

Ben Staunton:

Trolling the Global Citizen: The Deconstructive Ethics of the Digital Subject

Abstract:

This article compares two contemporary rhetorical figures: the 'internet troll', a name invoked to represent a variety of offensive and disturbing online discourse, and the narrator and main character of avant-garde English author Tom McCarthy's debut novel *Remainder* (2005). By thinking about how these two figures relate to Levinas' brand of deconstructive ethics, I attempt to develop an idea about how global communication technology (which is, including literature, an essential ingredient, inspiration and sometimes 'form' of the 'global citizen') bends our perception and performance of what is ethical. Both the troll and McCarthy's narrator represent the necessity of understanding in a world caged in technical language describing itself. And at the same time, each figure will be shown to represent the motivating force of a global society that strives for total understanding: an absence of understanding, or in Levinasian terms, the face of the other.

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Author:

Ben Staunton:

- Université Paul-valéry Montpellier 3, Route de Mende 34 199 Montpellier Cedex 5. Emma - Études Montpelliéraines Du Monde Anglophone, Université Paul-Valéry - Site Saint-Charles, Route de Mende, 34199 - MONTPELLIER Cedex 5
- ☎ + 33 (0) 4 67 14 20 00, ✉ bstauento@etu.univ-montp3.fr

The Troll in Theory

Responding to the discursive backlash against the outgoing CEO of Reddit, the community networking site often called the 'front page of the internet', Sam Altman, lead investor in the site, states that, "The reduction in compassion that happens when we're all behind computer screens is not good for the world," noting that, "People are still people even if there is internet between you. If the Reddit community cannot learn to balance authenticity and compassion, it may be a great website but it will never be a truly great community."¹

When asked to consider the future of digital globalization in terms of the global citizen, we might identify an ethical challenge that an ideal 'global citizen' faces in the figure of the 'internet troll'; a challenge that can be framed in terms of the antinomies of compassion and authenticity. The troll has come to the fore in the media recently, in particular relation to cyber-bullying and shaming practices. 'Trolling' has been described variously as an example of 'identity deception'² and as the action of 'everyday sadists'³. In simple terms, to 'troll' is to post a comment or message intended to bait a recipient into thinking that the message and its meaning is authentic, open about its intentions, thought-through and desirous of a reasoned response, and it is the desire to believe in this openness that will be established here as the challenge that the troll, the 'remainder' referred to in the title of Tom McCarthy's novel, and the digital form itself (as the convergence of sight, sound, touch and language) offers to the very utopian ideology that perpetuates it. The trick of the troll is to get another individual to take an entirely rhetorical linguistic message as literal, or semantically transparent, and for them to respond emotionally and intellectually (or 'authentically') to it. The troll that is the topic of this paper, therefore, needs to be separated from the online harasser/maker of threats, the patent troll, the Russian political troll⁴; the troll, as it is understood here, simply wants to trick someone into thinking that they have expressed genuine sentiment, intention or interest through the production of online images or text; they want to challenge the notion that technically formal communication equates to a kind of democratic participatory transparency. The narrator and main character of *Remainder* is a rhetorical figure of the global citizen, who becomes obsessed with (if not desirous of) the troll, or the other/reality, as it continues to intervene and disrupt his models and utopian simulations. It reflects the attempts to control the trope, and the troll, in order to stabilize reality within a platform that is ostensibly that of transparency and open-source, democratic participation. The assumption made here is that any 'global citizen' must necessarily be either achieved or performed (or both) through and within the formal restrictions and liberties afforded by the digital interface.

The debate surrounding the troll and the place of 'low' speech in online forums is an extension of the problem of the semantic undecidability of language: how can we determine the intention of language separated from its source, the subject? The troll performs the subjective intention or conviction which seduces the 'same' as response to the troll. It uses communicational loyalty as a mask for subversive discourse; it makes loyal communication subversive or disruptive of itself. The troll comment is the technical performative detachment of meaning from language; one that takes the guise of, and calls forth, its alternative: semantically concrete language. The common denominator between all these offenders and offences is that each capitalizes on, and hence reveals, both the power of language to actualize—to be performative, to offend or scare, to seduce both positive and negative reactions through normative readings—and the capacity in language for self-effacement or semantic inconsistency, which is the hidden aspect of the troll comment. This is why they are all grouped together within online discourse: digital society is obsessed with the power of language, in its ultimately undecidable position as both the key to utopian transparency (democratic liberation) and the obstacle it wants to overcome. The idea of digital citizenship presents the possibility of normalizing and structuring a single mode of 'being' a citizen, through a medium that has a staggering potential for both reification of knowledge and meaning, as well as a total semantic unravelling of those categories.

