborator' to describe the ways in which a reader assembles meaning from a printed text. See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980). I will elaborate on this argument in chapter three in which I account for the works of both Fish and Wolfgang Iser, and examine the ways in which their theories can be extrapolated to apply to hypertext.

[134] Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen, *Imagologies: Media Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 13.

[135] Baudrillard, 2001, p. 123.

## 2.3 Online Identity and Social Networking

Lyotard argues that a 'self' exists in a complex fabric of relations, and that a person is 'always located at "nodal points" of specific communication circuits' or at a 'post through which various kinds of messages pass'.[136] Language games are integral to what constitutes a self, and the self emerges not as something inherent but as something constructed, much in the same way as Baudrillard's reality is constructed by representation or simulacrum. Since, Baudrillard argues, we construct ourselves based on images that we see in the media, and since the prevailing mass consumer culture influences our ability to make rational decisions, the identity of the self can be understood not as something that we *are* but something that we *do*. The self is nothing but another representation, another simulation, and the various signs and images we see around us encourage us to fantasise about what we could be: indeed, to 'shop for' an identity. Again, a poignant example of this can be seen in advertisements which often tend to attach a particular way of life to the products that they are selling. In *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* Mike Featherstone writes:

> The term 'lifestyle' is currently in vogue […] within contemporary consumer culture it connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc are to be regarded as indicators of the originality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer.[137]

Since in the postmodern world technology has such an overwhelming influence on lifestyle (altering the way we make friends, arrange meetings, communicate, shop, listen to music, read, watch films, have sex) it too has changed the way in which identity is constructed and communicated. As Adriaan van der Weel argues, Western culture is a mediated culture, and an individual's perception of the world is nowadays governed more by mediation than personal experience.[138] Technology turns communication into a mediated experience: talking on the telephone or in an

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[136] Lyotard, p. 15.

[137] Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (California: Sage Publications, 2007), p. 81.

[138] Adriaan van der Weel, *Changing our Textual Minds: Towards a Digital Order of Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 1.

internet chat room is not the same as talking face to face, and the fact that the internet is by its very nature 'decentralised' means that there is no central authority for the signs passed between members. In Lyotard's view, it is at the intersection of these nodes of communication that the self is formed; an online self is, I argue, necessarily a different construct to an offline self. In 'Postmodern Virtualities' Mark Poster puts it this way:

> What is at stake in these technical innovations, I contend, is not simply an increased 'efficiency' of interchange, enabling new avenues of investment, increased productivity at work and new domains of leisure and consumption, but a broad and extensive change in the culture, in the way identities are structured.[139]

Poster goes on to discuss virtual reality, comparing it as a concept to 'real time'. The latter term, he notes, was born out of the audio recording field when multi-track and multiple speed recording offered the potential for 'other times' to exist alongside traditional clock time or phenomenological time.[140] The conventional sense of 'time' had to be prefixed by 'real' in order to preserve its original meaning. But this modifier, 'real', Poster argues, is problematic because it suggests the 'non-reality' of clock time:

> The terms 'virtual reality' and 'real time' attest to the force of the second media age in constituting a simulational culture. The mediation has become so intense that the things mediated can no longer even pretend to be unaffected. The culture is increasingly simulational in the sense that the media often changes the things that it treats, transforming the identity of originals and referentialities. In the second media age 'reality' becomes multiple.[141]

Baldly, Poster's thesis is that virtual reality places the individual inside alternative worlds, thereby furthering the boundaries of the 'imaginary of the word' and the

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[139] Mark Poster, 'Postmodern Virtualities' in *Futurenatural: Nature, Science, Culture ed.* by George Robertson (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 183.
[140] Ibid., p. 188.
[141] Ibid., p. 189.

'imaginary of the film or video image'. The result of this simulational practice, he argues, is that the conditions under which the individual's identity or self is formed are forever altered.[142] If this is the case, I would like to argue, then social networking sites represent a kind of virtual reality in which postmodern and neoliberal values collide.[143] The neoliberal subject, after all, is a selfish subject who wishes to detach him- or herself from society and who views his or her friends, acquaintances, and partner as service-providers. In this sense, the characters I present in *Esc&Ctrl* may be regarded as neoliberal subjects. Their social interactions take place in the simulated 'world' or structure of Facebook, which is itself situated within the larger simulacrum of the internet. They 'shop' for their identities, choosing which pictures to upload, which 'posts' to comment upon, what to reveal, or purport to reveal, in their 'status' updates, thus making themselves more marketable to other users.

To demonstrate this I set up Facebook pages for three of my novel's characters, Vincent Ballone, Davison, and Jadee Janes. I updated them in 'real time' as a plot-development tool, eventually writing up, as *Esc&Ctrl*, the story that emerged from the subsequent interactions. Throughout the eight days that the Facebook project was live, each of my characters acquired an online 'identity' which grew and changed depending on the outcomes of the situations they were placed into by the project's collaborators, a demographic including both my friends and colleagues and people I had never met, the latter of whom had become aware of the project through word-of-mouth and people 'sharing' the pages on Facebook.[144] I was, however, able to some extent to control the way each character developed by carefully selecting the words and images that formed my responses to comments posted by collaborators on the characters' pages. For example, I wanted the character Jadee Janes to come across as sexy and savvy with a no-nonsense attitude and I was able to convey this image simply by tailoring the information I posted on

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[142] Ibid., pp. 189-190.

[143] Neoliberalism is a complex topic which looks set to explode in academia over the next five years. Its key characteristics include driving free market capitalism and focusing upon individual responsibility as opposed to community. I first became interested in the subject when I attended the two-day postgraduate workshop *Neoliberalism as Policy, Theory and Practice* hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University's Institute of Humanities and Social Science Research in June 2013. Unfortunately, at this stage, it was too late to refocus my investigation in order to fully account for the complex challenges brought about by the neoliberal debate. It would, however, be very interesting to re-evaluate my project, from a neoliberal perspective, in the future. For a brief introduction to neoliberal subjectivity see Jodi Dean, 'Enjoying Neoliberalism', *Cultural Politics* 4:1 (2008), 47-72, and Brown, Wendy, 'American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization', *Political Theory* 34:6 (2006), 690-714.

[144] For a discussion of the ethical issues of such an undertaking, please see section 3.6.

her page. This, of course, is precisely how authors use language games to build the identities of their characters in traditional print novels, but it is also exactly how real people forge their online identities. On Facebook, the user can decide exactly how he or she wants to be perceived, regardless of whether or not it corresponds to the reality of the person sitting at the computer. In the offline world, individuals can to a certain extent control how they are perceived by others, by choosing which clothes to wear, which brands to purchase, what food to eat, how treat their peers, what opinions to express, and so forth, but there are nevertheless other important factors which cannot be so easily controlled such as race, gender and sexuality. What's more, the formation of the offline self is always rooted to a particular place in a network of ongoing communication. The decentralised nature of the internet, on the other hand, means that the nodal points through which the communicated messages pass are free of fixed location and the individual's online identity is therefore completely fluid.[145] While it may be argued that decentralisation and fluidity are part of the simulacrum of the internet and hence not real, I would like to suggest the opposite: it is in fact decentralisation which enabled the online simulacrum to exist in the first place. Put another way, I argue that there is a distinction between the online world 'in' the internet and the offline world 'of' the internet in which the user is situated, and this distinction is comparable to the worlds 'in' and 'of' the novel as suggested by Nash. The online self is part of the simulational world 'in' the internet, whereas decentralisation and fluidity are part of the world 'of' the internet, and not part of the simulacrum.

According to Marie-Laure Ryan in *Avatars of Story,* social networks are, 'deterritorialized networks of human relations replacing contacts with neighbours'.[146] Ostensibly, what people are doing when they are social(ly) networking is corresponding: either corresponding directly with one another through chat forums, private messages and so-called 'wall posts' on Facebook, or corresponding with multiple followers by posting status updates. However, as we have seen, the difference here is that they are corresponding via a medium which blurs not only the identities and 'selves' of the communicators but also the origin and destination of the messages they cast into the feedback loop. For this reason it

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[145] See also Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not A Gadget* (London: Penguin, 2011).
[146] Marie Laure-Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xi.

may be argued that the social network is not really a tool for corresponding at all, but instead a device for self-fashioning and fictionalisation.

The internet, then, and particularly social networking, embodies certain themes and practices which are vital concepts for an understanding of postmodern and neoliberal consciousness. On social network sites, as with television, we see a juxtaposition of high and low culture whereby links to 'high brow' publications such as the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Economist* appear alongside extracts from *The Sun* and TV shows such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. We see the emergence of different, contingent realities, and a shift in the various ways knowledge is stored and transmitted between these realities. Finally, as explained previously in this chapter, we see a manifestation of the Baudrillardian concept of the 'loss of the real', as well as the incorporation of shifting identities and fluid notions of 'the self'.

As Ruth Page, a pioneer in the field of social media theory, explains in *Stories and Social Media*, it has been argued (by theorists such as Sherry Turkle) that 'the performance of identity mediated through online interactions can become more "real" than offline experiences'[147]. Yet this does not mean that traditional procedures of authentication are completely abandoned in the online realm, nor that they are replaced by a new model of authenticity.[148] What is clear, however, is that the online realm is expanding into the offline world. Like the reference principle of the image, the online world was once influenced by the 'real' world from which it grew, but it has now, in turn, both saturated that world and irrevocably altered it. Similar to Baudrillard's proposition that the reference principle breaks down when the image alters the real world which supposedly precedes it, I argue that the implied chain of reference between online virtuality and offline reality breaks down when online occurrences have real-world consequences. The breakdown in objective reality, brought about by an all-encompassing virtuality, has meant that the epistemological paradigm of the early twenty-first century is one which craves authenticity but remains deeply rooted in the online realm and is therefore unsure where to look. In this chapter's concluding section I offer a possible solution.

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[147] Ruth Page, *Stories and Social Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 166.
[148] Ibid.

## 2.4 The Quest for Authenticity, or, 'Metafictional Virtuality'

There are many who label metafiction as a quintessentially postmodern phenomenon which is now not only residual and ultimately redundant but, in some cases, also intensely irritating. Indeed, it is true that the most challenging works of metafiction – the experimental novels of Christine Brooke-Rose, for example – can frustrate and disengage the reader: often, the author's single-minded pursuit of innovation, both at the very threshold at which fiction and theory collide and the actual typographical materiality of the line, proves more of a distraction than a suitable means of reader engagement. I will conclude the present chapter by arguing that the internet offers new potentialities for the practice and theory of metafiction, not only because of the new powers with which it endows the writer, nor purely because of the ways in which web theory can be used to interrogate the very concept of extrinsic reality, but also, crucially, because of the new potentialities that being online offers to the reader.

In 'The Father of Modernism', Jeffrey Eugenides remarks that:

The moves people make today to seem antitraditional are enervated in the extreme: the footnote thing, the author appearing in the book, etc. I am yawning even thinking about them. The most successful original work right now will arise from a more subtle pushing along the margins rather than from a frontal assault on narrative or sentence structure.[149]

While Eugenides is quick to point out in the same essay that he is 'fearful of the complacency of a certain anti-Modernist, antiexperimental stance that's becoming more and more fashionable these days',[150] he nevertheless highlights one of the problems commonly associated with metafiction, namely that this level of experimentation is at risk of deteriorating into a mere gimmick upstaging the very tale it purports to tell. As I shall demonstrate in the following pages, despite the obvious differences between the two literary conventions examined in chapters one and two, the terms realism and postmodernism need not necessarily be regarded as antonymous. However, one can only reconcile the two if one first identifies the

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[149] Jeffrey Eugenides, 'The Father of Modernism', *Slate* <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/features/2004/the_father_of_modernism/joyce_is_modernisms_household_god_or_is_he.html> [accessed 23 November 2012]
[150] Ibid.

broader cultural context within which the seemingly discrete discourses of realism, postmodernism and metafiction circulate, and as it turns out, there is a conspicuous lack of critical consensus regarding the nature of the dominant cultural aesthetic of our immediate present. Some, for example, suggest that in the wake of 9/11, western collective consciousness has once again become reliant on the grand narratives of truth, justice and religion that postmodernists fought so vehemently to eschew.[151] Others, such as Hari Kunzru, believe that postmodernism is over, but that its logical successor is not a return to realism, but an age of postmodern*ity*.[152] Finally Jeffrey T. Nealon, by contrast, suggests that the present era is one not of postmodernity, but of post-postmodernism.[153]

According to Kunzru, postmodernism 'was, crucially, a pre-digital phenomenon'. When postmodernism became popular in the 1970s and 1980s, many of the innovations and potentialities its proponents envisaged could not yet reach real-life fulfilment because there was no effective means of expressing or realising them. With the emergence of the internet, however, postmodernism became a reality, a mundane part of everyday life. The result of this realisation is that society has lived through the end of postmodernism, and now finds itself at the dawning of a new epoch of postmodernity.[154] Kunzru bases his argument on the premise that all avant-gardes attempt to move into the space they have predicted.[155] In other words, the modernist approach to architecture was concerned with functionality and the notion of the house as a 'machine for living in', and this led to the emergence of the square concrete tower-blocks that altered the skyline of hundreds of cities in the 1930s and 1940s. Kunzru's claim, then, is that the postmodernist predicted, to a degree, the present state of cultural consciousness and, when it arrived, moved in to inhabit it. But regardless of whether or not one agrees with Kunzru that the age of postmodernity is now upon us (and I do), it is problematic to assert that this new

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[151] Richard Gray discusses 'the familiar tropes of post-9/11 writing', the most obvious of which is a portrayal of the attacks as a 'turning point in history' and a view that this was the point when everything changed. See Richard Gray, *After The Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Iowa: Wiley Blackwell, 2011). Similarly, in *The Guys* (a play which shows the events of 9/11 through the perspectives of two characters, a New York City Fire Department captain and a New York City-dwelling reporter) Anne Nelson specifically refers to September 11th as 'the end of the postmodern era'. See Anne Nelson, *The Guys* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003), p. 8.

[152] Hari Kunzru, 'Postmodernism: From the Cutting Edge to the Museum', The Guardian, 15 September 2011 <http://www.theguardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/sep/15/postmodernism-cutting-edge-to-museum> [accessed on 4 October 2011].

[153] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-time Capitalism* (California: Stanford University Press, 2012)

[154] Kunzru, 2011.

[155] Ibid.

epoch has arisen as a consequence of the death of postmodernism. Since postmodernism is less a self-contained branch of literary and aesthetic theory and more a methodology reflecting a particular cultural outlook and lifestyle, such a claim would imply that when one engages in the ostensibly quintessential postmodern practice of surfing the world-wide web one automatically detaches oneself from the postmodern yearning which made the very notion of receiving information, creating meaning, and experiencing the world in such a way not only desirable but indeed possible in the first place.

Kunzru supports his proposition that the internet has killed postmodernism by statistics which, he claims, show that since 1997 there has been a sharp drop in the number of books with the word 'postmodernism' in the title: a drop which, he explains, correlates with a sharp increase in the number of books with the word 'internet' in the title. To deal with the second part of this observation first, I would like to argue that it is reasonably obvious that the number of books about the internet would have increased sharply since 1997, simply because the number of people with access to the world-wide web during that time-frame has also increased rapidly.[156] As regards the decline in the number of published works with the word 'postmodernism' in the title, I would suggest that the surge of interest which accompanies the emergence of any new aesthetic 'ism' brings with it a peak in the number of books written about it: a peak which, a few years after the initial excitement over the subject has settled, inevitably levels out.

According to Nealon in *Post-Postmodernism* the current zeitgeist is post-postmodernist but, in his view, this does not signify a break from postmodernism itself, but rather an intensification of certain postmodern modes. 'My aim', Nealon writes, 'is not to render obsolete either postmodernism or any particular analysis of it (as if either were possible) but to intensify, highlight, and redeploy certain strands within Jameson's analyses of postmodernism.'[157] Postmodernism has changed its tune, as it were, especially with regard to the human quest for authenticity. Yet whereas the *desire* for self-authentication has remained the same, it is authenticity itself and, most importantly, its relation to consumption, that has undergone significant change. In the 1960s and 1970s, Nealon writes, there was an antagonistic

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[156]In 1998, in only a few countries including Iceland, New Zealand and Sweden was internet use widespread, while the UK had only 8 million registered users. By 2000, there were 15.8 million users online in the UK, and by 2008, almost 47 million. See 'SuperPower: Visualising the Internet', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/8552410.stm> [accessed on 6 November 2012].
[157] Nealon, p. xi.

relationship between commodity consumption and authenticity. (Nealon uses a couplet from the Rolling Stones' *Satisfaction* as a means of demonstrating this antagonism: 'He can't be a man because / He doesn't smoke the same cigarettes as me'.)[158] In the past twenty or thirty years, though, Nealon observes that individualism and subversion have become inextricably linked with commodity consumption, and, as a result, a certain style of consumption has come to the foreground as a direct route to authenticity. For Nealon, therefore, the commodities we collect and assemble around ourselves are indicators of our real, authentic individualities.[159] However I would like to suggest that the most sensible place to search for authenticity is not within consumption but beyond it, and the reason for this lies in that most postmodern and ubiquitous of inventions: the internet. According to contemporary novelist Edward Docx:

> [T]he internet is the most postmodern thing on the planet. The immediate consequence in the west seems to have been to breed a generation more interested in social networking than social revolution. But, if we look behind that, we find a secondary reverse effect—a universal yearning for some kind of offline authenticity. We desire to be redeemed from the grossness of our consumption, the sham of our attitudinising, the teeming insecurities on which social networking sites were founded and now feed. We want to become reacquainted with the spellbinding narrative of expertise.[160]

In other words, the sheer volume of information, the apparent diversity in opinion, and the fact that everyone on the internet can pose as an expert on any given subject, has altered the very nature of authenticity. It has also disrupted the user's concept of a singular authority: instead, individuals subscribe to reviews on sites such as Rotten Tomatoes and Amazon.com; Twitter has become the news-source of choice with the capability to destroy reputations, through false information, in seconds; Wikipedia has replaced *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as the go-to source of information. The internet represents everything that postmodernism encompasses: fragmentation,

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[158] Ibid., p. 56.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Edward Docx, 'Postmodernism is Dead' in *Prospect* (20 July 2011) <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/postmodernism-is-dead-va-exhibition-age-of-authenticism> [accessed 15 January 2013]

micro-narratives, multiple realities, juxtaposition of high and low culture, pastiche, computerisation/democratisation of information, mass communication.

Of course, the internet is still in its infancy and will continue to expand. In order to grow, however, the internet must proliferate into somewhere; that somewhere, I argue, is 'offline' reality itself. As the internet expands, enveloping the basic realities of friendship, communication, economy, and so forth, the individual's yearning for genuine offline authenticity increases. Indeed, this yearning is already strikingly apparent in the offline world. Restaurants advertise 'proper' home-cooked food. Department stores sell 'genuine' leather furniture. Soft drinks contain 'real' fruit juice. The internet, therefore, represents the very core of what postmodernism was and is whilst simultaneously promulgating the dichotomy it sought to escape.

There are, I believe, two solutions which rise to prominence when pondering the problem of online-versus-offline reality. The first is to declare, as Docx does, that the postmodern era is over and to subsequently break from it entirely and turn instead either back to realism, or else forward towards a new epistemological paradigm: an epoch one might dub, for want of an already-established term, the age of authenticism. The other, and, I argue, more sensible solution, is to understand that because the loss of authenticity is inextricably linked to the technology of the internet (a quintessentially postmodern phenomenon) the only way to regain it is to search for it in postmodern terms, meaning that multiple realities are possible: thus the collective consciousness of the era is not one of realism, authenticism, postmodernism, post-postmodernism, or anything else – it is all of these, and more, simultaneously.

