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What is Cyber-Consciousness?: Digital Intermediation between Consciousness and Computer through Postmodern Tension in Tao Lin's *Taipei*

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Through Tao Lin's *Taipei*, this article defines literary cyber-consciousness: a post-postmodern narrative mode that embodies the intermediation between human consciousness and digital machinery in fictional narrative through a complex amalgamation of modernist sincerity, stream of consciousness and flâneurie, and postmodern hyperreality and self-parody. The novel's post-postmodernism is inherent in the tension between re-purposed modern and exhausted postmodern qualities, but the novel's cyber-consciousness is fully realized in how these qualities are reconfigured by digitality. While this merging of consciousness with digitality originates in cybernetics and computational theories of the mind, it is also crucially born of literary intermediation. *Taipei* uses stream of consciousness narrative reminiscent of modernist stream of consciousness that is focalized through Paul, but the way Paul's physical and interior movements are rendered digitally leads him to resemble a twenty-first century cyber-flâneur. While this digital reconfiguration of stream of consciousness and flâneurie accounts for much of Paul's cyber-consciousness in *Taipei*, the authenticity and sincerity of his interiority is complicated by the way his digitized consciousness also produces a markedly postmodern hyperreality and a combatant postmodern self-parody that undoes the sentimentality and credulity of his 'real' subjectivity. Cyber-consciousness, as the novel illustrates, emerges as the post-postmodern product of the composting of expired, modern and postmodern literary tenets within a twenty-first century digital context.

In his 2013 article reviewing Dave Eggers' *The Circle,* Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* and Tao Lin's *Taipei* as 'internet novels,' Ian Chang asks, 'What is our virtual life?' He concludes that '[i]t's a problem of privileged, bourgeois consciousness, and thus the rightful province of the novel' (2013). Chang ends his article with Lin's *Taipei,* suggesting that 'neither Eggers nor Pynchon has quite reached the desolate land's end of fictional cyber-consciousness' (2013). Failing to elaborate on his use of the term cyber-consciousness, Chang argues that Lin, 'who came of age with the internet,' has successfully located this cyber-consciousness in *Taipei*: 'Lin faces down digital over-stimulation and incurable jadedness by voting no-confidence in the notion of the author—or even the self' (2013). But what does Chang mean by cyber-consciousness and why does it remain a fleeting reference, unresolved? In the absence of a clear definition, this article defines, through Tao Lin's *Taipei,* literary cyber-consciousness: a post-postmodern narrative mode that embodies the intermediation between human consciousness and digital machinery in fictional narrative through a complex amalgamation of modern sincerity, stream of consciousness and flâneurie, with postmodern hyperreality and self-parody. While this merging of consciousness with digitality originates in cybernetics and computational theories of the mind, it is also crucially born of literary intermediation. *Taipei* uses a stream of consciousness narrative reminiscent of modernist stream of consciousness that is focalized through Paul, but the way Paul's physical and interior movements are rendered digitally leads him to resemble a twenty-first century cyber-flâneur. While this digital reconfiguration of stream of consciousness and flâneurie accounts for much of Paul's cyber-consciousness, the authenticity and sincerity of his interiority is complicated by the way his digitized consciousness also produces a markedly postmodern hyperreality and a combatant postmodern self-parody that undoes the sincerity of his 'real' subjectivity. Cyber-consciousness, as the novel suggests, emerges as the post-postmodern product of the composting of expired, modern and postmodern literary tenets within a twenty-first century digital context.

The Origins of Cyber-Consciousness

While the term 'cyber-consciousness' has its roots in cybernetics rather than literary studies, cybernetics serve as foundational to my definition of a *literary* cyber-consciousness. Cybernetics refers to 'the study of communication and control within and

between humans, machines, organizations and society' (Bouldin 2014). In as early as 1948, Norbert Wiener defined it as '"control and communication in the animal and the machine"' (Bouldin 2014; Beer 2002: 213) which prompted scientists like Warren McCulloch to 'provide a definition of "computing machine" that enables us to think of the brain as a "machine"' (Papert 2016: xxiv). According to Donald Bouldin, McCulloch 'described the brain as a digital computer' and systems that 'exhibit behaviour somewhat akin to that of humans are said to possess artificial intelligence' (2014). Stafford Beer similarly equates the human brain to machinery in cybernetics by stating that 'the most advanced type of control machinery we know about is surely found in the central nervous system of the human body' (2002: 211). Yet, the notion of the human brain as machinery is best elucidated by Alan Turing's contributions to cybernetics wherein he famously asked the question, 'Can machines think?' (2007: 23). The 'Imitation Game' or the Turing Test was designed for 'digital computers' or 'thinking machines' and involved a process wherein an interrogator, asking questions to both a human and a machine, would have to distinguish between the two based on the answers provided. According to Turing, 'the best strategy [for the machine] is to try to provide answers that would naturally be given by a man' because a human 'would be given away at once by slowness and inaccuracy in arithmetic'—the machine's forte (Turing 2007: 29–30; Stein 2012: 10). Turing's attempts to demonstrate how digital computers might orally articulate their answers in a way that mimicked a human's expression of consciousness grappled with Geoffrey Jefferson's 'Lister Oration' wherein he adamantly stated, '[n]ot until a machine can write a sonnet or compose a concerto because of thoughts and emotions felt, and not by the chance fall of symbols, could we agree that machine equals brain' (1949: 1110; Turing 2007: 47–49). Turing did not believe that digital computers had consciousness precisely like the human brain (2007: 49), but he did not want to dismiss the connection as theoretically unfruitful. Since the mid-twentieth century, such machines have been developed including BINA48, an advanced and interactive android commissioned by Martine Rothblatt of Terasem Movement Foundation, that exists as 'a machine imitation of another human'—Rothblatt's wife (Stein 2012: 10).[1]

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[1] The android was created as part of 'a larger exploration into imitating a person's thought process on the digital level' wherein the possibility of 'transferring consciousness from a person to a biological

