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(The) Digital

Writing about “the digital” is a difficult task. Associated with so much quantizing, so much reduction, the digital is itself an expansive, irreducible complex: at once something technical, socioeconomic, cultural, a logic and a subject, a frame and an object; it is imbricated in human and nonhuman nature; it *is* human and nonhuman nature. I recently participated in a panel on ‘digital cultures’.¹ An audience member asked if we speakers agreed that “the digital” was the thing that best described the contemporary: we had all used it in our papers, but also talked of new media and computation, neoliberalism and late capitalism; we had talked about digital things but also stuff that isn’t digital. In the end we agreed it was a significant logic and that to varying degrees it was the concept we were thinking the contemporary through. One of the speakers, Seb Franklin, in his book *Control* (2015), suggests that we are in an episteme of ‘digitality’: both ‘a logical-technical substrate through which certain machines might operate’ and ‘a predominant logical mode with which to address both individual social actors and the body of interactions between these actors that can be dubbed “society”’ (xviii). The digital is both a technical form in the contemporary, and a form that delimits what is thinkable as the contemporary.

In its most literal mode digital is data as discrete element; to digitize is to transform something analogue—something continuously variable—into finite data that can be stored in a limited amount of computer memory, infinitely reproduced, and manipulated using algorithmic formula (Berry 2012, Gere 2002, Wolf 2000). The digital also refers to the sociotechnical situation of distributed networks of electromechanical computing; not only personal (our sovereign *userness*) and mass (surveillance, governance), but nonhuman and infrastructural (data centers, undersea cables, rare earth mineral mining, satellites orbiting the earth, and on). It is difficult to comprehend the complexity of contemporary global computational systems; the scale

of abstraction eludes narrative and imaginary form. Benjamin H. Bratton (2015) has offered up the metaphor of ‘the stack’ to describe the ‘accidental megastructure’ of planetary-scale computation: a situation in which infrastructure is governance. In this situation, human and nonhuman users cohere as subjects in relation to interfaces such as platforms, and devices. Reporting on the interventions of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 US Presidential Election, 2016 UK Referendum on EU membership, and the 2015 Nigerian General Election demonstrates that we do have a narrative form to recognize some of this situation, a partial imaginary: we tell an old story about corporations and breach of trust; a story of surveillance (The Cambridge Analytica Files 2018). In the reporting of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica much is rightly made of the human proponents of the situation, of the researchers, CEOs, and Facebook users. What is less immediately sensible is that this situation is also acted out by planetary-scale networks of nonhuman agents—algorithms, rare earth minerals—and hidden human labour—workers in mining and construction who build media infrastructure, customer experience operatives in software companies who buffer the fall out of the new normal. Any attempt to write this situation is also a part of the situation; how can we grasp the production of more narrative about digital culture as the material reproduction of the toxic environmental conditions of digital culture?

Whether ‘the stack’ or ‘digitality’, the complex being described is an abstraction of software itself as complex. Attending to the abstraction of code is a way to witness the digital as always effacing itself from view. In other words, by focusing in on one level of planetary-scale computation—the operation of programming code—we open a space to think about the problem of the digital more broadly conceived. Describing the development of software as program and platform, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2004) notes, ‘Higher-level programming languages, unlike assembly language, explode one’s instructions and enable one to forget the machine’. Here Chun references the way in which today programming is not an act of working on the machine, or with the machine, as it has historically been (Grier 1996, Light 1999). Working in higher-level programming languages is writing code that is parsed and executed by other assembly and object code. Programming today requires a programmer to forget the machine and to communicate with other (and others’) code. Code appears to function as an

executable language. Writing code and pressing the Enter key appears to do things in the world, to execute action. In practice, code is multiplex. The processes that we might think of as writing code are not actually executable; programming languages must be translated into machine-readable instructions for execution. If source code has been written effectively, it effaces itself; once compiled, it is instead object code. Conversely, only once an action is executed can we properly name source code as source—it is only in the action of effacement that we can identify what would have been the instruction. In other words, software conflates an event with a written command, shifting the word ‘program’ from a verb to a noun (Chun 2008a). This process is how software both does and doesn’t do things in the world; and how users are imbricated in the digital in ways that resist legibility.

