

THE WORLD WIDE SEA-

Concepts of Knowledge,
and Transnational America in the Information Age

‘It is an ocean of subtile intelligences,’ Henry David Thoreau quotes Confucius to illustrate that, in this world, we are never truly alone but always surrounded by the thoughts of our fellow men, both in the present and the past. He employs the metaphor of the ocean to allude to the elusive yet seemingly endless assemblage of knowledge, experience, and information contained within the universe and forming ‘the perennial source of our life’ (Thoreau, 1854: 215). Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick*, also connects images of the ocean’s wide open spaces with epistemological considerations: ‘I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans’ (Melville, 1851: 116), Ishmael declares, comparing the demanding quest for knowledge to floating through the boundless widths of the sea. Elizabeth Schultz thus considers Ishmael’s epistemological journey a quest ‘that seeks knowledge from multiple sources and cultures regarding whales and their lives, one that affirms the value of a continued search for knowledge of all life’ (Schultz, 2001: 207). The ocean, for Melville’s narrator, is like an (un)intelligible medium composed of diverse and often contradictory sources. Ishmael’s futile struggle for attaining knowledge challenges notions of the sea as productive and integrative space, instead rendering it a threatening, overwhelming, and potentially destructive system. A more reciprocal notion of knowledge is suggested in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘At the Fishhouses’, according to which the sea ‘is like what we imagine knowledge to be, / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, / drawn from the cold hard mouth /

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of the world, derived from the rocky breasts / forever, flowing and drawn' (Bishop, 1983: 78–82). For Bishop, the ocean metaphor renders knowledge a concrete, material entity with which we enter a reciprocal heuristic exchange. Knowledge derives its information from constant interaction with the material world, yet it also remains elusive in its constant ephemeral to and fro. Carole K. Doreski notes that the sea, in this poem, figures as a 'powerful and ambitious metaphor that postulates knowing as a fluid, expressive, but chaotic, absorptive, and formless process expressed by the modifiers of "knowledge," "dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free"' (Doreski, 1993: 67). The ocean, accordingly, represents the continuous yet ultimately futile aspiration towards transcendence, since 'to expect wisdom or nourishment from the known but imaginatively dead shore-world is an error, but to step from it into the dark, salt, flowing sea is to be a transcendentalist, and suicidal' (68). Knowledge, in Bishop's metaphorical vision, is both potentially accessible to the searching self and forever disclosed due to its impenetrable depths.¹

The ocean has frequently been related to human curiosity as well as to anxiety towards (yet) unknown terrains, reflecting the restless desire to travel, explore, and seek the 'truth'. Not surprisingly, therefore, the ocean has figured as one of the leading metaphors for the Internet, conceptualized as the mythical space in which knowledge is stored, generated, and from which it emerges.² Whether we navigate or surf on the World Wide Web, whether we immerse in data flows or get involved in swarm intelligence, sea imagery has been central in imagining the Internet from its inception. The ocean, however, is not the only metaphor for the vast arrays of knowledge and information that constitute the Internet. William Gibson's coinage of the term 'cyberspace' in his novel *Neuromancer* (1984), referring to a system of interconnected

1 Other literary engagements with the ocean or water that have a decidedly epistemological focus include, to name only a few, Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* (1951), Adrienne Rich's poems 'Diving into the Wreck' (1972) and 'Solfeggietto' (1985–88), Walt Whitman's poem 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' (1856, 1881) and Kurt Vonnegut's novels *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Galápagos* (1985).

2 See Woiskunski, 2001; Gehring, 2004; Tokar, 2009.

computers, regard the Internet in analogy to the exploration of hitherto unknown territories in the context of space missions. Other metaphorical realms such as 'data highway', 'global village' or 'network' emphasize the accelerated dynamics of flow and exchange that characterize the Information Age. What, then, are the particular cultural implications of conceptualizing the Internet in terms of the ocean metaphor? Which features of the Internet does this semantic realm highlight in the broader context of an 'American epistemology'?

According to Eva Gehring, the ocean paradigmatically embodies the sublime, the confrontation of the subject with an overwhelming experience. Like the ocean, Gehring argues, the Internet comprising the dichotomy of chaos and order, of irrationality and rationality, of transcendence and empiricism, of nature and culture, challenges the subject through its technological complexity.³ In contrast to other Internet metaphors that give preference to more technological-futuristic implications, the ocean metaphor evokes a deep-seated anthropological desire to connect to an often overwhelming environment. What is more, the ocean, as an open and infinitely complex ecosystem, emphasizes a view of the Internet as a global, transformative, and organic microcosm. Like outer space, the ocean is open, seemingly infinite, and more or less shapeless. Yet, it is a 'worldly' cosmos, in that it contains a rich and highly diverse ecosystem of organisms which interact, form associations, and depend on each other. Because of its structure as vibrant 'Lebensraum' below the surface, the ocean has figured as an archetype for the mysterious capacity of human creativity and the powers of the subconscious. It is this quality of the ocean as containing deep secrets and potentially hidden truths which has made it a favorable metaphor for the process of seeking, finding, and generating knowledge.

