Patterns of Posthuman Numbness in Shirley & Gibson's "The Belonging Kind" and Egger's *The Circle* [1]

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Introduction: The future, the posthuman, the transhuman, and the symbol of the circle

In his sixth and last column for the magazine *Interzone*, author Bruce Sterling recounts how the cyberpunk movement and its poetics had sprouted in the early 1980s thanks to a small group of writers—Rucker, Shiner, Shirley, Gibson, and himself—arguably to die only a few years later. Being not only one of those cyberpunk pioneers but also a critical commentator of this sci-fi sub-genre, Sterling pointed out the capacity of cyberpunk to anticipate a bleak forthcoming for humanity and to erase any previous confidence in the future that classic sci-fi might have offered sometimes to its readers. By the end of the 20th Century, once postmodernism had questioned, demoted or even erased the old Western values from their traditional centralized position, the use of technology was not going to be necessarily positive or lead to the massive creation of immortal perfect beings. On the contrary, his analysis of the condition of humanity at the turn of the millennium turned out to be rather uncertain if not pessimistic. In his own words, it had become clear that "there are no sacred boundaries to protect humans from themselves." Sterling interrogated the possibilities for the future of humankind and dramatically declared:

> Our place in the universe is basically accidental. We are weak and mortal, but it's not the holy will of the gods; it's just the way things happen to be at the moment. And this is radically unsatisfactory; not because we direly miss the shelter of the Deity, but because, looked at objectively, the vale of human suffering is basically a dump. The human condition can be changed, and it will be changed, and is changing; the only real questions are how and to what end. (1997, 4)

By the end of the second millennium, critic N. Katherine Hayles profusely debated on how our vale of human suffering was turning our old species into the new posthuman one. Strongly relying on Norbert Wiener's theories, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999)

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Hayles defined the new evolved creature as being the result of a strong techno-scientific and cultural change, and linked the new paradigmatic condition to our increasing understanding that we are basically the result of information and information patterns. Not surprisingly, unlike the pessimistic cyberpunk prophecies for our near future, the consideration of being as information led other critics under the umbrella of the posthuman paradigm to develop the notions of *transhuman*, *transhumanism* and *transhumanity*. With these notions they signified the new physical or existential state which results of (bio)technological body enhancements and the predictable advent of processes in which human memories or even a full consciousness might expand their life spans by inhabiting a technological device or a virtual space (see Tirosh-Samuelson, 9–23). However, the optimistic transhuman approach seems to have, at least, two big flaws. On the one hand, there is only a very limited group of (mostly wealthy) people who can or will have access to sophisticated body enhancement (bio)technology, leaving the rest exposed to living conditions that, as things go, might increasingly lower the species down to the level of an *infra*humanity. On the other, in the formulation of the posthuman the basic premise that humans are information make of them (of us) an easy target of mass media manipulation. As the following pages exemplify in the grounds of fiction, in the 1950s Wiener's insights on the issue of mass manipulation connected to the development of cybernetics proved to be prophetic—and somehow coincidental with the findings of the Marxist Frankfurt School. While discussing informational patterns as the key to develop artificial intelligence, for Wiener the erosion of limits between human and machine became one of the big issues to account for the future of humanity. Although he was mostly concerned about developing intelligent machines that would replicate human brain patterns, when looking at his aim from the opposite perspective Wiener also anticipated unnerving results:

> I have spoken of machines, but not only of machines having brains of brass and thews of iron. When human atoms are knit into an organization in which they are used, not in their full right as responsible human beings, but as cogs and levers and rods, it matters little that their raw material is flesh and blood. What is used as an element in a machine, is in fact an element in the machine (185, emphasis in the original).

