Participatory Culture and the Death of Cyberflânerie in Tao Lin's *Taipei*

Adil Hussain[1]
University of Kashmir

Abstract
This paper examines how Tao Lin's novel *Taipei* is seen through the lens of the "cyberflânerie," and how that approach does not critically engage with the text. Cyberflânerie evolved from the twentieth-century concept of flânerie developed by Walter Benjamin and is a modern reinterpretation of the traditional flâneur adapted to the digital age. With social media rendering cyberflânerie impossible, the protagonist in *Taipei*, Paul, navigates a world in which his identity, consciousness, and interactions are deeply mediated by the Internet and social media. The paper argues that Paul's experiences reflect a broader cultural shift towards a participatory culture, where individuals simultaneously consume and produce digital content, blurring the lines between producer and consumer (prosumer). The novel is seen as a travelogue of the digital age and how the Internet structures identity, community, and even emotional experiences, often leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation. Engaging with theories from media ecology and participatory culture, the discussion shows how digital technologies shape cognitive and social behaviours, and how the Internet has replaced the passive flâneur with an active participant in a networked society.

Keywords
Death of cyberflânerie, media ecology, participatory culture, prosumerism, social media novel

Introduction

Ian Chang sees Tao Lin's *Taipei* (2013) as the consummation of cyber-consciousness with its powerful narrative style, calling it "autoimmune realism" that "dramatizes the effects of a fully virtual life better than theirs." Chang further

[1] Adil Hussain is a full-time research scholar in the Department of English, University of Kashmir, North Campus, India. Among his publications are eleven research papers in SCOPUS/WOS-indexed journals. His recent article titled "Beyond Body and Gravity: Hybridity and Technology in S.B. Divya's *Machinehood*" appears in *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Jun. 2024).
Email: adil.ncscholar@kashmiruniversity.net
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1262-7869

argues that while Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) and Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) are short of reaching "the desolate land's end of fictional cyber-consciousness," Lin's novel, rooted in the cyberspace and "immersed in virtual dislocation," is an authentic and unsentimental response to how we live now. Aislinn Clare McDougal argues that *Taipei*'s use of "a stream of consciousness narrative" brings the protagonist Paul closer to "a twenty-first century cyber-flâneur" (2). His analysis aligns with Benjamin Lytal's assessment of *Taipei*'s narrative as, in McDougal's words, "filtered through a twenty-first century flâneur figure, Paul" (10). While on a surface level the novel does seem to be an exercise in cyberflânerie, a deeper reading of the novel (especially when considered against what has been seen as "the death of the Cyberflâneur") reveals how such a reading fails to critically engage with the context (media) of the novel.

The object of this paper is to examine *Taipei* in light of the rise of participatory culture that coincides with the rise of the dynamic web, particularly social media. In order to do so, the theoretical framework grounded in media ecology and participatory culture, drawing on the insights of Henry Jenkins, Neil Postman, and Evgeny Morozov, among others, is employed.

Published in 2013, Tao Lin's *Taipei* follows Paul, a socially awkward drug addict, living in America, away from his parents who have moved back to their homeland, Taiwan. The novel is narrated in a manner of realism "in its 'presentism', in its 'nowness'" that depicts, using "psychonarration," the narrator as "ever present, guiding us as we delve into Paul's thoughts" (Jarai 220-222). As Paul navigates the urban landscape of America and Taiwan, he comes across people he is unable to communicate with. The novel depicts what happens when there is entropy and intrapersonal miscommunication even at the level of one's own desires. As Paul gets into relationships, breakups, and cheating episodes—alongside his deepening sense of failure—he is drawn into the spiral of drug abuse among which "the internet is perhaps the most potent" (Sudjic). The novel is semi-autobiographical, and Paul, for the most part, is meant to stand in for the author. As Jarai aptly puts it, "His characters are him, and he is his characters" (222). A "context analysis" of the novel shows how it deals with the demise of cyberflânerie, a successor of twentieth-century flânerie.