¹ Lee, Dave: "Reddit's Ellen Pao resigns after community's criticism"

² Donath, Judith S: Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community. 14

³ Buckels, Erin E., Paul D. Trapnell and Delroy L. Paulhus: Trolls just want to have fun. 97-102.

⁴ Bugorkova, Olga: Ukraine Conflict: Inside Russia's 'Kremlin troll army'.

The power of language in digital society can be confronted within what literary deconstructionist Paul de Man calls "the external politics of literature"⁵. In his summary of semiology and deconstruction, he describes the originators of this method in terms of their locating points of inconsistency, in particular the 'interpretant' (Pierce), or necessary human act of reading which makes the sign a *representation* that leads, not to normative or singular meaning, but to another sign which carries on this disruption 'ad infinitum'.⁶ It is precisely the deconstructive human-as-interpretant which is threatened by disappearance within the utopian framework of technical communication. Instant distribution of words- and phrases-become-memes, through the democratic operations of 'sharing', 'liking', 'up-voting', etc. gives the impression of dissolving inconsistent interpretation, of real semantic consensus. The digital interpretant (while retaining some semblance of negative agency through the figures of the programmer, hacker and troll) is reduced to an operator who reads the world that is summoned through this operation. In the case of the troll-comment, interpretation enters into a one-way street of literalness, even when this comment borders on the pure rhetorical, the absurd, or straightforwardly fictional. De Man establishes an investigative premise into what he describes as 'an undeniable and recurrent historical fact'⁷: the sign and literature are at once meaningless *and* provocative of public action. This irresolvable dualism, is challenged today by what various critics⁸ have called the discourse of 'utopian transparency,' which tries to frame our relation to each other and to the digital. Simply put, transparency, or the absence of problematic understanding, presents a challenge to deconstructive conceptions of both language and ethics; and to the positive, creative potential contained there. This challenge will serve to structure the consideration of the ethics of the internet troll and the narrator of English author Tom McCarthy's debut novel *Remainder*, as they are each operating within a social context dominated by an ideological drive towards total transparency.

In confronting the troll, the digital citizen of a globalized world de-problematizes the encounter in the form of a literal reading of the troll's message; they take the bait of a shared digital reality within which discourse is ideally governed by an 'internal law and order', by consensus, or by what Georges Bataille calls 'loyalty'. We can identify the potential for an ethical problematic within this context of 'loyalty to reality' if we consider English philosopher Simon Critchley's⁹ reading of Emmanuel Levinas' ethics. According to Critchley, Levinas describes the ethical as the encounter with, 'a point of alterity...that cannot be reduced to the Same'¹⁰; what Levinas calls the 'Face'. The face, writes Levinas, is 'the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the *idea of the other in me*'¹¹. The troll takes the route of reversal, in that what it performs is sameness, just prior to springing a linguistically violent kind of otherness out of the shadows of the same. The other is, by definition, what is capable of producing an *absence* of understanding in the subject. According to Critchley, Levinasian ethics is self-critique: "it is the *mise en question* of liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive enterprise of the ego".¹² In short, it is the moment where doubt about the subject's understanding of things becomes immanent, where the illusion of total cognizance, of self or world, is presented with a rupture in the form of an absence (or excess, or remainder) of understanding and the need to engage with it. It is a moment ripe with the potential for emotional and intellectual discomfort. This discomfort with the other constitutes a paradoxical fear of the real (the absence of total security, understanding, comfort, etc.), which Jean Baudrillard illustrates using a speculative fake bank robbery in *Simulacra and Simulation*; this scene is used to illustrate how, in order to maintain comfort and security in the confusing postmodern world of terrorism and ubiquitous information, the system and by proxy its citizens must always treat the appearance of threats to its universalizing tendency as 'real' (hence as a contradictory product of that tendency) and respond to them as such, lest one be treated as fake

⁵De Man, Paul: *Allegories of Reading*. 3

⁶ *Ibid.* 8

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Breton, Philippe: *The Cult of the Internet and the Internet as Cult*.