In line with the most pessimistic perspectives that can be drawn from Wiener's ideas, at the turn of the millennium thinkers like Francis Fukuyama updated the traditional fears raised by the increasing levels of hybridity operating between the human and the other. Thus, Fukuyama took into account cognitivism, genetic engineering and, in general, the risks that biotechnology represents for the future of the so far called human species (Fukuyama, 18–40, 72–102, and Part III: "What To Do"). As anticipated by Wiener, such fears openly clash against the beliefs in a more positive transhuman future, beliefs that were also questioned in the grounds of fiction and the cinema, sometimes in very subtle ways.

This work offers a contrastive analysis of two fictional narratives rather dissimilar in their styles: a short story by cyberpunk writers John Shirley and William Gibson and a novel by Dave Eggers. Its main aim is to focus on both narratives as reflections of the limits that a transhuman approach may find from our present condition. Interestingly, both narratives share a deep concern with the lack of critical capacity seemingly existing among people living in the United States and, by extension, in western societies. In line with Wiener's early analyses of the relations between humans and machines, McLuhan's theory of self-amputation and Bauman's concept of modern liquidity help to a reading of each narrative as being far away from any optimistic notion of transhumanism. Furthermore, the two literary works are also analyzed as examples of the dystopic and anti-mythic drive that the three writers provide for the notion of the circle, an ancient symbol frequently associated to the continuity of life and the permanent durability of existence. It is a well-known cultural fact that early in the 20th Century, the symbol of the circle became a powerful sign among modernist artists and thinkers, from Eliot to Jung, to resuscitate a mythic understanding of life that could somehow replace the decreasing importance of Christian religion (see Manganaro, 1–110). Some decades later, both at the peak of postmodernism (Shirley and Gibson's story) and in early 21st Century (Eggers's novel), it seems that irony and pragmatism have already displaced the positive and almost religious power previously conferred to the circle. Finally, this chapter evaluates the motif of the chase to round up the contrastive analysis of the two works and point out their allegedly different but complementary understanding of human development (or stagnation) at both sides of the crucial turn of the millennium.

Before and beyond the crossing of the millennium: The forge of posthuman numbness

At the beginning of the Introduction to his collection of essays *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan wrote this illuminating and prophetic passage:

> After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological *simulation of consciousness*, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (3, emphasis added)

McLuhan published his book in 1964, anticipating in some years Baudrillard's well-known theories about our present condition of living at the third stage of the simulacrum ("The

Orders of Simulacra," 1983). His impressive capacity of analysis allowed the Canadian literature professor to foresee a simulation of human consciousness that might be achieved thanks to the new technologies and become epistemologically complete, covering everybody in the planet—which led to his well-known notion of our world becoming a global village, in which human individuals are its "electrodes." Fifty years after the publication of *Understanding Media*, in his novel *The Circle* (2013) David Eggers fictionalized the ideological implications that such completion of the circle of knowledge would have when it might be extended "collectively and corporately … to the whole of human society." Thus, we may assume that, echoing McLuhan's theory, Egger's narrative also relates to the process of self-amputation that the Canadian thinker associated to the acquisitions of new technological skills or extensions of man that precede the alleged process of total collective knowing. However, with his characteristic cryptic style, McLuhan also pointed out that with every new extension of man a price has to be paid: self-amputation. "The effects of technology," he claimed, "do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily *and without any resistance*" (18, emphasis added). More explicitly, in one of the most widely cited essays collected in his book, "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis," McLuhan warned his readers that acquiring a new extension brings about a process of narcosis or numbness. Narcissus became numb when watching his reflective extension in the water and, as a result, he drowned. However, in his interpretation of the classic myth, the Canadian professor pragmatically concludes that Narcissus did not drown because he was in love with himself—as we have been repeatedly told—but because he was not aware that the reflection in the water was his own image. Thus, lack of self-awareness becomes an open gate to human inanity. Furthering his contention, McLuhan argues that "self-amputation forbids self-recognition" (42), which results in the fact that our culture is (already was in the 1960s) "narcotized." What follows in his essay on narcosis is the development of a well-known notion that has been amply proven by the abundant literature existing on the effects produced by the excessive use of the smart-phone or of constantly surfing the Internet. As he asserts, "The principle of self-amputation as an immediate relief of strain on the central nervous system applies very readily to the origin of the media of communication from speech to computer" (43). In other words, the extension takes over. As a result, our consciousness is suppressed, and thus we become slaves of the system.