Despite technical and historical definitions, the term digital is persistently opaque. It has come to be associated ‘metonymically’ with ‘virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity [...] it is to allude to the vast range of application and media forms that digital technology has made possible’ (Gere 2002, 4). The digital is an expansive culture of applications, media, and experiences, enabled by a specific set of technologies. Life now, life *after* new media, is a process in which the human subject emerges as living mediational entanglement, always becoming-with nonhuman, technological agents (Kember and Zylińska 2012). The digital then is also how the social might be articulated at all. For Franklin (2015, xix-xx), ‘digitality promises to render the world legible, recordable, and knowable via particular numeric and linguistic constructs’. Having a sense of the ways code does and doesn’t do things in the world is to have a sense of the ways subjects do and do not appear in the world at all. In other words, we need to account for the ways computational processes are not only new technologies, but new logics; new grounds for what is thinkable. To this end, we might concur with Matthew Fuller’s (2006) claim that ‘all intellectual work is now a “software study”’. If the algorithmic is the action of computational logic, and computational logic is a mode of contemporary being, then the ways we *do*, *are*, and *be*, might significantly look like the ways of software.

Taking Fuller’s claim seriously means approaching contemporary literary studies as already a digital study. Not only in the sense that all academic work today is digital (our research,

writing and teaching practices are computational to some degree), or in the sense that we may be dealing with digital objects—digital texts and archives. Rather it is digital in the sense the contemporary emerges in terms of the digital. There is no contemporary expression outside of the digital. Digital media is operated—by corporate and individual stakeholders—and operates—as algorithm, as program—throughout culture in such a way to make banal the affective novelty of its being here. In other words, the everyday, just there-ness of digital media is one of the ways we don't notice our becoming-with digital media (Dinnen 2018). Narrative culture, in its recording, manifesting, refracting of normative social practices, offers a means to apprehend these processes. Put differently, 'it is not the job of the scholar of literature to defend the literary from the technological but, rather, to attend with some care to the precise ways in which literature and technology constitute one another' (McPherson, Jagoda, Chun 2013, 616). For scholars such as Lori Emerson (2014) and Caroline Bassett (2007) we need to look to encounter digital media beyond the confines of that media. The contemporary computing industry sells us the promise of 'a more neutral, more direct, inherently better way to interact with our computers and the world around us'; while continuing 'unchecked in its accelerating drive to achieve the perfect black box' (Emerson 2014, 1). Literature can be a vital site for registering the co-constitution of digital technologies and digital subjects. Following Geert Lovink, Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker (2008) we should understand that '[t]echnology has no impact on our culture'; it *is* culture.

If technology is not separate from our lives but is culture, much is at stake in the choice of methods through which we critically apprehend 'technology'. Scholarly work on literature and digital media is not confined to a single field. Scholarship encountering literature through, with, and in the context of, digital media and computational culture focuses on computational poetics (Punday 2015, Tenen 2017); electronic literature and code poetics (*electronic book review* 1996–present; Raley 2001, 2008; Hayles 2008; Bell et al. 2014; Pressman 2014; Hammond 2016); new media studies (Bassett 2007; Nakamura 2002; Nakamura and Chow-White 2011); software studies (Fuller 2003, 2008; Kittler 2008; Chun 2008b, 2011; Galloway 2012); forensic and medium specific analysis (Hayles 2002, 2004; Kirschenbaum 2008; Hayles and Pressman 2013); media archaeology (Gitelman 2006, 2014; Parikka 2012; Emerson 2014); and surveillance and

algorithmic control (Browne 2015; Chun 2016). Most pertinent to this present chapter, is the loose field of scholarly work that reads literature as one of many cultural sites that give aesthetic and affective form to digital and computational culture (Tabbi and Wutz 1997; Hayles 1999; Kervorkian 2006; Punday 2012; Carruth 2014; Franklin 2014; Jagoda 2016; Dinnen 2018; Marczewska 2018). Although many of these studies focus on text, textual scholarship and the literary object, they do not privilege literature, or literary fiction as a category. Across the scholarship that is situated within literary studies, or buttresses that discipline, understanding new media through cultural forms requires engagement with culture as multiplex. Literary fiction does socio-political work, attuning and discombobulating readers through its 'reality effects' and capacity to make sensible the normative drives of everyday life, but it is not an exclusive site for such cultural work. Literary fiction is always in the mix with video games, comics, film, visual art, poetry, genre fiction, instruction manuals, technological platforms, devices, computing histories, all objects and practices of computational life. Understanding literary fiction as part of an ecology of cultural practices, instructions, and sites is a way to encounter the normative action of digital media as we are co-constituted as subjects with it.

