SCREENS AND EVANESCENCE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE 2.0: IMAGES, VIRTUAL PLATFORMS AND DIGITAL REPRODUCTIONS, IN TAO LIN'S TAIPEI

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Abstract: What the screen does in its manipulation of personal data, transposing or rather transfixing personality into a parallel dimension, is to produce an experience of absence in which the modern image abandons the real to dissolve in a generic "non-place." The central argument of this analysis is to examine the reshaping of the modern image and the erosion of the Self. The aim is to examine the image of the absentee, the user, who — being absorbed by virtual reality — disappears and dissolves in a digital dimension. Indeed, the self-evident challenges the Internet has posed to our image have led the modern Self to shift from private to public, from realism to artifact. As such, cyberfictional novels offer the reader a three-dimensional perspective. The real context, the immersive experience within the plot, and a third dimension, the digital one, in which the protagonist often dissolves, which is the case of Tao Lin's novel, *Taipei* (2013). In *Taipei*, a Twitter/Social network novel, an American-Chinese writer named Paul, wanders through New York in a desperate desire to connect. His life experience becomes incredibly immersive as he tweets, chats, sends emails, constantly checking his Facebook profile. As I aim to show, the protagonist represents the traditional figure of the absentee who abandons his place, in reality, to travel or rather fade somewhere else. In this way, the final concern of this study is to look at the manipulation of digital subjectivity through the power of the screen and virtual platforms, demonstrating how contemporary American literature is increasingly projected toward the representation of a parallel universe in which the protagonist manages to vanish, to enter a virtual reality torn between true and false, real and artificial. Through the lens of contemporary American fiction, the essay will consider the experience of absence offering an exploration of the modern image manipulated by screens and cyberculture.

Keywords: Screen studies; American literature; digital subjectivity; new media; cyberspace.

1. Introduction: The Ambiguity of Life beyond the Screen

In his discussion on virtual reality, Slavoj Žižek draws attention to cyberspace and the screen as essential tools to stimulate our everyday experience. More than twenty years ago, Žižek (1996, p. 1)[1] eloquently reminded us that we were in the middle of a shift toward what he termed "the epoch of dissemination". Needless to say, the digital revolution is grounded on a continuous play of *presence* and *absence* informed by the construction of multiple images of the Self. Yet, if we want to understand the dynamics of life beyond the screen and the ways in which the personal image is jeopardized and triggered by virtual reality, we need to take these statements as the basic assumptions for discussing what we henceforth define as the virtuality of the real. In this way, the screen or, more evidently, what lies behind this imaginary boundary, attracts the user to the point of being literally transported into a parallel dimension that manipulates his identity[2].

As recent criticism on media has shown, virtuality wires the subject who abandons reality and fades into an abstract dimension. As we know from our personal experience of technologically-dependent subjects, the digital world produces a diasporic identity that migrates from the real to the artificial. Indeed, cyberspace transcends the boundaries of time and space limiting existence in the concrete physical world. Based on this premise, my concern

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[1] For more on this see, Žižek's compelling essay "Cyberspace, or the Virtuality of the Real" (1996).

[2] In a short essay, I cannot do justice to the extensive discussion on the screen and cyberspace. Nonetheless, Sherry Turkle demands special mention for her wide study on cyberspace and the role of the screen. For a preliminary discussion of the topic see Sherry Turkle (1997).

here lies in the implications of discussing absence and the reappropriation of the Self within digital platforms through the lens of a contemporary cyberfictional novel. What I wish to suggest, however, is that cyberfiction or literature 2.0[3], recurrently illustrates the figure of the vanishing protagonist or absent character, as the technophobic user who is increasingly projected toward a parallel dimension, the virtual one, abandoning concrete reality to fade beyond the screen of virtuality.