When electric technology arrived, man "extended, or set outside himself." McLuhan interprets that such change becomes a "suicidal" process of self-amputation because any technological extension demands "new ratios or equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body" (45). In the field of creative literature, such process results, among others, in the eventually bodiless new creatures that William Gibson declared to exist when, by surfing the web, his cyberpunk characters "left the meat behind" in his first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984). In cyberpunk but also in terror fiction and film, it is frequent to find

warning and scary images of new kinds of individuals as empty shells or even as contemporary living-dead moving from material into virtual space and back. These creatures have proliferated in written and audio-visual narratives of the last decades as symbolic icons of the collective process of ultimate self-amputation. Such abundant dystopic symbolism on the results brought about by the transformation of the human into new intended transhuman creatures insistently points towards unwanted consequences existing in the present paradigmatic shift.

Belonging nowhere and everywhere or the pre-millennium community

Closer to the publication of McLuhan's book than to Eggers' novel, John Shirley and William Gibson's short story "The Belonging Kind" already offered in the early 1980s a symbolic reading of humanity as being in the process of becoming self-amputated and, thus, numbed by its new condition. The reasons for such process to take place clearly point to the capitalist system and its resulting consumer's society. Life in Shirley and Gibson's story has become a circle of production and consumption that keeps people subdued to the status quo. Thus, in practice, they become slaves of apparently unknown forces whose nature, although in a conceited way, is gradually revealed by the cyberpunk authors along the pages of their short story. Their tale explicitly describes the means to acquire the ultimate extensions of man: from fashion and shape shifting to money making, which leads to a reading of "The Belonging Kind" as a subtle exemplification of that condition of our times that Bauman's famously denominated "liquid modernity." Although from a different perspective, Bauman complements McLuhan's theories when he contends that by the end of the 20th Century, traditional solid ideologies have been erased to be replaced only by shallow and permanently flowing consumption, a move that systematically decreases the critical capacity of the human being—McLuhan's self-amputated individual. Stylistically, Shirley and Gibson's tale borrows some elements from horror and sci-fi narratives and films, whereas it coincides with Egger's novel in the use of Henry James's old strategies of focalization. In both works, their shared realist style relies on the never-explained omniscience of a narrator that abundantly focalizes the story through the perception of the main protagonist—James's "center of consciousness" technique (see Miller, 124–25). However, in both stories it is also difficult or at least paradoxical to imagine their respective focalizing protagonists as centers of "consciousness." In the case of these two narratives, James's old strategy should be better addressed as a center of *lack of* consciousness because their protagonists finally embrace McLuhan's stage of narcotic self-amputation.

First published in 1981 and later included in Gibson's short-story collection *Burning Chrome* (1986), "The Belonging Kind" is a strange tale that transgresses the classic boundaries existing between narratives of manners, horror, and sci-fi stories. Its unknown