As I have stated in chapter 1, metafiction relies on both illusion and the laying bare of that illusion: in other words, on both inauthenticity and the subsequent questioning of whether there is any point in trying to be (in)authentic in fiction in the first place. But if metafiction is to survive, then, like postmodernism, it too must undergo transformation in order to comply with the new rules created, by technology, for authentication. The internet signals the end of neither postmodernism nor metafiction; instead it provides a new framework within which postmodernism – and its limits – are redefined. Not only is the inherent self-referentiality and self-reflexivity of the postmodern era manifest in the 'world' of the internet, but as individuals we are so caught up in its simulated web that our perceptions of what is real and what is simulated have become confused to the point

where we fictionalise, narrativise and 'storify' our lives on the pages of social networking sites. To compound matters further, these fourth-order simulations are at once separate from the real world and inextricably linked to it: the decline of a 'Friend Request' on Facebook is seen as a real-world snub and, like Baudrillard's hijack scenario, arguments started online have real-world consequences.

In late 2011 Facebook launched its 'timeline' feature, inviting users to 'tell your life story with a new kind of profile', and to 'share and highlight your most memorable posts, photos and life events on your timeline. This is where you can tell your story from beginning, to middle, to now'.[161] The timeline provides a reverse-chronological 'narrative' of the user's life to date, starting with their birth and ending with their most recent post. It looks like social networking has evolved from its origins as a virtual communication tool into a scaffolding device that not only supports, but contains (and quite possibly also helps to sustain) the stories of our lives. In my Facebook experiment, the project-collaborators' timelines were connected to an entirely fictional narrative. Since, to all intents and purposes, collaborators place themselves as characters within the fictional narrative, there is no way of ascertaining the exact point at which reality ends and fiction begins, if such a distinction can be drawn at all in the online realm. Instead, my project allows fiction and reality to coalesce and concur.

The inevitable result of having an online identity is that it becomes self-referential: since the nodes through which the messages pass are decentralised, the only way to anchor them is to turn inward. And, similarly, since the online identity is a construct, it is fictional. In this case, though, the fact that the self is fictional is not the same as saying it is not real, because if it wasn't, then its online actions would not have offline consequences. The potentialities which this quandary offers for collaborative storytelling ventures are enormous, and form the basis of what I would like to suggest as an emerging literary genre: a subtype of metafictional narrative which I have termed metafictional virtuality. Put simply, metafictional virtuality involves using social networking sites to tell stories about a basic reality which is already inextricably fictional, thereby conforming to the established metafictional template of fiction about fiction. Metafictional virtuality differs from traditional metafiction because it places readers as characters in the narrative, exposing not only the fictionality of the story but also the possible fictionality of the

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[161] Facebook <www.facebook.com/about/timeline> [accessed on 11 March 2012].

reader. This results in a type of role-playing game in which readers are located within the story which they are simultaneously reading and facilitating. In this sense, then, there is most certainly no story without a reader. Key characteristics of metafictional virtuality include an engagement with the loss of the real, an exploration of the distinction between online and offline identity, and encouraging the reader to play an active role in a narrative which he or she knows from the outset is fictional.

Since metafictional virtuality is heavily reliant both on the use of hyperlinked information and on the role of the reader as artificer or collaborator, the best means of understanding it is through a combination of hypertext theory and Reader-Response Criticism. Accordingly, in chapter three I examine some of the critical arguments which might be used to evaluate the new genre, as well as accounting for the logistics of operating a social networking novel.

# Chapter Three:
## Social Networking and the Hypertext Novel

Premised on Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and Lyotard's notion of the collapse of Grand Narratives, my chief aim is to demonstrate that social networking sites can be interpreted as fictional realms in which real people become characters in a narrative of simulation. Social networking sites offer themselves for the telling of stories in a variation on the modern hypertext novel by incorporating metafictional elements such as authorial intrusion and an exposition of the text as artefact. I set out to investigate this in several ways: by writing a postmodern-metafictional novel which at once illustrates and interrogates some of the theoretical concepts explored in this exegesis; by researching and anticipating, in chapters one and two, the critical context into which such a novel might be born; and by creating Facebook pages featuring the profiles of three fictional characters whom readers may befriend, thus inserting themselves into the fictional fabric of a hypertext narrative. Chapters one and two have explored two very different, yet equally important, ways of representing reality in fictional form. In this chapter, I bring these perspectives together in order to demonstrate the new potentialities they create for the hypertext novel. Finally, I will discuss the more specific ways in which these theories apply to my own novel *Esc&Ctrl*.

The first half of the chapter looks at the origins of hypertext literature, as well as the fruitful application of Reader-Response theory to its critical reception, including Wayne C. Booth's notion of the 'implied author', Wolfgang Iser's 'implied reader', and Stanley Fish's envisaging of the role of the reader as collaborator or co-artificer. I will demonstrate how Reader-Response Criticism, which was originally intended as a means of analysing print text, can be refurbished in order to account for the ways in which the reader is led to decode a hypertext. I will also account for some of the ways in which traditional print text can be used to mimic the structure of a hypertext novel, and I will examine the counterintuitive argument that hypertext is, in fact, a less versatile medium than printed text.

The second half of the chapter will draw upon this critical engagement and show how it is possible to create a hypertext narrative by interlinking real and fictional profiles on a social networking page. Mobilising Baudrillard's concept of the 'hyperreal' I will analyse the characteristics of this type of narrative, and the ways in which it operates. I will also account for some of the ethical issues raised by this kind of narration. Finally, I will position and evaluate my own novel *Esc&Ctrl* within this critical context by explaining how the concepts explored in this exegesis relate to those advanced in the novel.

Since this is a literary enquiry as opposed to a scientific one, I will focus my attention on the narrative qualities of hypertext literature, and the reading experience such a narrative offers, as opposed to dealing with the technical and mathematical side of computer software and coding.[162]

## 3.1 The Origins of Hypertext Literature

The word 'hypertext' was coined by the American sociologist and information technologist Ted Nelson. Some sources place the coinage as early as 1963, but according to the official Ted Nelson newsletter, 'Interesting Times', he first used the word in 1965.[163] In *Literary Machines* (1980), Nelson writes:

> By 'hypertext' I mean nonsequential writing – text that branches and allows choice to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways.[164]

A more recent definition is published online as part of 'The Electronic Labyrinth', a self-proclaimed 'study of the implications of hypertext for creative writers looking to move beyond traditional notions of linearity'. The project, authored by Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin and Robin Parmar, was originally hosted by the

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[162] For a basic explanation of the technical aspects of hypertext literature see 'Forms of Linking, Their Uses and Limitations', George Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 11-20.

[163] 'Did Ted Nelson First use the word "Hypertext" at Vasser College?' Vasser College <http://faculty.vassar.edu/mijoyce/Ted_sed.html> [accessed 9 May 2012]. Note that the *OED* also cites 1965 as the first recorded appearance of the term. See <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/243461?redirectedFrom=hypertext#eid> [accessed 6 August 2013]

[164] Ted Nelson, *Literary Machines 93.1* (California: Mindful Press, 1993), p. 12.

University of Alberta (1993) before moving to the University of Victoria (1997–2000). For the purposes of this project hypertext is defined as:

> the presentation of information as a linked network of nodes which readers are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion. It allows for multiple authors, a blurring of the author and reader functions, extended works with diffuse boundaries, and multiple reading paths.[165]

It is worth noting that neither definition uses the words 'electronic', 'computer', or 'internet'. This is because, despite the vast majority of hypertext being computerised, it is possible to create a hypertext model which does not rely on computerisation. As Michel Chaouli explains in 'How Interactive Can Fiction Be?' there is already an established tradition of ink and paper texts that attempt to make use of the structural features Nelson describes.[166]

Moreover, the labels 'hypertext' and 'electronic text' are different in meaning, although the terms are sometimes (wrongly) assumed to be interchangeable. 'Electronic' simply refers to a digital copy of printed text (for example an Amazon Kindle version of a print novel, or a document read on a word-processor) which, arguably, does not offer any increased level of interaction or immersion to the reader. Hypertext, by contrast, is made up of the aforesaid 'linked network of nodes' which allows the reader to move backwards and forwards through a web of interlinked material. This, ostensibly, enables an increased level of interaction with the text since the reader is, to a certain extent, not limited (as with a traditional printed text) by the order in which the pages are bound together; instead, readers are free to navigate the hypertext in a number of different ways, effectively becoming the co-producer of the particular text they read. Yet this distinction is ultimately tenuous because even with a traditional printed text, no one forces the reader to move through the pages in the order in which they are presented, and similarly, within a hypertext, the reader is still limited by the boundaries of the network of nodes put in place by whoever created it. In the case of an electronic, computerised hypertext, these nodes take the form of 'clickable' links – often

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[165] Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin and Robin Parmar, 'The Electronic Labyrinth' <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0037.html> [accessed 9th May 2012] paragraph 1 of 6.
[166] Michael Chaouli, 'How Interactive Can Fiction Be?' *Critical Inquiry* , 31: 3 (Spring 2005), 599-617 < http://www.yorku.ca/caitlin/futurecinemas/resources/coursepack/chaouli.pdf> [accessed 12 November 2012] (p. 601).

coloured blue – and their exact positions within the text are always determined by the author. Furthermore, Reader-Response Critics such as Stanley Fish argue that the reader is *always* the co-producer of a text, printed or otherwise, since it is the reader who attributes meaning to the text and, by doing so, brings it to life. For this reason, I would suggest that the reader is not a co-producer of the hypertext *per se*: instead the reader is a co-producer of the particular *narrative* he or she experiences based upon the order in which s/he choose to traverse the text. The largest and most well-known hypertext is the world-wide web itself in which billions of pages are linked together. Within it there exist millions of other, self-contained, smaller hypertexts in the form of individual websites. The internet creates huge possibilities for the hypertext novel because it offers infinite space and the ability to link billions of pieces of information together.

Many hypertexts attempt to take interaction a step further by allowing readers to annotate the text, but – as explained by George Landow – the reader is only ever able to comment on the text as it is, not to alter it:

> A full hypertext system, unlike a book and unlike some of the first approximations of hypertext currently available [...] offers the same environment to both reader and writer […] you can take notes, or you can write against my interpretations, against my text. Although you cannot change my text, you can write a response and then link it to my document.[167]

As a result the text grows into a palimpsest: it may be added to, or developed, but the original text always remains visible beneath the annotations in its raw, unaltered form. My own hypertext experiment, too, allows readers to add to the text I create.

Note that by 'text' I do not mean only the written words posted onto the novel's Facebook page, but also photos, videos, links to other websites and anything and everything else which makes up the fabric of a 'real' Facebook page. It seems no longer meaningful to distinguish, like Ted Nelson, between 'hypertext' and 'hypermedia', which designates a linked network of pictures and media, simply because most contemporary hypertext tends to incorporate pictures and video as well

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[167] George Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 6.

as text. Notably, according to Michael Joyce, 'hypertext is, before anything else, a visual form'.[168] Of course, as a series of symbols all text is visual. But hypertext is arguably *more* visual. The hyperlinks need either to be visible and clearly indicated, so that the user knows where to click, or, in lesser cases, hidden, so that the user does not know where to click, which can introduce a level of mystery to the reading experience. Hence in 'Siren Shapes' Joyce draws a distinction between exploratory hypertexts and constructive hypertexts: the former refers to the use of hypertext as a presentational tool by which the 'audience' (Joyce asserts that *user* and *reader* have become inadequate terms) is able to control the transformation of information according to their own needs. Constructive hypertexts, by contrast:

> require a capability to act: to create, change and recover particular encounters within the developing body of knowledge […] they are versions of what they are becoming, a structure for what does not yet exist. Constructive hypertexts require visual representations of the knowledge they develop.[169]

One of the key differences, then, between the appearance of a traditional electronic hypertext novel and one assembled on Facebook is the fact that the latter incorporates photographs and videos into the fabric of the text. David J. Bolter remarks that electronic 'text' is not text *per se:* 'If you hold a magnetic tape or optical disc up to the light, you will not see text at all […] In the electronic medium several layers of sophisticated technology must intervene between the writer or reader and the coded text.'[170] Since the photographs and videos which appear on my Facebook pages are, like the hypertext Bolter refers to, made up of computer code – of noughts and ones – I argue that they are just as textual as the written comments and wall posts they appear alongside.[171] However, there is also a very different way

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[168] Michael Joyce, *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 19.
[169] Ibid., pp. 41-42.
[170] David J. Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer in the History of Literacy* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990), pp. 42-43 [Quoted in Landow, 1997, p. 22].
[171] Sadie Plant argues that these noughts and ones themselves represent the way that Western reality operates: 'Whether they are gathering information, telecommunicating, running washing machines, doing sums, or making videos, all digital computers translate information into the zeros and ones of machine code. These binary digits are known as bits and strung together in bytes of eight. The zeros and ones of machine code seem to offer themselves as perfect symbols of the orders of Western reality, the ancient logical codes which make the difference between on and off, right and left, light and dark, form and matter, mind and body, white and black, good and evil, right and wrong, life and

of looking at this kind of hypertextual multi-media amalgamation, which would insist on hypertext's superior modernity. As Joyce explains:

> Hypertext has been called the revenge of the text on television since under its sway the screen image becomes subject to the laws of syntax, allusion and association which characterize written language […] Thus images can be "read" as text, and vice versa.[172]

Significantly Joyce also points out that 'hypertext readers not only choose the order of what they read but, in doing so, alter its form by their choices'.[173] One possible means of evaluating the characteristics of this type of reading experience (in which the reader 'edits' the text in the process of reading it; hence, reading becomes a form of composition, of writing) is through Roland Barthes's concept of 'writerly' and 'readerly' texts discussed in *S/Z* (1970). The former, for Barthes, is a text in which the 'reader [is] no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'.[174] A 'readerly' text, on the other hand, contains that which 'can be read, but not written'.[175] Barthes goes on to explain his idea of an 'ideal textuality':

> The networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning, it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one […]; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.[176]

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death, something and nothing, this and that, here and there, inside and out, active and passive, true and false, yes and no, sanity and madness, health and sickness, up and down, sense and nonsense, west and east, north and south. And they made a lovely couple when it came to sex. Man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine: one and zero looked just right, made for each other: 1, the definite, upright line; and 0, the diagram of nothing at all: penis and vagina, thing and hole…hand in glove. A perfect match.' Of course, from the postmodern perspective, it is always best to be both zero and one at the same time. See Plant, p. 35.

[172]Joyce, 1995, pp. 23-24.
[173] Ibid., p. 19.
[174] Roland Barthes [1970], *S/Z* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p. 4.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid., pp. 5-6.

Hypertext, it seems, goes some of the way towards achieving ideal textuality, since the medium assigns the reader a significant role in the organisation and arrangement of the text. Michel Chaouli claims that in *S/Z*, published twenty years before the invention of the internet, 'the crucial outlines of hypertext seem to be prophesied with eerie precision. It's all there: the plurality of paths, the multiplicity of approaches, the infinity of codes, even the principle of randomization'.[177] In *Writing Machines* N. Katherine Hayles agrees, positing that 'Roland Barthes uncannily anticipated electronic hypertext by associating text with dispersion, multiple authorship, and rhizomatic structure.'[178] Yet, in my view, it remains problematic to celebrate hypertext as the definitive realisation of 'ideal textuality' because the reader is still limited by the overall structure of the hyperdocument. Put simply, readers are not entirely left to their own devices, but their reading practice – however wilful, unpredictable and 'individualist' – remains orchestrated by the links they find at their disposal, which are the links planted in the text by the author. The 'textuality' of hypertext, then, is perhaps not quite as ideally 'readerly' as it may first appear. Still, hypertext is certainly moving in the right direction. Since each individual reader chooses his or her own pathway through the text, they will arguably all end up with a different, quasi-bespoke experience the text. Not only does this create a text that is open to multiple interpretations, with beginning, end, and plot all in flux, but it also places the reader in a more active, collaborative role than traditional printed text.

The first example of a 'hypertext novel' is Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1990).[179] This was followed by other similar hypertext novels, most notably Stuart Maulthrop's *Victory Garden* (1993), which was the subject of an essay by Robert Coover, featuring on the front page of the *New York Book Review*, indicating that there was at last some mainstream interest in this new experimental form. Jeff Ryman's *253* (1996) and Mark Amerika's *GRAMMATRON* (1997) followed. Although the interest in hypertext fiction increased throughout the 1990s it remained something of a niche market and acquired taste, and ultimately the genre failed to

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[177] Chaouli, p. 603.

[178] N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), p. 30. In a philosophical sense, a 'rhizome' is a system of organising information with multiple points of entry and exit. According to Deleuze and Guattari, 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be'. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Introduction: Rhizome', *A Thousand Plateaus* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 3-28 (p. 7).

[179] Michael Joyce, *afternoon, a story* (Massachusetts: Eastgate Systems, 1990) <http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/Afternoon.html> [accessed 8 November 2012].

reach the anticipated mainstream recognition, a failure accounted for by Paul LaFarge in 'Why the Book's Future Never Happened'. According to LaFarge, the hypertext novel got a 'bad reputation' because it was 'born into a world that wasn't quite ready for it, and encumbered with lousy technology and user-hostile interface design'.[180] Twenty years later it may be the case that readers are finally ready to explore *en masse* the potentialities of hypertext literature, simply because readers are now already very much accustomed to using hyperlinks in everyday communication:

> So much of what we do is hyperlinked and mediated by screens that it feels important to find a way to reflect on that condition, and fiction, literature, has long afforded us the possibility of reflection […] hypertext fiction may let us try on new, non-linear identities, without dissolving us entirely into the web.[181]

The emergence of digital 'new media' has changed not only *what* we think but also *how* we think, and, more importantly, how we *create* meaning. As opposed to asking what hypertext can do for fiction, it is now a question of what fiction, particularly the novel, can do for hypertext. 'Hypertext is here to stay,' LaFarge remarks, 'but the novel's future may depend on the answer'.[182]

So, ostensibly, hypertext endows readers with new powers which enable them to co-produce the texts they are reading. In sections 3.2 and 3.3 I will proceed to examine the role of the reader in the interpretation (and co-production) of traditional print text by looking in more detail at the works of Reader-Response Critics Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser. Following that, I shall extrapolate Fish's and Iser's works to provide an account of the ways in which readers shape meaning in their interaction with hypertexts.

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[180] Paul Lafarge, 'Why the Book's Future Never Happened', *Salon* <http://www.salon.com/2011/10/04/return_of_hypertext/> [accessed 7 November 2012], paragraph 7.
[181] Ibid., paragraph 8.
[182] Ibid.