Given this multiplex ecology, what value might there be in looking at literary fiction particularly, when looking for the digital in general? Undertaking such work is to recognize the novel forms' novelty; its way of forming again in new media ecologies (with the caveat that new media literary studies are never only *literary* studies). Despite stories of its obsolescence, the novel remains a popular cultural form and moreover an ethically valent form. The novel is 'an important narrative technology of interiority that figures into and changes within a transmedia ecology' (Jagoda 2016, 46). Discursive, descriptive and speculative literary critical methods enable us to apprehend, if not necessarily comprehend, our complex digital condition. Below is a discussion of a novel that rests on the precipice of what it might be to write a literary novel today, in the age of social media, human and nonhuman digital entanglements, after reality TV, after the making banal of publishing your words, and in relation to the computational logics of control society. What does literary fiction about such a condition look like? A novel that attempts to represent the contemporary condition is itself conditioned by the dominant logic; it might also make tangible something of this logic. A novel might make visible, or reveal, some of those

codes—mediation, computation—of the contemporary moment that otherwise remain hidden; we might find in contemporary literature the narratives, metaphors, textualities and materialities that are also out there, operating our everyday digital lives.

Literary Fiction in the Age of New Media²

Sheila Heti's 2010 novel *How Should a Person Be?* is a novel in flux: Sheila is recently divorced, commissioned to write a play she cannot seem to focus on, and in the midst of forming new friendships that influence her creative practice (Heti 2013). Nothing much happens in the way of plot: the novel moves from scene to scene staging the everyday lives of Sheila and her friends, talking, sometimes daydreaming, often reflecting. Heti has spoken of this novel as indebted to reality TV and documentary film (Heti 2012). Formally it is like these things not only in the sense it is a fiction that reads like constructed reality, but also in its investment in scenes of impasse and in-between-ness. The novel is a mediation on its form and is mediational, in the sense Heti considers the way she is becoming a person—a social, identifiable being—*with* media. The novel stages the indeterminacy of becoming a verifiable person as a process, neurotically and obsessively; it is always on the verge of undoing itself (literally, it is barely a novel) as it registers the anxieties and processes of selfing—of constructing, working on, and producing a recognizable social self. In the novel these processes are not always digital technologies, but rather technologies of self-production and expression: art and literature as genres, typewriters and voice recorders as tools, friendship as constitutive of individuals.

How Should a Person Be? is conspicuously nondigital. Aside from a few transcribed emails and a couple references to checking emails, seeing something 'on the internet', there is no sense that Sheila and her friends think of themselves as having differentiated digital lives. In *How Should a Person Be?* digital media appears as a surface of the text; the text itself seems barely aware of it. The anxiety of mediation is present in lieu of the media device itself: "The other night out at the bars, I learned that Nietzsche wrote on a typewriter. It is unbelievable to me, and I no longer feel that his philosophy has the same validity or aura of truth that it formerly did" (89). Emails and scripts are strewn about the novel as the detritus of technologically mediated social interaction. In a mostly glowing review of Heti's book, James Wood (2012) writes off these

communications as red herrings, luring a reader away from Heti's art of fiction: 'Heti may include real emails and recordings of actual conversations, but, of course, her book is shaped and plotted (however lightly), and uses fiction as well as autobiography'. However, Wood misreads the function of the emails and recordings. For Wood these are by-products of processes that remain in the novel as a kind of misdirect, diverting the reader from the authorial labor of fiction. In contrast, I argue that these other media are at the center of the way Heti's narration works at the titular question. The emails and recordings are there to testify, not to some fake documentarian impulse, but rather to processes of mediated self-construction in general. *How Should a Person Be?* is discursive, chatty: there are constant shifts in form, from play scripts to transposed emails, from descriptive prose to allegorical asides; it invokes common communication rather than literary exceptionalism.