omniscient narrator follows the protagonist, a man named Coretti who, in his turn, chases obsessively a mysterious girl from bar to bar in a big city. By means of quick narrative brushes, Coretti is soon described as somebody who does not fit well anywhere he goes: he is a teacher of linguistics in a community college but paradoxically he is unable to communicate with other people, even if he goes to many bars trying to establish new friendships (Shirley & Gibson, 44). The narrator portrays him as somebody who lives in isolation; even his ex-wife thinks that "he didn't look as though he belonged anywhere in the city" (44). However, Coretti's life experiences a dramatic change when, attracted by a girl, he begins to stoke her. The element of fantasy appears when eventually the protagonist realizes that the girl he is so obsessed about has the outstanding capacity to change her dress and shape in keeping with the type of bar or club she visits. She is a contemporary shape-shifter, a new version of one of the oldest creatures that have traditionally inhabited mythologies all around the world. However, Shirley and Gibson's interest does not seem to rely on past mythologies. When, after much effort, Coretti is able to start a conversation with the shape-shifter, she replies by imitating his own tone and insecure voice. However, the narrator informs readers that she is not a mimic, but one of the "belonging kind"; she fits perfectly in any environment because of her capacity to transform her *emotionless self* accordingly. That is, in addition to her capacity to shift her shape and clothes, she is a creature in the tradition of Eliot's hollow men, an impassive living-dead that is, as McLuhan's Narcissus, unconscious of her own self, moving along an urban environment described by the narrator in terms of quickly shifting bars, dresses, and drinks. In addition, the narrative voice offers different descriptions of the settings the characters visit that frequently refer to their Art Deco decoration and to mass-produced furniture, which may allow readers to conclude the important role played by popular culture, consumerism, and the mass media in the formation of the mysterious "Belonging Kind." Thus, early in the story Coretti "pushed resolutely between the empty chrome–and-Formica tables" of the bar she had previously entered (Shirley & Gibson, 44). Later, he follows her to a club: "Lothario's was a quiet complex of rooms hung with ferns and Art Deco mirrors. There were fake Tiffany lamps hanging from the ceiling" (48). Moreover, the narrator provides descriptions that are frequently mediated by mirrored images. Those reflections come from actual mirrors but also from bottles and glass-ware of the bars they visit, and offer readers the possibility to know the moral but also the physical description of the protagonist ("he studied himself in the mirror, behind the bar, a thirtyish man with thinning hair…" 44). A mirror may even produce a paradoxical "dark clarity" (44). They are symbolic warnings that direct access to reality is not possible any longer; nothing appears beyond the array of clothes, drinks and bars that, condensed in the figure of the girl, continuously lure the protagonist into abandoning his previous life as a linguist who can still recognize himself in the mirror.

While Coretti follows the shifting girl and an accompanying male friend from bar to bar, the protagonist gradually builds an incredible tolerance to alcoholic drinks, similar to the strange creatures' he is following (47). If in the first pages of the story Coretti is still conscious of his own being and able to study himself in the mirror, his state of self-consciousness will progressively disappear. At an early stage of his metamorphosis and despite his heavy drinking, he is still able to understand the shallow nature of the creatures he is chasing: "They were the kind you see in bars who seem to have grown there, who seem genuinely at home there. Not drunks, but human fixtures. Functions of the bar. The belonging kind" (49). The shifting, fluid creatures in their sea of fashion and alcohol, may recall features of disguised invaders from sci-fi horror movies from the 1950s, especially in the episode when the protagonist follows them to their hotel room. There, Coretti discovers that they perch like birds and even show "membranes, third eyelids that reflected the faint shades of neon from the window" (54). The protagonist's shock when he sees the perching creatures may bring to mind the horror to which the human protagonists of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) were exposed when they realized that their town was in the process of being taken by extraterrestrial impersonators. In the case of Siegel's film, his terrifying creatures symbolically might embody the fear of communist deceivers in times of the Cold War. However, in Shirley and Gibson's tale, the flowing, liquid embodiments of the belonging kind more likely represent the numbed condition of the people in developed countries who are trapped in the cycle of consumerism, a condition associated to the incapacity of the individual to see and experience actual reality due to the luring veils fabricated by the mass media. Thus, the creatures' full description from the perspective of a still horrified Coretti is pervasively imbued with the notion of an indirectly visual and always-mediated approach to reality:

> At first he thought that their eyes were open, but then he realized that the dull pupils were sealed beneath nictitating membranes, third eyelids that reflected the faint shades of neon from the window. They wore whatever the last bar had called for; shapeless Salvation Army overcoats sat beside bright suburban leisurewear, evening gowns beside dusty factory clothes, biker's leather by brushed Harris tweed. With sleep, all spurious humanity had vanished. They were roosting. (54)

