

### **Extended Critical Analysis of Two Texts.**

Arnold, M, Gibbs, M, Kohn, T, Meese, J, & Nansen, B. (2017) *Death and Digital Media*. London : Taylor & Francis Group. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/UAL/detail.action?docID=5185493#> (Accessed:26/05/22).

*Death and Digital Media* constitutes a comprehensive primer on a field that is seldom discussed yet increasingly relevant to us all. As life moves evermore online, we may wish to reflect upon the consequences such a shift portends for our conceptions of death and the traditions surrounding it. This book presents such issues in a concise academic form, examining the most common mediums and media we interact with on a daily basis - including the social media sites that define our age. The wide-reaching implications of said research are reflected in the rhetorical tone of the text, which eschews overtly academic writing to find a more balanced voice that is direct and comprehensible. One wonders if such a choice was consciously influenced by the direct applicability of the book's subject matter to daily life and a desire to render its content more accessible. In considering such content, this analysis shall focus on one of the text's primary concerns: an examination of the materiality of online spaces and their suitability as sites for mourning and remembrance. The implications for the field of graphic design in relation to this are significant, if not simply due to the role designers play in moulding digital frameworks.

Contemplating materiality and endurance, one might assume that dematerialized and decentralised information lasts longer than any offline physical totem. 'Once it's on the internet, it's there forever', is a phrase that is often taken as a truism. Arnold et al. are quick to quash such a notion, noting that "Internet Service Providers and other internet hosts go out of business, domain names expire, network protocols change, mark-up languages such as HTML come and go" (pp. 35). Underlining this declaration of decay is a mutability in form; a disposition towards change which, when viewed through the lens of visual communication, inculcates the field of graphic design.

To suggest the involvement of graphic designers in the wider arena of the afterlife online is a purely aesthetic matter would, of course, be myopic at best. Throughout the many facets of this subject that Arnold et al. tackle, one can see the role of a designer implicated in nearly all. Designers play a role in creating websites such as Goodtrust, who guide the still-living through the task of creating a will for their online data. MyHeritage.com surely enlisted the help of designers to create their (rather ghastly) online tool for animating photos of the deceased. Perhaps more perturbing again, a company Eterni.me proposed building an online digital avatar of the deceased with which descendants can converse; a project that would, one can be assured, require some sharp webdesign based upon a firmly established company style guide. For the sake of brevity, however, let us return to a more baseline example that illustrates the role of graphic designers in all this.

In the physical realm, gravestones and other memorial markers most-often stand unchanged until eroded by the passing of time. The typographic choices inherent in such artefacts are literally set in stone and tend to conform to a certain aesthetic mode. In contrast, the social media accounts we leave behind are fast becoming memorial markers in their own right; something acknowledged by Facebook itself which now allows the preservation of profiles as memorial pages to the deceased. The typographic choices at play here are, in contrast to traditional graves, not static. Indeed a designer creating the new company style guide for such a company could be seen as making a typographic choice for the digital gravestones of millions of users. This constitutes an example of how, as Adam Greenfield points out, modern life (and now it seems death) necessitates entanglement in a global corporatised network. The implication of graphic designers in this network serves as an example of the often discussed conflict between criticality and commerce that stalks the discipline. As supranational corporations become the primary mediators of our modes of remembrance, what are the ethics at play when we design on their behalf?

Askin, C. (2021) *Cameron's World*. Available at: <https://www.cameronsworld.net> (Accessed: 25/05/22).

Cameron's World proffers a return to the aesthetics of the earlier internet; a web page defined by violent colour, chaotic typography, and a dizzying range of GIFs dancing out of step. Moreover and more importantly, the site constitutes an archiving practice that eschews contemporary design conventions to engage with the formal and aesthetic qualities of its subject matter. Scrolling through Askin's page, we are invited to explore manifold embedded links in a manner that feels random and playful. Here signs and signifiers are cast asunder as users have no real cues as to which of the many images and animations will cause their mouse pointer to invite further inquiry. All-in-all the site does a great job at evoking the sense of newness and potential discovery of the earlier internet, as well as its lack of a potent overarching design philosophy.

It is this latter point that I would like to examine in further detail, particularly as it relates to the role of graphic design in an mutable online world. Regarding the aesthetics of the bygone internet, one can see a distinct emphasis (at least in the realm of blogs) on individuality, experimentation, and self-expression. The overall impression is one of vernacular design, of local parishes that may share some commonalities with other sites of a similar theme. The internet-of-today presents an entirely different story; a cleanly designed, organised, and functioning adult to the disorderly teenager of yesteryear. A disorganisation, but also a creativity and form of expression, that graphic designers have helped quell in the name of standardisation.

