

# Posthumously Speaking: Thanatography in a Posthuman Age

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*Poor Orpheus woke up with a start  
All amongst the rotting dead  
His lyre tucked safe under his arm  
His brains all down his head  
O Mamma O Mamma*

—Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, “The Lyre of Orpheus”

*Then I got up and we did it again, and again, and again.*

—Tom McCarthy, *Remainder*

## Introduction

Are we living in an age without loss? An age of *living on* and *coming back*—to fame, to youth, to life? This is the digital age: the age of a technology that, at least until the mid-2000s, has been seen as having the power to design a culture of retrieval and unlimited un-doing: a culture no longer subjected to finality and death. As Zygmunt Bauman has aptly remarked, we live in an age of perpetual appearance and disappearance, instead of being and the cessation of being—where disappearance, so technology wants us to believe, can always be reversed (175). Survival, living on, appears to have become the existential mode of the digital age, in so far as digital technology makes every loss potentially a *virtual* loss, and may render erasure provisional:

in principle (though there is a considerable condition here) digital technology allows us to think of the deletions we make in a document as retrievable, just as the dead can be virtually restored as animated beings through the peculiar mechanisms of digital special effects in cinema.

If this is a digital age, it is at once a posthuman age: an age in which scientists have seriously probed the possibility of extending our consciousness to the computer, and of thus procuring endless life. *Posthuman*: beyond the human, carrying the human to a beyond of itself and imagining it to cross over the ultimate divide—that of death. This is related to *transhumanism*, a scientific ‘current’ that explores the transformative potential of the human; its potential to evolve and expand beyond of itself in a fantastic resurrection. Probably first coined by Julian Huxley, transhumanism refers to a quasi-scientific vision of wo/man transcending her/his limitations, and was further developed in the last decades of the twentieth century by Hans Moravec, Marvin Minsky, Max More, and others as a futurology exploring the interactions between humans and artificial intelligence: an intelligence affecting, modifying, and possibly surviving human minds and bodies.

As posthumanists, the transhumanists are at heart enlightenment thinkers, focused on the human as a project of unlimited potential and endless progress. This contrasts starkly with the critical posthumanism practiced in the humanities since the 1980s by Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, and others, and carrying on into the first decades of our twenty-first century with other critics focused on the becoming-animal and becoming-machine of the human. While these scholars use the posthuman to critique the liberal, autonomous subject invented by enlightenment philosophers, and try to negotiate a *beyond* of that subject in the age of late capitalism, the transhumanists start precisely from that autonomous subject and invigorate it by seeking to procure it eternal life.

And yet survival, *survivre*, living on, *beyond* the self and the present, is crucial to both critical posthumanism and transhumanism. It will be recalled that Jacques Derrida—whose rethinking of writing and the self in terms of difference rather than sameness has been an important starting point for the critical posthumanists—invokes the god Theut, the god of writing and death, in his essay on the pharmakon. This god is the figure of the supplement, that which comes after the self/the same (the father), yet at once logically instates it. In Derrida’s essay Theut thus comes to stand for writing itself—and writing revolves around survival: the persistence of the trace beyond of its author, and its inscription, in the interval that enables recurrence and signification.

If writing is difference, difference is living on, beyond the bounds of presence. For Derrida, the notion of survival (understood differentially) has thus always been decisive:

*I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is not to be added on to living and dying. It is originary: life is living on, life is survival [la vie est survie]. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live after death. When it comes to translating such a notion, Benjamin emphasizes the distinction between überleben on the one hand, surviving death, like a book that survives the death of its author, or a child the death of his or her parents, and, on the other hand, forleben, living on, continuing to live. All the concepts that have helped me in my work, and notably that of the trace or of the spectral, were related to this ‘surviving’ as a structural and rigorously originary dimension. (Derrida, Learning to Live Finally 26)*

As Derrida knew from Freud’s speculation on the life and death drives, life is always already a living on beyond death: a detour from and onto death, a survival from death. This would make all writing a writing from death as a primary or originary beyondness. Indeed, as we have learned from Maurice Blanchot, since all writing is the affirmation *and* annihilation of the writer, all theories of writing need to take death into account.