Yet, the ocean can also evoke anxieties. Water can be both enabler and threat to life, creativity, and growth. As Haskell Springer notes, water can be 'the joiner of human beings' and, at the same time, it can be 'the separator, the border, the dangerous boundary' (Springer, 1995: 1). The ocean's highly conflicting implications

3 See Gehring, 2004: 134

for human life and creativity as both utopian and dystopian realm have rendered the ocean an intriguing imaginary space for writers and readers, especially in the United States. As Klaus Benesch notes, especially in America, 'seascapes continued to provide a foil for various national, political, and philosophical projections' (Benesch, 2004: 10). Making an endless promise of discovery, progress, and transformation, the sea journey represents an American belief in mobility, self-renewal, and liberation.⁴ Springer declares:

Our receptiveness to sea literature rests in part on our sympathetic response to this archetypal journey, speaking as it does to truths that often transcend differences of culture and of gender. In this voyage-centered literature the sea assumes a double role: it is the field of action on which the separation and transformation are played out, and it is the thing itself, the heart of mysterious knowledge to which the protagonists aspire and with which they return. (Springer, 1995: 16)

The ocean's double function as 'field of action' and 'thing itself', however alluring it may be for US narratives of transcendental journeys, expresses a more universal, even global, and historically unceasing human desire to both find and utilize knowledge in the endless floods of experience and external signaling.

In my essay, I will look at a moment in history in which information and knowledge have attained a status that by far exceeds former ascriptions. I will explore the cultural functions of the ocean metaphor in relation to conceptions of knowledge, information, and experience in what Manuel Castells has called the 'Information Age' or the 'Network Society' (Castells, 2010). Although societies have always relied on information and knowledge for their communication, production, and wealth, the current age, according to Castells, is particularly determined by the complex flows of information. He sees the main reasons for this paradigm shift in a 'technological revolution, centered around information technologies, [which] began to reshape, at accelerated pace, the material basis of society' (Castells, 2010: 1). Secondly, Castells adds, '[e]conomies throughout the world have become globally interdependent, introducing a new form of relationship between economy, state, and society, in a system of variable geometry' (1).

4 See Springer, 1995: 21.

Against the backdrop of generally shifting political and economic relations towards more decentralized and diversified power structures, he calls this world a 'world of global flows of wealth, power, and images' in which 'the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning' (3). However, Castells emphasizes that the emergence of new digital technology alone has not created this shift towards informationalism but that, rather, it 'originated and diffused, not by accident, in an historical period of the global restructuring of capitalism, for which it was an essential tool' (13). As a result, information constitutes the 'core ontology' of our social, economic, and political patterns. This 'information technology paradigm' is so pervasive, Castells argues, since the new technologies exceedingly act on information, they pervade all processes of individual and collective existence, and they display a high level of flexibility in line with the networking logic of globalization and an increasing degree of technological convergence (70–71).

The correlating emergence between an information society and a global society has far-reaching implications both for the US' status as a nation state and for individual self-conceptions. Identity, whether national or personal, has not only, as Castells claims, become increasingly elusive, but, in fact, notions of what it means to be human have fundamentally changed towards posthumanist conceptions of the self as a node in a larger network of human and non-human agencies. 'In changing our understanding of the external world', Luciano Floridi remarks in relation to information and communication technologies, 'they also modified our conception of who we are' (Floridi, 2010: 8). The more we are influenced and dependent on information technology, the more we become aware of the fact that 'we are not standalone entities, but rather interconnected informational organisms or *inforgs*, sharing with biological agents and engineered artefacts a global environment ultimately made of information, the infosphere' (9). What Floridi calls 'inforg', in extending Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg as a radically hybrid self⁵, is a notion of the self as fundamentally 'networked'. According to Katherine Hayles,

5 See Haraway, 1985,

such a posthumanist view does not mean to fall back on dystopian notions of the human as a disembodied cluster of information that is completely determined by technology but, rather, to assume a harmonious synthesis in which humans have an increased awareness of their interconnectedness with their (technological, biological, ecological) environment:

No longer is human will seen as the source from which emanates the mastery necessary to dominate and control the environment. Rather, the distributed cognition of the emergent human subject correlates with [...] the distributed cognitive system as a whole, in which 'thinking' is done by both human and nonhuman actors. [...] To conceptualize the human in these terms is not to imperil human survival but is precisely to enhance it, for the more we understand the flexible, adaptive structures that coordinate our environments and the metaphors that we ourselves are, the better we can fashion images of ourselves that accurately reflect the complex interplays that ultimately make the entire world one system. (Hayles, 1999: 290)

What is interesting in both Floridi's and Hayles' descriptions of a more distributed notion of identity, is that they employ semantics of ecology, environment, and, in Hayles' optimistic vision, even survival. To acknowledge that agency has become (or has always been) to a certain extent decentralized, is regarded as a key factor in understanding complex environments as a whole and, so it implicitly reads, to being able to preserve them. (Ironically, in making claims for the perspective of complexity, especially Hayles cannot evade an anthropocentric view altogether, ascribing the human the ultimate capacity and responsibility to 'understand' and act accordingly.) Informational and environmental complexity, so it seems, are conceived of in similar ways: they both form the backdrop to a (re)contextualization of human agency.