⁹ This particular reading is pertinent as much for Critchley's role in co-founding the International Necronautical Society alongside Tom McCarthy as for its precision.

¹⁰ Critchley, Simon: *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. 5

¹¹ Levinas, Emmanuel: *Totality and Infinity*. 50

¹² Critchley, Simon: *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. 5

and a *rea/catastrophe* result. The troll is an 'other' masquerading as the Same; sameness is the bait that draws out the self-doubt that is meant to be elicited from the encounter with the other. The troll starts looking the same, but eventually reveals its intolerable difference, thereby resulting in the encounter with the 'face' as described by Levinas. The narrator of McCarthy's *Remainder* establishes a subject position that problematizes the encounter with a traditional kind of 'other' (Africans and women, in this case¹³); his encounters with these produce a feeling of neutrality. What will be shown is that McCarthy's narrator has moved beyond the human-as-other of traditional philosophy and literature; instead, the narrator locates the face of the other in the unexpected intrusion of the world into his carefully modelled re-enactments. The ethical for this narrator is merged with the idea of 'reality'. The encounter with the material 'other' of his world produces not self-doubt, but rather the intellectual serenity of an ethical and ontological deproblematization. The internet, as mode or form of digital citizenship, risks accelerating this process of deproblematization, as users become more and more detached from what its streams of information hides from them, as they become less aware (for what some might argue are good reasons) of the remainder, of what exceeds the understanding it provides/generates of the world.

The global citizen, as it is described in discourse and in this call for papers, is an ideal subject position premised on a universalizing technology capable of transcending or revising basic relations of society like political borders, or the concept of the 'social bond'. The figure of the troll represents an obstacle for the progression of the global citizen, in that it reveals a contradiction between the capacity for online freedom of expression and freedom from emotional and intellectual discomfort. These antinomies are technologically bridged, and the consequences of their antinomy deferred, by the accompanying ideological drive to produce and manipulate moments of reality—moments in which 'understanding' itself is never a problem—which might allow for the coming together of these two contradictory desires. In seeking freedom from discomfort online, we risk dissolving encounters with the other into unproblematic encounters with the same, we risk making ethical disagreement a remainder hidden behind the total image of the world produced by data and digital information. This ontological and ethical dilemma can be transposed onto the contemporary issue of the online right to the expression of 'low' forms of speech in digital forums. It is also to be found in *Remainder*, in which the narrator is driven to an incessant pursuit of absent-minded pleasure through the technological production of, investment and immersion in, a detached, serene 'reality' that is a constant challenge to the memory of its traumatic origin (the trauma of not knowing what is going on behind the scenes of language, or in this case, the digital image). What we will see in *Remainder* is a context within which the ethical is an ideal-but-accessible, sensually-intense but intellectually-serene reality; the ethics of a subject absent thought (a reflection of his inability to locate thought in other humans), in which the social bond (along with its productive contradictions) is deproblematized by the enforced absence of the Levinasian 'other'. In the subject position that McCarthy establishes, that of the subject entombed in communication technology, concrete, knowable reality is both the means and the end. This is the contradictory strategy being popularly employed against trolling: a legally, socially, and culturally compulsive performance of other-less, transparent subjectivity. And it is the very rigour of this performance that undercuts its eventual totalization, exposing the irrevocable relation of thought and ethics through the figure of the unpredictable, or the world thinking itself.