At the same time, however, there is a specific writing *of* death and even a writing *from* death in our literary culture that addresses the issue of survival. Think of Er in Plato’s *Republic*, who is able to report back from the world of the dead, of Orpheus; or of Edgar Allen Poe’s Valdemar, who speaks from death in his narrative; of Chateaubriand’s *Mémoires d’outretombe*; or of small-time writer Joe Gillis who in Billy Wilder’s movie *Sunset Boulevard* recounts his story as we see him floating, dead in the pool of Norma Desmond’s Hollywood mansion. More recently, we have had Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts*, in which the protagonist comes back to life with written instructions on how to return to the world of the dead; MyDeathSpace as a network of the dead; and art projects on the internet such as Mission Eternity, which ironically project a cybernetic afterlife where the dead can go on communicating with the living in digital capsules.

Death-writings such as these are called *thanatographies*. In this article, we explore such fictional writings *from* death in the light of posthumanism and our current information age. We aim to show how thanatographic writing reveals deep-seated anxieties about storage, retrieval, memory and forgetting in the information age: the age of

1. See, for instance: Hélène Aji, "From Poetry & Autobiography to Poetry & 'Autothanatography,'" *Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone* 5.1 (2007); E.S. Burt, *Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire, and Wilde*, New York: Fordham U.P., 2009; Ivan Callus, "(Auto)Thanatography or (Auto)Thanatology?": Mark C. Taylor, Simon Critchley and the Writing of the Dead," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 41.4 (2005): 427-38; Elena Deanda, "On Joy, Death, and Writing: From Auto-biography to Autothanatography in Clarice Lispector's Works," *Working Papers in Romance Languages* 1.1 (2006); Jeremy Tambling, *Becoming Posthumous: Life and Death in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2001.

2. In the later nineteenth century, the introduction of the phonograph and the technology it provided for self-recording gave rise to speculations on technological afterlives: the uncanny possibility of my self, as a critic noted in 1884, living on "without me—horror of horrors!" (Kahn and Whitehead 34).

digital technology that enables us to write ourselves outside of ourselves in cybernetic networks. Indeed, as we point out below, in the last decade there have been numerous scientific projects geared towards the development of digital ghosts—memory systems accompanying our entire lives in the future—that will survive us after death as a digital double, extending our personal identities as mnemonic constellations. What do these modes of self-survival tell us about personal identity in the digital age? In how far has personal identity become a posthuman identity, and what is the nature of this identity? We explore this triple question on the basis of a literary and a cinematic text on amnesia and repetition: Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) and Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000).

### Auto/thanatography

Thanatography has obtained a peculiar urgency and popularity during the last two decades<sup>1</sup>. Like every new medium before it<sup>2</sup>, the Internet has re-invigorated popular fantasies of a life extended in the machine, of living on in cyberspace. Our bodies may decompose, but our minds may somehow survive. Thus, projects like MyLifeBits and Lifestream allow us to save our memories communally in a huge network of connected databases. More intricate mnemonic systems have been envisioned in the meantime—think of Ubiquitous Memories, a memory externalization process that will allow us to remember the past using the body and the objects it has touched as mediators (Kawamura et al), or Eric Steinhart's Digital Ghost: "a simulation of a specific human life [...] an intelligent computerized biography that can simulate you at any time of your life. Since your ghost carries information about your life, you

3. Steinhart here imagines a retrieval of information as if it were a simple data retrieval. However, as José van Dijck rightly notes, "retrieval of documents from a database and retrieval of memories from a human brain are fundamentally different processes with very distinctive goals. Documents or recordings can be stored in a database and we want them to be there, unchanged, as we retrieve them and subject them to (re)interpretation; memories are never unchanging 'data' that can be stored and retrieved in 'original' shape" (Van Dijck 315).

survive after death as your ghost" (Steinhart 261)<sup>3</sup>. Following William Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, this digital ghost consists of a diary, a storehouse of recorded information, and an "artificially intelligent program that tries to reconstruct your internal first-person perspective from your diary. Your animator tries to replicate your psychology" (262). What was it like to be you when you were five, fifteen, forty-five? Yet, Steinhart asks, would you know enough about yourself? Would you not have forgotten certain perspectives, erased certain memories, even without being aware of it? Therefore, your digital ghost would include a spirit accumulating all the knowledge you could have of yourself—and lose again in time: "Your spirit knows more about you than you do. Your spirit does not forget" (263).