One of the perspectives necessary to consider after Turing's infamous question 'Can machines think?' is the alternate question, 'Can (or do) humans compute?' Are digital computers (and the internet, more specifically) modelled after the interworking of the human brain, or do we imitate, in consciousness, the machines and systems on which we so heavily rely? In the cases of BINA48 and Turing's machine, human consciousness has been relocated to the digital machine, but in what scenario is the opposite possible? This question stems from computational theories of the mind wherein 'the mind is a computational system similar in important respects to a Turing machine, and core mental processes (such as reasoning, decision-making, and problem solving) are computations similar to computations executed by a Turing machine' (Rescorla 2015). In other words, there is a tendency in computational theories of the mind to 'se[e] the brain as performing computations' that are, at times, similar to digital computers (Lavagnino 2013: 410). Steven Pinker calls the mind 'a system of organs of computation' and insists that 'thinking is a kind of computation' (2009: 21). Although complex and involved, these computational theories of the mind draw a parallel between human cognition and digital processes that is foundational to literary cyber-consciousness which strives to negotiate this nebulous relationship between human consciousness and digital machinery in literary narrative.

Like Turing and Rothblatt propose that human consciousness can be relocated into digital machinery, N. Katherine Hayles suggests that it is 'reasonable to assume that citizens in technologically developed societies […] are literally being re-engineered through their interactions with computation devices' (2007: 102). While Hayles answers the question 'Can humans compute?' by suggesting that the digital machinery with which we interact 're-engineers' human consciousness (2007:

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or technological body' was investigated (Stein 2012: 10). The scientists at Terasem hypothesize that a copy of a human's consciousness can be developed in a digital form or 'mindfile' by collecting ample information about the individual, and that such information could be outputted by a software system that they would call 'mindware.' Ultimately, the software can then be located within a technological body as a means of creating a lifelike, human replica (2012: 10), and Martine Rothblatt describes 'mindware' as an 'operating system that works the way the human mind works' (*The View* 2016).

102), her work on intermediation indicates how this digitization of consciousness is fully realized through literature. She is adamant that, '[l]iterature in the twenty-first century is computational' and that print literature in particular is 'marked by digitality' (2007: 99). To underline this, Hayles uses the term intermediation which she describes as 'complex transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media' (2005) to negotiate the relationships between language and code, and between human and machine.[2] Asserting that human consciousness enters into a symbiotic relationship with the digital machine where they are mutually beneficial to and impactful on one another (2007: 102), Hayles envisions a reconstruction of human cognition by digital machinery in literature (print or electronic). Hayles establishes that '[i]n the context of electronic' and print literature, 'intermediation' can be understood either 'as a literal description of the dynamic of human-computer interaction, or as a metaphor for such interactions' (2007: 104). Among various implications, this includes 'the in-mixing of human and machine cognition' and 'the rupture of narrative and the consequent reimagining and re-presentation of consciousness not as a continuous stream but as the emergent result of local interactions between various neural processes and subcognitive agents, both biological and mechanical' (2007: 121). Her suggestion that intermediation can inaugurate 'the rupture of narrative' in print literature leading to a 'representation of consciousness' that results from interactions between human thought and mechanical 'subcognitive agents' is invaluable to a definition of literary cyber-consciousness because it is what links computational theories of the mind to the literary. This process of intermediation overtly bridges the gap between 'cyber' and 'consciousness' in a far more complicated way than Chang likely imagined when he called *Taipei* a mastery of fictional cyber-consciousness. Hayles' use of literature functions as a means through which to explore the blurring of human consciousness and digitality and offers a theoretical framework for literary cyber-consciousness's genesis.

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[2] The way intermediation works is as follows: 'a first-level emergent pattern is captured in another medium and re-represented with the primitives of the new medium, which leads to an emergent result captured in turn by yet another medium, and so forth' (2007: 100).

Defining Literary Cyber-Consciousness

Chang's use of 'cyber-consciousness' remains elusive. In the absence of an explicit definition, and drawing on the previously outlined theories of Turing and Hayles, for the purposes of the following arguments this article defines cyber-consciousness as the literary embodiment of the intermediation between human cognition and the digital machine. While Turing asks 'Can machines think?' cyber-consciousness explores the ways in which this intermediation between human and machine is transmitted in literary fiction through character consciousness and narrative strategy. Cyber-consciousness responds to Hayles' mutually beneficial, human-computer relationship, but it explores the ways in which human consciousness, as depicted in twenty-first century fiction, functions like the digital technology that so heavily mediates it. In addition to this digitalization of narrative interiority, literary cyber-consciousness is simultaneously wrought with a productive tension between modern and postmodern formal features, emerging as a post-postmodern narrative mode that actively amalgamates modern sincerity, flâneurie and stream of consciousness, and postmodern hyperreality and self-parody within a twenty-first century digital environment. In this sense, literary cyber-consciousness draws on metamodernism's 'apparent rise of another modernism,' that is 'characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment […] between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2015: 310, 316). However, instead of incorporating metamodernism's 'pendulum'-like oscillation, literary cyber-consciousness is the result of a composting of bygone modern flâneurie and stream of consciousness with 'dead' postmodern self-parody and hyperreality within a twenty-first century, digital context. Cyber-consciousness fuses character subjectivity, identity, interiority, memory and thought with byproducts of the digital computer such as the internet, visual media, hyperlink, storage memory, downloading, streaming, sharing, storage and social media platforms. It is the result of an active merging of more traditional, literary conceptions of consciousness (stream of consciousness) with the immediate, expansive and ever-changing aspects of twenty-first century digital culture through an act of intermediation whereby the