Such common communication is a banal investment, where the banal is an effect of refusing to register novelty. The banal marks the place where surprise might have been (Dinnen 2018). In various ways Andy Warhol is the banal figure with whom Heti is in dialogue—as Wood also suggests. At the Basel Art Fair in Miami, Sheila observes a banner over one of the entrances featuring a quote from Warhol: 'Everybody's sense of beauty is different from everybody else's.' Sheila asks Margaux what she thinks it means. 'Oh yeah,' Margaux replies. 'It's saying you can be rich and stupid about art. You're all welcome' (107-8). This exchange establishes Warhol's legacy to Heti's work in terms of a posture of ambivalence that troubles Sheila. Sheila does not respond, because there is nothing left to say but, 'Several hours later, growing tired from the art and the cold, we left' (108). Warhol figures throughout the novel in complex ways. While in the end Heti's text speaks to the particular conditions of digital culture, it puts such a contemporary banal technic in proximity with a prior banal culture.

One of the key technical and mediational subjects of the novel is Sheila's digital tape recorder. The appearance of this shiny object disturbs the novel and defines the kind of literary mode—a social literary mode—that the work will eventually take. The recorder is an allusion to Warhol's art practice. As Pat Hackett (1989, xvi) explains in the introduction to Warhol's diaries, which were themselves transcribed from phone conversations and tape recordings, 'From the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, Andy was notorious for endlessly tape-recording his friends'.

Warhol epitomizes the recursive propensity of the banal that does not simply repeat but almost-not-quite-entirely effaces the possibility of new experiences in its paradoxical commitment to novelty. He is an ambivalent figure in Heti's work, signaling something old and also an investment in the new and now. *How Should a Person Be?* is written in a historical moment when such banal propensity is the structuring logic of dominant modes of communication and artistic production, but also a moment when we are inclined to still want to say something new about life, to express what Lee Konstantinou (2016) has described as 'post-ironic belief'. Although Heti writes her situation in relation to Warhol, the novel is drawing a trace rather than a sameness between the two artists, between the two historical moments. I am interested in how the tape recorder does something quite specifically contemporary in Heti's novel, instantiating a way to engage in social life after digital media, and it is through the allusion to Warhol that such contingency can be witnessed.

In the second chapter of act two Sheila meets her new love, 'a silver digital tape recorder.' It is mutual love at first sight: 'It has long been known to me that certain objects want you as much as you want them' (56). This object is one of the few conspicuously digital items in the novel, and its digitalness is almost beside the point. And yet, because it is one of the few conspicuously digital items in the book, and because it is a reified interface for the digital control society in general—a recorder—it can be read emblematically and allegorically as an ontology of the digital. For Warhol the cassette tape recorder was a way to remove his subjectivity from the social situation; as a prosthesis it marked Warhol as a listener. The playback function was crucial in Warhol's work, where such recordings were never really about the record, the archive; they were about the social, about amplification. For Warhol, 'the appeal of sonic scale was its potential for undermining the private containment of the listener's interiority' (Stadler 2014, 428). For Heti the recorder is also a social mechanism, but more significantly, it is a way to encounter her own mediational agency. After purchasing the recorder, Sheila goes into a coffee shop.

I whispered low into my tape recorder's belly. I recorded my voice and played it back. I spoke into it tenderly and heard my tenderness returned. . . . I wanted to touch every part of it, to understand how it worked. I began to learn what turned

it on and the things that turned it off. (57)

The machine verifies Sheila as herself, and so Sheila is becoming a person with the machine. Sheila falls in love with her machine and confirms her presence through it—I must be real, I can hear myself.

The chapter after Sheila buys the recorder describes the moment when she presents Margaux with the recorder. Margaux is her best friend, the book's main subject. But Margaux hates the idea of the recorder: 'Don't you know that what I fear most is my words floating separate from my body? You there with that tape recorder is the scariest thing!' (59). Sheila has been trying to write a play, but she is stuck. She believes the recorder will get her creativity going. It works. The chapter after Sheila buys the recorder is the first chapter presented as a script; the script describes the moment Margaux is presented with the recorder. Rather than understand this scene as solely a metafictional conceit—where the novel presents itself as a work of art in construction—this scene is an encounter with the novel as digital subject. The digital recorder, and its mobilization as embodied agency, temporarily makes the novel itself unworkable. For a moment, Margaux refuses to make or be the novel; subsequently the novel becomes a play script. Here digital media is reified as a shiny new thing (the recorder) blocking the affective novelty of digital mediation (the condition of being recordable). The destabilizing of the novel at this point allows us to see this process at work: the novel is all of a sudden a play, and the reader is confronted with the transformative mediational novelty of the digital recorder.