*Your spirit does not forget*. Clearly, these cybernetic memory machines—or, as José van Dijck has aptly called them, nostalgia machines—do not just act on an anxiety of forgetting, but also on an anxiety of being forgotten. This is where these machines relate to death. They tell us: *you will not disappear*. You will have been witnessed by a machine, as if you had been carrying a black box inside your head: an other inside of you. While this virtual witness would possibly counter forgetfulness, being a technology of continuous surveillance (an issue played out in the movie *The Final Cut*), it would also solve a fundamental and irresolvable paradox in our relation to death: we cannot imagine our own death. We cannot testify to our own death. We cannot archive our own death.

Yet in fiction, anything is possible, even testifying to one's own death. Maurice Blanchot's *L'instant de ma mort* is a famous case in point: it recounts an experience of surviving a near-fatal 'instant' before a firing

squad during WW II. This instant is a liminal instant, so to speak, straddling the borders between death and life—an instant of a death that *would have come*, that was imminent, and yet then receded, as the victim was unexpectedly released—and was still there to live through the instant. He speaks about the instant of his death, he *himself* speaks his death, at once object and spectator: he speaks *autothanatographically*. This is an impossible instance, as we all know: we cannot know death. We cannot die and also be witness to it. Yet there can be death in life—and we can survive it. Think of the death camps during the Holocaust and the survivor testimonies to them: are these testimonies not also autothanatographical rather than autobiographical alone? Do they not tell us of a self in death, in a radically other, dehumanized domain, a hell on earth that this self returned from in the end? What about diaries of a disease that had seemed fatal, an impending death in life, a death slowly encroaching on life, yet that one was able to ward off (at least temporarily)? Autothanatography is self-death-writing, instead of self-life-writing, even if death is an experience that cannot be had for oneself. Yet death and life can, in the final analysis, not be demarcated all that easily. In linking the posthuman to the posthumous in this article we will be arguing that posthumous identities in the present are typically identities in-between death and life: ghosts amounting to nothing more than empty, mindless enactors.

### Of Tattoos and Oblivion: Orpheus Lost in No Man's Land

Christopher Nolan's film *Memento* (2000) is based on the short story "Memento Mori" ("MM"), written by the director's brother Jonathan Nolan and published in *Esquire* in 2001. Both feature a main protagonist suffering from an unusual form of memory loss due to post-traumatic stress disorder. The protagonist, Leonard Shelby<sup>4</sup>, claims to know who he is and to remember everything leading up to the traumatic event triggering the loss, the violent death of his wife by the hand of a burglar. But having lost the ability to make new memories, he wakes up every day having to figure out his mission of avenging his beloved's death.

In their representations of memory loss, *Memento* and "Memento Mori" thematize it in relation to thanatography as a 'return from death': here, the afterlife of the amnesiac becomes a *second* life, with the discarded former 'self' speaking—writing—as a voice or author from beyond the grave. In Shelby, thanatography, trauma and identity come together against a background of the contemporary culture: sur-vival of death comes with the price of losing one's identity in a powerless repetition of trauma and self-erasure, a hopeless attempt at self-writing.

4. "Earl" in the short story, but henceforth named Shelby to avoid confusion.

5. Afterwards the viewer learns that the color segments begin at the point in time where the black and white segments end.

6. To which has been added in a smaller font, apparently at a later stage: "or James." This goes to show that 'the bare facts' are not quite as irrefutable as they seem, as will be explained.