Death of flânerie and birth of cyberflânerie

Paul's purposeless drug sprees in the city as well as how his identity is determined by his online activities have been viewed from the perspective of what Walter Benjamin sees as flânerie—a concept inspired and proposed by Baudelaire (Shaw

230) and Poe. Accordingly, "[t]he street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls" (Benjamin 37). For the Dadaists, flâneur was "that ephemeral character who, in his rebellion against modernity, killed time by enjoying manifestations of the unusual and the absurd, when wandering about the city" (Carei ch. 3). The flâneur practices the art of "los[ing] one's way in a city," (Benjamin qtd. in Hartmann 76) as *he* (traditionally and stereotypically a male figure as Griselda Pollock suggests) roams without a real purpose, therefore, promoting a critical understanding of the cityscape. Having an objective perspective as well as a central position in the scheme of things makes the flâneur the perfect candidate for socio-political commentary. Skees sees the flâneur as "a collector of the transitory and fleeting, ordering these around the permanent and central sense of self that constitutes a fundamental theme of modernity" (267). Hartmann examines the *Arcades Project*, an unfinished writing project of Benjamin in which he outlines flânerie as more of a methodology than a mere purposeless stroll across the city. Thus, flâneur becomes the keen observer and the critic of the urban space as he "frequented the arcades of Paris" (Goldate) and dissects the physiognomy (as in Poe's case), architecture and psychogeographical makeup of the city while all the time "endeavouring to remain anonymous, seeing and being seen, but not recognised" (Goldate). However, as Marc Augie explains, the modern urban space has led to the creation of "non-places": "a space that cannot be defined either as an identity or as a relational, nor as historical" (qtd. in Bote 2). With the creation of such fragmented and destabilising spaces that project onto the subject, its subjectivity and the perceived unity are threatened. Therefore, the individual is forced to renounce participation in the urban space and traverse the city as a tourist in order to appropriate the city through "psychogeographic wandering" (3). Accordingly, Benjamin envisions the death of flânerie because of the industrialisation and the development of departmental stores. While Susan Buck-Morss sees the attributes associated with the flâneur being displaced and replicated on mass scale by modern society, Benjamin declared "his demise when the Paris arcades gave way to the automobile and the department store" (Shaw 230).

Notwithstanding Bote's view of the need of a "mobile unity" (3) for the appropriation of the city, a new kind of flânerie can be seen as emerging in the digital age that does not require physical mobility of the subject. In this kind of flânerie, the subject deploys their extended self (or their avatar) in a virtual space, populating it as their "new virtual arcades – the Internet" (Skees 272) to navigate

the space. Hartman uses the concept of *cyberflânerie* for the "characterisation of the online sphere that cannot be 'captured' simply systematically" (76). The essential difference between the flâneur and the "hacker" cyberflâneur is highlighted by Skees in the following way: "While the flâneur is an observer of urban spaces, the hacker is an observer as well as actor in the digital mediascape" (266). It must be noted that even though Skees primarily deals with the hacker community, he maintains that the "ontological trace is, nevertheless, 'everywhere' – in the ubiquitous forms of web-surfing, blogging, emailing, etc. that pervade our digital mediascape" (273). A more robust definition of the cyberflâneur, in contrast with the flâneur, is provided by Goldate:

> The Cyberflâneur 'strolls' through information space, taking in the virtual architecture and remaining anonymous. […] If the Flâneur was a 'decipherer of urban and visual texts', then the Cyberflâneur is a decipherer of Virtual Reality and Hypertexts. S/he is the voyeur of the post-information age…. What the city and the street were to the Flâneur, the Internet and the Superhighway have become to the Cyberflâneur.

Goldate, therefore, highlights the role of the Internet as an emerging space for a new kind of flânerie. This would be seen as a feature of the Internet in the 1990s. The virtual space renders physical mobility redundant and simultaneously preserves the anonymity of the flâneur. While Goldate refers to this phase of the Internet as "post-information age," cyberflânerie has been seen as a feature of the incipient web characterised by its static nature.

Cyberflânerie and *Taipei*

For McDougal, cyber-consciousness is defined as a relationship between the concept of flânerie and the digital context. Taking his cue from Chang, it becomes a mediation between the "cyber" and "consciousness," standing for the various transactions between the two. This mediation leads to "the rupture of narrative and the consequent reimagining and re-presentation of consciousness not as a continuous stream but as the emergent result of local interactions between various neural processes and subcognitive agents, both biological and mechanical" (Hayles qtd. in McDougall 5). Accordingly, cyber-consciousness is a way of juxtaposing the old modes of representation and narration with the digital:

> [L]iterary cyber-consciousness is the result of a composting of bygone modern flâneurie and stream of consciousness with 'dead' postmodern self-parody and hyperreality within a twenty-first century, digital context. Cyber-consciousness fuses character subjectivity, identity, interiority,