## 3.2 The Role of the Reader

At a glance, it may seem problematic and paradoxical to discuss hypertext literature in terms of critical processes normally associated with traditional printed texts. In *Hypertext 2.0* George Landow argues that one of the main problems in evaluating how hypertext is written and read arises from the fact that we still read it 'according to print technology'.[183] This fact, he argues, can potentially cause considerable confusion:

> Writing about hypertext in a print medium immediately produces terminological problems much like those Barthes, Derrida and others encountered when trying to describe a textuality neither instantiated by the physical object of the printed book nor limited to it. Since hypertext radically changes the experiences that reading, writing and text signify, how, without misleading, can one employ these terms, so burdened with the assumptions of print technology, when referring to electronic materials?[184]

However, I would like to suggest that it does make sense to view hypertext literature as an extension of traditional print literature rather than a radical departure from it, simply because focusing on the similarities and continuities enables critics to extrapolate some of the concepts used to evaluate traditional print texts in order to then test their applicability to hypertext narrative. Put another way, by Van der Weel, 'the recognition is now beginning to take hold that book studies should take a longer perspective, and deal with the history of textual transmission at large.'[185] For that reason, I will use the critical work of Wayne C. Booth, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, all of which were originally used to evaluate traditional print text, to account for the ways in which the reader interacts with a hyperdocument.

      Booth's concept of the 'implied author' refers to the assumed characteristics which the reader may attribute to the author of a work, based upon its narrative tone.[186] For obvious reasons, the personality of this author-character may be nothing like the personality of the real author who composed the work, and it is possible that

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[183] Landow, p. 57.

[184] Ibid.

[185] Van der Weel, p. 3.

[186] Wayne C. Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction* [1961]*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 71-74.

an author might take on many different 'implied' personae dictated by his or her use of multiple narrative voices and dependent also upon the imagination of the individual reader. In 'Readers in Texts' W. Daniel Wilson explains:

> The 'implied' author whom we sense in a text, above or behind the narrator, is never identical with the real author in all stages of life as we experience him or her in other documents; the author fictionalizes himself or herself in order to meet the demands of a particular fictive world and the accompanying communication.[187]

Similarly, when creating a text, it is necessary that the author must make certain assumptions about the reader. In the case of a traditional print text, these are likely to include the assumption that the reader will proceed through the work in the order in which it is presented, starting on page one and reading the words on the page from top to bottom, left to right, until the final page is reached. Yet ultimately it remains impossible to predict each and every potential path that an actual reader *might* take, whether that involves reading the last page first, reading the chapters in an order other than that in which they are presented, or skipping various sections of the narrative altogether. For this reason, when I speak of the 'reader' of a particular text, what I am actually referring to is the notion of an 'implied' reader.  In *The Act of Reading* Wolfgang Iser writes:

> If […] we are to try and understand the effects caused and the responses elicited by literary works, we must allow for the reader's presence without in any way predetermining his character or his [sic] historical situation. We may call him, for want of a better term, the implied reader. He embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself.[188]

In other words, the text assumes that it has a reader whose readerly activities comply with its own design, yet although a text's design may suggest implicitly the manner

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[187] W. Daniel Wilson, 'Readers in Texts', *PMLA,* 96: 5 (October 1981), 848-863 (pp. 848-849).
[188] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 34-35.

in which it is intended to be read, there is no guarantee that an actual reader will stick to the signposted route of travel, since the implied reader *per se* is a fictional construct. The implied reader, Iser goes on to explain, 'has his [sic] roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader'.[189]

The implied reader is not the only example of actual readers assuming a fictional presence within the text. In 'Readers in Texts' W. Daniel Wilson accounts for the fascination among literary critics and practitioners alike of locating the reader inside the text itself. Wilson identifies an array of 'readers' closely linked with, but not entirely  identical with, the implied reader. These include, among others, the 'ideal' reader (synonymous with the implied reader), the 'fictive' reader (the appearance and/or apostrophe of a fictional manifestation of the reader within the text, as in the narrator's utterance of 'Madam' and 'Sir' in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*[190]), the 'characterized reader' (a subtype of the fictive reader in which the reader is referred to directly, as in 'gentle reader'), and the 'virtual reader'.[191] The implied reader, for Wilson, is an idealised reader who may be 'consciously or unconsciously conceived by the author, but he or she exists in every work, since almost every "message" presupposes a certain kind of recipient and implicitly defines him or her to some extent'[192].

Wayne C. Booth suggests that the best kind of reading is a collaborative experience of the sort where the implied author and implied reader complement each other perfectly:

> The author creates […] an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes the reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement.[193]

Although this argument was originally conceived with regard to print literature, and not hypertext, it naturally extends to the latter. Indeed, the role of the reader in the

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[189] Ibid.

[190] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* [1759-1767] (London: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 82-83.

[191] Wilson, p. 848.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Booth, p. 138.

assembly of hypertext narrative has been widely discussed.[194] The hypertext author must anticipate both where the reader will want certain links to appear within the text and in what order, but since this 'reader' is only implied, the author is merely making an assumption. If there are too few links, or if the links are in the wrong places, then there is a danger that the reader will become 'lost' inside the text and will, either out of frustration or boredom, simply quit. Similarly, if there are too many links, or too many *lexias* (the collective term for the blocks of text of which a hypertext document is composed), this can overwhelm the reader and obstruct his or her immersion, as the reader is constantly reminded of the text's constructedness. In other words, each time readers make a choice about which link to click they momentarily remove themselves from the world 'in' the text and enter the world 'of' the text instead.

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## 3.3 Hypertext and Reader-Response Criticism

Nash believes that 'one of the biggest obstacles to our perception of truth is the complexity of each individual subjective consciousness'.[195] Reader-Response Criticism is a branch of literary theory which focuses upon, as its name suggests, the role of the response of the reader in shaping the meaning of a text. It seems particularly applicable to hypertext theory insofar as it positions the reader in the role of 'collaborator' or 'artificer' as opposed to merely as 'consumer'.

The origins of Reader-Response Criticism are in post-war New Criticism which questioned the role of authorial intent in critical interpretation. In 1946, New Critics W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published 'The Intentional Fallacy' in which they argued that it was erroneous to interpret a text, in this instance a poem, with reference to the intentions of its author. Instead, they suggested, the only 'true' meaning had to reside within the text itself:

> Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artefact works that we infer the intention of an artificer […] A poem can *be only* through its meaning – since its medium is words – yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant […] Poetry succeeds because all or most of

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[194] Page & Thomas, p. 65.
[195] Nash, 1993, p. 10.

> what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like
> lumps from pudding and "bugs" from machinery.[196]

In other words, the interpretation of a text must derive from internal evidence, and not from external evidence (for example, biographical information about the author, the author's notes on the work itself) or contextual evidence (the ways in which this particular work of art fits into the wider context of the artist's work, or his or her times). Any reference to the author diverts attention away from the material autonomy of the work and must therefore be regarded as an intentional fallacy. Once a piece of art is created the artist retains no further control over it: it exists as its own entity, and must be judged accordingly without reference to authorial intent.

In *Is There a Text in This Class?* Stanley Fish introduces a number of concepts that are fundamental to understanding the 'interaction' between writer and text, reader and text, and, finally, reader and writer.[197] This interaction has been heatedly debated among literary theorists: 'reception theorists' such as Hans Robert Jauss, for example, reject the idea that the reception of literature and art incorporates two extremes – the passive consumer and the avant-garde producer,  insisting instead that the act of interpretation is, in fact, made up of a series of very complex communicative acts.[198] Similarly, Fish argues that the reader does not simply decode meaning from a text. Instead, the reader encodes meaning, which is then imposed upon the text, and as a result the reader's response *becomes* the text's meaning. This distinction leads Fish to posit that meaning ought to be 'redefined as an event rather than an entity'[199] and, later, that 'linguistic facts […] do have meaning, but the explanation for that meaning is not the capacity of syntax to express it but the ability of the reader to confer it'.[200] This second point allows Fish to retain the distinction between description and interpretation, which is essential if his argument that meaning is an 'after effect', not contained within the text but cast upon it, is to stand up. 'The relationship between interpretation and text is thus reversed,' he says. 'Interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading: they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape,

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[196] W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' [1946]. In *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 4.
[197] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980).
[198] Morris, p. 128.
[199] Fish, p. 3.
[200] Ibid., p. 8.

making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them.'[201] For Fish, meaning and structure have no independent existence outside the reading experience. In other words, the reader in effect 'writes' the text which only comes into being by means of the interpretive and imaginative activity that is reading. In 'Literature and the Reader' he argues that 'all poems (and novels and plays) [are], in some sense, about their readers […] therefore, the experience of the reader, rather than the 'text itself' [is] the proper object of analysis'.[202] Similarly, as we have seen, Wolfgang Iser holds that the reader is already implied in the text : 'Since texts only take on their potential reality in the act of being read, it follows that they must already contain the conditions that will allow their meaning to be assembled in the responsive mind of the recipient'.[203]

In order to illustrate his thesis, Fish analyses the following sentence, taken from Walter Pater's conclusion to *The Renaissance*: 'That clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours'.[204] Fish writes that 'if [the reader] were by chance drawn to it, he would not be likely to pay very much attention to the first word – "that". It is simply there. But of course it is not simply there; it is *actively* there, doing something […]'.[205] Regardless of whether or not the word 'that' is doing something, there is of course a high possibility that the reader may interpret it as doing (or meaning) something which the author did not anticipate. This, for Fish, is not a problem, since it epitomises the intentional fallacy: the only thing available, and concrete, is the text itself; the intention of the author, whatever it may be, must remain elusive and inaccessible. In fact, Fish goes a step further than Wimsatt and Beardsley by positing that 'what [the sentence] does is what it means […] What I am suggesting is that there is no direct relationship between the meaning of a sentence and what its words mean':

> A reader's response to the fifth word [in a sentence] is to a large extent the
> product of his responses to words one, two, three, and four […] in an
> utterance of any length, there is a point at which the reader has taken in only
> the first word, and then the second, and third, and so on, and the report of

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[201] Ibid., p. 13.
[202] Fish, p. 21.
[203] Morris, p. 122.
[204] Walter Pater. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* [1873] (Gloucester: The Echo Library, 2006), p. 107.
[205] Fish, p. 30.

what happens to the reader is always a report of what had happened *to that point* […][206]

If, as Fish argues, the meaning of text is shaped by the reader's response to it, then hypertext can be seen to extend the potentialities of the reader's role in organising and shaping this meaning. In 'Reading Hypertext: Order and Coherence in a New Medium' John M. Slatin writes:

> Hypertext's capacity for literally interactive reading and co-authorship represents a radical departure from traditional relationships between readers and texts. The implications of this departure from traditional relationships between readers and texts are enormous […] as many theorists now agree, understanding comes about when the mind acts upon the material.[207]

In a hypertext novel, when readers traverse the text by clicking on links and arranging the *lexias* to form a narrative, they are not merely attributing meaning to the words of an already existing text; they are creating a new text as they go along, attributing meaning in the process. In traditional print literature, the physical body of the text stays the same and the reader's role (according to Fish) is simply bringing it into being (by reading it) and thus attributing meaning to that text. In hypertext, the order of the text is constantly changing and so no two readers are ever likely to

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[206] Ibid., p. 27. Fish's concept of there being no direct relationship between the meaning of a sentence and the meaning of the words that make it up is problematic. To return to Fish's object of analysis, the sentence from *The Renaissance*, it is perfectly plausible that the word 'that' may be actively there, doing something, but it is only doing what it is doing because the word 'that' means something (it is a referent). Even if a different referent were used – 'this', for example – then the meaning of the sentence would be different, because of the very fact that the word 'this' has a different meaning to the word 'that'. Thus the sentence, '*This* clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours' has a different meaning to the sentence originally penned by Walter Pater: it is a case of changing the subject of the sentence from 'that' image over there to 'this' image here.

Fish then goes on to say that 'the book of the father' and 'the father's book' do not mean the same thing, because we experience the words at different points in our digestion of the sentence. But, I would argue, even when two different people refer to the same object in different ways, the meaning attributed to the object itself does not alter. For example:
     'Could you pass me that book?'
     'What, this book?'
     'Yes, that book?'
     Here, we see that the two different words 'this' and 'that' both refer to the same object. While the phrase 'this book' clearly does not mean the same as the phrase 'that book', the book itself – the signified to which the two opposing signs 'this' and 'that' point – remains the same, and so it could be argued that the meaning of the sentence overall does not change either.

[207] John M. Slatin, 'Reading Hypertext: Order and Coherence in a New Medium', *College English*, 52:8 (December 1990), 870-883, (p. 876).

attribute meaning to the same reading experience. In this way, hypertext novels have been used to overcome some of the problems of 'restriction' that certain theorists argue are imposed by regular printed text. Tim Parks, for example, argues that, in hypertext, there is no such thing as 'the next page': there is only '*a* next page' [italics mine].[208]

There is another aspect of this 'co-authorship' that I have not touched upon so far which involves the possibilities that hypertext literature offers for the addition of paratextual information to a pre-existing text. This issue forms the basis of the next section.

## 3.4 Hypertext and Paratext

It is Genette's notion of paratext as 'surrounding and extending' a text, and its contribution to, and promotion of, the text's 'reception and consumption', that I find most interesting, since electronic hypertext offers the chance to connect paratextual information to the text itself. For example, in a hypertext, each time a specific character's name appears in the text, the author may choose to incorporate a link leading to ancillary information about that character. Similarly, the author's name might be linked to a biography, or a list of previous works, and the title of the text itself can be linked to reviews of the work published online, or to pieces of similar interest, or to critical or theoretical articles in which the work is cited. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the Facebook pages that form part of the fabric of my own novel, since in this particular case the hypertext is essentially accomplishing two things at once. First, it is a self-contained 'part' of the novel, comprising interactions between both fictional characters and 'real' people, and this, I hope, generates a type of parallel narration that is integral to the overall understanding of the novel. But, secondly, it is also a paratext. Each individual character's Facebook page encompasses additional information about that particular character as well as links to other web pages and texts that touch upon some of the themes explored in the novel as well as the present exegesis. To a similar end, I am able to link to my own Facebook page, and to my personal website, www.stevehollyman.co.uk, as well as incorporating a discussion of my debut novel, *Keeping Britain Tidy* (2010), into the paratextual fabric of the narrative. Therefore, the narrative itself is shaped by the paratexts it generates, and the relationship is

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[208] Tim Parks, 'Tales Told by a Computer' in *The Fighter* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 201.

reciprocal, since the Facebook pages also form part of the text to which the prefix *para-* is added.

According to John M. Slatin:

> One of the most important differences between conventional text and hypertext is that most hypertext systems, though not all, allow readers to interact with the system to such an extent that some readers may become actively involved in the creation of an evolving hyperdocument. Co-authorship may take a number of different forms – from relatively simple, brief annotations or comments on existing material, to the creation of new links connecting material not previously linked, to the modification of existing material or the creation of new materials, or both.[209]

I have already mentioned George Landow's account of hypertext systems which allow the reader to add 'notes' to the text. This is a useful tool, particularly in the world of education and pedagogy, since it allows for an interpermeation of fiction and theory, encompassing both the primary text and intertextual and paratextual information.[210] In 'Positioning the Implied Reader: Using Hypertext to Enhance Students' Reading Experience of The Waste Land', for example, Lykourgos Vasileiou remarks:

> Supplementing the reading [of a text] in print form with the hypertext version of it allows students to experience inter-textuality as a series of choices for further meaning rather than a necessary hunt for sources, while it enables students to understand the implied reader position embodied in the poem and for them to accept the possibility of themselves taking that position despite the distance (historical, social, cultural) from the era of the poem's composition.[211]

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[209] Slatin, p. 875.

[210] The print element of *Esc&Ctrl* strives also to achieve this level of interpermeation, albeit on a metafictional level. See section 3.7.

[211] Lykourgos Vasileiou, 'Positioning the Implied Reader: Using Hypertext to Enhance Students' Reading Experience of The Waste Land', *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice,* 4: 4 (Summer 2011), 87-96 (p. 87). Eliot's poem is of course in itself intensely hypertextual, but is commonly described as 'merely' *inter*textual.

According to Vasileiou, the hypertext document can be used as a means of encouraging different readers to share their interpretations of the text by either writing directly onto it (as one would insert annotations in the margins of a traditional print text) or by linking from it to other texts, resulting in the kind of 'evolving hyperdocument' described by Slatin.

Arguably, one of the best examples of an 'evolving hyperdocument' is the informational website Wikipedia. Launched in 2001, Wikipedia is an online encyclopaedia comprising, at the time of writing, over 21 million articles in 285 languages. The vast majority of these articles can be edited by anyone who accesses the site, which currently has around 100,000 regular contributors. Each of the articles can be accessed in two different ways: either by typing a particular subject into the search bar, or by clicking on a link embedded into any other page referencing the same subject. For example, when I type the subject 'Charles Dickens' into the search bar, I am presented with a page discussing the life and work of Charles Dickens with an array of links to other articles on individual novels, other authors who have cited or commented upon Dickens, geographical places of interest relating to the author's life, literary realism, and the Victorian period in general.

The problem with websites such as Wikipedia is that the haphazardly collaborative nature of the project detracts from the integrity of both the individual articles and the site as a whole. Since it is possible for anyone to post an article on the site, much of the information it contains is questionable in terms of accuracy, and occasionally it turns out to be fabricated, defamatory, or both. The collaborative nature of a hypertext novel in which the reader is able to influence the actual text as opposed to merely re-ordering it could similarly undermine the 'authority' of the creative mind that first envisaged it, making it a literary (or literal) example of too many cooks spoiling the broth. Moreover, the reader may also post comments which directly contradict what the author intended, and this could be particularly dangerous if libellous or defamatory content was posted by a 'reader' and then erroneously assumed to be the work of the 'author'.

A case in point is the 'Wikipedia Biography Controversy', also known as the 'Seigenthaler Incident', in which a hoax article was posted on Wikipedia claiming that a well-known American journalist, John Seigenthaler, was a suspect in the assassination of US President J.F. Kennedy. According to an article written by Seigenthaler for *USA Today*, the article remained undetected on the Wikipedia site

for 132 days.[212] Seigenthaler, who in his article describes the incident as 'Internet character assassination', writes:

> At my request, executives of the three websites now have removed the false content about me. But they don't know, and can't find out, who wrote the toxic sentences […] And so we live in a universe of new media with phenomenal opportunities for worldwide communications and research — but populated by volunteer vandals with poison-pen intellects. Congress has enabled them and protects them.[213]

Readers are no longer limited to editing or altering a pre-existing electronic text; rather, they are able to alter history itself. According to the *New York Times*, in March 2009 a student posted a false quotation attributed to the French composer Maurice Jarre on Wikipedia, shortly after Mr. Jarre's death. This quotation was subsequently included in obituaries about Mr. Jarre in several newspapers, including the *Guardian* and the *Independent*.[214] As Joseph Reagle, an adjunct professor of communications at New York University with special expertise on the history of Wikipedia, told the *New York Times* at the time: 'Wikipedia now has the ability to alter the world that it attempts to document'.[215] For these reasons, in 2009 Wikipedia began a 'test' period in which it imposed new restrictions on the editing of articles about living people. Each time an article was amended or updated, it would appear as 'flagged', meaning that it is stored on an area of the site which the public cannot access, until it has been approved by an 'experienced volunteer editor'.[216]

This new verification procedure has problematised the nature of how information is created and accessed on Wikipedia. On the one hand, it is supposed to make information more reliable, more accurate, and to prevent defamation and libel. On the other, it may be seen by many as a form of censorship, as an attempt to control the internet. Since the Facebook pages I created for my project include contributions from real people, who may then link to information concerning other

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[212] John M. Seigenthaler, 'A False Wikipedia 'Biography', *USA Today,* 29 November 2005 <http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2005-11-29-wikipedia-edit_x.htm> [accessed 16 May 2012].
[213] Ibid.
[214] Noam Cohen, 'Wikipedia to Limit Changes to Articles on People', *New York Times*, 24 August 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/25/technology/internet/25wikipedia.html?_r=1> [accessed 16 May 2012].
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid.

real people, who are not themselves directly involved in the project, it was necessary to ensure that all contributors to the page fully understood the parameters of the project. The ethical implications of such an undertaking will be accounted for later in this chapter.