At this point, let me return briefly to the function of the screen in its ability to transfix personality and to produce the state of absence we will further discuss. In simple terms, the screen is like a black hole that encompasses non-actual things and lets us access an alternative artificial universe. As such, the separation of the subject from the outside, which is reality, leads to the emergence of a new image in the interface we know as cyberspace, or rather the interconnected space of digital technology. It should also be pointed out that as he dissolves from the real in a generic non-place, the user manifests himself in the figure of the absentee who escapes reality to re-appear as a virtual entity in a parallel environment. In this case, we refer to what Žižek (*Ivi*, p. 2) defines "the emergence of pure appearance".

Therefore, from a generic conceptualization, presence and absence can be considered as *states of being*. Indeed, if we look more closely, we see how both terms depend upon the condition of existing, being present, or absent in a specific context. In this sense, as Derrida has explained, there is not a neat distinction of the terms which give meaning to a state of being if they are simultaneously present. Quite simply, absence can be classified as such only in regard to presence; it is this existence that allows defining the meaning of nonappearance. Drawing this discussion further, media scholars such as Katherine Hayles have described the web as a system essentially rooted in the binary logic of presence and absence, being and not-being. Putting it in Hayle's terms, the integration of the human within the machine, the cyborg, represents a new way of thinking about these concepts: being present within technology and being almost inexistent as a human being[4].

What I would like to suggest, however, is that the screen or to be more specific, the computer, produces a distinction between the Self – personal identity – and the Other, technology. In other words, the user is torn between *the big Other*, the screen or the digital environment, and *the modern image*, a new cyber-identity. Yet, if we admit the ambiguity of life beyond the screen, we must conclude that the black mirror regulates a new lifelike reality, thus constructing a new imaginary projection of our identity not as it is, but rather as we wish others to see it[5]. The consideration of the screen as a figurative boundary or rather as a symbolic and inter-subjective frontier entails the necessity of overemphasizing the boundless structure of the book. Drawing from a general assumption according to which boundaries tend to refer to the unbound and that limits of all sorts unavoidably capture our attention to what lies beyond, Timothy Walsh (1992, p. 70) argues that "the ability to recognize what is not there, to see what is missing is a basic component of cognition and consciousness. Like a woodsman warned by a sudden silence, we are all attuned in myriad ways to recognize significant absences".

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[3] The term cyberfiction, coined after the publication of William Gibson's dystopian classic *Neuromancer* (1982), generally refers to that specific branch of literature that deals with information technologies, cyberspace, and the Internet. As such, the definition of literature 2.0 refers to the same literary production, influenced by the web 2.0.

[4] For more on this, see Jacques Derrida (1997). Derrida's critique on the question of presence is essentially related to logocentrism and the tension between writing and speech. For a different perspective, see Katherine Hayles's ground-breaking *How We became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics* (1999). In her work, Hayles considers presence and absence from the fact that in the digital age corporal existence is embedded within the simulation.

[5] For a broader discussion on the screen see Stefano Tani. *L'Alzheimer, lo schermo, lo zombie. Tre metafore del XXI secolo* (2012). In his analysis, Tani tackles the origins of the screen as a narcissistic system. As Narcissus fell in love with his reflection falling into the pond, today we see our Self on the screen stepping on the other side attracted by the possibility of recreating a new personal image.

This assertion is deeply related to the accessibility to virtual space that occurs as we step through the looking glass which attracts us to the point of discovering what lies on the other side. It would thus seem straightforward to claim that the screen is what allows an experience of evanescence and that the Internet and most importantly, virtual reality, produce an aesthetic of absence.