On the level of national identity, there have been similar tendencies towards adopting a decentralized perspective. In the course of the recent 'transnational turn', America's position in the world has been regarded less in terms of exceptionalist views of its status as 'world power', but rather in the context of its global interconnectedness, not only economically, but also in terms of geopolitics, communication, and ecology. As a 'symptom of massive transformation in the world political economy', transnational American Studies have invested in reconceptualizing America's

position in a world in which state sovereignty is becoming increasingly unstable (Pease, 2011: 7–9). Since the ‘transnational prevents the closure of the nation’ (5), transnational perspectives have turned away from visions of America ‘as exempt and exceptional and relocate it as defined by and constitutive of the postnational forces of globalization, whose primary commitments evade and transcend the affective and political demands made by the nation-state on people who are now citizens of the world’ (17).

Transnational American Studies pose many questions, of which Donald Pease’s contestation that concepts of America as decentralized node in a global environment lead to new forms of American exceptionalism is only one. A major problem in regarding America as interconnected node in a transnational network is that networks are by no means democratic but that they have their own power laws. As network scientist Albert-László Barabási has demonstrated, networks are complex figurations that display emergent properties of self-organization and follow what he calls ‘power laws’ based on the network’s growth and preferential attachment: ‘No matter how large and complex a network becomes, as long as preferential attachment and growth are present, it will maintain its hub-dominated scale-free topology’ (Barabási, 2002: 91). This means that decentralized agency does not necessarily lead to equally distributed power relations, but certain nodes (hubs) may become stronger than others through ‘rich get richer’ processes. Pease goes so far as to say that transnational networks do not create equality but, on the contrary, ‘[t]he importance of interconnected networks of finance, goods, labor, and peoples changed the definition of sovereignty to mean the monopoly of control over networks of interconnectivity’ (Pease, 2011: 8).

In a globalized world, the United States undoubtedly still plays the role of a hub that governs the flows of information not only through providing technological and economic infrastructure but also in terms of maintaining an undeniable supremacy in the production of mainstream popular culture. Globalization, so claims Ulfried Reichardt, is therefore often perceived as being equivalent with ‘Americanization’. However, Reichardt notes that such a cultural imperialist perspective is too simplistic in ignoring both the pluralistic and therefore inherently global nature of American popular culture

and the highly creative processes of transnational hybridization.⁶ Even if the US represents a cultural hub in the transnational networks of media, the contents that circulate in these networks are increasingly being recontextualized and reappropriated on a local level (Reichardt, 2010: 106).

The Internet, as the world's most visible system of interconnection, may serve as an example of a technology that has been reappropriated in a global context. Originally developed by the US Department of Defense in the 1960s, the Internet has become a global network that has been popularized for individual and business users from (theoretically) all over the world. According to Janet Abbate, the Internet's global expansion was not a process of 'translating' an American model to other cultural contexts but rather operated on the inherent decentralized logic of the network itself:

Though the Internet originated in the United States, it did not simply spread from the United States to the rest of the world. Rather, its global reach resulted from the convergence of many streams of network development. Starting in the 1970s, many other nations built large data networks, which were shaped by their local cultures and which often served as agents and symbols of economic development and national sovereignty. The question was not whether these countries would adopt an 'American' technology; it was whether and how they would connect their existing national or private networks to the Internet. (Abbate, 1999: 208-209)

Yet, there have always been international concerns over the United States' dominance of the Internet, relating principally to the top-level domains which were originally exclusively under American control or to the linguistic supremacy of English as the 'native language' of the Internet (211-212). 'The Internet, as a medium of instantaneous communication', Abbate thus holds, 'might overcome geographic distance, but it cannot simply erase political or social differences' (212). As Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin argue in their study on cultural mappings of cyberspace, the Internet has fostered conflicting narratives:

6 See Reichardt, 2010: 103-104.

Cyberspace, for some, disrupts these geometries of power by changing the socio-spatial basis on which they are formed and sustained. In these cases, cyberspace creates either utopian spaces of individual freedom or dystopian futures of 'big brother' with cyberspace operating as a giant panopticon (sic!). For others, cyberspace merely reinforces and deepens current geometries, providing a medium through which hegemony is further reproduced. (Dodge and Kitchin, 2001: 37)

Based on Barabási's theory of power laws in scale-free networks, one could even argue that existing power structures are reinforced and enhanced on the Internet. As recent revelations concerning the National Security Agency's global mass spying activities have shown, the notion of (US) power in seemingly democratic communication networks may have to be reconsidered. Not only are the main software and Internet companies such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter based in the United States, but also the technical infrastructure of global communication and information usage seems to be a lot more controlled by the American government than anyone (including the American public or large parts of the officials) would have assumed. What may hold true for culture, namely, that the local and the global are in a relatively open relationship of mutual exchange, is not necessarily the case for information which is to a much larger extent amenable to centralized control and misuse. Information, paradoxically, is both more impersonal (it needs human and cultural contextualization in order to become meaningful knowledge) and at the same time more politically charged. Especially in an age in which 'big data' are rapidly gaining (economic and political) relevance, not only the storage but also control, access, and usage of accumulating information increasingly becomes a question of power in which the United States have shown, once again, that they are keen on retaining their position as 'global player'.