## 3.5 The case against Hypertext

According to Michael Joyce, 'since even the simplest hypertexts present an enormous number of reading choices, and since the order of presentation always changes with readers' choices, hypertexts can never be adequately represented in print'.[217] Conversely, there are many vehement critics of the hypertext genre who argue that hypertext literature is either somewhat less 'pure' or 'organic' than printed text or that it is a redundant medium altogether since printed literature has been widely available for many years and has always suited its purpose perfectly well without the need for technological intervention or development. In this section I will examine both of these points of view, in order to evaluate whether hypertext really is a more versatile medium that print text in terms of reader interactivity and engagement.

It is often argued that hypertext offers readers an increased level of interactivity since they are free to choose which path they take through the text. However, as Tim Parks points out in 'Tales Told by a Computer', the reader is under no obligation to read a book from front to back, and 'the linearity of the book, of the page, or even the sentence, is thus only a convention, not inherent in the form but something we choose to submit to, or not, every time we read'.[218] Nevertheless, as discussed in section 3.2, it is *implied* that the reader will read the pages of the book in the order in which they are presented. This order is the same in all copies of the book and thus, in terms of the traversal of the text at least, every reader is expected to travel along the same route.

Moreover, it is assumed that if a reader reads a traditional print text more than once, he or she will take the same path through the text on both occasions. When a hypertext is re-read, however, it is unlikely that readers would take the same path each time, unless they made the effort to note down each particular link that was clicked during the original reading. For this reason, the implied traversal of a

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[217] Joyce, 1995, p. 21.
[218] Parks, pp. 203-204.

hypertext is different from the traversal of a traditional piece of print literature. 'Ergodic literature', a term coined by Espen J. Aarseth, requires 'nontrivial effort to allow the reader to traverse the text'.[219] Although Aarseth implies that print text cannot be ergodic,[220] I would like to suggest that the concept of nontrivial traversal does not refer exclusively to hypertext but also to novels such as Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) which rely on textual experimentation. The difference is that with 'ergodic' print literature the reader is still expected to proceed through the pages in the order in which they are presented. In a hypertext novel, various different 'paths' are available to the reader but, as stated earlier in this chapter, these paths are nevertheless dictated by the links between the different *lexias* which are pre-coded into the text by the author. For this reason, it could be said that a hypertext is, in fact, more restrictive than a traditional printed text: in the former, there are only a certain number of steps which the reader can take from one page to another, since only certain pages will be linked together via hyperlinks (and these pages may not necessarily link back to the same pages from which they were accessed by the reader). This means that it may be impossible for the reader to get from *lexia x* to *lexia z* without travelling via *lexia y*. In this sense, at least, a traditional text offers more options to readers. Although it is implied that they will take a certain path through the text they are nevertheless free to move without restriction from any single page within the volume to any other page they choose.

In *Reading Network Fiction*, David Ciccoricco writes:

> It is difficult to equate the reader's new responsibility with new 'power' at all, since the writer prearranges the paths that exist in network fiction, and the reader's 'freedom' is circumscribed – subject to the design of the author-as-artificer.[221]

It is perhaps for this reason that some authors choose to continue experimenting with the form of the traditional print book. This type of experimentation, of what British author B.S. Johnson refers to as 'form dictating content',[222] began long before the emergence of the internet with 'loose leaf' novels such as Marc Saporta's

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[219] Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 1.
[220] Page & Thomas, p. 66.
[221] David Ciccoricco, *Reading Network Fiction* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2007), p. 9.
[222] Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 115.

*Composition #1* (1962) and Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), the former of which is widely regarded to be the first 'book in a box'.[223] Essentially, these texts both work in the same way; they are unbound, with the reader free to shuffle the pages into an order other than that in which they are presented. There are, however, subtle differences: Saporta's novel consists of 150 loose leaves, printed on one side, which can be shuffled into any order, while Johnson's is made up of 27 stapled sections, of varying lengths, the 'First' and 'Last' of which are labelled as such and, according to the publisher's note, must be read in that order, with the remaining 25 chapters to be shuffled in between.

Johnson's second novel, *Albert Angelo* (1964), includes two pages with holes cut through them so that the reader can see what is about to happen, and this is an effect also employed by Mark Z. Danielewski in *House of Leaves* (the difference being that in the former the pages contain physical holes, whereas in the latter, this is mimicked using typography). The mutilation of pages is taken further by Jonathan Safran Foer: *Tree of Codes* (2010) takes an already existing text – *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) by Bruno Schulz – and introduces a different 'die-cut' to each folio in which certain words are removed in order to create a new story.[224] Steven Hall's debut *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) contains numerous typographical and textual innovations including a 50-page section in which the image of a shark, composed of letters of printed text, appears to move when the pages are quickly flicked by the reader.[225] Furthermore, in 2003, Shelley Jackson, who has also published three hypertexts, *Patchwork Girl* (1995), *My Body* (1997), and *The Doll Games* (2001), launched the 'Skin' project in which she proposed to write a story, of 2095 words, with each word tattooed onto the skin of a different participant. The 'call for participants' first appeared in *Cabinet Magazine*, issue 11, and is reproduced on the project's website:

> Each participant must agree to have one word of the story tattooed upon his or her body. The text will be published nowhere else, and the author will not permit it to be summarized, quoted, described, set to music, or adapted for film, theater, television or any other medium. The full text will be known only to participants […] In the event that insufficient participants come

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[223] Marc Saporta, *Composition #1* [1962] (London: Visual Editions, 2011).
[224] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2011).
[225] Steven Hall, *The Raw Shark Texts* (London: Canongate Books Ltd, 2007).

forward to complete the first and only edition of the story, the incomplete version will be considered definitive. If no participants come forward, this call itself is the work […] Participants will be known as 'words'. They are not understood as carriers or agents of the texts they bear, but as its embodiments. As a result, injuries to the printed texts […] will not be considered to alter the work. Only the death of words effaces them from the text. As words die the story will change; when the last word dies the story will also have died. The author will make every effort to attend the funerals of her words.[226]

From the examples listed above, it is clear that literature in print form is still evolving and still offering new potentials for creating narratives in an entertaining, provocative and engaging way. Yet there is one fundamental problem that traditional printed text cannot overcome. At the most basic level, when reading any novel in traditional print form, be it loose-leaf or bound, multi-linear or unilinear, ergodic or non-ergodic, one knows how far one is from 'the end' of the story because one is able to see the ratio of pages read versus pages yet to be read. This, of course, relates back to both the notion of 'narrative time' and 'story time' and also to Nash's discussion of the opposing worlds 'in' and 'of' the novel, to which I referred in chapters one and two.[227] It could be argued, then, that the story's frame is clearly visible, in terms of the physicality of the object at least, to the reader at all times when he or she is interacting with a printed text. With hypertext literature, by contrast, this is not the case, or at least it need not be. There are certain exceptions such as, for example, Geoff Ryman's *253* in which the reader is informed that the novel is made up of 253 *lexias*, each containing 253 words.[228] In this case, it is possible for the reader to ascertain how many pages and/or words are left to read based upon how many have already been read.

Of course the physicality of the frame need not always be seen as an entirely negative trait of printed text. In *Only Revolutions* (2006) Mark Z. Danielewski uses the ratio of pages-turned to pages-remaining as a means of propagating one of his book's main themes. The novel is literally two books in one, containing two stories,

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[226] 'Author Announces Mortal Work of Art'
<http://ineradicablestain.com/skin-call.html> [accessed 16 May 2011].
[227] Nash, 1993, p. 7.
[228] Geoff Ryman, *253,* 1996 <http://www.ryman-novel.com/> [accessed 17 February 2012].

each with a different narrator. Like *Esc&Ctrl*, the novel is designed in such a way that it has no definite beginning and no definite end. Danielewski tells two stories simultaneously with one beginning at the 'front' and one at the 'back', the text of one strand appearing upside down on the same page as that of the other. In order to read the novel coherently, the publishers recommend reading eight pages of one narrative, before turning the book upside down and reading eight pages from the other end, then back again, and so on.[229] The effect is such that as the reader moves towards the centre of the book, the two narratives (and the two characters) move closer, eventually overlapping, mirroring the events of the story itself. Once the middle point is crossed, they drift further apart again.

Mark B.N. Hansen remarks that 'for Mark Z. Danielewski, perhaps the central burden of contemporary authorship is to reaffirm the novel as a relevant – indeed newly relevant – cultural form.'[230] Danielewski himself has echoed this sentiment in interviews:

> [B]ooks don't have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page […] Words can also be coloured and those colours can have meaning. How quickly pages are turned or not turned can be addressed. Hell, pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards […] but here's the joke. Books have had this capacity all along […] Books are remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities […] But somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. Somewhere along the way, all its possibilities were denied. I'd like to see the book reintroduced for all it really is.[231]

In *House of Leaves*, for example, the word 'house' always appears in blue font (including on the book's title page which identifies its publisher as Random House). The exact reason for this has never been confirmed by Danielewski himself, but

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[229] Publisher's note, Mark Z. Danielewski, *Only Revolutions* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).
[230] Mark B.N. Hansen, 'The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves', *Contemporary Literature,* 45:4 (2004), 597-636, (p. 597).
[231] Ibid.

several explanations have been advanced on online blogs and web forums.[232] Some suggest that the blue font represents a 'blue screen' used in film making – that is to say that it can reflect anything that is projected onto it, a literal representation, perhaps, of Stanley Fish's understanding of the ways in which a reader might impose his own meaning onto a text. Others argue that the blue font represents rubrication – the medieval tradition of emphasising words by highlighting them. Another more popular explanation posits that the blue font represents a hyperlink on the internet (which traditionally appears in blue so as to draw the reader's attention to it), thus evoking the image of the house as a portal to elsewhere.[233]

This idea of mimicking hypertext in print is an interesting one. Ryman's *253*, first released on the internet in 1996, was subsequently published as a traditional novel, *253: The Print Remix*, in 1998. (It would be both interesting and somewhat ironic to see how effectively this 'traditional print' version of a hypertext classic might translate into an electronic text on the Amazon Kindle, but no Kindle edition is available at the time of writing.)[234] Other authors have similarly tried to replicate the workings of a computer in book form: Douglas Coupland, in his novel *JPOD* (2007) (itself an inherently metafictional text, complete with multiple appearances of the author-as-character), evokes the chaotic nature of the internet with long passages comprised of technical script. Notably I took inspiration from this in *Esc&Ctrl*: the code which Ike Mafar uses to analyse the *VOID* manuscript is printed in full as part of an email exchange between Mafar and his friend Taylor Yates.[235] In a similar way, it would also be possible to include screen prints of Facebook messages, taken from my own project's Internet-based counterpart, within the body of the printed text of the bound novel.

Now that the differences – and similarities – of print text and hypertext have been established, I come to explaining the crux of my argument, which centres on a proposed methodology for using Facebook as a fictional, hypertext narrative as well as a plot development device for a traditional print novel.

[232] 'Blue House of Leaves: A Projection of Heaven', *Literature and the Contemporary,* 25 April 2011 < http://pitt-lit-con.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/blue-house-of-leaves-projection-of.html> [Accessed 10 July 2013].
[233] Ibid.
[234] Geoff Ryman, *253: The Print Remix* [1998] (London: Flamingo [Reissue Edition], 2010).
[235] Hollyman, 2013, pp. 148-149. The code is taken from Alvin Alexander, 'A Ruby Script to find Hidden Messages in Text' <http://alvinalexander.com/blog/post/ruby/ruby-script-find-hidden-meanings-in-text> [accessed 26 March 2013].

## 3.6 Facebook as a Hypertext Novel

According to Chaouli, one needs only to 'scratch the surface of the concept of hypertext to recognize that what we encounter every day on the web appears to contain, in its very structure, highly promising conditions for the production of artistically advanced texts'.[236] The aim of my own project, then, was to develop current theories and arguments about electronic hypertext by creating a unique narrative experience told entirely through the interactions of characters on a social networking site. For reasons of simplicity (and the popularity of the site at the time of writing) I chose to use Facebook: three of the main protagonists/antagonists in the novel (Vincent, Davison, Jadee) would be equipped with a Facebook profile which I would operate and which would work in much the same way as a 'real' person's Facebook profile, consisting of blogs, messages, 'wall posts' and tagged photographs.[237]

In the last five years or so, cultural theorists have begun to take notice of the potential for building (albeit temporarily) communities around collaborative online storytelling ventures.[238] I intended to set up my own narrative by posting messages and creating conversations and interactions between my characters, and then, once the frame of the story was in place, invite real people to 'befriend' the characters and interact with them, thus shaping the plot and progression of the story in ways beyond my control. I hoped to create a narrative that looked real but still relied on the postmodern conventions of fragmentation, micronarratives and a preoccupation with computerisation and technology; a narrative that would serve as a working demonstration of simulation, metafictional virtuality, and mimesis in fictional form. The plot that emerged from the Facebook narrative would be incorporated into the story of a print novel-in-progress.

Broadly speaking, *Esc&Ctrl* is an example of what has come to be known in recent years as 'transmedia' fiction, that is, fiction which is narrated across a variety of different media platforms.[239] One common characteristic of transmedia

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[236] Chaouli, p. 602.

[237] Facebook, like a lot of new technology, brings with it a new set of linguistic terms and phrases. For a glossary of some of the most common of these, please see Appendix II.

[238] Page & Thomas, p. 5.

[239] In this case, the media platforms are traditional print text, Facebook (my characters' pages and my own author page), Wikipedia (paratextual material linked from these pages), and Smartphone (used not only as a means of interacting with the content listed above, but also in the form of screenshots of text messages from one character to another which were displayed on Facebook). There are, of course, several ways in which the novel's 'transmediality' could have been taken further, for example

storytelling is that it 'infiltrates' reality by including real entities (other Facebook users, real newspapers, Google Maps) within the fabric of the fictional narrative, and, for reasons which should be obvious, this poses a number of ethical issues. I had originally intended to keep the fictionality of my characters secret until the end of the project, simply because I wanted collaborators to believe that they were interacting with real people and not chimeras. Yet section 4.1 of Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities reads as follows: '[The user] will not provide any false personal information on Facebook, or create an account for anyone other than [himself/herself] without permission.'[240] To overcome this, I decided to use Facebook 'pages' instead of profiles. The purpose of pages on Facebook is to 'help businesses, organizations and brands share their stories and connect with people',[241] and Facebook permits the registering of pages to fictional characters (this appears as an 'option' when setting up the page). However, pages offer a less interactive experience for a number of reasons: at the most basic level, I argue, this is due to the 'fictionality' of the character being clearly stated on the page. Also, the restrictions of the page format do not allow Facebook users to 'befriend' fictional characters, only to 'like' them.[242] As a result of this, I was not able to post content from my characters directly onto the Facebook walls of the real people who were following their stories, and therefore most of the narrative action had to be located on the pages of the characters. There were advantages to this, because the new format helped condense the narrative proper to four web pages (my characters' and my own author profile) which arguably made the story easier to follow, but the restricted interactivity offered to me meant I was unable to use my characters to infiltrate the profiles of the collaborators at the level I had hoped, and at the level that is characteristic of most transmedia fiction.

I encountered a second problem in finding a means to ensure that everyone who posted content onto the pages consented to the possible inclusion of their intellectual property in my novel and/or exegesis. I was advised by the University's Ethics Committee that I would need to obtain permission from each collaborator if I wished to use the data generated by the Facebook interactions in my doctoral

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by linking to Google Maps to show the characters' locations, or by including screenshots in the print novel.
[240] 'Statement of Rights and Responsibilities' < http://www.facebook.com/legal/terms> [accessed 16 October 2012].
[241] 'Managing a Page' < http://www.facebook.com/help/pages> [accessed 16 October 2012].
[242] For a Glossary of Facebook terms, please see Appendix II.

research. On Facebook profiles, friend requests must be 'accepted' by the owner of the account, but this is not the case for pages. I therefore had no control over the number of people who engaged with the site, and no way of preventing them from posting information without first consenting to the terms of the project.

However, Facebook pages feature a 'cover' image which appears as a banner running along the top of the screen. The inclusion of a disclaimer on the cover is permitted as long as it does not infringe upon Facebook's own Terms and Conditions. Section 3b of Facebook's 'Pages Terms' states that 'covers may not include… contact information such as a website address, email, mailing address, or information that should go in [the user's] Page's "About" section'[243], so I had to ensure that the disclaimer was worded accordingly. The disclaimer I posted at the top of each of my pages stated: 'By clicking 'Like' or posting on this page you certify that you agree to the project's Terms and Conditions. For more information, please use the email address found in the "About" section.' Next, I set up an email address – escapeandcontrol@gmail.com – so that I could specifically address any questions arising from the pages, and I ensured that this was publicised in the correct section of the page. Having completed the preparations listed above, I submitted an 'Application for Ethical Approval'.[244] Since there was not sufficient time to wait for the University's Ethics Committee's quarterly meeting, I was awarded Chair's Action and at this point I began inviting people to view the pages I had set up. On 21st August 2012 I began running the novel in 'real time' and the site remained live until 28th August 2012. All of the information generated was subsequently written up and redrafted, and now forms the crux of the 'Times New Roman' strand of my novel. Readers (I use the term for simplicity; since the reader is also the collaborator, the co-writer, the artificer and, most importantly, the character) were able to contribute to the text in a variety of ways. On the most basic level, they might choose to 'befriend' one or more of the characters by 'liking' that character's page. The reader's name (and profile photograph) is then displayed in a list of users who are following that character's story. At the next level, they may 'correspond' with a character by commenting on wall posts and photographs, or by sending the character a private message which remains unseen by other readers (although it may be used as a screen print within the novel). Furthermore, they may tag characters in

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[243] 'Facebook Pages Terms' <http://www.facebook.com/page_guidelines.php> [accessed 16 October 2012].
[244] See Appendix III.

pictures, as well as adding locations to photographs, and they may also post links to content on other websites.

These interactions had a direct influence on the actions of the characters and, subsequently, on the shape of the novel's plot overall. Once a reader posted something onto a character's Facebook page, the post automatically and necessarily became part of the overall narrative. Soon, it became apparent that certain readers were 'taking sides' – that is to say, sending private messages to certain characters informing them of the nefarious actions, elsewhere on the internet, of their antagonists. Collaborator Rob Gilbert, for example, set up a discussion on Jadee's page in which he informed her of Davison's goading of Vincent, and advised her to exercise caution when dealing with Davison. Furthermore, the 'lie detector' scene at the end of the novel arose entirely from a conversation conducted privately between the character Vincent and collaborator Antony Buxton.[245]

As explained in section 3.1, in order to successfully argue that Facebook constitutes a narrative, we must first agree that Facebook is a text, encompassing not only its words-and-letters text but also its images. As Mieke Bal writes in *Narratology*:

> [W]e are establishing boundaries, boundaries with which not everyone would agree. Some people […] argue that comic strips belong to the corpus of narrative texts, but others disagree […] In this case, the explanation is very simple. Those who consider comic strips to be narrative texts interpret the concept *text* broadly. In their view, a text does not have to be a linguistic text. In comic strips, another, non-linguistic, sign system is employed, namely, the visual image.[246]

Once we have chosen to accept (or, indeed, not to accept) that a Facebook page (or comic strip, or picture book) constitutes a *text*, we must then, so Bal suggests, define what we mean when we talk about a *narrative text*. A *narrative text*, Bal writes, is a text in which an 'agent' conveys or tells a story to an addressee using a particular medium such as images, language, sound, even buildings, or a combination of two

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[245] See chapter 4.