Indeed such a contrast provides a neat visual example of the encroachment upon all of our lives by the corporate world. As noted above, our existence as mediated through technology (but really even without it) is now inherently linked to a supranational web of actors ranging from inter-governmental entities to tech companies. Leaving all judgements aside (many people, I'm certain, love the Corporate Memphis style), one does have to ponder what has

been lost in this transition. The foundational mythos of the internet could be described as libertarian in ideology, a free flow of ideas without boundaries - a conception that engenders many problems to be sure. Does such a description still hold, however, when speaking of the internet-of-today? Could one claim such when entities such as Facebook can claim near monopolisation of the internet in many countries? What was lost in such a transition and was it worth keeping intact?

Graphic designers may wish to reflect upon such questions, given that the profession can be seen as a facilitatory force in this evolution. In such a context, sites like Cameron's World are able to provide valuable spaces in which to reflect upon changes to the internet as a whole. Changes which are, of course, reflective of the society that created them and the values it holds dear.

*Bibliography - Extended Critical Analyses:*

Greenfield, A. (2017) *Radical Technologies*. London: Verso, pp. 9–30.

Laranjo, F. (2014) 'Critical Graphic Design: Critical of What?', *Modes of Criticism*. 18 April. Available at: <https://modesofcriticism.org/critical-graphic-design/> (Accessed: 29/05/22).

Wallace, S. (2020) 'In the Developing World, Facebook Is the Internet', *Medium*. 6 September. Available at: <https://medium.com/swlh/in-the-developing-world-facebook-is-the-internet-14075bfd8c5e> (Accessed: 29/05/22)

## **Annotated Bibliography.**

### *Reading List.*

Fritsch, M. (2015) *The Story of Technoviking: Short Version*. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/140265561> (Accessed 26/05/22)

Ari Stillman's 2014 article *Virtual Graveyard: Facebook, Death, and Existentialist Critique* promotes an idea, in the context of social media, that identities are collectively constructed. Matthias Fritsch's work offers ample evidence for such a theory, delineating the story of an unnamed individual whose identity becomes subsumed by that of meme. Interestingly, due to legal reasons, Fritsch is unable to show the true 'Techno Viking' throughout the film. This presents an interesting creative opportunity - how does one convey and characterise an individual's likeness without showing them at all? In my own practice I took a similar approach, using objects and music (artefacts traditionally associated with mourning).

Greenfield, A. (2017) *Radical Technologies*. London: Verso, pp. 9–30.

In the first chapter of his book *Radical Technologies*, Adam Greenfield examines the dematerialization of everyday objects whose functions have been subsumed by the hegemony of our smartphones. My work started by playing with this notion of dematerialization; relating it to the mundane objects that we interact with on a daily basis. By digitally cataloguing such items, I am examining the creation of data which, whilst nebulous, does require a physical storage space of some manner to exist. In doing so, I hope viewers will consider how everyday objects may act as narrative devices which tell the story of their existence. In a similar manner, the throwaway photos we upload online can also be seen to constitute a comparable form of narrative data.

Greenfield goes on to speak about the inherent involvement in our lives of the networked market and the supranational companies who underline it. Tied to the network, even in death we can no longer escape this fact. I considered graphic design's role in this by examining the typography of the memorial markers we leave behind. Where once a gravestone stood unaltered until eroded by time, now the aesthetic of one's online memorial conforms to whatever current style guide is being adopted by tech's big players.

Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* (Vol.14, No.3), pp.575-599.  
Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066> (Accessed: 05/05/22).

Haraway is critical of the unexamined ideology of scientific objectivity that informs our society and its technological advances. In contrast, she argues for a situated stance in which meaning exists in an active space between subject and object. Through my own practice, I have explored such a rhetorical space by examining the intersection between personhood and new forms of media and technology.

In my 3D experiments I have created sculptural works using my own body as a creative tool, as well as using scanning to catalogue the unremarkable items which define our lives. In this way, a sense of the self can be garnered and amplified by digital means; a practice which becomes important as we consider the afterlife online. Here the conflict between the situated-subject and the objective (digital) world interplays with tensions between institutional and personal modes of remembrance; made more complicated still by the role tech companies play in our existence.

As data is perhaps the primary byproduct of said existence, I engaged with my own biometrics in a subjective, tactile manner. Interfaces, such as those for interpreting medical information must conform to standardised forms in order to facilitate widespread use. This

does not, however, speak to the personal nature of data nor the manifold, personal ways in which people process it.