print, prose novel, reconfigures consciousness by representing it as digitally mediated. It embodies the implications of intermediation outlined by Hayles such as the 'in-mixing of human and machine cognition' which entails re-presenting consciousness 'as the emergent result of [...] interactions between [...] neural processes and subcognitive agents, both biological and mechanical' (2007: 121). This 'in-mixing' is what ultimately 'rupture[s] [...] narrative,' opening it up to explore the ways in which the human mind imitates the computer and/or the internet in expressions of nonlinearity, infinite content, communication and notions of memory storage. Cyber-consciousness becomes then a means of exploring the extent to which human consciousness is inflected and impacted by these developments in digital culture, as well as a means of further grappling with the tension between modern and postmodern literary modes in twenty-first century fiction. It hosts the precarious relationship between postmodern irony[3] and new (modern) sincerity[4] online, but also exposes how the impact of digital technology complicates such a relationship. A pure sense of new (modern) sincerity is complicated by the twenty-first century's heavy mediation, reducing our sense of reality to a more postmodern sense of hyperreality. Conversely, a postmodern hyperreality remains impossible because this heavily, media-saturated experience is disrupted by credulous (new) sincerity. The digital upsets and instantiates this tension and literary cyber-consciousness thrives on the tension's irresolution.

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[3] This notion of 'dead' irony draws on the popular characterization of post-postmodernism as a post-9/11 sense of post-irony and a return to realism (McLaughlin 2013: 285).

[4] I associate New Sincerity with a re-instantiated modernism because so many definitions of post-postmodernism describe a *return* to something prior to postmodernism's irony. For instance, the remodernists insisted on 'the quest for authenticity' after postmodernism (Childish and Thomson, 1999: 104) and Alan Kirby remarks that with the death of postmodernism's 'concern with representation and an *ironic self-awareness*,' many people felt the need to return to 'critical realism' (Kirby 2006). Similarly, New Sincerity is often associated with David Foster Wallace who insisted post-postmodern writers revert back to 'single-entendre values' (1993: 192), and 'risk the [...] accusations of sentimentality, melodrama' and '[c]redulity' (1993: 193). It is this simultaneous insistence on backwards movement and eschewing of postmodern irony that informs my association of the two.

Cyber-Consciousness in Tao Lin's *Taipei*

Taipei is a pseudo-autobiographical work depicting twenty-six year-old Paul, a Tai-wanese-American writer uncannily resembling Lin, as he meanders through his book tour across North America. The novel catalogues Paul's day-to-day as he works through various unstable relationships, ponders his existential status and 'ingest[s]' (2013a: 9) countless illegal and prescribed drugs while 'looking at the internet' (2013a: 14–15); he makes a penultimate trip to Taipei during which he traverses the city, religiously recording his experiences on a MacBook with his new wife, Erin. Paul's depressed and eventless saga culminates with, what he believes to be, a near-death experience via a drug overdose after which he feels 'grateful to be alive' (2013a: 248). While the plot of *Taipei* remains as aimless, disaffected and depressive as Paul's character, the narrative purposively embodies the intermediation between Paul's consciousness and digital machinery, an intermediation that, when combined with tension between modern and postmodern tenets, produces a fruitful example of cyber-consciousness.

Although it is a twenty-first century novel, *Taipei*'s meandering depictions of character interiority and plotless stream of consciousness narrative are reminiscent of modernist literary tenets in a way that relates to post-postmodern New Sincerity. Despite *Taipei*'s plotlessness, Benjamin Lytal contends that the novel 'is not with-out scaffolding.' Terming the novel a 'modernist masterpiece,' Lytal suggests that 'in terms of feel [*Taipei*] is a modernist, one-thing-after-another novel, a slurry of evenings and all-nighters dammed and channeled according to whatever Paul's rela-tionship status is' (2013). Although he does not elaborate on this interpretation, Lytal's assessment of *Taipei* as 'modernist' could be considered in a number of ways. Lin's work has been associated with the 'post-ironic,' 'post-postmoder[n]' sentimen-tality (Willems 2015: 228) of New Sincerity that is often regarded as synonymous with a return to the realism of literary modernism. In keeping with David Foster Wallace's definition of post-irony, *Taipei* certainly 'risk[s] the [...] accusations of senti-mentality, melodrama' and '[c]redulity' (1993: 193) through its depictions of the mil-lennial realness of complex relationships, incessant drug-use, existential crises and both digital and physical navigation through the social world. This tendency toward

sincerity is also in keeping with 'alt lit' (Alternative Literature), a 'mysterious Internet subculture' of writings published almost entirely online with roots in dirty realism and K-mart realism,[5] for which Lin is considered a frontrunner (Morrell 2014). Alt lit writers 'rely on social media and personal blogs to deposit most of their material' and 'consider their tweets and Facebook statuses part of their creative output' (2014). Andrew Morrell writes that

> Alt lit embraces the brand of postmodern introspection that [previous] writers spawned, but makes the leap online, where it fits surprisingly well. Alt lit writing is at times eerily personal despite its surface blandness and bleakness. Poems and stories by alt lit writers frequently incorporate stream-of-conciousness musings on the mundanity of life, with strong themes of existentialism and almost comical levels of over-analyzation. (2014)

Like post-postmodern New Sincerity, alt lit is mobilized by a certain level of sincerity that has its roots in literary modernism, yet in alt lit this interior sincerity is transmitted online. Johannes Voelz reminds us that literary sincerity 'often involves claims to autobiographical nonfictionality.' He writes: 'In offering the private with the means of literature, reference doesn't stop at the character. Behind the character stands the narrator, and behind him stands the author' (2015: 213). *Taipei*'s uncertain status as fiction with autobiographical details or 'autobiographical fiction' as Lin calls it (Lee 2013) ascribes it the kind of sincerity that Voelz outlines. The fact that sections of *Taipei* emerge as almost-exact transmissions of Lin's memories and experiences (Lee 2013) fortifies its status as post-ironic, sincere and sentimental, reminiscent of New Sincerity.