In the following analysis, I aim to examine how and to what effect the Internet has been portrayed as 'an ocean of knowledge'. I thus want to investigate the heuristic potential of the ocean metaphor for cultural projections and negotiations of epistemological concerns in the digital age. In doing so, I rely on a notion of the Internet as a particularly 'American technology', representing values that have traditionally been associated with American beliefs and principles, such as a decentralized network-logic,

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spatial expansion, and pluralistic forms of informal association.⁷ In this regard, the ocean metaphor bears certain implications for (re)considering the Internet not only in the wider context of a culture of knowledge but also in relation to America's ongoing desire to connect, transform, and transcend boundaries of space, origin, and physicality. In the following analysis, I will examine both cultural projections of the 'Internet as ocean' as well as creative negotiations of sea imagery in which the Internet functions as medium and/or material. In considering these two levels of critical engagement with the Internet-ocean nexus, I intend to take into account their double function as both 'epistemological concept' and as 'creative space'. I thus attempt to review and connect debates on American digital culture, transnationalism, and posthumanism as complementary processes involved in America's ongoing project of navigating the boundaries of seemingly endless spaces.

In what follows, I will take a critical look at a selection of current media examples in which water/sea imagery is employed in relation to or as a metaphor for information and knowledge or the lack thereof. I will begin my analysis with visual representations and abstractions of information in the form of infographics that rely on the heuristic model of the sea metaphor for conceptualizing aspects of the Information Age. In a second step, I will turn to the experimental film project *Life in a Day*. The production principle of this participatory film collage is programmatic, since the 'crowdsourcing' of film footage reflects the metaphorical function of the numerous water references that self-reflexively comment on the centrality of an 'open access' information culture. A radically critical counterexample of the Information Age, Dan Chaon's novel *Await Your Reply*, will subsequently be discussed.

7 America has traditionally been regarded as a network at least since the nineteenth century, when Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, depicts America's receptiveness for democratic structures in a coexistence of unity and diversity, a horizontal distribution of power, and a society built on flexible as well as reconfiguring informal associations. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri ascribe to the early nineteenth century the birth of what they call 'Empire', a new form of global sovereignty built on 'a democratic interaction of powers linked together in networks' (161). Such positive notions of 'America as network', however, are counteracted by more critical accounts of America as imperialist network which totalizes global culture, economy, and societies like a spreading virus.

The novel creates a dystopian view of identity loss and annihilated agency in a digitalized world that is deeply trapped in the logic of cybercrime and identity theft. Water, in this novel, only occurs in transfigured states; it has either vanished or is frozen. In its somber reflection on (the limits of) human responsibility, the novel poses central questions about the relationship between the ecological, technological, and epistemological resources of our increasingly posthuman world. I will conclude with a brief reference to Google's recent underwater mapping project *Sea View*, discussing some of its implications in view of the suggestive tangents between the two major global ecologies that will determine the future of (post-)humanity, the ocean, and the 'seas of knowledge'.

What if the Internet were an ocean? This question has motivated Athanassios Danoglidis' recent infographic depicting selected features of the Internet in terms of iconic and symbolic visual and textual data. The visualization represents a map that portrays the Internet as a spatialized map that resembles the ecosystem of the ocean. In this two-dimensional illustration, the usually 'hidden' depths of the ocean become surface. The ecosystem of the ocean contains not only 'organic' species such as fish, or coral reefs, but also technology. Vessels of various sizes and shapes inhabit the sea just as 'naturally' as sea animals and vegetation. Yet, nature and technology do not intermingle but inhabit different spheres: the deep sea is inhabited by swarms of fish, which symbolize the collective user activity of social media platforms such as Youtube and Facebook, while the more shallow waters provide official routes on which various forms of formalized internet traffic take place, both legal and illegal. The Internet is conceived of as a creative, fluid space in which innumerable different applications, institutions, and collectives intersect in what seems like a shared zone of communal experience. At the same time it is being displayed as a 'pool of sharks' in which data hackers, sex traffic, and data kraken operate underneath the more or less powerless control of data protection agencies.

This infographic does not only display certain features of the Internet but, as its name suggests, it sets out to explain it by structuring the information into a form of visual narrative. The appeal of infographics is that the visual narrative spatially

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organizes and reduces the complexities of an abstract phenomenon. Infographics portion information into manageable segments and therefore help to process otherwise perplexing information loads.⁸ The elusive question of what the complex figuration of the Internet actually represents is answered through a metaphorical restructuring of information. Through iconic and spatial narrativization, the infographic turns bodiless meta-information into relevant and easily accessible knowledge. The ocean presents a suitable metaphor for this particular visualization, since it allows showing the diversity of different agents and participants that constitute the ecosystem of knowledge as well as representing hierarchies, dynamics of flow, and spatially distributed, yet connected, sites of agency. Still, the Internet is presented as a map in which flow is primarily suggested but not actually performed. In its immobile materiality, the infographic first and foremost provides a geographical map that discloses the loose coherence of a lively yet mostly opaque community. In presenting the Internet as a 'basin of information' and simultaneously offering meta-information to 'navigate the vast amounts of data presented to us' (Lankow and Ritchie, 2012: 12), the visualization thus self-reflexively constitutes the lighthouse that helps to 'travel through' the manifold layers encountered in the ocean of information. According to its implied narrative, the Internet displays an alternative territory, working in a mythical realm usually disclosed to the human eye yet developing its creative power from within the ominous depths of free floating agencies. The function of this playful visualization is to transform the invisible into the visible, to map the hitherto unknown regions of the techno-cognitive underworlds with its pluralistic currents.