Steyerl, H. (2021) *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. pp. 31-45.

The digital degradation at the heart of Steyerl's composition provoked me to reflect further upon the tension between our subjective selves and the purportedly objective frameworks that mediate our lives online. For Steyerl, the degraded JPG reflects a shared, collaborative artefact that decays due to the very fact of its proliferation. I found this concept to be deeply humanising and emotive, and sought to incorporate it into my work. We tend to think of digital spaces as permanent. In reality, such spaces are far from eternal. Indeed, they are contingent on a vast range of variables including (decaying) hyperlinks, (outdated) markup languages, (unmaintained) servers, and many more. I explored making such digital decay visible in my website prototypes. A digital funeral pyre acts as a shared space in which 3D objects can be collected, only then to be deleted upon a set date. In another, a web page solicits donations in order to remain active; rendering clear the economic and structural imperatives that underline it.

*Own Reading.*

Arnold, M, Gibbs, M, Kohn, T, Meese, J, & Nansen, B. (2017) *Death and Digital Media*. London : Taylor & Francis Group. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/UAL/detail.action?docID=5185493#> (Accessed:26/05/22).

This comprehensive overview of an emerging field provided ample food for thought and informed my practice as I narrowed my focus to on the afterlife online. Providing insight into a wide breadth of topics, from the practicalities of dealing with the data of the departed and innovations in the funerary world, the book illuminates several overarching themes that informed my projects. The work's focus on the spatial qualities of the online world, its limitations and possibilities as a site of remembrance, led me to consider notions of materiality and immateriality as they relate to personhood and mourning.

I was also taken by the book's contrast of vernacular and institutional modes of mourning; the former being naturally promoted by the medium of the internet. Responding to this, I sought ways to merge traditional and more individual modes of remembrance in ways that combined tactile and digital materials.

Harbisson, N. (2016) *The Renaissance of Our Species* [Speech]. MuseumNext New York. November. Available at: <https://www.museumnext.com/article/the-renaissance-of-our-species/> (Accessed: 05/05/22).

In his 2016 talk *The Renaissance of Our Species* Neil Harbisson expounds upon his desire to “become technology”, a process he has pursued with maximalist vigour via a literal incorporation of hardware. The world's first legally recognized cyborg, Harbisson's most prominent sensory extension allows him to hear colour and experience this facet of sight which we take for granted in novel ways. As a diabetic who wears a (albeit removable) chip in my arm, I find Harbisson's embrace of technology as a creative medium fascinating.



Through a combination of his pre-existing biology and incorporated hardware Harbisson is essentially able to use his body as a tool for art by creatively interpreting data.

In my own practice, I have followed a line of enquiry that explores this intersection between physical biology and immaterial data. By posing my own body and using 3D-scanning equipment, I have experimented with a form of sculpting that is immediate, direct, and near-tactile in technique. My iterations using my Libre-Link sensor have involved reinterpreting my blood sugar data into a form that is more personal and subjective to me. In doing so, I chose to render the results in the form of a flipbook as this felt in-keeping with my background in literature and my practice as a whole.

Lapper, E. (2017) 'How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve?' In U. U. Frömming, S. Köhn, S. Fox, & M. Terry (eds.), *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives Across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 127–142. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxrxw.12> (Accessed 25/5/22)

Ellen Lapper writes of the “digital traces” (pp.128) we leave behind, comparing them to physical tokens of remembrance. Reading this affirmed the direction my work was already taking and further reading gave me a vocabulary by which to better define my practice. Lapper goes on to cite Ari Stillman’s notion of “collaborative identity construction” (pp. 136), which is based upon a person’s Facebook wall. This is an idea I explored directly, collating a host of objects from a deceased person’s instagram to populate a predetermined poster template. Such an exercise confronted the possibilities of knowing someone via a truncated definition of their life, whilst also offering a potential avenue for mourning by functioning as a printable funeral pyre. As my project continued I further explored this capacity of digital traces to function as characterising devices, tying them to physical tokens on remembrance. In this respect I found playlists / mixtapes to be of particular interest, as immaterial phenomena that have conveyed personal meaning whether consumed via digital or analogue means.

Tait, A. (2019) 'What happens to our online identities when we die?', *The Guardian*, 2 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/02/digital-legacy-control-online-identities-when-we-die> (Accessed: 05/05/22).

The entanglement of our lives with technology is a truism, a melding that goes unquestioned as we live our days partly through a screen. In volume, our online data comprises a vast inheritance that we leave to the world upon our passing. Yet such a collection of information is, by definition, immaterial and therefore this fact hardly feels concrete.