> memory and thought with byproducts of the digital computer such as the internet, visual media, hyperlink, storage memory, downloading, streaming, sharing, storage and social media platforms. (McDougall 6)

As such, cyber-consciousness becomes a useful tool for McDougal's analysis of the novel. *Taipei*'s disillusioning narrative and nightmarish imagery take the reader through the darkly psychedelic world with a sense of "nothingness of the future" (Lin 8), as Paul sees himself "lost in the world" (7). The characters' knowledge predates their encounters, as they have crossed paths either through "vaguely negative things on the internet" (4) they said about each other, through their view counter or blog "hits" (6), or through their websites/magazines (24, 45, 90). Seen as a flâneur going across the city, Paul is faced with the impossibility of interpreting situations. He feels like "an amoeba trying to create a personal web-page using CSS" (10). This disconnect is a symptom of Paul's surroundings as he feels "'completely lost,'… in a tundra-like area of Brooklyn" (19), a world sans history or context, in which his life is only "traceable numerically backward almost to birth" (19). As Bote suggests, "The metropolitan city is restrictive and has never been able to hide this quality" (2). For Paul, this architectural "flatness and dimensional vagueness, shifting and osmotic as some advanced form of gaseous amoeba" (Lin 22) restricts his perspective, leading him to view people (such as Anton) as "de-gendered and abstract… a kind of silhouette" and to enter an "interim period" in which he vows to communicate with no one except for the Internet (23). The fractured relationship that Paul shares with his urban environment results in "the non-belonging, non-binding and non-identification with the space and the relationships that occur there" (Bote 2). As Skees remarks, "Benjamin himself argues that 'the department store is [the flâneur's] last haunt'. It seems, today, we all practice a bit of flânerie as we meander through Macy's, Harrods, or Les Galleries Lafayette" (266).

However, viewing Paul as a cyberflâneur does not comprehensively resolve the complexities introduced by the role of the Internet (especially social media) in the text. For McDougall, cyber-consciousness "born of [the] modernist stream of consciousness… turns to definitions of computer and internet streaming to update the 'stream' to mean the transmission and receiving of digital data" (17). Paul's physical world is mediated and actively defined by the digital as he "objectively" sees himself "refreshing Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail in a continuous cycle—with an ongoing, affectless, humorless realization that his day 'was over'" (Lin 76). Paul's knowledge of his surroundings, including the people

he interacts with, is updated and reinforced by whatever he reads on the Internet, which directs his interest and obsession.

The description of Paul "surfing" the Internet resists the simplistic characterisation of him as a mere cyberflâneur as Paul's rambling has a method to it. Paul views himself as a dot in the matrix, or precisely the "dot" that stands for his coordinates on a virtual map, which can be read (or re-read against McDougall's analysis) as giving him a sort of identity (and with it a kind of fixity) in terms of his extended self being reflected in the virtual realm:

> Paul imagined *another him* walking toward the library and, for a few seconds, visualizing the position and movement of two red dots …. He visualized the vibrating, squiggling, looping, arcing line representing *the three-dimensional movement*, plotted in a cubic grid, of the dot of himself, *accounting for the different speed and direction of each vessel of which he was a passenger*.... (24-25; emphasis added)

As a Künstlerroman, *Taipei* shows Paul navigating the physical world, his perception of it actively mediated by the digital medium he is glued to (Sturgeon). However, this is a symptom of the bleakness of the environment he inhabits and against which he actively reacts by killing the purposeless and leisurely surfing of these spaces. As Sheu aptly sums up, the novel deals with

> the period in the life of protagonist Paul between the publication of two of his books, during which time he drifts from party to bar to book reading to party, and from New York to the East Coast, the Rust Belt, and Taipei, all while ingesting generic, prescription, and illegal drugs. (1275)