[246] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative,* 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 4.

or more of these mediums.[247] A *fabula* is 'a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors'.[248] The *story* is the content of the text and the way in which it 'produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and "colouring" of a fabula'.[249] In the case of a Facebook narrative, then, the narrative text is constituted by the interlinking pages via which an agent (myself, acting in character) conveys the stories of Vincent, Jadee and Davison through a combination of images and language. The fabula are the different Facebook posts and photographs, links, and comments of which this narrative text is composed. The story is the content of the text (and pictures) and the way this adds meaning to the fabula.

Before I continue, I would like to focus briefly on a counterargument which suggests that social networking and the internet in general are *not* useful tools for extending the potentialities of the novel. Sven Birkerts argues that the internet and the novel are different, even irreconcilable media (indeed, he uses the word 'opposites'), and also that they are incompatible because the former has significantly changed the way the human mind constructs narrative from experience.[250] Advances in the field of neuroscience, he says, mean that we now regard the human mind not as something immaterial and ineffable but as the product of chemical reactions in the brain. What we understand by 'mind', then, is simply a set of operations carried out by the brain, just as walking is a set of operations carried out by the legs. The advances in this area of research go hand-in-hand with what Birkerts calls 'the digitizing of almost every sphere of human activity'.[251]  For Birkerts, the human imagination, the very way we shape experiences and organise narratives, is shrinking, and the 'digitizing' of information is to blame. Imagination, he writes, 'thins out every time another digital prosthesis appears and puts another layer of sheathing between ourselves and the essential givens of our existence'.[252] The problem, according to Birkerts, is that there is simply too much information, and when there is too much information the reader tends to graze it lightly without savouring it ('gobbling [the] foie gras', as Birkerts puts it). A Victorian realist novel

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[247] Ibid., p. 5.

[248] Ibid.

[249] Ibid.

[250] Sven Birkerts, 'Notes on why the novel and the Internet are opposites, and why the latter both undermines the former and makes it more necessary' in *The American Scholar,* at <http://theamericanscholar.org/reading-in-a-digital-age/> [accessed on 15th November 2011].

[251] Ibid., paragraph 14.

[252] Ibid., paragraph 19.

such as Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849), with its mellifluous language, its circumlocutory descriptions and its seven-hundred-plus pages is no longer accessible to human consciousness, not because the digital era has rendered print-literature obsolete, but because 'the novel serves and embodies a certain interior pace' which has been altered by 'the transformations of modern life'.[253] Lengthy tomes such as *David Copperfield* were once 'synchronous with the basic heart rate of its readers, and [are] now no longer so'.[254] If, as Birkerts suggests, the novel and the internet really are opposites then how might one form a defence of the 'social networking novel'?

I suggest that if the novel is to remain as a genre then it must live up to its name and adapt; it must become 'novel' again. Contemporary authors must take steps to resynchronise their work with the interior pace of their readers. One way of doing this might be the general dumbing-down of fiction, the shortening of books, the simplification of plot, the shaving-off of adjectives. But I suggest that it is more beneficial to take the root cause of this change in interior pace – digitisation, mediated communication, the abundance of information – and use this as a means of telling fictional stories. For this reason, I believe that the internet is not quite as 'opposite' to the novel as Birkerts claims. In his article, he states that 'we stare at a computer screen with its layered windows and orient ourselves with a necessarily fractured attention', which is correct, but he goes on to theorise that 'it is not at all surprising that when we step away and try to apply ourselves to the unfragmented text of a book we have trouble' without accounting for the existence of non-linear narrative, ergodic literature, and unbound novels.[255] There is, I argue, no reason why digital means may not be used to further the experimentation which has been going on for decades in printed literature, while still conforming to what we understand as the concept of the 'novel'.

So my Facebook pages are, I argue, as much a part of the novel *Esc&Ctrl* as the printed text. The pages operate in a very similar way to a hypertext novel, but there is an important distinction between my Facebook narrative and a traditional hypertext. With the latter, despite the fact that readers are (as stated in the quote from George Landow in section 3.1) able to 'add to' the text, and despite traditional hypertext offering the potential for a vast array of different reading experiences

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[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid., paragraph 49.
[255] Ibid., paragraph 32.

(governed, for the most part, by the decisions made by the reader with regard to the order in which the text is traversed) the reader is always working with a text which is, in one way or another, already finished. By this I mean that the author has created the text and then published it on the internet or via another digital medium. In this sense at least, the author's involvement in the creation of the text has ended. With regard to my own Facebook narrative, by contrast, the end result is a collaborative effort, the culmination of an ongoing 'live' collaboration between my readers and me as author/characters. In other words, the reader attributes both readerly and writerly meaning to my text.

The idea of creating narrative from interlinking Facebook pages is further problematised by both Booth's concept of the 'implied author' and Iser's notion of 'implied readers'. The collaborators in this project – by which I mean the 'real' people 'befriending' my fictional characters – are both 'implied' readers (since I had to consider the expectations of my readers/interactors when I developed the profile pages) and 'implied' authors (since the narrative tone of the textual content posted by my collaborators necessarily sheds light on the sort of person that they *might* be). As well as being both implied readers and implied authors, though, my collaborators are also characters in a story; it could be argued that, based upon the points in the previous paragraph, and in chapter two, they come to share the fictionality of the characters Vincent, Davison and Jadee . In signing up to the project, each reader is essentially placing him/herself into the fabric of the narrative, as a character. Traditionally, as Iser and Fish demonstrate, this kind of interaction used to remain confined to the mind of the reader, but in this case, the text itself is necessarily its own paratext: there is no distinction between the textual and paratextual realms because the information that would normally be regarded as belonging to the latter is intrinsically part of the fabric that makes up the complete narrative as opposed to being merely ancillary.

It could be argued – and, indeed I believe Baudrillard *would* argue – that all Facebook profiles are fictional simulations regardless of whether or not they correspond to some state of affairs that exists outside the internet. After all, as I set out in chapter two, the process of constructing one's Facebook profile, of deciding which pictures to upload, which statuses to post, who to be friends with, is inherently and unavoidably an act of simulation in the Baudrillardian sense of the word. The Facebook narrative, then, takes place in a virtual realm, a world in which

fictional characters interact with real people, who in turn have made 'characters' of themselves by choosing how to construct their online identity. It is, as explored in chapter two, and as illustrated in *Esc&Ctrl*, a means of 'shopping for a self', exemplifying the point at which identity becomes not something that one *is* but something that one *does*.

I used my own 'author page' on Facebook to infiltrate the fictional text and comment upon it both externally and internally. Examples of external comments include the advertisements for the project which I placed on my page in the days running up to the launch. (I refer to them as external comments because my vantage point remains detached, that is, I am commenting on the work as an artefact.) Internal comments, on the other hand, allowed me to 'get inside' the text and place myself as a character within it, alongside my collaborators. As I have remarked elsewhere in this exegesis, a common feature of metafiction is authorial intrusion where the author appears as a character in his or her own work. Yet, as William Lavendar explains, this is not the same as placing a 'real' historical character in a novel. The latter is intended to 'enhance an effect of reality' whereas the former, Lavendar argues, is:

> too esoteric to function at the level of effect. They are, rather, kernels of reality buried in a text that everywhere seeks an effect of unreality. The parody is not realism, but irrealism. To the postmodern statement that fiction is not truth, it opposes a new paradox: fiction cannot lie.[256]

In other words, although fiction is by definition untrue, it cannot be said to propagate lies because its status is always already laid bare in its labelling as fiction. The potentiality for including in the fabric of the text multiple readers (who are readers, collaborators, and characters all at the same time) opens up further dimensions to this irrealism.

Mas'ud Zavarzadeh posits that the new communication technologies problematise the formulation of 'encompassing authoritative visions'.[257] Our current information overload creates multiple and contrasting views of reality which cannot be contained within a single interpretive frame while retaining a coherent vision of

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[256] William Lavendar 'The Novel of Critical Engagement: Paul Auster's *City of Glass'* in *Contemporary Literature* 34:02 (Summer 1993), 219-239 (p. 236).
[257] Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 5.

experience. 'The information revolution,' Zavarzadeh continues, 'also expands the range of the probable to the extent that it blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction […] the present seems to be more a mutation than a continuation of the past'.[258] Zavarzadeh's thesis serves as a central point of reference in Nicholas Carr's essay 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?' in which Carr argues that the fragmentary nature of the internet has changed not only what we read but also how we read:

> A recently published study of online research habits, conducted by scholars from University College London, suggests that we may well be in the midst of a sea change in the way we read and think […] They found that people using the sites exhibited 'a form of skimming activity,' hopping from one source to another and rarely returning to any source they'd already visited. They typically read no more than one or two pages of an article or book before they would 'bounce' out to another site. Sometimes they'd save a long article, but there's no evidence that they ever went back and actually read it.[259]

If, as Carr suggests, the internet really is changing how we read, then it follows that it may in time (indeed I believe that it is already doing so) also change how we write, particularly if the traversal of hypertext is, as has been argued throughout the course of this chapter, a collaborative effort in which the distinction between the writer as artificer and the reader as organiser becomes blurred. However, the influence of the internet upon our consciousness does not end at the edges of the computer screen:

> As people's minds become attuned to the crazy quilt of Internet media, traditional media have to adapt to the audience's new expectations. Television programs add text crawls and pop-up ads, and magazines and newspapers shorten their articles, introduce capsule summaries, and crowd

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[258] Ibid.

[259] Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google Making us Stupid? What the internet is doing to our brains', *Atlantic Magazine* (July/August 2008).
< http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/>
[accessed 25 November 2011].

their pages with easy-to-browse info-snippets […] Old media have little choice but to play by the new-media rules.[260]

As has already been noted, the pages I created on Facebook offered different levels at which readers could interact with the text and characters which, in turn, offered varying degrees of immersion and identification. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) Marie-Laure Ryan asserts that the 'experience of immersion requires a transparency of the medium that makes it incompatible with self-reflexivity'.[261] This creates a problem for my project, because up to this point I have been touting *Esc&Ctrl* as a work of metafiction, one of the key characteristics of which is self-reflexivity. I would argue Ryan's observation is true only if through the medium's transparency one is seeing what is really there as opposed to what appears to be there, which is one of the reasons for my choosing to incorporate a third narrative strand into the novel, comprising an interpermeation of fiction and theory, in which a fictional scholar uses real sources to critique both the novel itself and the Facebook pages corresponding to it.

There are several other advantages to be gained by writing a novel composed of both an electronic element and a print text. First, I can compare and contrast the two different media along with their various hermeneutic implications, the relationship between reader and author, and the reading experience in general. This, in turn, enables me to mobilise some of the theories of realist and postmodern representations of reality discussed in chapters one and two. Secondly, the fast-moving nature of internet technology means that social networking sites such as Facebook usually have a life-span of only several years, and therefore there is a danger that the Facebook element of the project might be inaccessible to future scholars. The combination of print and electronic text, however, means that the results of the plot-development experiment are always available, written-up, in *Esc&Ctrl* (and in the form of screenshots in this exegesis); therefore the majority of the project is preserved. Finally, the printed novel is used to comment on the duplicitous nature of the internet, and the hypertext counterpart reflects on the possible fictionality of the 'real world', thus contributing to the metafictional, self-referential nature of the project and expounding some of the theories which I put

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[260] Ibid.
[261] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 175.

forward in this critical piece. Put simply, and to borrow Carr's terminology, the juxtaposition of print text and hypertext shows old media playing by the new media rules.

## 3.7 On the Structure of *Esc&Ctrl*

The inspiration for creating a traditional print novel with an internet counterpart came from Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007). Hall's novel consists of a bound book containing thirty-six chapters, but for each of these chapters there exists a 'negative' (sometimes referred to as an 'unchapter' or a 'lost chapter') hidden somewhere, either on the internet or in the 'real world'.[262] Hall has confirmed the existence of these 'negatives' in a post on his official website, dated 15th August 2007:

> For each chapter in The Raw Shark Texts there is, or will be, an un-chapter, a negative […]
>
> Not all the negatives are as long as a full novel chapter – some are only a page, some are only a couple of lines. Some are much longer than any chapters in the novel. About a quarter of them are out there so far. (It's an ongoing project set to run for a while yet). Not all of the negatives are online, some are, but they're hiding. Some are out there in the real world, waiting to be found […]
>
> The negatives are not deleted scenes, they are very much a part of the novel but they are all splintered from it in some way.[263]

Similar to Hall, I wanted the printed text of my novel to exist as a standalone work separate from its hypertext counterpart. I wanted to ensure that readers could enjoy the printed work as a novel in itself, even if they had no knowledge of the 'extra-textual' material published on the internet. For this reason, the inclusion of real Facebook pages is intended as a practical experiment which demonstrates some of the theoretical concepts at work in the novel, and their perusal is not essential to an understanding of the novel proper.

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[262] At the time of writing, the official Steven Hall website is alive with discussion regarding the whereabouts of these 'negatives' – some of which remain undiscovered. Indeed, rumour abounds that one of the 'unchapters' is etched onto a park bench in Hall's hometown of Glossop, Derbyshire.

[263] Steven Hall, 'What Are the Raw Shark Texts Negatives?' <http://forums.steven-hall.org/yaf_postst52_What-are--Raw-Shark-Texts-Negatives.aspx> [accessed 9 May 2012].

The most difficult aspect of writing *Esc&Ctrl* was developing its rhizomatic structure, and this took many months of consideration. After reading Alasdair Gray's nonlinear novel *Lanark* (1991) I decided to compose the novel as two separate novellas and then join them together afterwards. I wanted to create a 'circular' text which appears to resolve itself but which, on closer inspection, creates an aporia. The idea for a 'circular' narrative comes from two texts: Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and John Barth's collection of stories *Lost in the Funhouse* (1988) which includes a story called 'Frame Tale'. This story, which takes up only one folio, includes the instruction 'Cut on dotted line. Twist end once and fasten AB to *ab*, CD to *cd*.' If readers were to act as instructed then they would be left with a ring of text which simply says 'Once upon a time there was a story that began'. The physical circularity of the printed artefact means that these lines must be repeated, again and again, infinitely. There is also, when looking at the ring of text described above, no obvious beginning and no end.[264]

In his essay on Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, a novel with which *Esc&Ctrl* shares many similarities, not least in its setting, William Lavendar discusses the 'open ended' nature which is characteristic of many such novels of critical engagement:

> We turn, expectantly, to the 'disclosure' or 'decipherment', the object, the complement of the sentence. But it never comes. The last two days are never plotted […] and both the plot and the plot theory, the subterfuge and the sequence, the hermeneutic and the hermenutemes drift into insignificance. But perhaps, we conjecture, this *is* the answer. For to answer 'Is there an enigma' with 'Yes' leaves the questions unanswered, and to answer 'No' denies the question's predicate. So this hermeneutic sentence is closed, not with the 'period of truth' [...] but the ellipsis of silence.[265]

There are three narrative strands in *Esc&Ctrl* which I refer to respectively as Times New Roman, Courier, and Footnotes. It is the first of these which corresponds most closely to the Facebook pages I created. The plot of the novel as a whole runs as follows:

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[264] John Barth. 'Frame Tale', *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 1-2.
[265] Lavendar, p. 232.

In the year 2014, Research Associate Ike A. Mafar is asked by Professor Fatima Tonelci to provide a set of annotations on an already-published novel by the name of *VOID*. As he reads through the work, Mafar notices parallels between his own life and the story he is annotating, and he begins to suspect that whoever wrote the work did so with the deliberate intention of it somehow finding its way to him. He also starts writing a story of his own, typed onto the back of the pages he is annotating, and this makes up the Courier narrative which forms the eponymous self-begetting novel. The footnotes similarly build into a counter-narrative: soon, Mafar realises that he is in fact the protagonist of the novel; he has escaped from its frame and is now annotating his own story.

Both the Times New Roman and Courier strands have their own self-contained micro-plots. In the former, Vincent Ballone wakes up in an empty apartment in New York with no recollection of how he got there. We learn that he suffers from false memory syndrome, and that his girlfriend, Emily, was murdered. As the narratives move forward, Vincent receives strange phone calls from a character he refers to only as The Voice. The Voice promises to help Vincent find Emily's killer. Meanwhile, in the Courier strand, an unnamed narrator sits in his flat in Manchester, creating fake profiles on a social networking site in order to spy on his girlfriend whom he suspects of cheating on him. The Courier strand also describes the events leading up to Emily's murder. The Times New Roman strand picks up straight afterwards, but it is not revealed until the end that Vincent is not in New York at all but is, in fact, in Manchester, building a fictional tale through interactions on a social networking site, while Emily's body lies decomposing in the bedroom. A third layer is achieved when it is revealed that Mafar wrote the Courier sections, which act as a prelude to the novel, *VOID*, in which he himself appears as Vincent Ballone (the name of one of the profiles he supposedly created). Having completed his annotations in 2014, Mafar posts them to Tonelci at the university, whereupon they find their way to the author-character Steve Hollyman, arriving in 2012.[266] Hollyman notes that the *VOID* manuscript closely represents his own work-in-progress. The question as to whether one of Hollyman's characters really has escaped from the book's frame and annotated it in the future, or whether the whole

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[266] Indeed, this suggests that a time warp has opened up, allowing Mafar to escape from the novel in the future, annotate it, and then post it back to Hollyman. On the other hand, it could be a hoax, perhaps even orchestrated by Hollyman himself. This dichotomy is deliberately left open to the reader's interpretation.

problematic is an elaborate hoax, is never ascertained and so the ending is deliberately ambiguous.

As Anthony Grafton points out, the purpose of footnotes was traditionally to offer scientific or empirical proof for the arguments presented in the main text.[267] Nowadays, it is more often the case that the most important arguments and provision of evidence occur within the text proper, while the sources of this evidence are relegated to footnotes.[268] My intention was to set up a dialogue between the footnotes and the main text in which they appear to comment on one another. Indeed, in some instances in the novel I use footnotes in the traditional sense: for drawing attention to some of the evidential material I used in shaping the novel's argument. But, contrastingly, I also use the main text to comment on the footnotes: for instance, to give an account of Mafar's 'escape' to the real world, and the subsequent fact that he is able to annotate the manuscript in the first place. The result is that the footnotes become a self-standing narrative *per se* which adds an extra layer to the novel. Similarly, the main text colours the reader's perception of what is happening in the footnotes.

The concept of blurring identities is an important motif in *Esc&Ctrl*, and is intended to exemplify the ways in which the self is formed online (i.e. it is decentralised and fluid). When Vincent suspects Emily is cheating on him, he punishes her by uploading an intimate video to the internet, listing it under the alias Jadee Janes; consequently, a character called Jadee Janes appears in the corresponding strand of the novel. Similarly, the reader discovers that Davison is an alias used by Vincent in the online realm, which is then problematised further by the revelation that both Davison and Vincent might in fact be pseudonyms of Mafar. Finally both Ike A. Mafar and Fatima Tonelci are revealed to be anagrams which can be re-arranged to spell 'I am a faker' and 'metafictional' respectively.