The Ethics of Remainder

McCarthy's narrator, who is also the main character, has a certain traumatic relationship with the idea of 'reality'. *Remainder* opens with the declaration of an accident: "About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits. That's it, really; all I can divulge."¹⁴ We begin with a technological accident that strikes the entire past from the nameless character, including the event of the accident itself; he has no recollection of the time before the accident, except for the, "images, half-impressions: of being, or having been – or, more precisely, being about to be – hit; blue light; railings;

¹³ McCarthy, Tom: *Remainder*. 36-7

¹⁴ McCarthy, Tom: *Remainder*. 5

lights of other colours; being held above some tray or bed."¹⁵ The accident takes away all memory, both of the character (who remains nameless throughout, a representation of anonymity in a collective world, and the online use of pseudonyms) and of the accident itself; it does this first as a physical strike, half-remembered through images of railings, multi-coloured lights, trays and beds, all objects that serve to recall a hospital or delivery room. The strike that is at first identified as the accident itself serves as birth-trope, the doctor's slap that brings the wail of a new human voice into the world. The accident to which the protagonist refers is that of his birth, of the production of a new human subject from within the traumatic explosion of medical science and communication technology of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

If digital birth-imagery is to be found in the character's recollection of the accident, this initial focus is quickly shifted towards an intimately related concept, called the 'Settlement'. He mentions having heard about it from his lawyer before gaining consciousness after the accident: "...during the months I spent in hospital, this word planted itself in me and grew. *Settlement*. It wormed its way into my coma...Later still, during the weeks I sat in bed able to think and talk but not yet to remember anything about myself, the Settlement was held up to me as a future strong enough to counterbalance my no-past, a moment that would make me better, whole, complete."¹⁶ The accident that opens *Remainder* is un-recollected, actual but repressed and opaque, both because of its effects—a loss of control, of memory—and because of the restrictions compelled by the social solution to the accident: the *settlement*.

The accident is a metaphor for birth in a technological world¹⁷, or if we want, the citizen who is defined by its interpellation by the digital form, one that fits in precisely with the concept of the child/adult dialectic described by both literary surrealist Georges Bataille and theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard. Within this dialectic, the child represents both ontological misery and potential, a subject-position we can easily connect to the dual potential of reading online signs and discourse. The adult, or the settlement, represents culture and language's attempts to ease that misery and control that potential through what de Man calls 'controlling the trope'¹⁸. The same can be said of the recent backlash against trolling and the uncontrolled negativity of sites like Reddit: the community of internet user have no time for the misery of misunderstanding or aporia, they seek a consensual clarity that facilitates their self-understanding, and their construction of subjective sameness.

The settlement therefore represents the act of enforced understanding that appears after the act of erasure is accomplished through the accident; in truth, both contribute to a kind of forced forgetting. The accident serves to produce the need for the settlement, and yet, it is not the necessity of understanding that is effaced (else there would be no remainder, no settlement) but rather, the memory of a serene, intense existence prior to the accident. The settlement serves to fill in the space of 'potential' evacuated by the accident: it settles the future, and what the narrator's place in it might be, before he wakes. It consists of £8.5 million and agreeing to never speak about the accident he cannot remember—not erasure but decontamination of potential. It seems as though the dialectic is at this point already-accomplished: the accident erases the memory of pre-digital existence and imposes a legal and economic settlement which reinforces the mandatory forgetting of the trauma of the accident, and that which came before it, by virtue of fully inculcating the character into 21st century digital society.

Yet, Lyotard argues that this dialectic necessarily leaves a remainder, in the form of, "what... passes as institutional: literature, the arts, philosophy."¹⁹ In other words, this dialectic does not resolve itself, but continually produces an excess; what Lyotard associates with institutional products, and what Bataille describes in terms of an irrational, unproductive refusal of the subject to give up the potential of childhood²⁰. This remainder is

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. 6

¹⁷ And at the same time, 'of' a technological world.

¹⁸ De Man, Paul: *Aesthetic Ideology*. 167

¹⁹ Lyotard, Jean-Francois: *The Inhuman*. 3

²⁰ Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*. 13

an obstacle to power/settlement/understanding/knowledge, and hence at the same time stands as an essential ingredient to the development and expansion of power/understanding/knowledge. We can understand the encounter with the 'face' of the other as an instance of remainder; the internal thought of the other as the *excess* of our plan or model or understanding or social network 'profile', of it.