Thinking about the physical reminders we leave behind, often the mind is drawn to the tokens which represent us best. Upon the grave of a keen footballer one might expect to find a pair of boots and memorabilia of the deceased's club of choice. During our lifetimes however, our day-to-day interactions are often defined by thoroughly mundane, disposable items which we cast aside without thought. Such detritus is perhaps a more comparable fit for the pages of data we upload on a daily basis. By rendering such physical items in a 3D space, I am playing with this notion of permanence; changing unremarkable physical objects into immaterial data. By using the typographic aesthetics of the early web and its current form to redesign headstones, I explored how our identities are now tied to a suprastructure that is at once impersonal whilst facilitating an expression of the self.

### *Practices and Projects.*

Askin, C. (2021) *Cameron's World*. Available at: <https://www.cameronsworld.net> (Accessed: 25/5/22).

Cameron's world constitutes a cataloguing practice focusing on the Geocities websites which presaged social media. This evocation of the flourishing creativity which defined early blogging provided inspiration for my own work. When contrasting these visually idiosyncratic sites with the cleanly designed modern internet, certain themes become starkly evident. Chief amongst these is the receding of personal expression and individuality in favour of standardisation and ease of use. This theme informed my thinking throughout my practice and particularly influenced the Geocities and Web 2.0 gravestones series for my project on the afterlife online. Made evident by contrasting these sites is the hand of the maker; the overstimulating aesthetics of the early web highlighting contemporary design choices which often go unremarked. In all of this, the role of the graphic designer is key; a realisation which forced me to reflect on my position when engaging with such content.

Berrow, A. (2021) *A Tale of the Tarot* [Ceramics]. Timothy Taylor Gallery, London. (Viewed: 20 August).

Alma Berrow's 2021 work *A Tale of the Tarot* constitutes an ode to lived experience in tactile terms. In depicting the remnants of a dinner party through the medium of ceramics, Berrow invites viewers to play detective and piece together a scene-that-was. By shifting the materiality of the everyday objects at hand, most of which are spent cigarette ends, we are prompted to reconsider their position in relation to ourselves. We tend to consider great works of art as the objects which most represent the cultures in which we live, and by extension consider them as the objects most worthy of preservation. In truth, however, the articles with which we interact the most, those that define our lives as consumers, are comparatively more mundane.

In my own practice, I have been exploring the use of 3D-scanning towards a similar end. By creating a gallery of everyday objects (found discarded in various tote bags), I am establishing a record of the detritus that the banality of life leaves behind. In translating the

materiality of each object to a 3D space, I render them immune from physical decay to a form comparable to the uncountable quantities of data we generate online each day.

Jamie Llyod, C. (2021) *Acts of Control* [Publication]. Available at: <https://graduateshowcase.arts.ac.uk/projects/223213/cover> (Accessed: 05/05/22).

Cara Jamie Llyod's final BA project follows a similar line of enquiry to my own, with the designer creatively interpreting her own blood sugar data to create a biodata-led publication. Given that Cara works in the publications workshop at Central Saint Martins, it may seem surprising that I was unaware of her project until it came time to print and bind my own book (a process she guided me through). Once more, one would be forgiven for assuming a certain level of disappointment on my part at being pipped to the post. However I believe the contrast in our publications speaks volumes. That two designers could interpret data from the same application interface in visually divergent ways, for me, hints at the tension between human 'subjectivity' and technological 'objectivity'. As mentioned above, the technological interfaces we navigate daily are by necessity static and designed for the median user of a broad audience. However, the experience of those who use them is situated in a space where these UI structures and our preexisting characters combine.

Mattes, E, and Mattes, F. (2016) *Fukushima Texture Pack* [Texture Pack]. Available at: <https://0100101110101101.org/fukushima-texture-pack/> (Accessed: 26/5/22).

Eva and Franco Mattes' 2016 collection of texture maps directly inspired my own practice investigating the material (and immaterial) implications of death in the internet age. Interestingly, the Mattes' own work can be seen as a digital translation of a near-literal dead zone, granting access to micro-portions of a restricted site. This access, however, also acts to destabilise the value of the original locale by rendering it replicable and commodifiable.

When space, of any size, can be collapsed or extended to near-infinite degrees our relationship with it fundamentally changes.

Mimicking their method I created similar PBR materials from a local graveyard. I speculate that my own files could be used to lend verisimilitude to future digital memorial markers online, perhaps in a world culturally dominated by the metaverse. In doing so, I am raising questions surrounding concepts of authenticity and the suitability of intangible modes of congress to act as sites of memorial.