2. Cyberspace and the Aesthetic of Absence in Tao Lin's *Taipei* (2013)

In "The Cognitive and Mimetic Function of Absence", Walsh further explains that besides the natural emotional propensity to perceive what is missing, the experience of absence in art and literature has often been used as a metaphor for a sense of instability and uncertainty. To clarify the use of absence as an artistic and literary trope, Walsh notes that

> The aesthetic manipulation of absence, far from heralding a descent into incomprehensible "free play" as many post-structuralists suggest, is very often suggestively resonant and meaningful if one is attuned to, as Eliot phrased it, those "frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail though meanings still exist". (Walsh 1996, p. 89)

What this quote expresses is that the question of absence as a narrative or aesthetic motif, serves as a way to give meaning to a sense of vulnerability that is hard to grasp[6]. As Thomas Docherty (1985, p. 235) demonstrated, in postmodern fiction the idea of the protagonist as a necessary figure has changed. In his words, postmodern narratives demonstrate how "the character changes, loses its place and ecstatically loses the static self, becomes 'absent' in the novel". Grounded as it is on the potential of new media and the technophobic use of the digital, American literature in the 2000s has often illustrated the compulsive user who dissolves to be fully absorbed within the digital scenario.

The third novel of the young American writer, Tao Lin[7], encompasses all the characteristics of cyberfiction, epitomizing the aesthetic experience of absence for the technophobic user and, as I aim to show, an *absent* character. Lin's polyhedral attitude as a writer and computer literate, illuminates the meaning of the story in the protagonist, a technological fanatic compulsively addicted to the screen, continuously drawn to the construction of a digitalized identity. In *Taipei* (2013), a social network/Twitter novel[8], Lin illustrates the syndrome of the modern generation interconnected with the screen, a sort of

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[6] It is interesting to note that American literature is not new to the presence of absent characters who leave the main scene and abandon the linearity of the story to disappear from narration either abstractly or concretely. Among classic cases, Washington Irving's folk tale, *Rip Van Winkle* (1819). Here, the narrative openly presents the figure of the absentee par excellence, the protagonist, who falls asleep for twenty years, awakens in post-independence America disappearing from the scene and being forgotten by society. Equally emblematic is the case of Hawthorne's "Wakefield" (1837). In this case, absence plays a central role in the development of the story as the protagonist purposefully chooses to step aside and leaves to see the effects of his absence on others. Another illuminating example of absence is Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1856). Despite overall interpretations that consider Bartleby as the main presence in the novel, I would rather align with recent criticism considering that by giving centrality to the protagonist's rejection and apathy, Melville offers an experience of pure absence. Anticipating the postmodern figure of the *absent* character, Melville's case provides an excellent example of how the vanishing protagonist in canonical literature evolved becoming an ever-recurring theme in contemporary fiction.

[7] Defined as a young writer for the young generation, Tao Lin is the author of three novels, two books of poetry as well as a memoir and a discrete amount of online content. His prose, written in a bloggy/Internet language in the form of cyberfiction and dystopian narrative, arouses the interest of readers who are hardly indifferent to his style. Indeed, Lin's greatest ability is to illustrate today's compulsion and obsession for the new media.

[8] This definition refers to Lin's language and his inclusion of technologies and the new media in the narrative which, recalls the language of blogs, social networks, and – more broadly, the Internet.

magic lantern that intrigues so much to produce a sense of total alienation from external reality. Indeed, this is what we see in the protagonist, Paul, an Asian-American writer, who wanders through New York and Taipei infused by an endless desire for Internet connection. As Ian Sansom clarified, "What characterizes the book indeed – in the person of Paul, in its tone, its plot, its shiny cover – is the desperate desire to connect" (*The Guardian*, 2013). However, not much happens throughout the novel that lacks a concrete plot and guides readers to focus on the protagonist and his addictive behavior toward drugs and social media. To view the narrative in these terms, one must recognize that Paul is an empty character. He has little or nothing to say as he regularly makes use of drugs, and he relates almost exclusively through the web isolating himself in an imaginary world based on virtuality.