It is sufficient for the belonging kind to consume their alcoholic liquids and they can shift clothes and appearances, provide insubstantial conversations as if they were "functions of the bar" and, as Coretti eventually discovers, even make money out of their own bodies, which they use to buy more drinks that allow their existential consumerist cycle to start again. Increasingly, Shirley and Gibson's tale shows a profound pessimism in the future of humanity that Coretti represents. Despite his disturbing findings about these creatures with three eyelid layers, the protagonist becomes further attracted to them. As a result, he loses his job at the community college, symbolically renounces any religious belief and finally, after much drinking, becomes able to fabricate his own money (56). His first act of fluid copulation with the girl he had been stoking happens also in a bar, after which he is able to

maintain a mindless conversation with the bartender, which prompts the narrator to add the final ironic sentence in the story: "And [Coretti] said it right. Like a real human being" (57).

According to Bauman, constructing a durable identity in liquid modernity becomes increasingly difficult if not impossible. The task, he writes,

> is consumption, and consumption is an utterly, irredeemably individual pastime, a string of sensations which can be experienced – lived through – only subjectively. The crowds filling the interiors of George Ritzer's "temples of consumption" are gatherings, not congregations; clusters, not squads; aggregates, not totalities. However crowded they may be, there is nothing "collective" in the places of collective consumption. (97)

Shirley and Gibson's liquid consumers of fashion, alcohol, and empty conversations live mechanic lives that are centered on the notion of "satisfaction in distraction." In addition, the sharp cyberpunk authors frequently connect such type of life to Art Deco and mass culture as indicators of the progressive lack of solid ideologies that characterizes postmodern or liquid modernity. In "The Belonging Kind," the stoker is finally absorbed into his alleged prey's species when, as McLuhan's Narcissus, he becomes unable to recognize himself in the mirror any longer. Coretti's human image disappears when his former solid isolation progressively gives way to his utter dissolution into the social, allegedly inane *closed circle* of consumption that characterizes the belonging kind. The result is a paradoxical new type of being, a non-conscious member of a monstrous gathering, unable to recognize his self as distinctive from the others. The same as tourists do, the belonging kind accept everything they see wherever they go and leave their money to the place, without altering the system in any way. As mentioned above, in the final scene of the tale, Coretti mechanically initiates an act of copulation with the girl. A strong sense of fluidity marks the sexual encounter:

> After the third margarita their hips were touching, and something was spreading through him in slow orgasmic waves. It was sticky where they were touching; an area the size of the heel of his thumb where the cloth had parted. He was two men: the one inside fusing with her in total cellular communion, and the shell who sat casually on a stool at the bar, elbows on either side of his drink, fingers toying with a swizzle stick. Smiling benignly into space. Calm in the cool dimness. (57)

Again, Bauman's ideas are revelatory of the protagonist's plight: "The body orifices (the points of entry) and the body surfaces (the places of contact) are now the primary foci of terror and anxiety generated by the awareness of mortality" (184). Finally, once their sticky touching has displaced his former body orifices, Coretti is accepted into the communitarian tribe of the *un*self-conscious belonging kind, at a time in which communitarianism has been

increasingly accepted as a mechanical and sedative alternative to the existential horrors still found in the fluid condition of contemporary society (Bauman 170-71).