*Memento* opens with a shot of a Polaroid depicting a bloody crime scene slowly dissolving into an indistinct blur of colors: by fanning the photo, it seems like the protagonist erases the image. Then we realize we are watching a scene running in reverse order: the photograph is swallowed by the camera, the bullet by a gun. From this very first shot, the traumatic schism in Shelby's patterns of memory procession is reflected in the film's narrative structure. Starting with the ending, the events recounted continuously move back and forth—the present portion of the narrative is told in a progressive fashion and depicted in black and white, the past is represented in fragments going back in time, and portrayed in color<sup>5</sup>. This in itself is remarkable, going against filmic conventions: the deviation can of course be explained by the fact that Leonard's loss of his love and his memory, his trauma, renders the present bleak and ungraspable, whereas the past is romanticized. We even wish to go one step further and propose that in a very real sense, Leonard has died with his wife, and what we are witnessing is his afterlife. As the protagonist writes to his future self in "MM": "*Your life is over. You're a dead man,*" "a corpse" (3).

Shelby's life mission: search and destroy. Target: 'John G.'<sup>6</sup>, alleged rapist and murderer of his wife. Obstacle is, of course, his inability to form memories. This is where writing comes in: externalizing his new findings on his path towards killing the killer, he makes extensive use of memory substitutes in the form of post-it notes, legal pads, printed lists, hand-drawn maps, and Polaroids with handwritten captions: "Leonard's memory consists of nothing but texts" (Nungesser 32). Writing is employed as a "materialized portion of [the] mnemonic apparatus," storing

7. This is all very understandable when we see how the only people Shelby communicates with: corrupt police officer Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) and gangster sweetie Natalie (Carrie-Ann Moss) manipulate him by forcing their own versions of reality on him and use him as a pawn in their own plans. Thus, paranoia is induced in the viewer as well, for instance when we see how the hotel desk clerk has tricked him into renting two rooms at once.

his memories and enabling him to reproduce them at any time “with the certainty that it will have remained unaltered and so have escaped the possible distortions [or in Shelby’s case: complete erasure] to which it might have been subjected in... actual memory” (Freud 225). The great advantage of these (mostly paper-based) mnemonic devices, as Freud explains in “A Note upon the “Mystic Writing Pad” (1925), is the quasi-permanent and unchangeable nature of the memory traces inscribed. For this reason Shelby puts his unwavering faith in writing and in his own, reassuringly recognizable, handwriting in particular: other people could of course forge notes to take advantage of him<sup>7</sup>. The same sense of paranoia underlies his distrust of phone conversations (one of his tattoos reads “never answer the phone”): “I need to look people in the eye when I talk to them.” The mediated character of modern communication is feared and rejected in favor of direct, unmediated interpersonal contact.

But even more than a telephone conversation, where at least the voice of the other is present in the moment, written language, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out, is characterized by *absence*. The writer leaves a mark and takes a leave, the mark is cut off from him and henceforth produces effects independent from his presence, “indeed, even after his death, his absence which moreover belongs to the structure of all writing...” (Derrida, “Signature Event Context” 5). This might be why Shelby resorts to tattoos for a more permanent and embodied form of communication with his later selves, as “a permanent way of keeping a note.” Wearing his most important pieces of information directly on his skin, he has “turned his body into his most precious memorial site” (Nungesser 32).

In this mode of writing, the addresser is always undeniably present as a physical materiality: unlike scraps of paper or books, the body cannot be ‘cut off’ from writing (Neef 223), it retains its bonds with the act of signification. Shelby believes in the power of tattoos to transcend time, surviving *even after the writer’s death*.

As Sonja Neef argues, tattoos are culturally considered as a sign for, and affirmation of, individuality, identity and authenticity (224). At the same time, the act of tattooing punctures the skin, forging a fissure in the unitary body by an intervention of *the other*: this violating dimension stresses the vulnerability of the human body. Skin, as the mediating boundary between inside and outside, becomes “an effect of a painful disturbance of the ego’s borderline, a traumatization, or perforation, of the self by the other” (Neef 232). Far from ‘fixing’ a ‘self’ as a unique, self-same identity, tattoos beget the character of scars, pointing to “the rupture between life and death, self and other” (Neef 232). By marking his body with his past, Shelby differentiates himself, performing a breakdown of the limits between inside and outside: he is self *and* other, alive *and* dead. His tattoos become a sign for his obsessive efforts to survive his trauma by remembering, but they are also a repetitive re-enactment of the initial traumatic experience—which not coincidentally entailed a penetration of his house and his wife.