While the novel's characteristics of alt lit and New Sincerity account for some of Lytal's claim for a 'modernist' 'scaffolding,' *Taipei* is, in Lytal's words, a 'modernist masterpiece' as it remains a meditation on the isolation of the self (albeit in a drug-induced, technologically developing era) by employing an involved, stream of

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[5] 'Dirty realism' was defined by Bill Buford in 1983 in an issue of *Granta* in which he described it as 'a new fiction [...] emerging from America [...] devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture' (Buford 1983). 'K-mart realism' is another title for dirty realism that is also used interchangeably with minimalism (Lin qtd. in Morrell 2014).

consciousness narrative, filtered through a twenty-first century, flâneur figure, Paul. The flâneur was defined prior to the *fin de siècle* by Charles Baudelaire who calls him 'the perfect idler […] the passionate observer' both 'at the very centre of the world' and 'unseen [by] the world' (1863: 14). But in the 1920s and 1930s, the flâneur was further developed and popularized by Walter Benjamin (Lauster 2007: 139) who described him as demonstrative of a *modernist*, urban experience. For Benjamin, the flâneur can be seen 'botanizing on the asphalt' (1977: 36) as '[t]he street [is] a dwelling for the flâneur' where he can observe the urban space much like an aesthete observes paintings and sculptures (1977: 37). Grappling with Friedrich Engels' description of 'the bustle in the streets of London' as endless and futile, prompting a 'brutal indifference' and 'unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest,' Benjamin writes that '[t]he flâneur only seems to break through this "unfeeling isolation" by filling the hollow space created in him by such isolation with the borrowed—and fictitious—isolation of strangers' (1977: 57–58). It is this perspective on the flâneur as a 'quintessentially modernist literary persona […] who idly roams the streets of the city, surrendering to its aesthetic fascinations and delights' (Fernihough 2007: 66) that best informs Paul's flâneurie. Throughout *Taipei,* there is a particular emphasis on Paul's physical movements through both New York and Taipei where he, as literary figure, conceptualizes and surveys his physical, urban reality. The novel opens with an emphasis on Paul's physical location as he walks the streets of New York with his girlfriend Michelle, toward an art gallery. Paul is hyper-aware of his own positionality on the sidewalks and streets as he moves through the city with Michelle: 'Paul had resigned to not speaking and was beginning to feel more like he was "moving through the universe" than "walking on a sidewalk"' (Lin 2013a: 3). His conception of his place on the sidewalk as being more like moving through the expansive universe works to emphasize his isolation as flâneur figure because this notion minimizes him in the universe's grandeur and removes him from the grounding inherent in the sidewalk and its connected metropolitan community. However, part of the novel's plotlessness has to do with the very organic and laissez-faire ways in which Paul stumbles through the city in unintentional bewilderment. At one point Paul relates that, after '"working on things" in an underground computer lab in Bobst Library […]

[he] became "completely lost" […] in a tundra-like area of Brooklyn for around twenty minutes before unexpectedly arriving at the arts space hosting the panel discussion […] he'd agreed to attend' (2013a: 19). The description of this area of Brooklyn as 'tundra-like' indicates Paul's indulgence in the urban landscape as imagistic, and his becoming '"completely lost"' caters to the aimlessness inherent in the modern flâneur. In a modernist context, Anke Gleber describes the flâneur as

> …at once a dreamer of exteriors, an historian of the city, and an artist of modernity who transforms his perceptions into texts and images. Through an increased and immediate attention to the lights and textures of modern environs, flânerie embraces an overall intoxication with images as icons of modern mythology. (1999: 363–364)

Paul easily emerges as 'a dreamer of exteriors' since his perceptions of the urban landscape are often depicted as surreally re-imagined. Most striking about this assessment of the flâneur's capability is the notion that the flâneur's perceptions are 'transform[ed] […] into texts and images.' The narrative often renders Paul's interpretations of his external reality as imagistic and aesthetic, and this is always offset by his own indolence: 'Outside, walking steadily but aimlessly, they entered East River State Park and sat on grass, facing the river and Manhattan, which seemed to Paul like an enormous, unfinished cruise ship that had been disassembled and rearranged by thousands of disconnected organizations' (Lin 2013a: 82). Characteristic of the flâneur, Paul's movement through New York is explicitly purposeless, but even this aimless traversal of the cityscape inspires his own unique, aesthetic readings of the city where he transforms his concrete surroundings into alternative, imagistic constructions.

While Lin's descriptions of Paul moving through New York draw on the traditional flâneurie of literary modernism, the author reconfigures this flâneurie into cyber-flâneurie by depicting Paul's perceptions of his urban roaming as inherently digital in a way that oscillates between meatspace[6] and cyberspace. Lin portrays the

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[6] Meatspace refers to the physical, real world in contrast to the cyber world: 'The physical world, as opposed to cyberspace or a virtual environment' ("meatspace, n." 2018).

complex alienation of the flâneur through Paul, but he does so by ensuring such a figure remains 'intoxicat[ed by] images as icons of modern mythology,' or rather, as this article argues, a post-postmodern mythology. While on a bus in Taipei, Paul is described as 'star[ing] at the lighted signs, some of which [are] animated and repeating like GIF files, attached to almost every building to face oncoming traffic' (2013a: 166). Here, Paul ascribes a digital meaning to the signs and imagines the city buildings as digital entities with 'GIF files [...] attached' in a way that amalgamates meatspace and cyberspace. Yet, Paul does not just simply conceive of the urban meatspace as digital; rather, he digitizes it quite literally. One of the most overt instances of Paul's cyber-flâneurie is during his visit to Taipei when he and Erin record their movements through physical, urban space on his MacBook. This act of recording the streets of Taipei via the MacBook or, as Paul's mother calls it, 'the video thing' (2013a: 189), involves '"get[ting] dramatic shots of the street"' (2013a: 171) and recording the goings on in a Taiwanese McDonalds (2013a: 194). This recording of his flâneurie marks Paul as digital archivist of his meanderings in a way that actively 'transforms his perceptions into texts and images' (Gleber 1999: 363). At one point, Paul is described as 'pointing the MacBook at the three-lane street, on which hundreds of scooters and motorcycles pas[s], in layers, with more than one per lane, at different speeds, appear[ing] like a stationary, patternless, shuffling' (Lin 2013a: 189). Here, Paul uses the MacBook to record his perception of the three-lane street, but in doing so, also transforms these perceptions into the alternate image of a 'patternless, shuffling' 'stationary.' Beyond reconstructing the images on the screen into alternative images in his imagination, Paul's act of recording his physical movements through urban spaces literally transforms these perceptions into digital imagery that can be forever immortalized in the digital space of his MacBook, thereby translating his 'concrete reality' into digital memory.