The Circle of Knowledge or the implosion of the human

If Coretti's fluid conversion into the inane belonging kind is achieved by his entrance and absorption into the circle of consumerism, in Eggers' novel *The Circle* the story stops at the verge of completing a cycle also related to consumerism but with new posthuman nuances. Shirley and Gibson's circle of consumerism and alcoholic drinks at the end of the millennium has been amplified in the more recent story to incorporate the transforming role information plays in our present lives. If Bauman focuses on fluidity, as mentioned above McLuhan does on ratios. In Egger's story, the ratios that defined the traditional human individual are strongly disrupted by the ever-increasing information flows that constitute the main product the Circle social network acquires, produces, and sells, together with its implementing technological tools. Built as an updated story of Bentham's Panopticon for the age of information and social nets, Egger's novel offers his readers an ironic perspective of a new type of belonging kind, characterized by the stupefied condition that you can see every day present in so many people who are unable to control the power that their smartphones have over them. The omniscient narrator in *The Circle* follows the progress of young protagonist Mae Holland after she gets a job at the powerful technological corporation and social network The Circle. From her new position, she will quickly advance to one of the most important and privileged ranks in the corporation, very close to two of the so-called three "Wise Men" who set up the company. The final and subversive aim of The Circle is to complete what they denominate "the circle of knowledge," that is to say, to reach an absolute control of all possible existing information, an aim that demands the end of privacy and also, eventually, of human individuality. Egger portraits his characters as beings linked to an updated repertoire of informational devices that force them to become progressively trapped and consumed by their own anxiety for info-consumption; they grow into the flesh and blood exemplification of McLuhan's human electrode.

Although Mae becomes increasingly absorbed by the multiple informational tasks she is assigned, seemingly unaware of the dangers they represent, we find in the figure of her ex-boyfriend Mercer the renegade who, close to McLuhan's ideas, is not ready to accept the tyranny of the social net corporation. On the contrary, he foresees the gigantic dangers involved in the completion of the circle of knowledge. Where Mae, as Coretti did, stops being a self-conscious individual and is absorbed by the mechanical attraction of communitarianism, Mercer stays alert and self-conscious, avoiding his exposure to the new technologies and their increasing demands for personal information.

Strongly resounding of Orwell's dystopic analysis of the authoritarian society in *1984*, "Secrets are Lies, Sharing is Caring, and Privacy is Theft" become the new political mottoes of the social network. The maxims are attributed to Mae but they have been subtly forced out of her mind by one of her bosses. The two "wise men" who actually control the company use such mottoes to justify the necessity to end privacy and install little devices, ironically called "SeeChange cameras," all over the planet. The Shakespearean "se*a* change" extolled by Ariel to celebrate the mythic cycle of life in *The Tempest* becomes in Egger's novel a net of machines to find and control information all over the world. Thus, the new Circle will have access to all information flows and trap in it all existing beings. In a letter to his former girlfriend, self-conscious Mercer writes as follows:

> "We are not meant to know everything, Mae. […] You people are creating a world of ever-present daylight, and I think it will burn us all alive. There will be no time to reflect, to sleep, to cool. Did it occur to you Circle people, ever, that we can only contain so much? Look at us. We're tiny. Our heads are tiny, the size of melons. You want these heads of ours to contain everything the world has ever seen? It will not work." (547–48)

In other words, Mercer recognizes the dangers of the ultimate extension of man and prophesizes a gigantic McLuhanean *short-circuit* if the circle of knowledge ever comes to completion. However, Mae is irreversibly trapped in her own dumbness. Her technologically narcotized condition does not allow her to stop believing that such completion will bring peace and unity to the world. She is no longer conscious of her extremely limited self and, like Narcissus, she is ready to jump into the waters of her own ruin. Egger has constructed her as a prototypical antihero, but adapted her role to the posthuman environment foreseen by Wiener and McLuhan: the more important she becomes in the company, the more screens are added to her desk, the more messages she needs to answer, and the more on-line groups she needs to belong to. Increasingly, her personality is taken over by the technological extensions she has to use in her job. At an earlier stage, she can still cope with the demands: "She was asked to sign a petition for more vegan options at lunch; she did. There were nine messages from various work-groups within the company, asking her to join their sub-Circles for more specific updates and information sharing. For now she joined the ones dedicated to crochet, soccer, and Hitchcock" (135). However, in line with Bauman's analysis of fluid modernity, she is soon infected by ideas of "community first" and "transparency," which eventually lead the protagonist and still center of consciousness to stop having any private life and to stay in the Circle premises, making her social life part of her job. Egger details the process that turns Mae into a source of increasing income for the company in a formula that adds and mixes ideas of communitarianism to Wiener's centralization of information and McLuhan's theories on the modification of human ratios resulting of the use of extensions. In other