The remainder appears when the character is first told of the total of his settlement: "It took another second or so for me to take in just how much money that was. When I had, I took my hand off the wall and turned suddenly around, towards the window. The movement was so forceful that it pulled the phone wire with it, yanked it right out of the wall...I stood there for some time, I don't know how long, holding the dead receiver in my hand and looking down at what the wall had spilt. It looked kind of disgusting, like something that's come out of something."²¹ This scene is instructive in that it serves as a series of tropic turns, a movement from wall to window, from obstacle to portal, from the relatively stable child/adult dialectic, into the problematic field of the digital social bond. At the very moment he receives the details of his settlement (the metaphorical social bond), his connection to that larger society (the telephone) is immediately cut off, although he remains connected as a voyeur through his window, itself a trope that turns from glass, to digital screen to binary code, to transparency itself. Settlement completed, he now experiences the state of living it guarantees: community consensus through *isolated* technological communication through Microsoft Windows© that are neither glass nor transparent. And it is consensus that is at the heart of this settlement: Bataille argues that communication requires loyalty, and this character is loyal to a very particular kind of communication.

"Things I don't understand make me feel dizzy."²² These feelings are caused by the phrase 'I'm putting you through'; he doesn't know who 'you' is meant to refer to. Linguistic uncertainty makes him dizzy, serene detachment feels real; he is a figure of the pursuit of utopian communication, he reacts to the undecidability of language and prefers the isolated mental serenity of technological representation. This ontological preference is highlighted in his adulation of Robert De Niro's onscreen actions: "I mean that he's relaxed, malleable...He doesn't have to think about them, or understand them first. He doesn't have to think about them because he and they are one. Perfect. Real."²³ Reality, and his utopian destiny, is in the unity of subject and action. The narrator has no access to the thoughts behind the image; which is why the actions of the scripted film star are by definition more 'real' than his actions, made different by the fact that the accident forced him to 'know' all of his movements and how they worked beforehand: "No Doing without Understanding: the accident bequeathed me that forever, an eternal detour"²⁴. This is the remainder left by erasure of the accident: in order to do he must first understand. This is also a way of articulating the impossibility of managing unpredictable potential in a digital society that seeks to control its tropes.

Armed with his money, and this ideal image of 'being real', the narrator sets out to re-enact the world of his memories (which are returning, or maybe simply arising, ad hoc in his mind like pop-up ads). He invests in technology and communication futures, creating a steady flow of capital. He dreams of a flat he used to live in, and reproduces it and its tenants. He scripts their movements while he repeats the same motions over and over in this artificially managed setting. He is trying to achieve the perfect reproduction of the flat from his dream, and in doing so discovers that the utopian serenity he seeks—freedom from understanding and all that accompanies it—cannot be intentionally produced. While initially he exalts in the perfectly planned scene, one of his first moments of intense and serene 'reality' occurs when an actor and he exchange spontaneously thought-of greetings. Instead of being thrilled by a precision copy of his scripted action, he enters a serene trance upon both experiencing and performing spontaneity: Levinas' other. We can define this shift in terms of a contradictory passion for artificial intelligence, or the re-enactment of thought, which is "everything except

²¹ Tom McCarthy: Remainder. 9

²² Ibid. 7

²³

²⁴ Ibid. 22

artificial"²⁵ according to Baudrillard, thanks to "the fact that artificial intelligence is a matter of the hyperrealization of thinking, of the objective processing of thinking".²⁶ What he means by "objective processing," is thought processed through objects; it is the world thinking itself, taking the reins relinquished by human thought. The narrator wants to eliminate thought in the sensuous serenity that he produces through perfectly coordinated action; yet what eventually produces these moments of intense serenity is the invasion of an 'other' thought. He achieves moments of utopian serenity only when his plans and models are invaded by unpredictable, spontaneous disruption; it is in these moments that he no longer thinks himself or his world but is rather 'thought' by the scene itself. This progression is capped in the novel by a re-enactment of Baudrillard's bank robbery scene. The narrator rehearses the scene with several actors over and over again; at one point during rehearsal an actor trips over a wrinkle in the carpet. The narrator becomes obsessed with this unexpected irruption, eventually re-enacting the wrinkle and the trip on purpose, making it part of the modelled scene. When the real fake robbery occurs, the absence of the wrinkle in the real banks carpet unexpectedly trips the actor and he falls, accidentally shooting and killing another actor. Even when the accident is planned and prepared for, the bare reality of death comes flowing in of its own accord, and the narrator experiences a transcendent rush of serene realness; an unproblematic ethical relation to an inhuman other.