By rendering his urban landscape as digital, Paul as cyber-flâneur, intermediates between meatspace and cyberspace physically. However, the novel also draws upon the organic relationship between the flâneur and interior consciousness through its use of stream of consciousness. After establishing that the flâneur 'transforms his perceptions into texts and images [...] embrac[ing] an overall intoxication with

images as icons of modern mythology,' Gleber asserts that '[b]y way of flânerie, an inner monologue of perception emerges in literature and the modern mind, the stream-of-consciousness of sight is translated into writing and images' (1999: 363–364). Gleber seems to suggest an organic relationship between the flâneur's exterior fixations and internal reflections by highlighting a logical connection between the physical wanderings of the flâneur through urban space and his/her similar meandering via stream of consciousness. Although written in the third-person, *Taipei* employs stream of consciousness showcasing 'the unbroken flow of perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings in' Paul's 'waking mind' and including 'long passages of introspection, in which the narrator records in detail what passes through a character's awareness' (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 380). Lin claims to have developed the narrative strategy for *Taipei* from his own stream of consciousness notes:

> With *Taipei,* I started out with hundreds of thousands of words of diary-like notes that I typed quickly with many stream-of-consciousness-seeming sentences like this sentence that I knew wouldn't be published but were just notes. (Plummer 2017)

This establishes the pseudo-autobiographical status of the novel, but more importantly provides context for its stream of consciousness narrative strategy. From its opening, Lin's narrative is mobilized by long, drawn-out and structurally complex sentences that survey the acute and arbitrary aspects of Paul's subjectivity. *Taipei* employs stream of consciousness in that it is acutely focused on the minute and banal details of Paul's interiority, at times sprawling paragraphs of aimless, uncoordinated consciousness. Following a passage in which Paul imagines his hypothetical experience living in the city of Taipei as a 51-year-old man, he reflects:

> An earnest assembling of the backup life he'd sketched and constructed the blueprints and substructures for (during the average of six weeks per year, spread throughout his life, that he'd been in Taiwan) would begin, at some point, after which, months or years later, one morning, he would sense the independent organization of a second, itinerant consciousness—lured here

by the new, unoccupied structures—toward which he'd begin sending the data of his sensory perception. The angered, splashing, water-treading land animal of his first consciousness would sink to some lower region, in the lake of himself, where he would sometimes descend in sleep and experience its disintegrating particles—and furred pieces, brushing past—in dreams, as it disappeared into the pattern of the nearest functioning system. (Lin 2013a: 15–16)

Although filtered through an omniscient narrator, Lin's excessive parentheses, dashes and commas create divergent 'side streets' that encapsulate the ways in which Paul's streaming consciousness resembles intricate street routes, connecting sometimes benign or unrelated elements in a flowing, and seemingly never-ending succession. In just two sentences, the author suggests a metaphorical connection between flâneurie and stream of consciousness in which both constitute a traversal of respective spaces.

The novel's stream of consciousness goes hand-in-hand with Paul's flâneurie in a more traditional, modernist sense, where his urban movements are complemented by his interior movements. However, like Paul's physical movements through urban spaces are rendered digitally, his interior movements through the aforementioned, cognitive 'side streets' are also explored as inherently digital. This digitization of interiority establishes a connection between the cyber-flâneur and cyber-conscious-ness. For instance, in the previous passage when Paul describes his 'itinerant con-sciousness' (2013a: 15–16), he imagines a mobile consciousness, separate from his physical self, yet able to travel through the 'new unoccupied structures' of his life—presumably separate from his 'sketched [...] constructed' and 'blueprint[ed]' 'backup life'—but contactable through digital means. The imagination of his life (current or backup) as being 'blueprint[ed]' immediately establishes Paul's 'life' as a digital landscape that his consciousness can tread. Paul ascribes the physical mean-dering of the flâneur to this separate consciousness itself, but then proposes his own ability to 'sen[d] the data of his sensory perception' to it, as one would send an email with attached data, or consume streamable content on the internet. In the

context of ethnography, Charles Soukup recommends that ethnographers 'embrace the mobilized gaze of the flaneur' (2013: 228) when assessing hyper-mediated, contemporary society. Soukup describes 'a steady stream of flaneur-like characters in coffeehouses. Their gaze shift[ing] between the "screen world" and the coffeehouse environment.' Soukup suggests that '[b]y shifting their gaze between screens and people, they are constantly "moving" but sitting still' (2013: 238). Soukup draws a crucial parallel between Benjamin's flâneur and the digitally-engaged, wanderer of cyberspace, and although he does not relate this cyber flâneurie to interior consciousness, his description of immobile, urban flâneurs, intermediating between 'the "screen world"' and the real world informs literary cyber-consciousness because it necessitates the flâneur's interiority to annotate this movement through both corporeal and ethereal spaces. Paul's explanation of his 'itinerant consciousness' suggests the cyber-flâneur's dual ability to physically perceive urban spaces as digital, and to interiorly perceive consciousness as digital. It entails a similar tension between the immobile body in urban space and an interior, digital mobilization, ultimately bridging the necessary relationship between cyber-flâneur and cyber-consciousness. Paul employs this technique when he imagines a hypothetical scenario in which he lives in the city of Taipei as a 51-year-old man:

> The unindividualized mass of everyone else would be a screen, distributed throughout the city, onto which he'd project the movie of his uninterrupted imagination. Because he'd appear to, and be able to pretend he was, but never actually be a part of the mass, maybe he'd gradually begin to feel a kind of needless intimacy, not unlike being in the same room as a significant other and feeling affection without touching or speaking. (Lin 2013a: 14)

Paul sees the inhabitants of his public space as a screen onto which he could project his interiority, yet in this cognitive act of digital projection, Paul struggles with the reality of self-alienation in a way not unlike Benjamin describes the flâneur breaking through isolation. Although, instead of 'filling the hollow space created in him by such isolation with the borrowed—and fictitious—isolation of strangers' (Benjamin

1977: 58), Paul develops a fictitious and 'needless intimacy' with those in the 'mass' (Lin 2013a: 14). Here, Paul's cyber-flâneurie is apparent through the digital mediation of his exterior landscape, but his cyber-consciousness emerges in the fact that this digital, exterior landscape serves as an avenue to explore his interior crisis of social isolation and false intimacy with the digital 'unindividualized mass' (2013a: 14).

Paul more obviously intermediates between meatspace and cyberspace when he imagines himself as a Google Maps dot, an act that aggressively exposes his cyber-consciousness:

> [...] for a few seconds, visualizing the position and movement of two red dots through a silhouetted, aerial view of Manhattan, [Paul] felt as imaginary, as mysterious and transitory and unfindable, as the other dot. He visualized the [...] arcing line representing the three-dimensional movement, plotted in a cubic grid, of the dot of himself [...] He imagined his trajectory as a vacuum-sealed tube, into which he'd arrived and through which [...] he'd be suctioned and from which he'd exit, as a successful delivery to some unimaginable recipient. Realizing this was only his concrete history, his public movement through space-time from birth to death, he briefly imagined being able to click on his trajectory to access his private experience, enlarging the dot of a coordinate until it could be explored like a planet. (Lin 2013a: 24–25)

Paul's digital traversal again encourages his own social isolation, but more crucially, the detachment he experiences between his corporeal self and his digital cognition exposes an alterity wherein he becomes alienated from the machinery of his own digital consciousness. While Paul's consciousness of his own movement through Manhattan is indicative of a traditional flâneurie, the fact that he transitions this movement through the urban space from the physical/external to the abstract/internal, adds an innovative layer to his emergence as cyber-flâneur. Paul's role as a cyber-flâneur is crucial because it redefines the boundaries between meatspace and cyberspace wherein the two become indistinguishable within the conscious 'stream' of Paul's interiority. By drawing a comparison between his 'public movement' (which

he attributes to his 'concrete history') and an 'imagined […] ab[ility] to click on his trajectory to access his private experience,' Paul suggests that his flâneurie can fluctuate from the physicality of his concrete experience to the more nuanced particulars of his abstract interiority. In other words, his interior experience—as digitally rendered—becomes the ethereal, cyberspace which he traverses as cyber-flâneur: his cyber-consciousness.

While Paul's cyber-consciousness, as a crucial byproduct of his cyber-flâneurie, constitutes an amalgamation of his physical, interior and digital movements, its roots in stream of consciousness enable it to communicate these movements through a re-definition of the act of streaming. Cyber-consciousness is born of modernist stream of consciousness, but it turns to definitions of computer and internet streaming to update the 'stream' to mean the transmission and receiving of digital data. In *A Dictionary of Computer Science,* 'streaming' is defined as '[t]he process of providing a steady flow of audio or video data so that an Internet user is able to access it as it is transmitted' (2016). While Paul's interiority is characterized by a 'stream' in the sense that, like modernist narratives before it, it 'reproduce[s] the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character's mental process' (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 380), it more crucially transmits this 'full spectrum and continuous flow' as digital output. The lengthy and digressive narrative form embodies this 'steady flow of data,' and additionally, it more overtly explores digital metaphors in relation to Paul's consciousness:

It occurred to him that, in the past, in college, he would have later analyzed this [social situation], in bed, with eyes closed, studying the chronology of images—memories, he'd realized at some point, were images, which one could crudely arrange into slideshows or, with effort, sort of GIFs, maybe—but now, unless he wrote about it, storing the information where his brain couldn't erase it, place it behind a toll, or inadvertently scramble its organization, or change it gradually, by increments smaller than he could discern, without his knowledge, so it became both lost and unrecognizable, he probably wouldn't remember most of this in a few days and, after weeks or months, he wouldn't know it had been forgotten, like a barn seen from

inside a moving train that is later torn down, its wood carried elsewhere on
trucks. (Lin 2013a: 118)

Paul's description of his memory as 'a chronology of images' or a 'slideshow' of 'GIFs'
(2013a: 118) actualizes the internet streaming metaphor, invoking the various suc-
cessions of visual and audio media consumable to the twenty-first century internet
user. This passage builds on Paul's earlier fears about his increasingly inaccessible
memory which he compares to 'an external hard drive that had been [...] hidden
[...] or placed at the end of a long and dark [...] corridor' and which 'required much
more effort than he felt motivated to exert simply to locate' let alone 'to gain access'
(2013a: 74). Later in the novel, after seeing his face in the reflection of his MacBook
screen, he '[thinks] of the backs of his eyelids as computer screens' both able to 'dis-
play anything imaginable' deducing that '"ppl are powerful computers w 2 computer
screens & free/fast/reliable access to their own internet"' (2013a: 170). The implica-
tion of one's ability to 'access [...] their own internet' is that Paul draws a unique par-
allel between his cognitive abilities and the infinite, depth of his internet searches.
Not only does Paul characterize his cognitive function as similar to digital machinery,
but these metaphors also suggest a relationship between internet streaming and the
stream of consciousness narrative that constitutes the novel's fabric.