The recorder is an allegory for personal digital communications. Through it, Sheila substantiates herself as a social being in the world. It is a tool, a word processor, and as Margaux's reaction suggests, it is a medium that estranges an utterance from the body and simulates that body as itself. This situation is one that belongs to a history of recording and playback audio devices, but is mediationally distinct *after* networked automation and infinite reproducibility. As Galloway has argued (2012, 137) 'whenever a body speaks, it always already speaks as a body codified with an affective identity (gendered, ethnically typed, and so on)'. And now, given the 'postfordist colonization of affect and the concomitant valorization of affective difference, a body has no choice but to speak. A body speaks whether it wants to or not'. The

digital recorder interpolates codified bodies and stands in metonymically for the work of the novel as a whole. In the instance of the recorder's legibility we may register the digital complex as it forms a mediational figure. This figure is the user-subject, and the form of agency afforded it, this, the body at the end of our 'menu-driven identities', is delimited by the program (Nakamura 2002, 113; see also Noble 2018). In Margaux's anxiety of being made to speak, we witness the social dynamic of affective difference in the programmable world(s) of Sheila/Heti. Margaux's anxiety stands in for the readers' capacity to be made to speak as user-subjects. Sheila/Heti writes Margaux into subjectivity through processes of digital capture, enclosure, extraction, abstraction. But Sheila/Heti is also produced as a subject through these same processes: the text creates community out of data; the novel understands the ways characters are seen to be "alike", to be categorically similar. Or, as Sheila puts it after she's watched a video online of 'an heiress' giving 'her boyfriend a hand job': 'Watching her, I felt a kinship; she was just another white girl going through life with her clothes off' (105).

Structurally, the recorder is a mechanism for Sheila's script, and for her social life, which is both digital and analogue material, and both a fictional and nonfictional occurrence. In the novel the appearance of the recorder and the script is a material metaphor for amplification, but this is a mediational rather than effacing process. The recorder signifies a moment when voice is iterated as distinct from writing, and this happens through a shift in the format of the book itself (the change in layout to script) as well as through the introduction to the narrative of a voice-recording device. No longer is the novel only narrating to us, it is also performing voices; this is marked by Margaux's comments and by the fact that characters now speak independently of Sheila's voice. Characters' names appear before they speak.

MARGAUX

Well, *of course* there are people here that are really truly great! But how could you see that? Like, for instance, if Takeshi Murakami had just one of his sculptures here, you wouldn't know how good it was. (103)

Corollary to the script in the novel are the emails represented on the page as numbered lists, in smaller font, graphically distinct from the general narration. Heti attends to the difference of

email as a distinct medium within the novel—something other than the novel: ‘*One morning, Sheila finds an email from Margaux*’ (35). The novel is undone by the emails and the scripts because they are not within the constraints of the fiction; they attest to Sheila Heti’s social life, mediation as becoming-with, and Sheila Heti’s work as author. In Heti’s novel the emails and scripts are conversation. Conversation is the social. In the novel Sheila wants her work to be social, she wants it to be *this*, the conversation.

New Media Sincerity

As categories of the new sincerity, post-postmodernism and postdigital presume to describe an aesthetic and political imperative of US art and literature in the twenty-first century. As Konstantinou (2013, 419) has suggested, these terms circulate in relation to others: ‘globalization, cosmodernism, metamodernism, altermodernism, digimodernism, performatism, postpositivist realism, the New Sincerity, or, for more lexically austere analysts, the contemporary’. What is at stake in which term you turn to, and how you use it, is the question of what kind of cultural break has or has not been enabled by the ongoingness of late capitalism and the dominance of neoliberalism, or, at the anthropocenic scale, the ‘crisis of “ongoingness” that is both the cause and effect of our species’ inability to pay its ecological and financial debts’ (Bratton 2015, 303). In the particular geopolitical conditions of liberal democracies of the global north, this stuckness often manifests in art as a question of expression, authenticity, and mediation: how do we work with or move on from our mediated subjectivity? Writing about a new sincerity in the films of Wes Anderson, Warren Buckland (2012, 2) suggests, ‘In a dialectical move, new sincerity *incorporates* postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony’. Similarly, contemporary internet art practices are also contending with the constraints of medial commodification. For the artist Jennifer Chan (2014, 110), ‘This particular cultural moment is defined by digital identity formation that vacillates between two extremes: careful self-curation and “indiscriminate over-sharing.” . . . Initiative is both self-interested and ideological’. The social context of these art practices is one in which the largest platforms of the internet can confidently assert themselves as communities where people use their authentic identities, their “real” names. To be real, to be authentic, is both a cultural-political demand and a technical one:

if “false” code is input, the program will not run, or it will run, and in the process, become something else.