I wrote the novel in the order implied by the events it documents. Following the completion of the Times New Roman strand (the *VOID* manuscript) I began to add the ancillary information starting with the Courier narrative and subsequently moving on to the footnotes. (The Courier narrative is not annotated by Mafar simply because Mafar himself wrote it.) I also included some email correspondence between Mafar and Tonelci, Mafar and fellow academic Taylor Yates, and

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[267] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.1.
[268] Ibid., p. 15-16.

Hollyman and Yates, respectively, in order to reinforce the account for the presence of the footnotes, which I did not want to be seen as a gimmick. Instead, I used the footnotes to challenge my own creative writing as well as arguing against some of the points put forward in this exegesis. I also included deliberate errors (or, rather, points which deliberately contradict some of my own ideas) in order to interrogate the very value of literary criticism and pedagogy. Finally, I added a Foreword by Dr Lisa el-Llesi (an anagram of 'lies all lies'). I was careful to draw readers' attention, albeit subtly, to the fact that the Foreword is dated January 2015 which implies that it too was falsified by Mafar, since the world 'of' the book is the world of September 2012. I set up this slow revelation on page one of the novel proper with the motif 'the future has already happened'.

Embedded within the main text are many of the themes discussed in this exegesis. The 'floaters' in Vincent's vision are intended to evoke the shadows in Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave', in which he accounts for the 'true form' of reality. The ambiguity of language is examined through Vincent's reference to carrying a set of keys with him: the reader assumes that this means keys to a house or a car but it is later revealed that they are keys from a computer keyboard. The Baudrillardian concept of the loss of the real is a theme which recurs throughout the novel, starting with Vincent creating his fake online profile and 'shopping' for an identity or self, as Davison, before moving on to examine the power of advertising and the ways in which signs become simulacra. Finally, Schrödinger's theoretical cat experiment is introduced through the metaphor of the unscratched scratch card. There are also various traditional motifs that appear throughout the novel including imagery relating to the eyes and perception (shadows, glaucoma, outlines, blindness, blinking, floaters) and to the doppelgänger or double (mirrors, false names and aliases, lookalikes, triangles, the fact that Vincent always buys two drinks and not one).

With a detailed overview of my novel's purpose, plot, context and critical engagement now firmly in place, I would like to discuss in more precise detail the exact way in which I set up and operated the Facebook pages. This makes up the fourth and final chapter where I show how the story of *Esc&Ctrl* 'emerged' from

Facebook over an eight-day period.[269] I also give a statistical analysis of user interactivity during August 2012.

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[269] According to Ruth Page, 'social media interactions are emergent, that is to say, they are distributed across textual segments [...] that are created and received asynchronously by participants who are often [...] geographically remote from each other. Social interaction appears in episodic form, as sequences of messages develop over time, and draw attention to the processes of storytelling, rather than focusing on a discreet narrative product' (Page, p. 8).

# Chapter Four:
## Statistical Analysis

The transmedial platforms used in the *Esc&Ctrl* narrative include multiple Facebook pages (representing my characters, myself, and collaborators), 'real' websites and newspapers (Wikipedia, The *Manchester Evening News*, The *Wall Street Journal*), photographs, and a traditional bound novel. In the following chapter I will explain how the different platforms work together and inform one another, creating a coherent, multifaceted, intertextual and interactive reading experience incorporating traditional printed text as well as computers and Smartphones.

As discussed, during the project I ran four Facebook pages concurrently. Three of these were the pages of my novel's protagonists and antagonist: Vincent Ballone, Jadee Janes and Davison. The fourth page was my Facebook author profile page which, in keeping with the project's metafictional nature, allowed me to locate myself, as author, both within the fabric of the narrative and external to it.

Each of the three character pages had its own banner, displayed below:
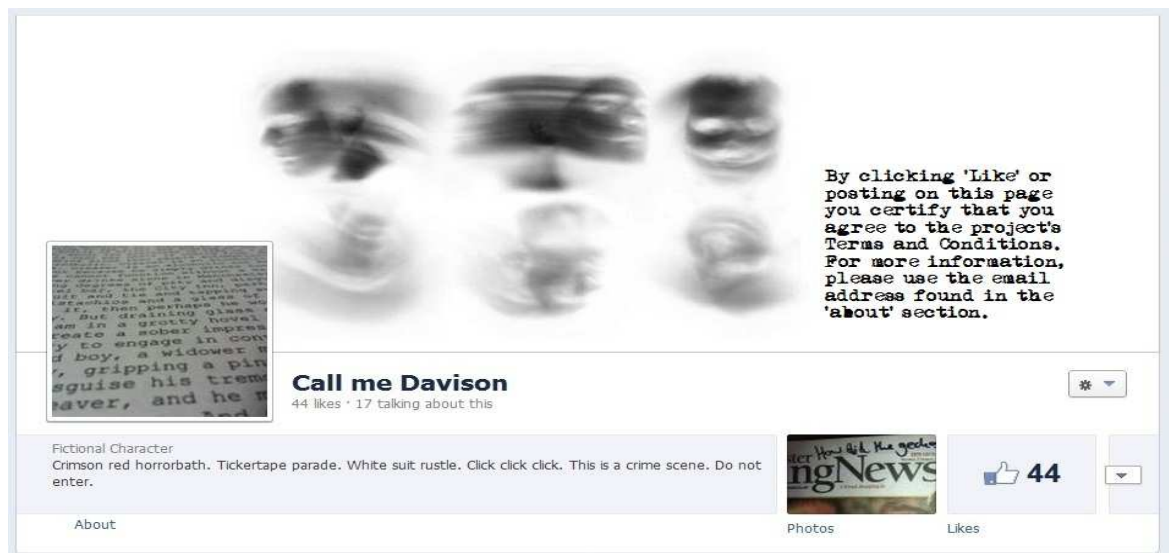
**Fig. 1 – Davison's Cover**

**Fig. 2 – Vincent's Cover**



**Fig. 3 – Jadee's Cover**



Once the pages were created and the covers added, I began to build them up by adding photographs and other paratextual information for each of the characters. I then used my Facebook author page to contact people who had been interested in my first novel, *Keeping Britain Tidy* (2010), and invite them to take part in the *Esc&Ctrl* project. I also posted comments from my fictional characters in response to my own

author posts in the hope that it would generate more interest. This works well because each time a comment appears on my author page, even if its source is an account controlled by myself, it is published on the Facebook news-feed of everyone who has 'liked' not only my author page but also the page where the comment originated, thus increasing the level of exposure to all four pages.

The screenshot below shows an example of one of these posts, which I uploaded at a rate of one a day, for seven days, counting down to the project in the week prior to its launch.

**Fig. 4 – Example of some of the methods used to generate traffic on Facebook in the week prior to launch**



When a person clicks 'Like' on a Facebook page this means that they have registered an interest in the particular subject and wish to receive updates about it without having to continually visit the site and check. In other words, each time I added a new post on the Facebook 'wall' of one of my characters, these updates would be instantly visible to anyone who had 'liked' the page of that particular character as soon as he or she connected to Facebook.

Different participants achieved different levels of interaction with the characters (and with the Facebook element of the novel as a whole) based upon the number of pages they chose to 'like'. For example, some participants chose to only 'like' the page of Vincent Ballone which is where most of the narrative action took place. However, others liked all four pages and were thus exposed to supplementary material. Furthermore, I linked the fictional content of the novel to the 'real' world by adding hyperlinks contextualising some of the themes at play in the novel, incorporating blogs, newspapers and articles from Wikipedia. Again, this 'infiltration' of the real world is a common device in transmedia storytelling.

**Fig. 5 – Example of hyperlinks**



## 4.1 Project Maintenance and Operation

The *Esc&Ctrl* project launched on 21st August 2012 and ran for eight days. Despite the fact that participants knew that the characters were fictional, I wanted to make the pages operate in as authentic a manner as possible, much in the same way as a reader expects a traditional realist narrative to be true-to-life even though s/he knows from the outset that it is fabricated.

I had to take into account the time differences in the novel, since much of the activity takes place (supposedly) in New York City. However, I also wanted to account for the twist at the end of the novel (it is revealed that Vincent Ballone is not in New York at all, but in the UK) without surrendering this information too early. Therefore, I made sure that the location service on all three of the characters' pages was disabled, since the location service tracks and publishes the geographical

location of each post. I also ensured that I posted comments that corresponded to the Eastern Time Zone instead of Greenwich Mean Time, while still keeping the time zone of the account set to GMT, to give the impression that the page was a UK-registered account being accessed from New York.

The first post on Vincent's page from August 21st corresponds with chapter 3 of the novel. In the original drafts, this sequence was the opening chapter, but for reasons of reader engagement I decided to move it later in the final version and to then refer back to it as a flashback. I did this because I felt the opening of the novel was too convoluted in its original form.

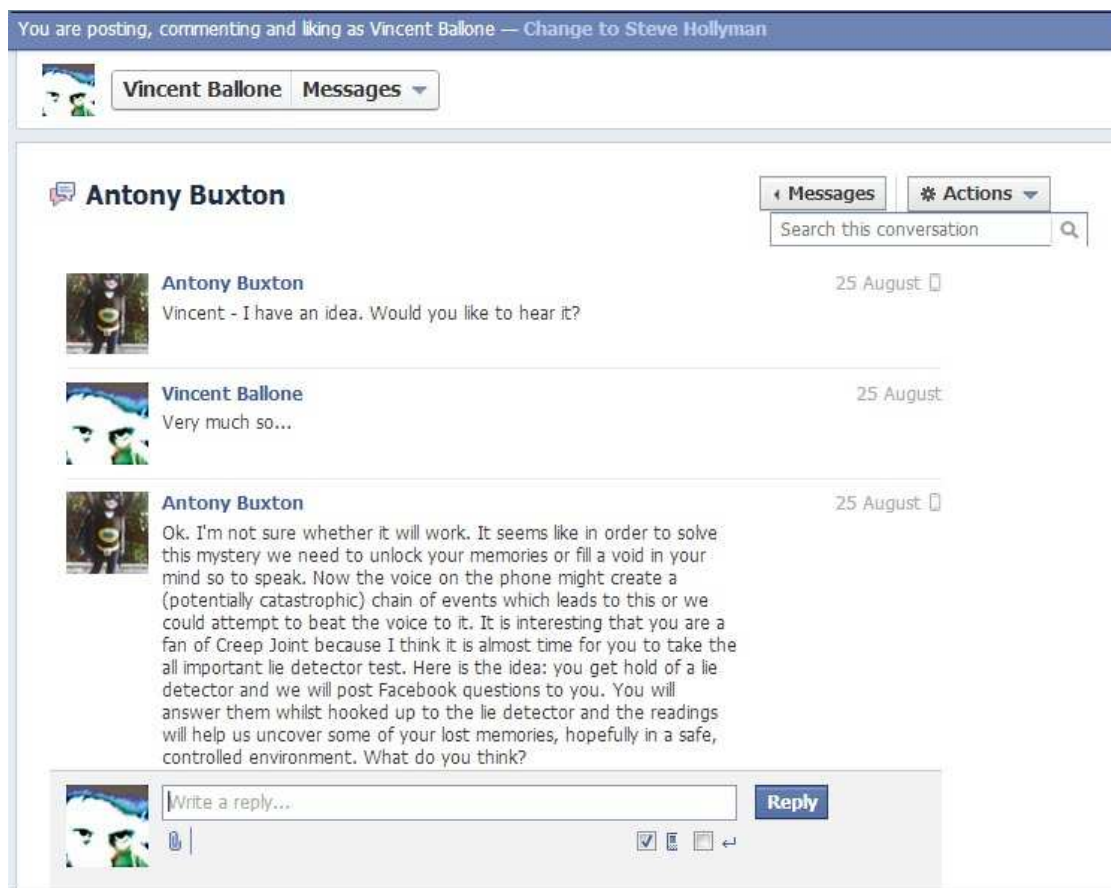**Fig. 6 – Post from 21st August 2012**



This post received 16 responses in the first hour and was eventually seen by 358 people.

In order to move the narrative forward, I posted questions and allowed collaborators to tell the characters what to do.

**Fig. 7 – Post from 21st August**



As the story moved forward, this began to have a direct effect on the events which I eventually wrote up in the printed novel. Furthermore, some collaborators took the initiative to contact my characters 'off screen' and to send private messages. Below is the message which eventually led to the 'lie detector test' strand in the novel which became an essential part of the overall fabric of the piece. Prior to receiving this message I had not planned the scene at all and it would never have appeared in the novel without the participant's suggestion.

**Fig. 8 – 'Private Message' received 25th August 2012**



> You are posting, commenting and liking as Vincent Ballone — Change to Steve Hollyman
>
> Vincent Ballone   Messages ▾
>
> 💬 **Antony Buxton**    ◄ Messages    ⚙ Actions ▾
>
> Search this conversation    🔍
>
> **Antony Buxton**    25 August
> Vincent - I have an idea. Would you like to hear it?
>
> **Vincent Ballone**    25 August
> Very much so...
>
> **Antony Buxton**    25 August
> Ok. I'm not sure whether it will work. It seems like in order to solve this mystery we need to unlock your memories or fill a void in your mind so to speak. Now the voice on the phone might create a (potentially catastrophic) chain of events which leads to this or we could attempt to beat the voice to it. It is interesting that you are a fan of Creep Joint because I think it is almost time for you to take the all important lie detector test. Here is the idea: you get hold of a lie detector and we will post Facebook questions to you. You will answer them whilst hooked up to the lie detector and the readings will help us uncover some of your lost memories, hopefully in a safe, controlled environment. What do you think?
>
> Write a reply...    **Reply**

I also found that some participants enjoyed setting challenges for my characters. One participant, Matt Colbeck, challenged the character Davison to obtain a copy of the day's *Manchester Evening News*, write a certain phrase onto its cover, and then upload a photograph of it. The premise for this was that the character claimed to be in Manchester, but many collaborators thought that he was lying and that he was, in fact, in New York with Vincent. I obtained a copy of the newspaper, wrote the text that the participant had specified, and uploaded the photograph:

**Fig. 8 – Photograph from 23rd August 2012**



However, this post alerted the attention of another collaborator, who then asked Vincent to obtain a copy of that day's *Wall Street Journal* and post a picture online, having written upon it the number which appears on the bank note at the start of the novel:

**Fig. 9 – Copy of Wall Street Journal with number (circled)**
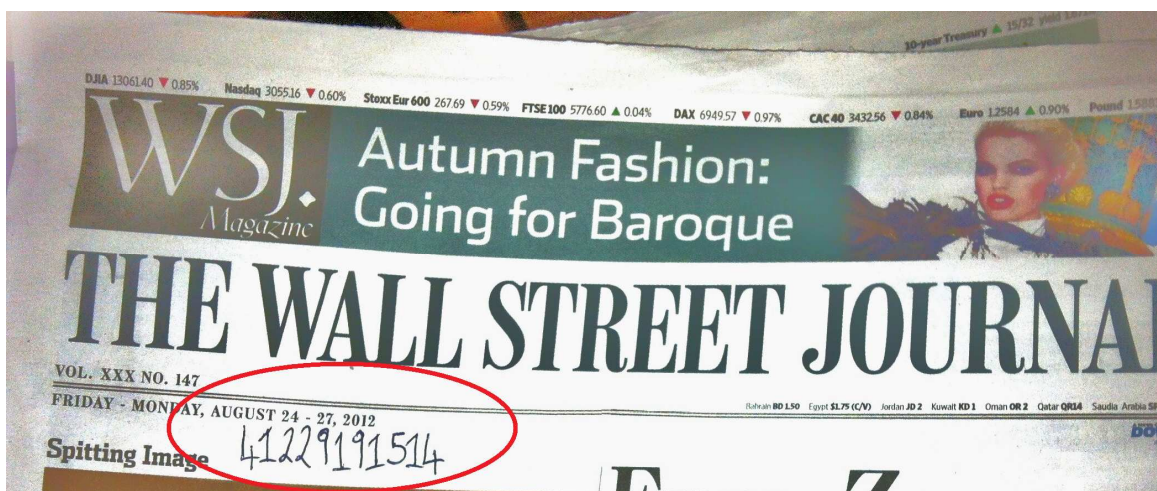


Indeed, photographs formed an important part of both the Facebook narrative and the novel. (I have argued throughout chapter 3 of this exegesis that they are very much part of the text.) Throughout the novel, Vincent discovers different keys taken from a computer keyboard, which eventually spell a message. Each time a plastic computer key was found throughout the eight days, I posted a photo online, at the exact point in time to which it corresponds in the print narrative. I also posted photos of the bank note found during the opening chapters, the underpass in which Vincent meets Davison's 'contact' to collect the computer software, and the first hotel room

in which Vincent stays in New York, as well as other places visited by the characters including Johnny's Bar and Central Park. These are all bespoke photographs I took when I visited New York to research the novel.

## 4.2 Statistics: Site Activity (August 2012)

In the week leading up to the launch, I used my 'author page' on Facebook to generate interest in the pages I had created for each of my characters. The graph below shows activity on my author page for the period 12th August to 27th August.

**Fig. 10 – Statistics for Steve Hollyman author page on Facebook during project week**
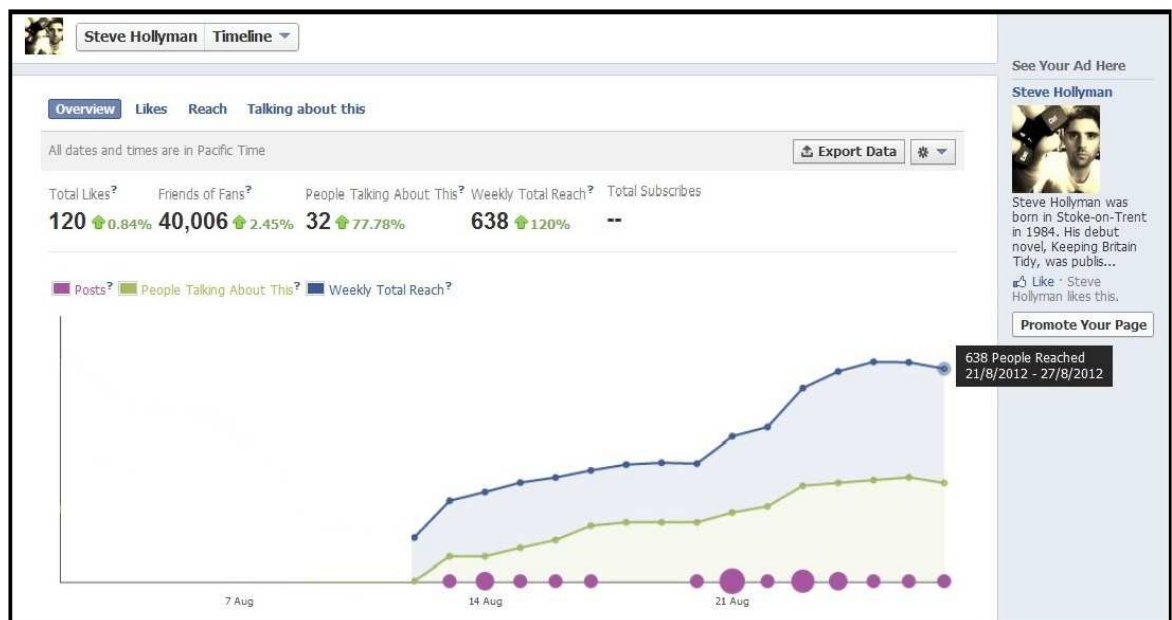


The purple dots running along the *x*-axis represent the number of 'posts' written on the page on that particular day.