Whereas typically, our associative capacities enable us to integrate our experiences into linear, chronological consciousness or “narrative memory,” in the case of trauma, this cannot be achieved: the traumatic flashback causes a *discontinuity* in memory, and dissociation (Caruth 152-53). This is derived from the principle underlying the impossibility of imagining one’s own death (the ultimate unrepresentable experience): as Freud has stressed, it is impossible to rid oneself of one’s own presence as the one imagining the event of one’s death (as in Descartes’ *Cogito*-argument). We cannot be both subject and (dead) object of the mental act, both spectator and the one who undergoes it. A split is created in personality between these positions: “one never dies in the first person” (Razinksy 69). Blanchot speaks of the radical alterity of death (a “non-experience”), causing the *a priori* impossibility of any relating with it from a subject position: it is not me, as a singular being, who dies: it is an anonymous and impersonal “on meurt” (Blanchot 128-32).

In order to come to terms with the traumatic event of his wife’s death, Shelby constructs an *I* and a *not-I*, and splits himself into a *self* and an *other*. In “MM,” the narrator vindicates this practice by arguing that “*everybody* [...] *needs mirrors to remind themselves who they are*” (7). Mirrors are used to create the image of the double and often refer to the

8. The fracturing of mirrors is a recurring cinematic image for traumatic experience. Another instance of the broken mirror employed as a metaphor for trauma is found in a scene in Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951): when Blanche Dubois is raped by Stanley Kowalski leading up to her mental breakdown, this is subliminally reflected in a cracked mirror.

idea that the basic notion function of electronic culture is to create doubles and parallel selves (Ebert 128). Furthermore, in Shelby's case, this mirror is *fractured*. In his recollection of the night of his wife's murder, we see how one of the intruders bangs his head against a mirror, which breaks into tiny fragments, just like his identity is shattered from that moment on into a multitude of others<sup>8</sup>. Surviving an experience of death involves a fracturing of selves as a strategy to channel extreme internal conflicts (Caruth 136–38.) A second, deadened version or double of the self can be created, allowing for a splitting-off of the traumatizing experience. In "MM," this state of being is presented as shared by all of us, the unitary self as an illusion:

*Every man is broken into twenty-four-hour fractions, and then again within those twenty-four hours. It's a daily pantomime, one man yielding control to the next: a backstage crowded with old hacks clamoring for their turn in the spotlight. Every week, every day. The angry man hands the baton over to the sulking man, and in turn to the sex addict, the introvert, the conversationalist. Every man is a mob, a chain gang of idiots.*  
("MM" 5)

In Shelby's case this is quite literally so: every *I* has ten minutes to further the investigation and report it in notes to a future self, who then takes the stage for the next ten minutes, and so on: It's a shame, really, that you and I will never meet. But, like the song says, "By the time you read this note, I'll be gone." ("MM" 9).

To make up for the incomprehensibility of the violent traumatic experience, it is relived and re-created in repetitions that establish complementary forms of intrusion without leading to understanding (Caruth 62). Like

9. This hypothesis is supported by a shot of Jankis in a wheelchair at a home after the death of his wife, followed very briefly by an image of Shelby sitting in the exact same place. In "Memento Mori," the same effect is created by a revealing description of a tattoo covering the most of the protagonist's chest, reading "I RAPED AND KILLED YOUR WIFE" (6). Only afterwards we learn this is accompanied by the tattooed portrait of a man's (the generic John G.'s) face (8).

Sisyphus and Tantalus, Shelby is condemned to endlessly repeat a cycle of meaningless behavior: losing his short-term memory, taking pictures and writing notes to subsequent selves, looking for his suspects and killing them. His tattoos make for an especially interesting case of repetition, since as argued above, he is replaying the original intrusion on his body. He also relives the moment of his wife's death in his dreams, and he even re-enacts it with a call-girl playing his wife. This is all to no avail: he keeps missing the actual moment of his wife's death, unable to turn back time and bring her back to life.