From the opening scene, the reader is thrust into a virtual and technological space from which the protagonist moves to step onto an imaginary reality made up of screens and online interactions. As Lin writes in the following passage, most of the narrative revolves around the character's view of the world as a giant screen through which he can envisage his desolating image of life: "The unindividualized, shifted mass of everyone else would be a screen, distributed throughout the city, onto which he'd project the movie of his uninterrupted imagination" (Lin 2013, p. 15). This passage makes clear how the narrative focalizes on Paul's constant encounter with an otherness – the screen, the computer, or in a broader sense, virtual reality – that gradually leads to a total assimilation into media. Nevertheless, with Paul, Lin expresses the epitome of the mentally-disordered phobic and morbid user, who confronts with a technology that intrigues to the point of making him a single entity embedded within a computer. In addition to his constant disappearance into the web and social network sites, Paul turns into an android when Lin tells us that he "became like a robot that could discern (but not process, consider or interrelate) concrete reality" (*Ivi*, p. 203). In a previous passage, the narrator describes the protagonist as an amplification of the computer, lying on the floor with the machine extending from his body: "Paul said he would benefit by being in America […] visualizing himself on his back, on his yoga mat, with his MacBook on the inclined surface of his thighs, formed by bending his knees, looking at the internet" (*Ivi*, p. 15). Seen from this perspective, the computer becomes a prosthetic extension of the subject who, as Lin recurrently illustrates, is barely human or even post-human, in his approach to technology. On this view, Miriam Fernandez-Santiago (2021, p. 25)[9] recently explained that "Lin's Taipei articulates a strategic misanthropy through its depiction of its main character's embodied transhumanism as being a perversion of inhumanity". As such, the character is entangled in a paranoid image of himself to the point of going to sleep dreaming to download documents or transforming PDF files and imagining that he accesses his Facebook account using "the back of his eyelids as computer screens" (*Ivi*, p. 170).

The quasi-robotic approach to life that the protagonist adopts, contributes to increasing his self-isolationism and the depressing image he has of himself. The sole comfort comes from the Internet and drugs, which Lin compares as addictive substances epitomizing the current and modern approach to life. Drawing these parallels even further, one can consider the role of Paul as a vanishing character in his dissociation from life and in the self-exile within the reality of social media. We can carry this investigation on the following passage,

> [Paul] visualized the vibrating, squiggling, looping, arcing line representing the three-dimensional movement, plotted in a cubic grid, of the dot of himself, accounting for the different speed and direction of each vessel of which he was a passenger – taxi, Earth, solar system, Milky way, etc. […] He imagined his trajectory as a vacuum-sealed tube, into which he arrived and through which

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[9] For a recent analysis on Taipei from a post-humanist perspective see Fernandez-Santiago (2021).

– traveling alone in the vacuum-sealed tube of his own life – he'd be suctioned and from which he'd exit, as a successful delivery to some unimaginable recipient. (*Ivi*, p. 25)

In this three-dimensional image of cyberspace that sees the protagonist as a lone passenger traveling throughout his life on a trajectory, that of the screen and cyberspace, Lin maps the contours of the traditional absent character staged throughout the narrative by the screen, a strategy for alienation and self-isolation. Actually, the novel's literary frame dwells upon the contrast between presence and absence: Paul exists as a character in the novel but his personality, his active role as a protagonist of the story, is almost inexistent as readers witness his disappearance from the real context and his new presence on Internet platforms. At some point, Lin remarks that "Paul would feel a blandly otherworldly excitement, like he must be in some bizarre and extended dream, or lost in the offscreen world of some fictional movie set in an adjacent country" (*Ivi*, p. 41). Considering the experience of the user and the immediacy of being transported in a three-dimensional space, techno-criticism has shown that "Whereas film is used to show a reality to an audience, cyberspace is used to give a virtual body and a role to everyone in the audience" (Walser 1990, quoted in Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 21). Paul's identity stands in-between his real existence, that provokes low self-esteem and a pathetic image of life, and an imaginary ideal of himself, based on the possibility of constructing a new persona in a virtual dimension. By drawing heavily on Paul's presence online, the narrative deals with what we might define as a *shadow protagonist*, a character who lives in the shadow of an imaginary and alienated identity that allows him to escape from real-world unpleasantness.