Notice the exponential increase in activity on the page during the dates when the project was 'live'. The total number of people who viewed the site between 21st August and 28th August is 638 – an increase of 120% on the previous week.

A total of 32 people were 'talking about' the page (i.e. actively engaged in the site by liking statuses, posting comments, linking content etc.) during the week that the project was live. This represents an increase of 77% on the previous week. As expected, the most activity occurred during the week that the project was live.

As predicted, Vincent Ballone's character page achieved the highest level of interaction. I had assumed that this would be the case since Vincent's is the page on which most of the narrative action was situated:

**Fig. 11 – Statistics for Vincent Ballone's character page**



'Reaches' represent the number of people who have seen posts on each of the pages – either because they have 'liked' the site themselves or because they are 'friends' with someone who has.

The week in which the project was live saw a total of 2,181 reaches, representing an increase of 507% on the previous week.

As expected, there was a sharp increase in the total number of reaches on the first 3 days that the project was launched. The number of reaches continued to rise steadily between days 4 and 8.

A total of 46 people were 'talking about' the page during the week that the project was live. This represents an increase of 53% on the previous week.

The next two graphs show the statistics for the two ancillary pages, Call Me Davison and Jadee Janes.

**Fig. 12 – Statistics for Davison's character page**



**Fig. 13 – Statistics for Jadee Janes's character page**



Again, there was a significant increase in activity on both pages during the first three days of the project.

On the Call me Davison page, the total number of reaches for the week was 751, representing an increase of 171%. Janee Janes's reaches totalled 804 – an increase of 61%.

The graph demonstrates that there was a slight drop in the number of people actively engaged in the Jadee Janes character page on the day that the project was launched. This, I believe, is due to the fact that I did not introduce Jadee to the narrative proper until the fifth day of the project (similarly, Jadee does not appear until around halfway through the print novel).

On the final day of the project I spent five hours online as Vincent Ballone, answering questions posted by collaborators in real time. There were 134 comments posted in five hours and this eventually became the 'lie detector' scene in the novel.

**Fig 14 – 'Lie Detector' scene**
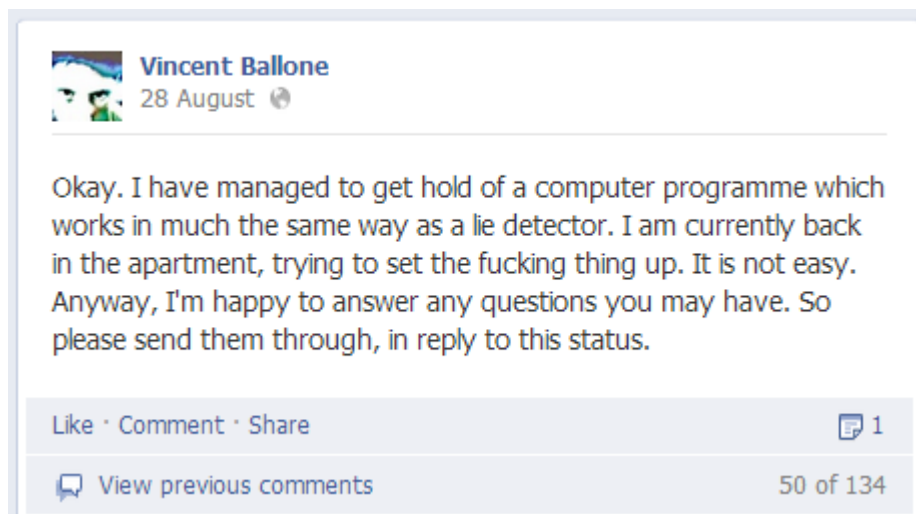


The decision as to whether to include this scene in the print novel and, if so, to what extent, proved difficult. I was unsure whether the scene fitted with the rest of the narrative and I was concerned that it would seem out of place or gratuitous. But on the other hand, I felt that it was not justified to cut the scene completely because it corresponded to the point at which user interactivity on the Facebook page was at its most intense. For this reason, there are certain scenes in the print novel which I would have cut were it not for the collaborative nature of the narrative, but such an undertaking would undermine the fact that one of my key research objectives was to suspend the authority of the author. When I launched the Facebook pages I had a vague idea of the shape that the plot would take, but the comments and posts from

the project's collaborators moved the story in directions which I never envisaged. In this sense, then, the project was a success: it was a collaborative effort in which the traditional roles of author, reader and character are in flux. However, if I were to create another transmedia narrative in the future, then I would like to begin with no pre-conceived ideas for the plot. With *Esc&Ctrl*, there were certain things that the narrative had to accomplish in order to satisfactorily meet the criteria I set out in my original proposal. This meant that it was sometimes difficult to manipulate the data generated from the Facebook pages in order to make it fit with the task that I set out to accomplish in my printed novel, and the themes discussed in my exegesis.

# <u>Conclusion</u>

When, in 2008, I first envisaged the project that would eventually become the subject of this doctoral thesis, I intended to produce an original piece of print metafiction with an online hypertext counterpart. The hypertext would be used as a means of interrogating some of the theoretical concepts expounded in the novel, and the result would be a project which operated at the very interface of fiction and theory, interrogating the parameters of what fiction can accomplish.

As is to be expected, the nature of my project morphed and refocused throughout the course of two years of planning and a further three years of research. But there is one key difference between the proposed project and the finished thesis, and the root cause of this change lies in my decision to create a hypertext counterpart using Facebook instead of traditional HTML. There were several reasons for this choice. First, the huge rise in prominence of Facebook between early 2007 and late 2010[270] means that many readers are already well accustomed to using the site and are able to do so proficiently. Since traditional hypertexts have sometimes been described as alienating to readers, I felt it was sensible to utilise a user-friendly medium with which many, if not all, of my readers would already be familiar. Similarly, I had originally anticipated the need to seek help in the technical aspects of building a hypertext website, since my own research interests lie in the narrative potentials offered by the medium as opposed to its computational and software intricacies. Using Facebook meant I was able to build, maintain and operate all of the pages myself. Second, I decided to refocus my project slightly and to use the hypertext element as a plot-development tool, allowing readers to influence the work-in-progress. The form and layout of a Facebook page makes this interaction easier because readers are able to 'correspond' with my characters in exactly the same way as they would 'correspond' with their real friends online. (I place the word in inverted commas because, as both myself and others have argued, whether social networkers are really corresponding at all is a contentious subject.) Facebook, after all, is more than a website: it is a dynamic environment in which

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[270] The number of Facebook users worldwide rose from 12 million in December 2006 to 600 million in January 2011.
<http://www.benphoster.com/facebook-user-growth-chart-2004-2010/> [accessed 15 April 2013]

music sharing, games, politics, social interactions, all collide. Third, throughout the course of my investigation I became very interested in the Baudrillarian notion of the loss of the real, and this concept, as I have argued, can be applied more closely to the specific area of social networking than to the internet in general. The result of this fundamental change was that I was able to pioneer a new methodology through which to apply theories of metafiction to the emergent narrative of social networking sites, culminating in my coinage of the term 'metafictional virtuality'.

Another key factor in my choosing to work with Facebook as opposed to other popular social networking sites such as Twitter, Instagram or Myspace is the introduction of the 'timeline' feature, which was first made available in New Zealand in late 2011 and subsequently rolled-out across the world throughout 2012. The timeline presents the user's life as a 'story' in which events, interactions and photographs are displayed as 'milestones'. This is particularly relevant to my project because I wanted to cast my readers as characters or avatars, each with their own online mini-narratives, and to locate them within both the individual narratives of Vincent, Jadee, and Davison and within the broader story of *Esc&Ctrl*. Unfortunately, the timeline function applies only to Facebook profiles, not pages, which meant that I was unable to fully embed the feature into the narratives of my characters. Nevertheless, since one of my chief aims was to situate real Facebook users within the fabric of the fictional text, and since this text began on my characters' pages and spilled onto the profiles of the interactors, thereby becoming necessarily and inextricably embedded into the user's own 'real life' story, I would like to argue that the timeline feature was an essential facet to my investigation.

During the course of the project I encountered several problems, the majority of which concerned the operation and maintenance of the Facebook pages. There were many factors which had to be considered. First, I needed to ensure that the project adhered not only to the University's ethical guidelines for data collection but also to the Terms and Conditions of Facebook Inc. As described in chapter three, this posed a series of challenges in ensuring that users were aware of the nature of the project and of my intention to collect the data amassed and use it in both my novel and this exegesis. Next, I had to choose how many characters to assign Facebook pages to. Since I would be operating the pages myself, I wanted to ensure that I would have sufficient time to reply to all of the messages and comments received. At the same time, I wanted to keep readers interested (and challenge my

own creative abilities) by running several pages simultaneously. Furthermore, I needed to ascertain the optimum number of collaborators who would 'befriend' my characters by liking their pages. With too many collaborators, there was the potential that I could lose all control over the project: that it might produce so many conflicting narrative threads that it would be impossible to forge a coherent, plotted story from them. Similarly, with too few collaborators there would not be enough data generated. Since the pages were public, meaning that anyone was able to like them and comment on them, limiting the number of collaborators was, to an extent, beyond my control. I was, however, able to influence the number of collaborators to a degree by not publicising the project too widely, and by running it for only eight days.

I also encountered problems incorporating the metafictional strands (the Foreword, email correspondence, and footnotes) into the text of my novel. The first draft, completed in June 2011, was rather more ergodic than the finished piece, and encompassed footnotes, typographical experimentation such as struck-through passages and words presented in columns, and stream-of-consciousness. In the second and third drafts there were short sections in which I did not use punctuation *per se* but instead spelled out phonetically the punctuation I had omitted. The idea was to evoke the impression of the words having been dictated, which was intended to expose the novel's fictionality and its constructedness. For example:

> you capital Y are walking through Central Park capital C and P full stop you do not know where you are going and you do not know where you have been full stop what you do know is that comma at some point in the last few hours comma you have been drinking full stop you can taste the bitterness of the alcohol which still clings to the roof of your mouth full stop new paragraph open speech marks the first rule of the system is en dash check with a capital C your pockets full stop close speech marks[271]

It soon became apparent that my novel was so inextricably caught up in experimentation at the level of the line that the story was suffering as a consequence. The metafictional elements seemed like a gimmick which not only upstaged the novel proper but also detracted from it. I therefore decided to re-write the entire

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[271] *Esc&Ctrl* draft 3 (31 July 2012) p. 33.

novel without referring back to the three previous drafts. The result was a streamlined fourth draft which contained no footnotes or ancillary information, but which was very heavily influenced by the events that unfolded online during the eight days my Facebook project was live. I kept much of this material for the fifth and final draft, into which I worked the third narrative strand in which Ike A. Mafar provides his annotations to the *VOID* manuscript.

In my early drafts the character Emily was originally cast as a pornographic actress. I spent a lot of time researching the British and American pornography industry in books such as Jenna Jameson's *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star* (2006) and Gail Dines's *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (2011) and films such as Stephen Walker's *Hardcore* (2001). My intention was to use pornography as a means of exemplifying the loss of the real in postmodern society as well as accounting for the changing attitudes towards pornography brought about by the internet. I eventually assigned the role of the pornographic actress to Jadee Janes, but in subsequent drafts the focus on the pornography industry became increasingly diluted and this motif is almost absent from the final draft.

As a writer, I do not like to plan the intricate plot arcs of my fiction. I prefer instead to start with a concept and to work with it until a coherent story starts to emerge. Once I notice patterns in the text (which, I believe, often arise from the subconscious) I then begin a detailed process of revising and redrafting. In my first novel, *Keeping Britain Tidy* (2010), this methodology worked because the narrative is very much driven by action. The rhizomatic structure of *Esc&Ctrl*, however, coupled with its introverted and self-referential problematic, made this approach extremely difficult. Before I could begin writing the novel proper, I had to first establish the intricate links between the different characters (some of whom were the same people, but using different names) and the different layers of narrative. In original drafts, for example, Davison appeared as a personification of Vincent Ballone's conscience, but I found this premise too convoluted and soon abandoned it in favour of placing the former as the social networking alter ego, a device much more pertinent to the story at large. One particular scene which required multiple drafts was the chapter 'Two For Sixty' in which the protagonist visits an adult video shop. The chapter was originally narrated in the third person (as, indeed, was much of the 'Davison' thread of the novel, which was eventually switched to second person). I then changed it to first person, and placed it within the Times New Roman

narrative. Finally, I changed viewpoint a third time, into the second person, in order to situate it within the Courier strand. I also changed it from present tense to past tense, and then back to present again (as can be said for all the Courier chapters). Furthermore, the scene was originally set in an unspecified city in the United Kingdom. When I redrafted it for the Times New Roman section, the process involved an overhaul of the language, imagery, and characterisation in order to convincingly portray a pornography store in New York City, since this is where the reader believes the action to be taking place. In the finished novel, the scene takes place in Manchester, a move which required further rewriting and editing.

The redrafting process was further complicated by the fact that I had to wait until the data had been harvested from my Facebook experiment before I could devise a definitive chronology of events, and this research was not carried out until I was already heavily involved in the redrafting process. For this reason, if I were to complete a project with similar scope and ambition in the future, I would carry out the online research first, as a matter of urgency, and then gather the data and structure a plot around it accordingly. Writing up the novel would be the final stage.

The fact that the plot of the novel was, by nature, in constant flux meant that I had to continually rewrite, delete and reintroduce scenes in accordance with my ongoing research. Some of the deleted scenes are, I believe, interesting and engaging, but I had no choice but to omit them since they did not serve the story and therefore seemed gratuitous and confusing. As it stands, I have a separate file containing 62,714 words of leftover material and omitted scenes which were written between 2010 and 2013.[272] I have named this collection *Ctrl&Esc* and, once edited, I intend to publish it in its entirety online. I believe that the missing chapters shed valuable light on the conditions under which *Esc&Ctrl* was constructed.[273] Similarly, each time I changed the focus of the novel, I had to edit the exegesis because the two documents should be regarded as separate parts of a single argument. The process, then, was one of continual drafting and redrafting, of editing and revising in order to ensure the novel and the exegesis were correctly aligned.

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[272] To put this into perspective, the entire word count of *Esc&Ctrl* is 60,972 words, including footnotes.

[273] Indeed, one of these short extracts was published in *Bewilderbliss* magazine in the form of the short story 'He Knows His Name'. Please see *Bewilderbliss*, no. 2, July 2009, ISSN: 1759-9695. The piece describes a meeting between Vincent and Davison in Johnny's Bar, NYC. In previous drafts, I focused more on the doppelgänger motif and Davison appeared to Vincent in human form, as opposed to as The Voice on the telephone. One of my reasons for scrapping these scenes is that I believed they were too derivative of the relationship between Tyler Durden and the unnamed protagonist in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*.

The formalities of submitting my thesis to the examiners also posed problems. I wanted to adequately present the translation between different media platforms (print text, hypertext, social networking) and I encountered difficulties in representing the project for the purpose of evidencing it on paper. At the time of writing, the Facebook pages I used in the project are still online, still active and viewable. For evidential purposes, I also created a CD-Rom containing a downloaded version of three of these pages (although the hyperlinks will of course not work unless the user connects to the internet and signs in to Facebook). I decided to omit the fourth page (my author profile) because much of the information it contains is not relevant to the project, and those posts which are relevant are already visible as posts on the other three pages. However, in order to display correctly, the CD-Rom relies on the currency of the software through which it is viewed, in this case Facebook.com. Facebook is still hugely popular and currently has over 1 billion monthly active users, but all technology has a shelf life and as soon as Facebook becomes redundant or the software used to run it changes into a form which is incompatible with the pages I created, a portion of the project will be lost forever. The only way to prevent this from happening would be to take a screen print of each individual comment, wall post, photograph and message on each of my pages and to preserve it in hard copy. But this would be impractical: not only would such an endeavour amount to hundreds of pages, but the experience of viewing and interacting with them in print form will never be the same as engaging with them on screen in their intended, raw form. This is one of the primary reasons I decided to produce a Facebook novel with a printed counterpart as opposed to a piece of fiction located entirely online: the existence of the print text ensures that the majority of the project will be preserved for future academics to consult.

In recent years, new media and transmedia fictions have risen to prominence as subjects of interest among literary theorists. Ruth Page has published extensively on the potentialities offered to narrative within the frame of social networking. The originality of my own project lies in my use of Facebook as a plot-development tool for producing a collaborative work of fiction. However, as a genre, what I have termed the 'social networking novel' is very much in its infancy – indeed, the internet as a whole is still regarded by many as a playground. For that reason, to refer to this chapter as a conclusion is something of a misnomer. Instead, my entire project should be regarded as an introduction to the narrative potential of Facebook

for creating collaborative fiction. The very process of such research spawns new questions, opening up the floodgates for future scholars as well as posing new challenges for creative work. The remainder of the chapter, therefore, will discuss some of the ways in which my research might be applied, adapted and contested in years to come.

One of the simplest and most effective ways that my research might be developed would be to create an entire novel-length reading experience across a platform of different social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Tools such as Google Maps may also be used to plot the geographical locations of characters, as in Charles Cummings's pivotal *The 21 Steps*. Cummings's work forms part of 'We Tell Stories', a digital fiction series spearheaded by Penguin Books. It is told entirely on Google Maps and unfolds as the reader follows the protagonist, Rick Blackwell, on a mission that takes him across the world.[274] Furthermore, narrative time and story time can be increased from the eight days of my own project to a month or longer. Teams of people can control groups of characters, creating a large network in which fictional people interact with real ones, who, in turn, become caricatures in a narrative of simulation: an online soap opera. The fictional realm can then be used to further infiltrate the real world, posing additional questions about where one realm ends and the other begins.

The paratextual and intertextual aspects of social networking can be used as a learning tool. Many institutions already offer online access to lecture notes, podcasts, and source materials. Facebook pages may be set up for individual modules and these can be used to 'push' notifications to students' Smartphones. Links can be embedded into these pages, and used to direct tutees to source materials on, for example, Google books, YouTube, or, in the case of many British universities at present, an online library or Ebrary. Using social media in this way means that up-to-date information is always available to students without them having to log on to a device in order to receive it. But it must be noted that in many respects the social aspects are lacking from this type of networking and it is arguable whether the pages are doing anything other than simply delivering content. Furthermore, students may be reluctant to use social media in this way because in

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[274] 'We Tell Stories' <http://www.wetellstories.co.uk/stories/week1/> [accessed 15 May 2013].

order to do so they must access the material from their personal accounts, which exposes personal information to anyone else who views the page.

Nevertheless, many universities are now making use of new technologies as a means of disseminating information and receiving feedback. The Manchester Writing School, which hosts the UK's most successful Creative Writing MA, began running an online 'Virtual Writing School' in 2002, and almost half of the students currently enrolled on the course have chosen the online route. The online course is exactly the same as its campus-based alternative in terms of course units, tutors and assessment. The only difference is the delivery, which consists of through-the-week correspondence via emails and discussion boards, live chat-room based seminars and workshops, and recordings of lectures. Many other universities are now offering an 'online' or 'distance learning' option. The Open University has developed its own style of the latter entitled 'supported open learning'.[275] Under the scheme, students interact with their tutors and peers both on- and offline. They have access to online materials such as web forums, social networking and conferencing, but there are also day schools, informal study groups, and events, all of which provide face-to-face interaction. Similarly, students are offered studying facilities and advice in their local region. Other British universities currently offering an online learning route for degrees and/or short courses include the University of Lancaster, University of Liverpool and Oxford University.