The most important instance of repetition, however, is the Sammy Jankis Case that Shelby keeps retelling (as inscribed on his wrist: "Remember Sammy Jankis"): this man, an insurance client of Shelby's, was supposedly an amnesiac whose diabetic wife desperately tried to put his memory to the test by repeatedly asking for her insulin injection (again, an act of puncturing): he complied every time until she died of a lethal overdose. Eventually we learn that the real Sammy did not suffer from memory loss and did not even have a wife: Shelby *himself* seems to be the man who left his diabetic wife, who has survived the break-in, to die from an overdose<sup>9</sup>. Having killed the second intruder more than a year earlier, Shelby keeps repeating the quest for his John G.'s: keeps hunting them down and shooting them up. With Sammy, he has created a double: a fictionalized, externalized version of his own life narrative. Through the constant repetition of this lie to himself, he creates a redemptive belief that he *can* live with, to stand in for the unacceptable truth.

This re-written version of himself is then clad in a range of texts and textures: his paper traces, tattoos and stories, but also the

10. Another instance of codification of information that would be too dangerous for Shelby's consciousness to deal with, is a daydream in which he lies next to his wife with a tattoo across his chest spelling "I did it". Seemingly he has killed the killer and brought his wife back to life, but the image is thoroughly ambiguous: it could just as well signify that he himself has killed her, and created a displacement.

clothes of the men he has killed: "You know, I think I'd rather be mistaken for a dead guy than a killer." Once again, he tries to break free from his predicament by impersonating these faceless others. Moreover, it is revealing that he identifies himself with a dead man, since this is exactly how he perceives himself. For the viewer, too, Shelby lacks all personality; he is a hollow shell of a man. Like his desolate and sterile surroundings he is robbed of all singularity and cultural specificity. Roaming around this no man's land, he kills to leave traces of people just like him, indistinguishable like "a dead man... a corpse": "In death, as in police sketches, faces tend to look the same" ("MM" 3). His lack of an essential core identity is made up for by a violent performance of identities.

But discarding a former self comes with a price: one has to perform an act of violence *against oneself*. It is, in Frank Ankersmit's words, "nothing less than an act of suicide..." (Ankersmit 316). These instances of self-writing all contribute to the erasure of Shelby's former self through forgetfulness. This is actually hard work for him: repeated lying about the Jankis Case, expropriating pages from the police file, manipulating information, burying and burning the memento's of his wife on the graveyard, and the continued destruction of the usual suspects. Left with scraps of information without a traceable origin or history, he has "create[d] a puzzle [he] won't ever resolve." In this encryption, all signs leading to the truth are erased, which for Shelby is the only way to survive<sup>10</sup>.

In a sense, our protagonist is aware of this deadlock, asking his future self "*how can you forgive if you can't remember to forget?*" ("MM" 3). According to Ankersmit, in cases like these, when we reject part of our past,

dissociate it and discard it from our self image, we have to *remember* this act of forgetting (Ankersmit 296). We cannot forget to forget *because of* this act of dissociation: the traumatic experience is forced into the realm of the unconscious and thus obliterated, but precisely by storing it there, we also preserve it as an unconscious memory. As such it is a relentless memento of the fact that there is something, in this case a former identity, that must be forgotten (Ankersmit 300, 303). This is the condition for the possibility of acquiring a brand new self (and, as Ankersmit asks, "is this not as close to death as one may come?" (Ankersmit 303). Survival [*survivre*] entails a responsibility to the impossibility of an adequate response to the experience of death, an acknowledgment of the breakdown of one's understanding (Derrida, "Demeure" 20). This is where our protagonist falls short.