While *Taipei*'s cyber-consciousness is first and foremost the byproduct of an
involved combination of modernist stream of consciousness narrative and flâneurie
with digital machinery, this combination necessarily produces a postmodern sense of
hyperreality that is both inherent in cyber-consciousness and complexly counter to
the sincerity and authenticity of Paul's narrative stream. Jean Baudrillard defines the
'hyperreal' as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (1981: 1).
He suggests that this notion of hyperreality is reached through three 'orders' of
simulacra. In the first order, 'simulacra [...] are natural [...] founded on the image' and
'on imitation and counterfeit' (1981: 121), and in the second, 'simulacra are produc-
tive' and 'founded on energy force' with 'materialization by the machine in the whole
system of production' (1981: 121). Yet, of the third order he asks, 'is there an imagi-
nary that might correspond to this order?' (1981: 121). For Baudrillard, in this third

order '[t]here is no real' and 'there is no imaginary except at a certain distance' (1981: 121).[7] Baudrillard's theoretical perspective on real contemporary culture as replaced by the hyperreal is rooted in technology's proliferation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Sheehan 2006: 31). Richard J. Lane writes that '[t]he best example' of Baudrillard's third order is 'virtual reality' because, since virtual reality 'is a world generated by computer languages or code' and 'mathematical models that are abstract entities,' it is hyperreal, falling under the third order 'where the model comes before the constructed world' (2008: 29). For many, Baudrillard's assertion that postmodernity bore hyperreality in society remains true in the twenty-first century, when multitudes of people constantly perceive reality through the internet's social media platforms. Although it is not virtual reality in the sense that the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999) and Thomas Pynchon's massive multiplayer online roleplaying platform, DeepArcher, in *Bleeding Edge* are virtual realities, social media platforms offer simulations of social reality that seem real to their users because users eschew physical social interaction to accommodate the more convenient, online social relations. In a Baudrillardian sense, life online is ultimately so far removed from reality that our everyday engagement with others is hyperreal: the models of reality replace reality itself. While cyber-consciousness entails a coming together of digital technology and modern stream of consciousness, Baudrillard's postmodern theory of hyperreality figures quite organically into my definition of cyber-consciousness because contemporary understandings of hyperreality as the inability to distinguish between the real and the imaginary (namely through digital media platforms) are inherently linked to human consciousness. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines the hyperreal in a way that draws out this connection to human consciousness rather well: 'The realm of the hyperreal [...] is more real than real, whereby the models, images, and codes of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior' (Kellner 2007). Living online in a stasis of hyperreality exemplifies cyber-consciousness in

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[7] Richard J. Lane simplifies these orders by describing them as follows: 'the first level is an obvious copy of reality and the second level is a copy so good that it blurs the boundaries between reality and representation. The third level is one that produces a reality of its own without being based upon any particular bit of the real world' (2008: 29).

that one's cognitive engagement with the world and others is filtered through, communicated by and dependent on digital machinery.

   In *Taipei,* the ways in which Paul suffers from an inability to distinguish between his life online and what he calls his 'concrete reality,' and the ways in which his interiority is shaped by 'codes of the hyperreal' indicate how postmodern hyperreality complicates the authenticity of Paul's narrative stream. Lin's depiction of the world in *Taipei* inadvertently harkens to Baudrillard's hyperreality in that there is an intense focus on attempting to differentiate between 'concrete reality' (Lin 2013a: 18) and Paul's ethereal existence online. The phrase 'concrete reality' appears seven times throughout the novel, which is striking because the narrative rarely relies on the singular word 'reality' to refer to meatspace. By including 'concrete' as a constant adjective for 'reality,' Lin encourages an awareness of postmodern hyperreality in the narrative where Paul struggles to distinguish between the real and the virtual. From the opening of the novel, we are privy to Paul's gross media saturation: 'At some point, maybe twenty minutes after he'd begun refreshing Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail in a continuous cycle—with an ongoing, affectless, humorless realization that his day "was over"— he noticed with confusion, having thought it was a.m., that it was 4:46 p.m' (2013a: 76). This hyper media saturation, where time dissolves in the face of infinite and endless social media use, is rooted in Lin's own admission in a *New York Times* article that, in the mid to late 1990s, he 'moved online' (2013b).[8] He discusses this move as one that greatly (but not unsatisfactorily) altered his social relationships with his parents and produced a sense of isolation that he was quite content with. Subsequently, he discusses imagining that the world in full would 'relocat[e] into the Internet' (2013b). His account of life online, replete with 'multiplayer role-playing game[s] […] set in […] virtual world[s]' (2013b), can be considered hyperreal in a Baudrillardian sense. Although not engrossed in role-playing games

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[8] Before describing Lin's writing style in *Taipei* as 'bloggy,' writer Ian Sansom suggests that Lin is one of the inaugural writers 'formed not through traditional page and print culture but in and through social media and the internet' (Sansom 2013). Hayles' prediction that 'young people' in 'technologically developed societies […] are literally being re-engineered through their interactions with computation devices' (2007: 102) is central to cyber-consciousness, but the circumstances remain undoubtedly applicable to Lin, himself a child of the internet.