In act two, chapter six of *How Should a Person Be?* Sheila has a dream about her play and calls her Jungian analyst, Ann: ‘I went to my computer and made it gently ring’ (81). The analysis session is presented in script form. After Sheila recounts the dream, Ann suggests that Sheila is anxious because she keeps quitting things she thinks might be dangerous: her marriage, the play. To this Sheila responds:

(defensive) Wait! I want to cancel the play not because it’s *dangerous*, but because life doesn’t feel like it’s in my stupid play, or with me sitting in a room *typing*. And life wasn’t in my marriage anymore, either. Life feels like it’s with Margaux—*talking*—which is an equally sincere attempt to get somewhere, just as sincere as writing a play. (82)

Here is the question of how to be social as it is posed in the novel. It is also the edge of the novel, the point at which the novel is not itself but rather a general iteration of the status quo. This is not just a meditation on the literary work in the manner of something typed versus something verbal, or a solo authorial project versus a social one. It is also a moment in which the novel recognizes the work of the social. There is a precarious indistinctness of work and social life endemic to workers in the creative economy and to everyone as social media users in the contemporary moment. The edge of Heti’s novel is where her sociality is also the material of her labor. This edge is fully incorporated *in* the text in those passages that are, and reflect on, Heti’s social work. The barely perceptible but ubiquitous presence of digital media in the novel blocks the apprehension of new modes of artistic production and social life instantiated by digital media, but this aesthetic of obfuscation can be apprehended through a critique formed in relation to the digital as both a ‘logical-technical substrate’ and a ‘predominant logical mode’ (Franklin 2015, xviii).

Describing the ‘informalities and ethics of new media culture,’ Chan identifies the contemporary condition as that ‘which is as much about the existential and ethical dimension of making art online and the creation of surplus value around its affects, as it is about the politics

and anxieties that exist around so called post-internet art practices' (108). Today artists 'write, curate, blog, chat, comment. With every interaction, your playtime is the corporate network's goldmine. Under post-internet conditions artists must capitalize on boredom, busyness, and procrastination' (116). This command/condition is a function of creative labor within what Jodi Dean (2005, 2010) names 'communicative capitalism' and Tiziana Terranova (2013) figures in terms of 'immaterial labor': processes by which conversation—sociality—is creative work. This condition is writ large through *How Should a Person Be?*, but only if the novel is understood in terms of mediation and the digital, rather than a literary category apart from everyday technoculture. James Wood writes of *How Should a Person Be?* that 'Heti never pursues that solitary note with the rigor that it deserves. It is easier, more charming, more hospitable, more successfully evasive, to bring in the gang of friends and get a 'vaguely intelligent' conversation going'. For Wood the sway of the social is a problem; it is an evasive maneuver that gets Heti out of her authorial duty. I argue that the social is, in fact, *the* work of the novel.

The published novel, authored by, credited to, Sheila Heti, is testament to the compromise of how social a novel can be. It can be a conversation to the extent that it incorporates the transcription of conversation, of sociality, so long as it remains marketable as a novel. To fully address what is to be gained from situating this novel beyond its literary milieu, it is important to consider what is at stake in reading this text as a meditation on the digital instead of as a literary work of post-postmodernism and the new sincerity. This is, after all, a novel, and as described, it stages various scenes of thwarted writing that result in Sheila Heti's social methodology. On the back cover blurb Miranda July calls this work a 'new kind of book and a new kind of person, . . . a major literary work'; Lena Dunham describes it as 'a really amazing metafiction-meets-nonfiction novel'. These remarks frame the book as literary. It is not only in discourse with the constructed nonfiction of reality TV, the banal postmodern gestures of Warhol's artwork, and the social work of art in a postinternet market; *How Should a Person Be?* also exemplifies the post-postmodern discourse of contemporary literature as it attempts to document a new kind of subject, one that is both invested in the authenticity of emotion (nonfiction, sincerity) and the necessity of representation (metafiction, irony).