Shelby's tragedy lies, on the one hand, in his refusal to forget his wife ("I can't remember to forget you"). He either wants to bring her back, like Orpheus, or remain living as a dead person himself, refusing to move on. On the other hand, it lies in his unwillingness to acknowledge the fact that he has forgotten his former self ("I know who I am, I know all about myself"). "Memento Mori" takes on a new meaning here, in the sense that Shelby keeps forgetting to remember that he *has* died, thus living on in circles, outside of time, as an empty shell. The tattoo on his wrist reading "Remember Sammy Jankis" could be understood both as 'remember to remember him as not-I: do not identify with him,' and, at the same time, as 'remember to forget: hold on to your memory loss,' linking in with another prominently inscribed warning: "Memory is Treachery." Thus, he discharges himself from the obligation to live on, to survive his wife knowing he has killed her. Instead he lives eternally in the moment, knowing only grief and vengeance, ignorant of the fact that he has already died: *your advantage in forgetting is that you'll forget to write yourself off as a lost cause* ("MM" 1).

## Death as Remainder

Whereas the only media figuring in *Memento* are older ones—writing, the body, Polaroid photographs and telephones—an expressions of prevalent anxieties concerning technologies of the information age and forgetting in mass media culture can be distilled. Mass media, it is believed, destabilize our sense of self, creating a paranoid atmosphere of in which doubles are constructed as strategies to survive the information overload, a world in which "[t]here is no redemption, there is just this endless repetition of crimes over and over again and the creation of false selves and multiple personalities in order to hide behind them"

(Ebert 168). In externalizing our identities and memories, we are able to store away parts of our past in an attempt *to create an absolute, eternal present*, just like Shelby does. Ubiquitous forms of mediation organize *forgetfulness* in the collective imagination, until memory becomes a site of erasable trauma (James 18). Without remembering to forget, part of our identities is lost beyond retrieval.

Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* likewise foregrounds this relation between networked media, inauthenticity, and (self-)forgetfulness. The nameless protagonist, and first-person narrator, has had an accident that has put him in a temporary coma and has made him go through memory loss. His past returns in installments but even then, this past is never fully owned by him: he is not grounded in this past, but instead—as we will see—always in search of a past. To be precise, he is in search of one particular blissful moment, a fragment of enriched sensation, right before the accident:

*I turned the palms of my hands outwards, closed my eyes and thought about that memory of just before the accident, being buffeted by the wind. Remembering it set a tingling from the top of my legs to my shoulders right up into my neck. It lasted for just a moment—but while it did I felt not-neutral. I felt different, intense: both intense and serene at the same time. I remember feeling this way very well.*  
(McCarthy 5, 9)

He *remembers* feeling as *he felt*, buffeted by the wind, right before the accident—of which he cannot speak, because he cannot remember it and because he is legally bound to silence (“you must forget it ever happened”): he has received 8,5 million pounds in return. Second best is the remembrance of a sensation, the intensity of an instant that cannot be relived but only approximated. This idea of being once removed, disconnected, standing on the outside—like a specter—announces the fate of the protagonist: the *not-neutral* will remain inaccessible to him. In the first chapters of the novel this detachment is emphasized when he calls his lawyer and keeps being cut off, as if he were a ghost vainly trying to connect from the other side. Throughout the novel, the protagonist retains this aspect of derealisation: an automaton, a shadow. This is reflected in McCarthy's style, which is a meticulously detailed, scenic style that reports everything from the outside, as if to reinforce the narrator's otherness.

As in *Memento* and “Memento Mori,” the afterlife in *Remainder* is a traumatic afterlife that is ruled by repetition. The protagonist is nothing but an *effect* of the trauma of his accident and in the failure

to recapture himself, becomes a re-enactor in search of lost time and reality—not through writing, like Marcel, but through staging. First, in the hospital, he again *learns to move* and this slow recovery of his motor system anticipates what is to come: the obsession of the narrator with the minute re-enactment of movements from memory, but also from scenes he has witnessed, or films he has seen—even of sites and smells and sounds he may never have actually witnessed. All this starts at a party, when he sees a crack in a wall of the bathroom and has “a sudden sense of *déjà vu*” (McCarthy 64). He remembers a similar room, a building around it, people living in it, the smell of liver cooking in a pan, “real, live” piano music—yet he does not remember where it was (McCarthy 65). Sudden, unmediated and intrusive, a *déjà vu* is nonetheless a typically unreliable sensation of past things and impressions: it is a kind of short-circuiting of the brain, whereby an image is stored in the brain before being processed by consciousness. This means that the ‘memory’ of the protagonist is in fact a delayed perception of the present. Even this intense sensation of the past is a fake—however lively and invasive, however real, it is as a sensation of the present.