and virtual worlds, Paul's existence is similarly isolating and hyperreal in that he often experiences the social world through simulations of reality. Instead of interacting with Erin in 'concrete reality,' after becoming infatuated with her, Paul gets to know her by 'reading all four years of her Facebook wall and, in one of Chicago's Whole Foods, one night look[s] at probably fifteen hundred of her friends' photos to find any she might've untagged' (Lin 2013a: 109). Paul's perception of Erin is initially hyperreal as his thoughts are informed and shaped by the aforementioned 'codes of the hyperreal' that he finds online. If we recall Paul's description of his memories as GIF animations (2013a: 118) and his subsequent description of Taipei's cityscape as 'GIF files' (2013a: 166), the cyber-consciousness therein moves beyond the melding of stream of consciousness and digital technology. Instead, these perceptions of his cognitive function and his 'concrete reality' as digital emerge as hyperreal. The fact that he quite literally uses 'codes of the hyperreal' (such as GIF animations) to construct his thoughts and construct his physical reality in *Taipei*, indicates how hyperreal experience is inherent to cyber-consciousness. At one point in the novel, Paul becomes acutely aware of his perception of the physical world as a 'simulation,' reflecting that the central function of technology is 'to indiscriminately convert matter, animate or inanimate, into computerized matter, for the sole purpose, it seemed, of increased functioning, until the universe was one computer' (2013a: 166). On a bus with Erin in Taipei, Paul witnesses this phenomenon, reflecting that 'he could almost sense the computerization that was happening in [that] area of the universe, on Earth' (2013a: 167), believing that he 'could imagine the three- or four-minute simulation, in a documentary that probably existed, of occurrence and eventual, omnidirectional expansion, converting asteroids and rays and stars, then galaxies and clusters of galaxies, as they became elapsed in space, into more of itself' (2013a: 167). He perceives his physical surroundings as hyperreal, simulation, but more crucially, this perception of a simulation is self-conscious of that hyperreality in a way that removes the postmodern hyperreality from itself. Paul is hyper-aware of his own awareness of the hyperreality of his surroundings. In this regard, he employs a post-postmodern perspective wherein he is completely aware of his own hyperreality.

Hyper-awareness transcends Paul's perceptions of hyperreality and includes Lin's own hyper-aware narrative that, while employing modernist characteristics, works to challenge itself as a 'modernist masterpiece' by use of insincere parody. Lin seems aware that he pits a traditionally modernist narrative style against a postmodern, parodic attitude, and does not simply draw on modernist narrative strategies to mobilize an unadulterated sincerity. *Taipei* offers a glimpse into the minds of disaffected millennials, exploring what it means to be human in an intensely mediated society, but instead of purely reinstating modern tenets, Lin's use of sincerity, flâneurie and stream of consciousness is amalgamated with too-cool hipster irony, or what Dwight Garner calls 'self-parody' (2013). Throughout his stream of consciousness narrative, arbitrary words and phrases, separated in purposive quotation marks seem to adhere to the removed, hipster irony of the twenty-first century and counter the sincerity of his narrative stream. For example: 'That night—after leaving his room at dusk, then "working on things" in an underground computer lab in Bobst Library, as he did most days—Paul became "completely lost," he repeatedly thought' (2013a: 19). By air quoting portions of his own narrative, Lin inserts an artificiality into the narrative that breaks up the stream of consciousness as if to poke fun at his own narrative's sincerity, existentialism and emphasis on human subjectivity. Even in the aftermath of one of the novel's more serious scenes—Paul, believing he has died after ingesting 'psilocybin mushrooms' (2013a: 243–244)—Lin places the novel's final lines in quotation marks similar to those peppered throughout the text: '[Paul] was surprised when he heard himself, looking at his feet stepping into black sandals, say that he felt "grateful to be alive"' (2013a: 248). Whether the scene is ironic or sincere is ambiguous as the narrative does suggest that Paul outwardly utters this phrase, but the scene constitutes yet another instance where the narrator quotes Paul in a way that first pokes fun, and second reflects Paul's self-conscious mimicry of human consciousness.[9] Even if we read Paul as sincerely '"grateful to be alive,"' the conclusion to the text is rather ironic given that, at the novel's halfway point, Paul insists '"[He doesn't] care if [he] die[s]"' declaring: '"I'm just ready to die. Life just seems like […] it's fine if I die. Once I'm dead I'm dead"' (2013a: 126).

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9 Like Turing's Imitation Game, Paul's self-conscious quotations constitute a mimicry of what he perceives to be an authentic reaction, in human consciousness, to a near death experience.

The quotations also work to parody American hipster-artist culture—perhaps alt lit, more specifically—as the quotations are meant to emphasize the irony-saturated articulations of disaffected millennials. In some ways, we can read Lin as quoting the millennial generation in a way that demonstrates its inherent struggle between sincerity and irony. When, with Daniel, Paul puts on 'Such Great Heights' by Ben Gibbard's ephemeral band, The Postal Service, he does so ironically in order to parody twenty-first century hipster culture: 'He clicked "Such Great Heights" by The Postal Service and said "just kidding"' (2013a: 84). Paul is 'just kidding' because Lin is suggesting that nobody would sincerely listen to the song anymore, an exemplary, early-2000s hipster staple written and performed by The Postal Service and then popularized by hipster-band, Iron and Wine's famed cover, featured in Zach Braff's *Garden State*—a 'hipster' film (Braff 2004; Zeitchik 2009) with a cult following. The layering of hipster references within this single song reference before Paul's insistence that he is 'just kidding,' blows Lin's parodying American hipster culture wide open. But more importantly, because Paul is the fictional double of Lin himself, the quotations constitute an aggressive self-parody wherein Lin is poking fun at his own written narrative because the quotations suggest that he is parodically quoting himself through Paul. In merely being ironic self-parody—a tired, postmodern trait—*Taipei* fertilizes its own exhaustion in a way that not only condemns modernist attempts at interior authenticity and sincerity, but also delegitimates its own postmodern disingenuity. This tension between sincere interiority and insincere self-parody exists within an endless loop that is exacerbated by the novel's digital environment and mobilizes its cyber-consciousness.

Taipei's cyber-consciousness as a post-postmodern narrative strategy is fueled by a coexistence of re-purposed modern and exhausted postmodern literary qualities. This productive tension between modern sincerity, flâneurie and stream of consciousness and contrasting postmodern hyperreality and self-parody stems from post-postmodern uncertainty about the purveyance of irony in a newly sincere but highly digitized century. The novel suggests how cyber-consciousness thrives on this tension, but uses it to explore the intermediation between human consciousness and digital machinery. Within the twenty-first century's digital context, *Taipei* composts Paul's sincere interiority with his simultaneous ironic self-parody, a complex tension that fertilizes post-postmodern cyber-consciousness which thrives on this unresolved tension.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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