Conclusion

Remainder's narrator is a citizen for whom understanding is a reminder of his own artificial identity; for him what is ethical is real and what is real is only that which happens absent human thought or understanding. On the other hand, according to self-described troll Zack, interviewed by Jamie Bartlett for an op-ed on the BBC website, "Trolling is not about bullying people...It's about unlocking situations, creating new scenarios, pushing boundaries, trying ideas out, calculating the best way to provoke a reaction."²⁷ Both figures represent ontological or ethical transparency; it is the context, performed or actual, from which they emerge. Each are operating on the premise that intellectual serenity and 'reality,' or the passion for artificial thought, are not just related, but paradoxically standard and idealized notions of the internet, capable of extending beyond the realm of communication into the world of 'external politics'. The troll and the narrator are the same in the sense of their knowledge of their shared subject position; each has a bitter relation to understanding and a desire to disrupt it. They differ however, in their relation to thought. The troll, based on my intentionally narrow concept of that identity, desires the provocation of negative or self-critical thoughts in a subject who must necessarily be able to think. The narrator, on the other hand, seeks to provoke the automated thought of the external world; he wants the world to think itself on his behalf. This is his utopian scene, and it inspires in him a kind of science-fictional turn towards the ethics of an artificially intelligent system; a world managed by an external agency to which he and all other citizens are subject. This is the ethic of a kind of passive curiosity that has been located largely within, and connected to, the reading of literature²⁸, but can now be easily related to the techno-dependent, to the 'thinking' and choosing done by algorithms, to the listless socializing and browsing happening right now online.

The troll, in the end, is an irrevocable product of the push towards controlling the trope; as are the actions of the narrator of Remainder. In truth however, if there is a troll to be identified in Remainder, it is the wrinkle in the carpet, the unexpected intrusion of the world into the space of the models designed by the narrator, and in a sense, the author. This wrinkle serves as a final scene of semantic reversal, one which flips the script on the narrator who at this point begins to plot this unpredictable disruption into the coordinates of his model; in the end, it is the absence of this troll, or wrinkle, that causes death and catastrophe. However, the troll implicitly occupies a humanist ethical position, given the necessity of a thinking human subject to its endeavours. Each

²⁵ Baudrillard, Jean: *Art and Artefact*. 26

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Bartlett, Jamie: *Viewpoint: Who are the People in the Dark Corners?*

²⁸ Nandrea, Lorri: *Objectless Curiosity*

figure's ethical stance is informed in some way by this mandatory division of real and false that keeps them longing for reality-through-obfuscation; that is, the division set in place by the accident and settlement. The desire to legislate or censor disruptive thought away can be understood from the bio-political perspective of safe-guarding life; it retains the potential to do more harm than good. However the figures of the troll and the narrator establish a relation to reality that confirms both the presence and the value of fixed meaning; the troll can't troll without it, nor could the narrator provoke the unexpected or accidental. The troll is meant to provoke a reaction in the form of discourse and doubt. The one reaction which would negate all value in the troll, rendering it nothing more than a malfunctioning unit in McCarthy's narrative, is to treat the troll's introduction of doubt and excess (the other) as if it were an unnatural, artificial wrench in the otherwise 'real' gears of digital society. In an extension of the contradiction between freedoms that framed this discussion, the troll can be seen as an opportunity to reflect as opposed to react, to double-back to the origin, to the moment, uncomfortable as it is, when thought found purchase in the subject, to the moment when it was the human that thought its world, and not the other way around (which means accepting the risks inherent in reading and thinking). It is in this moment that the troll, the narrator, or the speculative global citizen finds what minor access to power they may still have within the context of digitally-dissolved borders; the power to change established meaning, the power to actualize the 'external politics' of literature (the technology of a different kind of citizen), which are reframed but not abandoned by the technology of digital communication. The troll becomes a kind of satyr, a kind of digital shepherd of the empty center, ostensibly trying to reinvigorate the very freedoms and individualisms that are meant to be secured by a digital citizenship, but which are in fact depleted by the obsession with consensual communication and transparency.

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