In this way, we can take Paul not only as a perfect model of the absent character in a dystopian/cyberfictional narrative but even as a figure who embodies an example of virtual Self. To clarify this point, Ben Agger remarks that by *virtual self* we refer

> […] to the person connected to the world and to others through electronic means such as the Internet, television, and cell phones. Virtuality is the experience of being online and using computers; it is a state of being, referring to a particular way of experiencing and interacting with the world. (Agger 2004, p.1)

Undoubtedly, "virtual reality is the medium that best expresses the contemporary definition of the self" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, p. 21). A Self – an identity – that fades to be recreated through the screen or rather through the hypermediacy between user and reality. At this point a reference to Sherry Turkle's ground-braking analysis is necessary. If from a poststructuralist perspective, we assume that the Ego (identity), is made up of fragments and connections, we must conclude that the Self online is rooted in multiplicity and flexibility. By further elaborating this point, Turkle remarks that online experience is a resolution of our identity in a new parallel space and when we step through the looking glass "we see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine" (Turkle 1999, p. 643). As the protagonist of *Taipei*, we perform our identity on the Internet to construct an image of the modern Self that transcends the boundaries of time and space. On this Lin (2013, p. 76) writes: "Paul woke and opened his MacBook sideways. At some point, maybe after he'd begun refreshing Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail in a continuous cycle – with an ongoing, affectless, humourless realization that his day was over – he noticed with confusion, having thought it was a.m., that it was 4:46 p.m.". If we adopt Turkle's approach for which the online environment produces multiple images of personality, we can easily consider Paul as the user who slips into the screen experiencing a moment of transition between states of the self. In my view, if we consider absence as an evanescence of personality from the real context, the connection through screens and the resulting side-effect of being present online becomes an experience of pure absence.

Following again Žižek's (1997, p. 129) theory for whom in cyberspace as in today's society, there is a tension between the subject's goal and the contingent intrusions which prevent the realization of a realistic identity, likewise, Lin's protagonist embarks on an experience of invisibility to unfold a new personal image. In this sense, the forces that foster Paul's personality are formed by the alternation between nothingness and wholeness. Put simply, the experience of the absent protagonist who *disconnects* and disappears from reality to be absorbed by the immateriality of the Internet, wavers between a sense of wholeness, in the accomplishment of a new image, and the void of absence. As the narrative shows, the screen with which Paul obsessively connects, affects the perception of everyday experience to the point he no longer relates to a real identity but to an avatar that gives him a less realistic but essentially more idealistic image of himself. By further elaborating this concern, *Taipei* proves how the screen functions both as an instrument of evanescence and at the same time as a way to play false images, constructing a new *screen persona*, thus underscoring non-acknowledged aspects of personality.

By portraying the challenges of the web and the concern of contemporary culture, Tao Lin's narrative demonstrates how cyberfiction orients itself toward the figure of the vanishing protagonist or the absentee, as the metaphor of our current approach to a new self-image shaped by digital media. Indeed, the ontological question of absence in the novel demonstrates how virtuality today offers an artificial and novel context of engagement, creating a flexible and mutable image. If, as Kiene Wurth (2012, p. 2) has argued, "the screen has transformed the ways in which we design and approach narratives in literature, we can see quite easily how the vanishing character alters the contemporary novel becoming a mode in between page and screen, visibility and invisibility, realism and artifact".

As we "still struggle to make meaning from our lives on the screen" (Turkle 2004, p. 647), *Taipei* forces the reader to make an effort to follow the vanishing protagonist, dealing with his absence from reality by means of the screen. As such, one might conclude that Tao Lin warns his readers of the challenges of the computer in the digital age. In this sense, cyberfiction proposes a mediated, fragmentary and elusive state of absence, essentially reconstructed in the innumerable spaces offered by the web. In today's technophobic society we need more novels like *Taipei* that force us to confront an absent subject to be able to manage the representation of the new personality in the digital age.

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