Inspired, the protagonist subsequently devotes all his time and money to restage and re-enact his vision, hiring an entire building, actors, props, and animals. Paradoxically, he thus stages, repeats, (re) mediates, to gain access to the real—a project fated to fail as it only produces a simulation controlled by the protagonist. (It may be asked if the protagonist could actually deal with the real: like the protagonist in Sartre's *La nausée*, the real makes him sick: “My undoing: matter” (McCarthy 17)). Bored, the protagonist moves on to the next re-enactment, focusing on violent scenes of death, and slowing down his rehearsing movements ever more to achieve a hypnotizing intensity. Tellingly, his desire to have a real experience is a desire for continuity:

*... to be real—to become fluent, natural, to cut out the detour that sweeps us around what's fundamental to events, preventing us from touching their core: the detour that makes us all second-hand and second-rate.* (McCarthy 264)

The detour that, according to Freud, is life itself: a detour to death. Could it be that this empty, excessively styled posthumous life of the narrator is not just a life after death—a death that may never be spoken of—but a *desire for death*: unbound and liquid? Is not repetition here the movement of a return to death, an eternal present that the protagonist ultimately finds in an airplane that he has flying in circles (“for now ... , the clouds tilted and the weightlessness set in once more as we banked,

turning, heading back, again” (McCarthy 308)? A deeply philosophical novel, we suggest, *Remainder* uncovers the posthuman quest for eternal life—a life in the machine, just as the protagonist is an automaton—as a *death drive*. If this is a novel about authenticity, this is a mode of being that precedes life, the detour itself *out of which* life emerged by accident, as remainder. The protagonist *is* that remainder, like the splinter in his knee, floating around after his accident, “redundant, surplus to requirements” (McCarthy 8). Yet as an enactor, the one who *acts*, the protagonist also realizes an authentic life, if we recall that authenticity literally means self/doing (hentes: doer): to do, from Old English *don*—to perform, to make (one’s own), however ‘fake’ these performances may be. This is authenticity in its Heideggerian sense, for whom wo/man is an event (*Ereignis*) or happening rather than an interiority or essence. Wo/man reveals what s/he is, over and over again, in and through her or his doings and relations. The nameless protagonist in *Remainder* embodies this assumption in being a pure performance of the movement toward death: repetition.

Like so many other characters in the fictions of the digital age, the nameless protagonist in *Remainder* and the mindless protagonist in *Memento* and “Memento Mori” are enactors rather than fully fledged, traditional characters. They act on the basis of a script, on the basis of written instructions or patterns detected on a map, on a wall, rather than being motivated—as is traditionally the case in the novel—by the workings of an inner self. As survivors, they give shape to a posthuman identity that is empty at its core: an amnesic self constantly inscribed and constantly erased on the one hand in *Memento*, and a quasi-amnesic self in *Remainder* that is neutral, “formatted, ... unreal” on the other (McCarthy 54). These enactors, we suggest, do not just tell us something about fantasies of a prolonged—or a returned—life in the posthuman age and the networked technologies facilitating it. Rather, they may be conferring upon us an anxiety that we are only now beginning to notice: an anxiety that, in the digital age, we may have become what we are no longer.

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## SUMMARY

In this article we explore thanatographic writing, fictional writings writing of and from death addressing the issue of survival, in the light of posthumanism and our current information age. We aim to show how thanatographic writing reveals deep-seated anxieties about storage, retrieval, memory and forgetting in the information age: the age of digital technology that enables us to write ourselves 'outside of ourselves' in cybernetic networks. What do these modes of self-survival tell us about personal identity in the digital age? In how far has personal identity become a posthuman identity, and what is the nature of this identity? We explore this triple question on the basis of a literary and a cinematic text on amnesia and repetition: Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) and Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000).

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