words, the more influential the protagonist becomes, the more people follow her advice to purchase goods and services, and the more revenue the Circle obtains. Accordingly, within the social structure of the company, her so-called "conversion rate" increases on a par with her position in the Circle (319). The same as happened to Coretti, her private habits—symbolized in the activity of solitary kayaking—give way to her almost totally public existence when she enrolls in an experiment to go "transparent" and becomes the surveillance object of anybody who wishes to connect to her camera. In sequential episodes, Egger describes the process by means of which a human being becomes almost totally self-amputated in the interrelation with her extensions. The result is that Mae becomes a living (?) camera-eye whose main purpose is for everybody else to go "transparent" and thus complete the circle of knowledge. Induced by sinister Bailey, the "Wise Man" who eventually takes control of the company, Mae declares that "Secrets are lies" among the "stampeding applause" of the Circle's multitude (385) in a public act that puts an end to Book I of the novel.

The second part of *The Circle* opens with a reference to what eventually develops as the main symbol for Bailey, the eventual controller of everything in the corporation. He has planned an experiment with a tank of water where a turtle and some sea-horses are expected to coexist with a new species of shark which, as the Circle aims to do to the whole world, is transparent. Despite being regularly fed, the shark eventually kills and devours every living being in the tank, as metaphoric indication that Bailey's plan of "transparency" for the whole planet is the prelude to its devastation. The issue at stake is, of course, who may control the one who controls all information. As progressively—and seemingly unawares— Mae helps Bailey to convince both people at the Circle and an increasing number of politicians to go transparent, Mercer's previous words of warning become prophetic. SeaChange cameras are installed all over the planet, and Mae develops a conspiratorial scheme to control American democracy by means of a new social program called Demoxie or "direct democracy" (507–08).

After all, it is the Chase again: *Homo homini lupus*

As pointed out above, both Coretti in "The Belonging Kind" and Mae in *The Circl*e follow a similar path of dissociation from their individual consciousness, motivated by a number of extensions that require the rearrangement or self-amputation of their former (human) capacities. By his sticky-touching coupling with the girl, a new uninsulated Coretti extends and is absorbed by the belonging kind. Thanks to her capacity to interact with technological devices, Mae's individual perception is extended with similar results: she becomes narcotized by the need to attain all possible information, thus increasing her "conversion rate." Along her process of being absorbed by the surveillance machines, she even brings

about the public exposure of her parents' sexual life (468–71) and, eventually, also the death of her former boyfriend. The protagonists of both narratives, in this sense, qualify as McLuhan's *un*selfconscious creatures, whose extensions have brought about their narcosis and its subsequent devastating effects. Accordingly, there is another, important aspect that both literary works also share: the motif of the chase.

If there is something that stands out in human behavior since the first historical records we have is its proclivity to chase its own species, often to kill it or, at least, to subdue it. Whereas other hunting species usually chase other species for purposes of survival, humans have systemically hunted all other species but also themselves to the point of causing massacres when not total extinction. In the two narratives analyzed here the motif of the chase is also evident. Furthermore, in each of them it revolves upon itself to suggest the extinction of the human species. In Coretti's case, the paradox is that the chaser ends up being the chased prize; the bait is sexual attraction and the result is the turn of a human individual into a non-thinking piece of the circle of consumerism. On the other hand, Mae becomes a believer and supporter of The Circle's conspiracy to control all information in the world. While doing so, she also becomes the chaser of Mercer, her former boyfriend and McLuhanean defender of the human way. Mercer behaves as a prototypical old human; his extensions are his fashioned physical tools, among them his pen because he is even a writer of letters that he posts, not a consumer of technological devices that take control of you as soon as you use them. When, in her attempt to test the efficiency of the technological programs allegedly developed to suppress crime, Mae offers Mercer's name to be localized by the Circle's cameras, she is offering her ex-boyfriend as human sacrifice to the new technologies, not to the new allegedly transhuman creatures who are actually controlled by the technological devices. The episode results in the ritual chase of the innocent human by a pack of thoughtless infrahuman beings which, like the transparent shark, are ready to pursue their need to know it all while devouring (their own) life in the act. Meanwhile, they remain unaware of the fact that they are not conscious beings any more but narcotized entities whose consciousness have been absorbed by the machines. Their technologically "enhanced capacities" have canceled not only their humanity but also any expectations of ever reaching the perfect transhumanist future they seek. As the chase for Mercer comes to its end, it is obvious that Mae has also delegated her center of consciousness to a number of SeeChange cameras, of machines that serve the purpose of localizing her former boyfriend and make him panic. Mercer has become the omega man facing the new living-dead in the arena of The Circle's technological traps:

> And while the cheers were growing louder, Mae saw [through the camera] something come over Mercer's face, something like determination, something like serenity. His right arm spun the steering wheel, and he disappeared from the view of drones, temporarily at least, and when they regained their lock on him, his truck

> was crossing the highway, speeding toward its concrete barrier, so fast that it was impossible that it could hold him back. The truck broke through and leapt into the gorge, and, for a brief moment, seemed to fly, the mountains visible for miles beyond. And the truck dropped from view. (586)

In conclusion

The fact that Mercer's induced suicide, if not homicide, is not sufficient to make Mae recuperate her former humanity locates *The Circle* in the grounds of dystopic fiction, together with Shirley and Gibson's tale. Along the few decades that separate the first from the second narrative, the progressive numbness of developed societies has continued. If anything, the symbolic and more conceited arrangement of the cyberpunk text, open to denser interpretations, has given way to a remarkably "realist" depiction of human stupidity in *The Circle*, as if otherwise contemporary readers could not have followed complex narrative strategies in a story about the transformation of the human into the posthuman. It is also relevant to mention the fact that in both literary texts the protagonists hold degrees in higher education. They are learned persons who allegedly could not be easily manipulated. However, the new condition of Coretti, Mae and other highly qualified workers at the Circle is that of the "cogs and levers and rods" pointed out by Wiener. They are the slaves of the new social order, a pyramid in which a few people can climb up according to their position and their influence in the social net, but they will still be slaves, as symbolic easy prey for the shark who is on the top of the new net of (almost) total knowledge. Both works describe the formation of a new species, a fresh but unreflective slaved community that, as Bauman warns, is born as a mere wish to cope with the existential lack—"the main appeal of communitarianism is the promise of a safe haven, the dream destination for sailors lost in a turbulent sea of constant, unpredictable and confusing change" (171). The desire for plenitude, represented in the completion of the circle, seeks for its aim in the future. It lures people forward, to nowhere but their own self-destruction.

As represented in the two literary works analyzed here, around the birth of the third millennium the consumerist and, more recently, technological extensions of man have taken over the informational fluids that run our bodies. In both literary examples, such extensions are ultimately entropic, as they disguise or respond to an aspiration to get rid of bodily individualities in favor of a wish to know it all and live eternal lives. "The Belonging Kind" and *The Circle* unveil and describe Sterling's human condition that "will be changed" in the near future as the consumers' and technological new versions of the old unattainable Lacanian sense of plenitude. Along the process, a higher ratio in fluid information seems to have accelerated our mental entropic condition (see Jackson, 61–91). As happened to Narcissus, such condition means numbness and it makes us an easy prey to

be controlled by the system, whatever or whomever the system may be. Ideologically, the new existential stage represented by the absorbing belonging kind and by the omnipresent SeeChange cameras stands very far away from the mythic Sea Change of the Jungian waters of primordial myth… The latter requires reflection and promises self-discovery, the former represents the ultimate victory of the extensions over their human containers.

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