Other visualizations of the Internet draw on less on concrete visual images but employ more abstract patterns to suggest connections between complex data. In Paul Butler's 'Visualizing Friendships' (2010), for example, global social interactions of Facebook are reduced to conceptual patterns drawn from statistical data. The visualization, however, generates an embodied materiality of its own sort. Against a dark blue background, a carcass of the world

8 See Liebig, 1999: 60.

map emerges through white lines that suggest social network connectivity on a global scale. When crossing the oceans, the thin white lines submerge within the corporate color of Facebook's navy blue, infusing the ocean's deep, resourceful, and ultimately creative space. The light blue connections thus evoke the material counterpart of submarine communication cables while at the same time suggesting the technological transcendence of such material connections. The visualization becomes an intricate texture of material colors, shapes, and forms, floating over the oceans of the global map like interacting flickerings of the sea. Social networking, this visualization seems to suggest, relies on and, in turn, constitutes the essential and archaic source of creativity and of life itself.

Produced by one of Facebook's own employees, the map optimistically presents virtual interconnectedness as an explicitly global project in which America, as one of the island-hubs, floats in the vast blue ocean of transnational communication and knowledge. However, not only does this map suggest a sense of universal online community, but it also reveals the gaps, edges, and power centers of the virtual world. While some parts of the globe, mainly the Western hemisphere as well as some parts of Asia and Australia, display a high density of Facebook connectivity, other parts of the world, most notably perhaps Russia and China, are excluded from this seemingly shared social realm. Internet platforms such as Facebook may be global networks, but they are not democratic in the sense of providing a universal realm of experience, nor do they necessarily transcend traditional boundaries and power relations. In contrast to Danoglidis' 'Internet as ocean' metaphor, Butler's visualization does not give any information about the organization and content of social networking. Neither does it represent the Internet as an ocean of agencies. Instead, the ocean represents the transcendent space in which global communities merge into one source of communication. Paradoxically, however, the visualization does not even emphasize human interaction, but rather suggests a vision of global interconnectedness as essential, ecological, and globally sustainable in which the self liquefies in abstract spatial flows of global communication. Yet, ironically, it overtly ignores the fact that its supposedly universal

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social networking relations are derived exclusively from data provided by one (yet highly powerful) software company, thus rendering its program to 'visualize friendship', a highly selective and therefore ultimately absurd endeavor.

While these two visualizations draw on sea imagery to emphasize the Internet's quality as complex organic and/or global communication system, other creative engagements with online media pick up the ocean's inherent principle of creativity itself. Oceans are the 'collecting tanks' of individual streams and rivers; they assemble diverse waters, minerals, and organisms into one seemingly coherent whole which connects and sustains the world. This unifying function of the ocean as emerging medium that sustains the world makes it a powerful metaphor for cultural production, not only on the level of semantics but also on a methodological level. The notion of the Internet as a technical configuration and 'pool' that generates knowledge and information has become increasingly prevalent in the course of growing user participation in the Web 2.0. An increasing number of art projects are based on the idea of crowd-sourcing, a way of accumulating ideas and resources from the online community rather than from traditional investors. The concept of cultural crowd-sourcing relies on what Pierre Lévy has called 'collective intelligence', or rather 'collective creativity', of the online community rather than on the authority of artists that have undergone formalized institutional training.⁹

The YouTube documentary *Life in a Day*, released in 2011, is such a collaborative film project that edited footage from 80,000 Youtube films, submitted by individuals from all over the world on July 24, 2010. The film thus attempts to portray a cross-section of global human experience. It does so by arranging the montage of numerous film clips in a seemingly coherent narrative that follows the chronology of a daily routine. The title 'Life in a Day', in its inversion of the more common, specific 'a day in life', emphasizes the seeming simultaneity of events on a global scale, thus purporting to present the unrepresentable, to narrativize the 'timeless time' of our virtual media environment.¹⁰

9 See Lévy, 1997.

10 See Castells, 2010: 491–494. I owe the idea that the documentary suggests simultaneity through its reversed/reversible title to my student Sarina Amankona.

An important structuring device in this constructed global narrative is the universal element of water. On the representational level alone, the numerous references to water, especially to the sea, are striking. Water is elemental not only for every human depicted in the film, but it also has an important structural function for the implied narrative of the documentary. Following the chronology of a global daily routine, water is present in all moments of transformation, such as when people get ready for the day, before they have lunch, and before they go to bed. In the highly diverse plurality of experience, water is displayed as one of the essential links that connects humans all over the world, just like immaterial themes such as love, family, work, or food. Water is constitutive and symbolic of universal themes such as birth, friendship, family, sustenance, and death, representing the narrative 'glue' of this global video-mosaic and thus becoming one of the film's main protagonists or non-human agencies.