The new(ly) sincere encounter is with the problem of the person; how might we be a good

one? In recent scholarship on post-postmodern literature and the new sincerity by Nicoline Timmer (2010), Stephen J. Burn (2008), Adam Kelly (2011), and Lee Konstantinou (2013), the post-postmodern is understood as having a renewed interest in character. Whereas postmodern literature and art decentred the human subject, post-postmodernism addresses and produces a thinking, feeling, interpersonal human subject. The category of the interpersonal is where my interest in the social of Heti's novel as a new mediational form meets a literary critical interest in how the contemporary novel engenders characters who think and feel in relation to one another. In both cases contemporary literature is being read as responding in various ways to postmodern literature's experiments with ahistorical, fragmentary, holographic networks of characters; and to the commodification of social life through digital media in ever more banal ways. As Konstantinou notes (2013, 419), in 'our post-postmodern moment, the social transforms itself into what Mark Zuckerberg calls the "social graph," generated on a digital platform owned by some friendly, for-profit corporation'. Literature and digitality constitute one another and are like one another to the extent they are processes for both capturing social life, making that life legible in normative ways, and revealing these operations as such.

Discussion of post-postmodernism understands itself in response to the 'information society' and is cognizant of many of the sociopolitical aspects of a new media life. However, little attention is paid to how, within computational culture, software might be the layer at which interpersonal, authentic subjectivity is delimited. In other words, what is identified in literary criticism as a problem of sincerity is actually codified in ubiquitous, obfuscatory, everyday mediational systems as a computational logic of verification. As posthuman and nonhuman studies have made clear, the thinking, feeling, interpersonal subject is always mediational (Braidotti 2013, Grusin 2015). To this end questions of authenticity are protocological—structurally endemic to digital culture. The intimacy of the scene of sincerity as it might be read in contemporary literature is always an intimacy with the scene of digital media. Whereas a post-postmodern analysis might suggest that Heti's novel is about the viability of the interpersonal, feeling subject of literature *after* postmodernism (after reality TV, and Warhol), I suggest that it is a novel about the ontology of a social subject in the contemporary digital situation.

In Nicoline Timmer's account of post-postmodernism (2010, 359), one of the dominant

critical investments of this new literary genre is sharing. ‘In the post-postmodern novel “sharing” is important; for example sharing stories as a way to “identify with others” (and to allow others to identify with you)’. Timmer frames this in terms of writing by Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, which conscientiously, but anxiously, presents the act of voicing others’ stories as ethically vital. For Timmer, in the post-postmodern novel ‘a desire for some form of community or sociality is highlighted’; there is ‘a structural need for a we’. Reading *How Should a Person Be?* we encounter a similar investment in community and a belief in the power of sharing stories. As Sheila tells Ann, her life ‘feels like it’s with Margaux—*talking*—which is an equally sincere attempt to get somewhere’. But if sharing is a demand of communicative capitalism, and moreover is an algorithmically determined and determining social action in which the body speaks whether it wants to or not, then a contemporary aesthetics of sharing is mediational and protocological. Timmer posits literature as the genre that is being contested and challenged from within; how do we make the solitary novel a ‘we’? Heti’s novel exemplifies how talking is a common command of digital culture. As a ‘we’ appears in the novel it is contesting the very right of literature as a genre, and the novel as a dominant expressive medium, to exist. Heti’s digital tape recorder and her emails remind the reader that there is no separate space in which we encounter the literary object and no non-digital medium through which the writer appears.

The contemporary ‘we’ is complex. Any ‘we’ now is likely to form through, and speak as, a corporate platform, a proprietary program, nonhuman agents. In the end the answer to Heti’s titular question is that we should be empathetic, a friend, a participant. The novel knows that these are not simple things; it is itself a commodification of these things. The novel has a life beyond itself, in the offline and online bodies of Sheila Heti and her real friends. Heti’s novel incorporates its own concern about the value of the novel today, not as a newly sincere invocation of literary value, but as a digital recording device that destabilizes the authorial work of construction and effaces the individual creator while it reifies the false transparency of recording. *How Should a Person Be?* refuses to resolve its own problem, to create a text that could answer its own question. It remains unsettled, disturbing the operations of digital culture, holding on to a sense that there is emerging, in Miranda July’s words, a new kind of person.

Notes

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² The following sections are adapted from *The Digital Banal*, Dinnen 2018.

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