There are advantages to learning online. At the Manchester Metropolitan University's 'Virtual Writing School' the mediated discussions operate in real time and this adds immediacy to the process. Seminars are entirely text-based with no webcams or video conferencing. This approach lends itself particularly to the study of Creative Writing because students are conducting their studies through the very medium that they are studying: writing. Further benefits include the opportunities afforded to international students who are able to complete the course without having to apply for a visa (although for the live sessions differences in time-zones must be taken into account). The online realm helps less confident students to thrive in a workshop environment and for this reason some students may opt for the online route despite being within easy travelling distance of their university. Dominant

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[275] 'Teaching and Learning at the OU'. See <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/the-ou-explained/teaching-and-learning-the-ou> [Accessed 20 August 2013].

voices can be mediated, and a log may be kept of all discussions which can be saved by participants and then referred back to during the redrafting of work.

My findings also open up opportunities for advertising and the corporate world. Brands are able to create social networking profiles for their mascots and to have them interact with real people, shaping stories based around both the mascots themselves and the brands they represent: the notion, explored in chapter 2, of attaching a lifestyle to a product. Links to products and services can be embedded into fictional narratives, so that each time a character mentions a particular product, the reader can click a link to find more information on that product and, perhaps, follow the link to purchase it online. Indeed, in *Esc&Ctrl*, my Facebook pages contained links to paratextual information which included sites such as Amazon.co.uk where books which were topics of discussion within the fictional narrative could be perused and bought. This idea is also applicable to books read on tablets, Kindles, and other electronic reading devices since many of these are already equipped with internet capabilities.

Conversely, my findings may be used as a means of arguing *against* the benefits of social networking and social media. I have already stated that there is evidence of a search for offline authenticity which suggests that not only does the online world constitute a different reality to its offline referent, but it is also hijacking that offline reality. If social networking continues to replace face-to-face interaction, and if experience continues along this path towards complete mediation, then there will be no need for traditional fiction at all, since all experience will already be inherently fictitious. The chances of this happening seem slim, but I have nonetheless demonstrated that online events may be regarded as more important than offline ones. The result is that what occurs online is seen as more 'real' than what occurs in the offline realm, and this has serious implications not only for the way in which people forge their identities (Lyotard's notion of the self being located at nodal points through which messages pass) but also to the very concepts of reality and authenticity as problematised in chapter one. Thus we are faced with a quandary: the internet does not feel real, and this is perhaps the reason why people are willing to state online, very publicly, matters of opinion which they might prefer to keep to themselves if they were speaking to a room full of people. But at the same time, the simulated realm of the internet is absolutely real in that it inextricably

alters the offline world to which it supposedly corresponds, exposing Baudrillard's subversion of the reference principle of the image in real time.

What is obvious is that the zeitgeist of the contemporary is one of mediated experience and mediated communication. One needs only to visit a pop concert and observe the number of audience members watching the show through the screen of a mobile phone to understand that there is something about this method of transmitting information and experiencing life that some individuals regard as preferable to experiencing the real world first-hand. The soon-to-be-released Google Glass (worn by the user as a pair of spectacles) can be used to take photos, videos, translate languages, and even to stream live to other users what the wearer is presently seeing. Many of these features are available through verbal commands such as 'take a picture'.[276] As Claire Cain Miller writes in the *New York Times*, the wearer of the device is transported to a strange realm where their line of sight is always online.[277] Of course, Google Glass can be interpreted as an extension of social networking with users able to broadcast their day to day movements and interactions. And, like Facebook, I argue, Google Glass offers huge potentiality for telling fictional stories: 'The glasses could be used to play an augmented reality game in which the real world was annotated with virtual information', Miller explains.[278]

But, like Facebook, the introduction of Google Glass has caused controversy. The glasses, which have yet to be released, have already been banned by Las Vegas casino Caesars Palace, which claims the device violates Nevada gambling laws.[279] Concerns have also been raised that the Google Glass might be used as a spying tool and some are concerned that, in the near future, wearers will be able to use facial recognition software to identify strangers.[280] Furthermore, in both Russia and the Ukraine it is currently illegal to use spying gadgets which can take pictures and video in an inconspicuous manner.

My final word here, then, is that I am not suggesting that virtuality will ever replace offline reality. Nor am I positing that the ostensibly oppositional

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[276] 'Google Glass' <http://www.google.com/glass/start/what-it-does/> [Accessed 16 May 2013].
[277] Claire Cain Miller, 'Google Searches for Style', *New York Times*, 20 February 2013 < http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/21/technology/google-looks-to-make-its-computer-glasses-stylish.html> [Accessed 20 August 2013].
[278] Ibid.
[279] Sharon Gaudin, 'Caesars Palace deals Google Glass out of its game' <http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9238989/Caesars_Palace_deals_Google_Glass_out_of_its _game> [Accessed 8 August 2013].
[280] Miller, 2013.

online/offline realms should be regarded as different sides of an overall reality which is multiple and contingent. Instead, I argue that online reality and offline reality must be understood as distinct and equally important realities. What is real in an online world is not necessarily real in an offline world, and vice versa, but unlike the distinction drawn in chapter one between fictional truth and real truth, the reality of the internet directly influences the reality of the offline world. It is inevitable that an understanding of reality shapes the fiction that corresponds to it. But here we see the opposite: ostensibly fictional events are beginning to alter their corresponding reality. This, in turn, dilutes the authenticity of experience to the point where fiction and reality are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, it is already difficult to draw a distinction between the two.

# <u>Appendix</u>

## <u>Appendix I: Images from Vincent Ballone's Facebook Page</u>
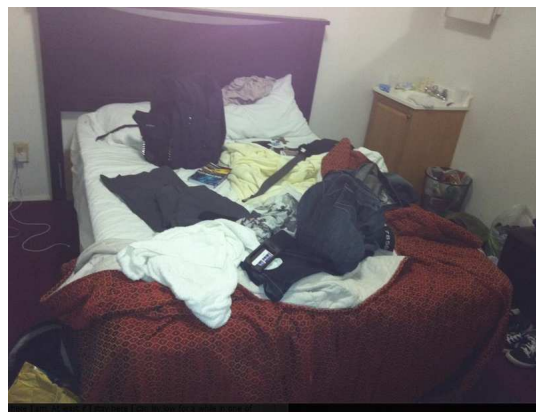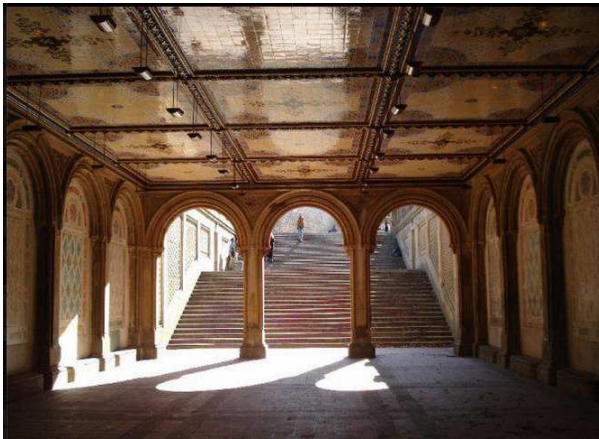


**Clockwise from top left: Greenwich Village, Bar, Vincent's banknote, Vincent's hotel room, computer keys, underpass at Central Park.**

# <u>Appendix II: Glossary of Facebook Terms</u>[281]

*Profile*                On Facebook, a user's profile is his or her 'timeline'. Here, the user is able to share the photos, posts and interactions that tell his or her story.

*Page*                   Pages allow businesses, brands, and celebrities to connect with people on Facebook. Administrators can post information and news feed updates to people who like their pages.

*Friend*                 When one person links their own Facebook profile with another person's profile, they become 'friends'.

*Friend Request*         An invitation, sent from one Facebook user to another, which requests that the two pages be linked together.

*Tag*                    These appear predominantly in photographs, but also on maps, comments and wall posts. Tags are used to show who appears in a particular photograph, who is being referred to in comments and posts, and which interlinked users were in the same location (i.e. a particular bar, or music event) at the same time.

*Wall*                   The space on a user's profile upon which comments and posts appear.

*Wall Post*              The text (and images and videos) on the wall is referred to as a wall post.

*Privacy Settings*       Facebook allows users a variety of different 'Privacy Settings' which help control the number of people who have access to a

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[281] Please note that this section is for informational purposes only. Many of the definitions provided are not my own but are taken from Facebook's own 'Glossary of Terms' <http://www.facebook.com/help/219443701509174/> [accessed 15 November 2012].

particular profile page. These range from 'Public' (open to all) to 'Friends Only' to 'Friends of Friends'.

*Share*               Where one Facebook user publishes a link on another's Facebook profile.

*Timeline*            Launched by Facebook in 2011, this feature provides a chronology of the Facebook user's life, and can be updated retrospectively.

*News Feed*           The ongoing list of updates on a user's home page that shows updates from the friends and pages he or she follows.

*Like*                Used to show support and give positive feedback with regard to a particular group, cause, or comment.

*Talking About This*  The number of people commenting upon a specific topic on a Facebook page over a specific period of time (usually 7 days).

*Comment*             Comments allow Facebook users to annotate each other's photographs, links, and walls.

*Milestone*           An 'event' published on the Facebook timeline, for example the year of the user's birth, marriage, or graduation.

*Reaches*             The number of individuals who have seen a particular photograph or comment published on a Facebook page.

## Appendix III: Ethical 'Checklist' and Disclaimer for Participants

Application Number……………..                                    **(facultycoding)**
                                                                 (Sep 2007)

**Date: June 2012**

# MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

## APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

**Introduction**
All university activity must be reviewed for ethical approval. In particular, all undergraduate, postgraduate and staff research work, projects and taught programmes must obtain approval from their Faculty Academic Ethics committee (or delegated Departmental Ethics Committee).

**APPLICATION PROCEDURE**

The form should be completed legibly (preferably typed) and, so far as possible, in a way which would enable a layperson to understand the aims and methods of the research. Every relevant section should be completed. Applicants should also include a copy of any proposed advert, information sheet, consent form and, if relevant, any questionnaire being used. The Principal Investigator should sign the application form. Supporting documents, together with one copy of the full protocol should be sent to the Administrator of the appropriate Faculty Academic Ethics Committee. **(Insert contact details)**

**Your application will require external ethical approval by an NHS Research Ethics**
**Committee if your research involves staff, patients or premises of the NHS (see guidance notes)**

**Work with children and vulnerable adults**
You will be required to have a Criminal Disclosure, if your work involves children or vulnerable adults.

**The Faculty Academic Ethics Committee meets every (insert period) and will respond as soon as possible, and where appropriate, will operate a process of**

**expedited review. Applications that require approval by an NHS Research Ethics Committee or a Criminal Disclosure will take longer - perhaps 3 months.**

**1. DETAILS OF APPLICANT (S)**
**1.1 Principal Investigator:**

Steve Hollyman, Research Student/Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing - s.hollyman@mmu.ac.uk

**1.2 Co-Workers and their role in the project:**
N/A

**1.3 University Department/Research Institute/Other Unit:**

Department of Languages/Department of English

**2. DETAILS OF THE PROJECT**
**2.1 Title**: The Self-Begetting Novel: Metafiction in the Twenty-First Century.

**2.2 Description of Project:** (please **outline** the background and the purpose of the research project, 250 words max.)

Patricia Waugh (1984) states: 'If metafiction is to be seen as a positive stage in the development of the novel, then its relevance and sensitivity to the increasing and diverse manifestations of self-consciousness in culture as a whole have to be established'. Re-evaluating the relevance of metafiction for the twenty-first century, my critical-creative project exposes the metafictional novel to the virtual reality of the internet in order to both identify and pioneer a new type of self-begetting novel. The project will expand upon current definitions of the genre by extending the potentialities of what creative and critical writing can accomplish.

The potential ethical issues of the project arise due to the author's intention of creating fake Facebook profiles belonging to the novel's protagonists with whom real people can interact, thus shaping both the traditional printed novel and a hybrid of social networking/hypertext narrative as it is in the process of being written.

> **Describe what type of study this is (e.g. qualitative or quantitative; also indicate how the data will be collected and analysed). Additional sheets may be attached.**

This is an experiment into the narrative qualities of social networking sites such as Facebook and how these relate to current theories of hypertext narrative and storytelling in general.

**2.3 Are you going to use a questionnaire?** NO.
(Please attach a copy)

**2.4 Start Date / Duration of project:**

The site is expected to go live in September 2012 and will run until enough data has been gathered. This, I expect, will take between six and eight weeks.[282]

## 2.5 Location of where the project and data collection will take place:

Information will be gathered online.

## 2.6 Nature/Source of funding

AHRC Block Grant.

## 2.7 Are there any regulatory requirements?
If yes, please give details, e.g., from relevant professional bodies

No.

## 3. DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS
### 3.1 How many?
It is expected that the project will use up to 100 participants but this may change.

**3.2 Age:** 18 years and above.

**3.3 Sex:** Male and Female.

## 3.4 How will they be recruited?

Online. Each participant must agree to a disclaimer if he/she wishes to participate. See attached.

**3.5 Status of participants:** (e.g. students, public, colleagues, children, hospital patients**,** prisoners, including young offenders, participants with mental illness or learning difficulties.)

Students, colleagues and friends, members of the public.

**Inclusion and exclusion from the project:**

N/A.

**Payment to volunteers:**

N/A.

## 3.6  Study information:

N/A.

## 3.7  Consent:

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[282] In fact, the project generated sufficient data in under two weeks.

(A written consent form for the study participants MUST be provided in all cases, unless the research is a questionnaire.)

Have you produced a written consent form for the participants to sign for your records?

See attached disclaimer.

## 4. RISKS AND HAZARDS
Please respond to the following questions if applicable

**4.1 Are there any risks to the researcher and/or participants?**
(Give details of the procedures and processes to be undertaken, e.g., if the researcher is a lone-worker.)

No.


**4.2 State precautions to minimise the risks and possible adverse events:**

N/A.

**4.3 What discomfort (physical or psychological) danger or interference with normal activities might be suffered by the researcher and/or participant(s)? State precautions which will be taken to minimise them:**

None.


## 5. PLEASE DESCRIBE ANY ETHICAL ISSUES RAISED AND HOW YOU INTEND TO ADDRESS THESE:

The ethical issues pertain to problems regarding copyright which may potentially arise due to the collaborative nature of the project, and the use of 'real' people in what is essentially a fictional fabric.
All participants will be made aware of the nature of the project. Please see attached disclaimer.


## 6. SAFEGUARDS /PROCEDURAL COMPLIANCE
## 6.1 Confidentiality:

(a) Indicate what steps will be taken to safeguard the confidentiality of participant records.  If the data is to be computerised, it will be necessary to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

The personal data that will be noted will be the participant's name and Facebook profile picture, both of which are already in the public domain.

(b) If you are intending to make any kind of audio or visual recordings of the participants, please answer the following questions:

a. How long will the recordings be retained and how will they be stored?

Indefinitely. They will be stored online on the Facebook page, and in screen prints to be included when the project is submitted to examiners. Also in digital form on a CD-Rom and/or USB storage device.

b. How will they be destroyed at the end of the project?

They won't be destroyed.

c. What further use, if any, do you intend to make of the recordings?

N/A.

## 6.2 Human Tissue Act:

The Human Tissue Act came into force in November 2004, and requires appropriate consent for, and regulates the removal, storage and use of all human tissue.

a. Does your project involve taking tissue samples, e.g., blood, urine, hair, etc., from human subjects?  NO

b. Will this be discarded when the project is terminated? N/A

If NO – Explain how the samples will be placed into a tissue bank under the Human Tissue Act regulations:

## 6.3 Insurance:

The University holds insurance policies that will cover claims for negligence arising from the conduct of the University's normal business, which includes research carried out by staff and by undergraduate and postgraduate students as part of their courses.  This does **not** extend to clinical negligence. There are no arrangements to provide indemnity and/or compensation in the event of claims for non-negligent harm.

Will the proposed project result in you undertaking any activity that would not be considered as normal University business?  If so, please detail below:

No.

## 6.4 Notification of Adverse Events (e.g., negative reaction, counsellor, etc):
(Indicate precautions taken to avoid adverse reactions.)

Please state the processes/procedures in place to respond to possible adverse reactions.

In the case of clinical research, you will need to abide by specific guidance. This may include notification to GP and ethics committee. **Please seek guidance for up to date advice**, e.g., see the NRES website at http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/

All participants will be given the contact details of the PI (Steve Hollyman) and will be advised that they should contact him with any queries regarding the project. Any MMU staff and students who participate will have full access to student support/ the counselling service should any support be required.

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR        DATE:

..........................................................................................
.................................
SIGNATURE OF FACULTY ACADEMIC ETHICS        DATE:
COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSON:

..............................................................................        ................................

**APPENDIX**

**Checklist of attachments needed:**
1. Participant consent form
2. Participant information sheet
3. Full protocol
4. Advertising details
5. Insurance notification forms
6. NHS forms (where appropriate)
7. Other evidence of ethical approval (e.g., another University Ethics Committee approval)

# <u>Appendix IV: Disclaimer for Participation in the 'Online Counterpart' to the Novel 'ESC&CTRL'</u>

You are invited to participate in a unique creative writing experiment in which you will 'interact' with the profiles of fictional characters on Facebook, thereby influencing the plot in an as-yet unwritten printed counterpart (the experimental novel 'ESC&CTRL') to be submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of doctor of philosophy (PhD) at Manchester Metropolitan University by research student Steve Hollyman.

By participating in the project, you acknowledge and agree to the following terms:

- That Vincent Ballone, Davison, and Jadee Janes are fictional composites whose Facebook pages are controlled by the project's co-ordinator, Steve Hollyman.

- That any posts which appear on any of these Facebook pages, regardless of their author, do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Steve Hollyman.

- That anything you post on the pages of any of these 'characters' – in  the form of text, photographs, videos or other digital media – may be used in full or edited form in the experimental novel 'ESC&CTRL' which will be submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University.

- That this usage may include:
  – Screen prints of any of your postings on the characters' profile pages
  – The posts themselves, in digital form.
  – Your Facebook 'profile picture' which will appear alongside any posts you make and may subsequently appear in a screen print.

- That your postings and comments on the site may directly influence the plot of the experimental novel 'ESC&CTRL' and that Steve Hollyman retains full copyright of both the novel and the corresponding Facebook pages.

- That you are responsible for your comments on the site and that you agree not to post anything that may be deemed as offensive, racist, homophobic, defamatory or libellous.

- That you are aged eighteen years or over.

- That you are free to cancel your involvement in the project at any time, but that anything you have already contributed to the project may still be used.

- That questions and queries must be directed by email to Steve Hollyman – s.hollyman@mmu.ac.uk or escapeandcontrol@gmail.com.

- That individual authorship may not be acknowledged in the final piece.

- That failure to observe one or more of these rules may result in your comments being removed from the page and your involvement with the project being terminated but your comments/posts still used.

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# <u>Acknowledgements</u>