The film begins in the early morning hours with a scene of an elephant's night bath, followed by a scene in which a mother is nursing her baby (0:01:10–0:02:00). This sequence of images evokes the Hindu mythology of creation and birth in a decidedly self-referential statement.¹¹ Opening with the image of water, as the central source for life on a global scale, the implied focus of the film is on creativity as an essentially human resource, as the 'joiner of human beings' (Springer, 1995: 1). Water is the elemental source of which the day, the film, and life, evolves, develops, and feeds itself. Accordingly, the individual co-authors are considered parts of a greater community, conjoining at the universal well of online creativity. The film, by its very method, addresses a huge variety of humanity's personal and global challenges, while suggesting that they can be overcome by communal effort, by transcending the particular and by connecting with others to form a bigger, universal whole. Global community does not remain an abstract

11 According to an Indian legend, Ganesha, god of literature, wisdom, and success, was born while defending his mother who was taking a bath. Beheaded by his father, Lord Shiva, who mistook him for an intruder, he was rescued by his mother transplanting an elephant's head onto his body, from then on being the god of the beginning and creation.

concept, but is rendered as materially graspable through the narrative organization of multiple authentic experiences.

Life, the film suggests, is a possible story that unfolds from the endless streams of pluralistic information. As one of the film's 'protagonists', the little Peruvian shoe cleaner says about his most valuable possession, his computer, that he loves to be on the Internet because pages like Wikipedia 'are full of stories' (0:46:00). Like the Internet with its endless depths of information and data, life takes on an infinite number of different faces and facets. Yet, just as strong as the endlessness of stories is the wish to find meaning, coherence, and narrative. In a world in which we are increasingly confronted with endless unedited media material, this documentary functions as a 'cultural web browser'. If 'YouTube is an ocean of images and sound, offering all kinds of experiences' (Iversen, 2009: 347), the documentary is a vessel that carries us through a carefully selected route on these overwhelming waters. Like Danoglidis' infographic, the film selects, organizes, and classifies information. It thus helps to navigate through the ocean of Youtube videos that stream in every day, making them 'readable', relevant, and manageable.

The film thus does not so much represent the 'millionfold narrative of the self' (Schwierin, 2013: 25) in that it is no endless, unsorted mass of local perspectives, but individual stories are merged into one global narrative that is bigger than the sum of its individual parts. The film suggests an anthropological connection between all humans that is not as concrete as Howard Rheingold's notion of 'virtual community' as concrete participation in online social groups in that it does not involve direct interaction.¹² However, it goes beyond Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' in conceiving not only the nation but also the global as 'a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 1983: 7). According to Anderson, mass media have constituted one of the important developments in creating such a notion of a 'shared world' in that they have enabled people to simultaneously experience information and knowledge that pertains to constituting a national consciousness (37–46). In the age of digital media, however, the information

¹² See Rheingold, 1993.

we receive through mass media is less controlled by central authorities but is increasingly drawn from multiple sources, often including user-generated content such as amateur video footage and blogs. Truth therefore becomes a pluralistic, evolving concept which reflects (local) perspective rather than (total) authority. The film's extensive use of water imagery reflects the experience of watching this collection of Youtube videos, of being immersed in and letting oneself flow through the endless streams of information. Thomas Elsaesser notes in relation to the specific narrative logic and functions of Youtube that 'the structured contingency is, on the one hand, strongly informed and shaped by mathematics, via the site's programming architecture and design, based on its search and sort algorithms. On the other hand, the chaos of human creativity, eccentricity and self-importance prevails' (Elsaesser, 2009: 181). Elsaesser describes his observations based on a self-experiment of a Youtube search experience in relation to the ocean metaphor: 'My clusters around "collapse"', he says, 'were only small islands of sense carved out of a sea of boiling magma, made up of human self-presentation and self-performance, the trials and errors of the collective "me", which is YouTube' (181).

In an age in which the participatory media platform Youtube has become a major competitor to traditional TV networks as well as other online television platforms¹³, the idea of 'imagined communities' has to be reconsidered in terms of a more global sense of imagined online community. The Youtube community is a highly heterogeneous one, not only in terms of nationality but also in terms of age, gender, social status etc. A paramount media platform of a Web 2.0 culture, Youtube purports to grant power to the individual to create and disseminate content. Henry Jenkins, in an optimistic statement on what he calls the participatory nature of a rising 'convergence culture', claims that 'the emergence of new media technologies supports a democratic urge to allow more people to create and circulate media' (Jenkins, 2006: 269). Seen in this light, allusions to water in the documentary express a wish for reclaiming the material, the concrete, the human in the virtual floods of data. *Life in a Day* creates

13 See Uricchio, 2009: 26-27.

a material product out of manifold and more or less shapeless voices and turns the creative, yet elusive, depths of information floods into a tangible and purportedly universal human experience. In this vein, the film's soundtrack expresses this wish for material experience: 'I want to drink from the clearest water', Ellie Goulding opens against the background of drop-like accompaniment. Presented as the nautical ship on the wide oceans of information that amalgamates diverse 'sources of life', the film brings virtual and disembodied flows of information back to the level of the human, rendering structured knowledge rather than shapeless information essential for human existence.

Yet, Youtube is of course not immune to similar mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion as is Facebook. Although 'YouTube is localized in 56 countries and across 61 languages' (youtube.com), its user base is not distributed equally, but it can be assumed that it includes a more technologically inclined generation of the Western hemisphere.¹⁴ Such a supposition would somehow tint the notion of *Life in a Day* representing seemingly 'authentic global experience', not least since a large number of selected video material has been submitted by (semi-)professional film directors. What is more, the process of selecting and framing the film material also reflects a decidedly Western perspective. Although the film is global in scope, method, and authorship, it is directed, produced, and edited by a European film team and produced in collaboration with the American Youtube/Google corporation. Youtube first facilitated not only the marketing but also the technical prerequisites for individuals to contribute their footage. The film can be viewed on Youtube, in addition to the huge number of video entries that were not used as well as interviews and follow-up videos. The Internet may have the appeal of being open to participation,

14 As a study on the geographic popularity of Youtube videos has shown, Youtube access and interaction is highly local. According to this study, 'about 50% of the videos have more than 70% of their views in a single region' (Brodersen, Scellato and Wattenhofer, 2012: 1). Another study demonstrates that 'the links to related videos generated by uploaders' choices have clear small-world characteristics' (Cheng, Dale and Liu, 2008: 229). Thus, it can be inferred that Youtube exhibits typical power laws of scale-free networks, such as local clustering and preferential attachment, reinforcing and reproducing existing power structures.

allowing for multiple perspectives and ideas, but it is still largely controlled by Western and, particularly, by American business organizations. As the ultimately 'global' technology, the Internet crosses national, legal, and cultural boundaries, but its dynamics and the way we navigate through it remain largely dominated by America, thus granting the United States a privileged position in the representation and dispersion of seemingly global experience and information. As this collaborative documentary shows, information and knowledge may be a local resource. However, the narrative authority of the Western/American world remains powerful in regulating the dispersion, direction, and managing of this increasingly valuable good.

That both water and knowledge have become increasingly valuable in a globalized information culture, is also the central concern of Dan Chaon's dystopian cybercrime thriller *Await Your Reply* (2009). The novel emphasizes the precariousness of knowledge, reflecting the dehumanizing aspects of the Information Age rather than the notion of boundless creativity and self-expression. At the same time, it directs attention to an increased, yet often futile, quest for self-knowledge in times of increased virtualization. Self-knowledge has often been considered an 'epistemic privilege', distinct from knowledge of the world in that it implies a sense of a 'direct', unmediated, and self-constituting form of knowledge.¹⁵ In this novel, remarkably set in the dry Midwest of the United States, the prevailing absence of water figures as one of the central metaphors for an increasing sense of distrust in identity-formation.

Chaon weaves three assumedly separate threads together in one complex narrative that predominantly centers around the protagonist Hayden, a computer hacker largely involved in identity theft. Hayden constantly tries to reinvent himself, following a deep-seated yet mostly unfulfilled aspiration for self-renewal and transformation. He thus represents the virtual avatar, constantly adapting, shifting names and locations. However, not only does he feel increasingly self-estranged and fragmented in his constant quest for reinventing himself, but also the people clos-

15 See Gertler, 2011.

est to him grow insecure in their search for 'the truth', for getting to know the 'real' Hayden.

The state of not-knowing, not-recognizing, of lacking orientation, is symbolized by two distinct water images. Under the pseudonym of George Olson, Hayden takes his girlfriend Lucy to a deserted motel in the middle of Nebraska adjacent to a dried-up water reservoir. 'Nebraska's own Atlantis' (Chaon, 2009: 122), as Hayden calls this drowned and desiccated town, is indicative of a civilization regress, of an ecocatastrophe that embodies the 'ruin lifestyle' (230) of unfettered capitalism, overpopulation, and natural disasters. The disappearance of water represents both the drowning of civilization and, in turn, the total loss of meaning, purpose, self-integrity, and cohesive knowledge. Meanwhile, Hayden's twin brother Miles drives up north to the Canadian Arctic Sea, desperately following a trail of his missing brother. His journey for the ocean also becomes a painful search for his own identity and purpose in life. Miles' obsessive quest for 'the truth', however, turns out to be fruitless, the only answer to his expansive list of questions remaining 'unknown' (130).

The obscurity of Hayden's whereabouts is mirrored by the state of the Arctic Ocean as permanent ice: information regarding his brother seems to be locked in, at least to Miles, who still believes in a way to 'decode' the puzzle. But, as his fellow 'detective' Lydia observes, water is able to constantly change shapes, since 'the limit of permanent ice is not as stable as it used to be [...]. Global warming and so forth' (250). The sea as a sensitive marker for global developments such as climate change is related to the elusiveness of information, identity, and self-knowledge. The only person who seems to still believe in a form of 'secure knowledge' is Hayden himself, who articulates his dystopian theory of overpopulation:

Most people just can't accept the truth. You know what I mean. Do they think we can just continue on like this, all this babble and bullshit, as if we're not on the edge of ruin? Do they not see it? The Arctic ice cap is melting. We've got dead zones in the oceans that are expanding astronomically. (229)

The image of an overflowing ocean alludes to civilization's general surplus of capital, population, and information. Through

human greed and accumulation of goods, humanity will eventually inundate itself, both literally and metaphorically.

The sea-knowledge metaphor is extended when the faked drowning of Hayden's supposed son Ryan in the Pacific Ocean is followed by his subsequent physical disintegration through information excess in the virtual network of stolen identities. Ryan paradigmatically represents a posthumanist figure who becomes literally 'disembodied' by losing his right hand while being held hostage by a group of dupes. His amputated limb is indicative of his dissolving agency in the logic of 'the body as information': 'But imagine yourself in pieces. [...] It's not that easy, after all, to know what you're made up of' (89).

The novel suggests that the coherent self drowns in view of increasing processes of virtualization in which everything becomes disembodied information. The ocean as a metaphor for a democratic and fertile ecosystem of knowledge is challenged by its dystopian counterpart. This regards the mysteriousness of the ocean as threatening, the abundance of 'information' as overwhelming, and the potentially destructive power of the ocean as a dominating force, generating apocalyptic images of ecocatastrophes and self-destructive experiences. Conversely, the novel also demonstrates that, in the twenty-first century, water as an 'organic source of life' has become a scarce and valuable resource, as has relevant and reliable information. Increasing virtualization turns the essential foundation of our existence, the knowledge about ourselves, into a precarious good, allowing for continuous evasion, transformation, and delusion. The concrete, materially embodied self appears to Hayden as a mere shell, its recovery in terms of true self-possession an impossible challenge.

In the end, the novel leaves its characters either dead or disconnected from their homes, removed to Africa, Mexico, and Europe. America itself has become a disembodied, virtual space; its citizens can find meaning and self-knowledge only abroad. Globalization, with its increasing logic of virtualization, has given preference to decentered, transnational experiences in view of the impossibility of self-discovery at home. In view of receding flows of water, the ultimate symbol of self-renewal has become obsolete

in its symbolic function for epistemological journeys of personal and national self-recognition and self-assertion.

But, apparently, all is not lost. For Google, the next frontier is always just around the corner. Google's latest mapping mission, after completing its grand epistemological project *Street View*, is its maritime twin *Sea View*, a project geared towards scanning a space no less impenetrable as the global depths of the ocean. 'Today we're adding the very first underwater panoramic images to Google Maps', Google's official blog announced September 2012, 'the next step in our quest to provide people with the most comprehensive, accurate and usable map of the world' (McClendon, 2011). Google's next 'frontier' is the rich underwater world of the ocean. The global venture to capture the earth's topographic information and to make it available in an accessible format is taken just one step further. Which practical and economical applications this 'submarine street view' might have remains to be seen. Yet, Google's 'dip into the ocean' shows that metaphors of knowledge may shift from notions of 'civilized infrastructure' to organic ecosystems. America's digital expansion has now officially included the oceans, the 'natural' resource still largely undiscovered, but yet full of unclaimed data, information, and knowledge.

It is perhaps no coincidence that at a time in which America is increasingly regarded in terms of transnational flows and global dynamics, the oceans become a prevalent metaphorical realm to conceptualize and organize epistemological concerns with digital information technology. The contrasting implications of the ocean as both utopian and dystopian space have rendered it an intriguing imaginary realm for negotiating America's position in the Information Age. The ocean suggests both promises and failures of mobility, self-renewal, and liberation. While for America the idea of navigating through space has traditionally been connected with the idea of more or less linear self-development¹⁶, it may be time to reconsider America in terms of transoceanic exchanges and dynamics. As Kate Flint notes, we need to 'replace the language of the frontier with that of the oceanic; to substitute for notions of nationhood that depend on ideas of pushing

16 See Manovich, 2001: 272.

forwards and outwards, of expansion and conquering, a concern with fluidity, transmission, and exchange' (Flint, 2009: 325), using the ocean metaphor to reiterate Shelley Fisher Fishkin's claim for a 'transnational turn' in American Studies (Fishkin, 2004). The decentralizing and pluralist dynamics of the Information Age, in which knowledge has become the most valuable currency, require new ways of thinking about and of consolidating notions of territory, national identity, and information structures. Capturing the power of information, which still resides largely within American hands, within a fundamentally global and 'organic' metaphor, water brings together transnational, ecological, and posthumanist discourses involved in negotiating the position of America in the Information Age. America's double status as both part of the 'world wide sea' of information and as a site of strong hegemonial attempts to control the transnational networks of knowledge makes it a fruitful and often contradictory space in which concepts of transformation, transcendence, and self-renewal are presented in a continuous struggle to navigate through ever-growing complexities of transnational entanglements and global challenges.

To quote Lévy, for whom a new and highly powerful anthropological space has emerged that he calls '*knowledge space*', both 'the existence of economic networks and territorial power will depend on mankind's capacity for the rapid acquisition of knowledge and the development of a collective imagination, as will the survival of the great nomadic earth' (Lévy, 1997: 257). Networks of knowledge and information, so run the cultural narratives of our times, have not only entered a metaphorical relationship with the material flows of water that have secured and motivated human existence since its inception, but the two realms have increasingly become mutually dependent on one another. In the Information Age, what it means to be human and what it means to belong to a certain culture seem to depend more than ever on concrete, territorial realities as well as on questions of knowledge and informational systems. To understand and negotiate the complex boundaries and interlaces between these different territorial domains is a cultural and academic cruise that has only just begun. The waters of relocating American agency within the storms of the global Information Age are still wide.

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