Paul pits this mediated public version of himself against his private version inaccessible to others and to himself: "Realizing this was only his concrete history, his public movement through space-time from birth to death, he briefly imagined being able to click on his trajectory to access his private experience, enlarging the dot of a coordinate until it could be explored like a planet" (Lin 25). McDougall's analysis of Paul's character as a cyberflâneur does not deeply explore Paul as an ever-evolving artist-protagonist who is not static in terms of his personal and emotional growth as seen by the end of the novel. He does, however, see new sincerity as a reaction against postmodern "ironic self-awareness," (7) but fails to see how Paul's character as a cyberflâneur is endangered by the Internet's power (or that of Web 2.0) of dynamically structuring his identity as well as imparting a sense of community. Paul's provisional sense of self is in flux "based on what he currently [knows], which could be wrong" (Lin 24). This does not mean that the character of flâneur

remains static even as his roles evolve owing to, for instance, exposure to modernity and its novel media. As Gelber suggests, along with his role as observer, "flâneur emerges as a 'historian' of his particular Heimat, a reflective 'critic' of his city, a close 'analyst' of its architecture, a 'collector' of scenes and images, and an 'interpreter' who translates these impressions into his text" (130). *Taipei,* therefore, does not have to read like a cautionary tale.

Paul feels disconnected from other people and takes refuge "in his desolation towards a greater desolation, further from others and himself, closer to the shared source of everything" (Lin 40). As Paul proceeds towards his entry into the ecology mediated by the Internet, his role as a mere observer is threatened by his heightened sense of participation and community formation. As such, digital communication becomes his environment as he is actively defined and refined by it. To use the words of Neil Postman, for Paul "*all communication is an environment*" (8). Going by the definition of the flâneur provided by Rob Shields, one can see how counterproductive it is to view Paul as one: "[The flâneur] jealously guards his individuality and agency by obscuring it beneath the mask of the anonymous and insignificant 'man of the crowd' [...] flânerie is a sociability of Ones" (Tester 76-77).While Paul's initial engagement with the Internet can be viewed as a detached pursuit of anonymity, it ultimately serves as a means of self-promotion. I have discussed elsewhere how self-censorship and self-promotion are two features that shape social media novels (Hussain). In fact, since Paul lacks the crucial distance from cyberspace, it is through the feedback mechanism supplied by his continual engagement that he adjusts his sense of self. Being participants rather than observers, he and those around him, therefore, form a community (and a kind of habitat) that does not reduce them to a 'crowd'.

Death of cyberflânerie and media ecology

Evgeny Morozov sees cyberflânerie as a feature of the early stages of the Internet in the 1990s that viewed cyberspace as a "virgin territory, not yet colonized by governments and corporations." Synonymous with the demise of flânerie due to the introduction of the "automobile and the department store," cyberflânerie became impossible as the Internet became more structured and user-centric. To Morozov "the very practice of cyberflânerie seems at odds with the world of social media." In this regard, Jan van Dijk accurately sees the impending new media technology as a harbinger of a revolution in social and cultural relationships as it signifies "the integration of telecommunications, data communications and mass communications in a single medium" (6-7). Dijk sees network society as "a social formation with an infrastructure of social and media

networks enabling its prime mode of organization at all levels (individual, group/organizational and societal)" (20). In fact, as we proceed towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, digital media is so normalised that the "affective novelty of becoming-with digital media" goes unnoticed so much so that we fail to observe "the ways we are co-constituted as subjects with media" (Dinnen 1). This is how Dinnen opens her discussion of the "digital banal." Therefore, to understand how digital banal structures Paul's experience and identity, I propose reading the text *not* as a picaresque flânerie but rather as a digital travelogue of his analogue subject, as Sheu would have it. Rather than viewing Paul as merely "the cyberflâneur, associated with the inquisitiveness of casual web surfing" (Shaw 230), as McDougall suggests, I view him as an active participant who is shaped by the dynamic nature of the Internet.

However, this does not negate the fact that the former kind of reading is supported by the text; on the contrary, the text readily lends itself to being read as a cyberflâneur's experiences in the virtual world as Paul moves "through the universe" rather than "walking on a sidewalk" (Lin 3) feeling "lost in the world" (7) submerged in an "area of torsos" (5) which he, along with his own emotions, views with "theoretical detachment" (12) as he imagines himself "do things" while "looking at the internet" on his MacBook (14-15). As a "blow-by-blow recreation of everyday existence," as Zadie Smith sees it, *Taipei* (to use Gelber's words for Hessel) "extend[s] the terrain of flânerie" in a literary sense (109). Paul suffers from social anxiety which results in his "interim periods" in which he does not have "in-person conversations" with people but chats regularly on Gmail chat and emails with Charles (Lin 20-23). A contrapuntal reading, therefore, would reveal, as Ganley concludes in her article, how the "post-modern era therefore poses unknown questions about the future credibility of the flâneur" (5) without going into the question of "the possibility of an observer and witness of modernity" (Gelber 129). With Morozov's announcement of the death of cyberflânerie and the static Internet that enabled it, the novel must inevitably be located within an interconnected world that forms a participatory ecology. According to Hendel, flâneurs (and by extension, cyberflâneurs) value "solitude and individuality, anonymity and opacity, mystery and ambivalence, curiosity and risk-taking." With these being a thing of the past, "thanks to Facebook" (Hendel) Paul belongs to the "ecology" that he actively consumes as well as produces for. For Ursula Heise media "ecology" has three specific attributes:

> [F]first, the way in which such technologies form a cultural environment that most of its inhabitants take for granted, but that nevertheless shapes their cognitive possibilities and social behavior in significant ways; second, the ways in which changes in one individual technology change

> the media configuration and its manner of operation as a whole; and third, the ways in which such technologies function as systems with a logic of their own. (157)

Paul situates himself in cyberspace that forms an alternative sphere, fostering new identities by allowing users to choose to create their own. Postman in his 1973 keynote address inaugurates an "ecological view" of communication that does away with the traditional "atomistic view of communication" as a "chunk" (7). Postman sees this field of study as a paradigm shift in communication. He takes McLuhan to task for the "McLuhan–Jacques Ellul paradigm, in which all human behavior is understood as a function of the dominant communication technologies of a culture" as it uses an "idiosyncratic" methodology (7-8). For Postman, McLuhan lacks a systematic methodology. He counters this tendency in new media studies by positing the methodology which he calls "context analysis" as opposed to content analysis (8). Context analysis would therefore deem it inadequate to read how Paul's tale plays out without caring for the context (media). The importance of media is highlighted by theorists like Birdwhistell, who see communication as establishing "a predictable continuity in life" (Postman 8). Sheu asserts this point about *Taipei*: "But underneath the superficial level of the plot lies a complex and vexed relation to digital technology, expressed not only in the monotony of the prose in describing events and conversations, but also in the short bursts of insightful metaphors that can be found dispersed throughout the text" (1275). Sheu goes on to state that the style of the novel "manages to not just represent but directly convey a digital worldview" as it works like computer code (1277).

Paul's Internet usage

Before Paul is introduced to hallucinatory drugs, his experience of being "lost in the offscreen world of some fictional movie set in an adjacent country" (Lin 41) results in his self-othering and silencing. As a result, he uses drugs to induce desynchronization and sensory latency to cure his sleeplessness and nervousness (44). Since Paul decides to stop communicating with people in person to increase his productivity as a writer, he starts navigating the Internet to keep himself updated with the world. While on the surface, his Internet usage might seem chaotic, random, casual and passive (qualities of a flâneur roaming around the marketplace), as one digs deeper, the devil in the details emerges. That is why the novel has been seen as an exploration of "traveling or finding love in the 'Internet Age'" (Sturgeon). Paul is aware of the structured nature of the Internet and treads accordingly. Even though Paul wastes his time "looking at the internet," he

knows how the addition of one letter (or its omission) can give completely different results:

> Laura typed "ambient" into Google.
>
> "No," said Paul grinning. "That's the music, delete the *t*." (Lin 43)

If Paul is a cyberflâneur, he knows how, rather than strolling around the city, he can limit his "search" to a more meaningful result he is looking for. Naresh argues that "[w]ith the Internet and social media nexus, we're evolving a totalized and unitary cultural vocabulary. You can't just walk aimlessly through cyberspace anymore. You must have a purpose and it must be negotiable within certain restrictions." Accordingly, Paul has been viewed as "a protagonist who leads the life, materially, of an analogue subject, but whose subjectivity is manifested within a digital worldview" (Sheu 1273). Sheu sees the usage of digital communication by Paul and others as the prominent feature that depicts "the permeation of digital technology into the analogue…. Characters often engage in intricate interactions via email or texting, and numerous arbitrary-seeming phrases are placed within quotation marks, creating an ironic distance, as a result of how Twitter has altered Lin's brain, so that he 'think[s] in tweets now'" (1280). This goes against the fundamental quality of passivity shared by the forefathers of cyberflâneurs. Citing Nietzsche, Gelber explains that the characteristic quality of a flâneur is passivity: "Their attentive yet not explicitly active engagement resembles the flâneur's inclination to 'look but not touch,' to see everything without partaking actively in anything" (130). While this was possible before the introduction of social media, this model of passive reception of the impressions as a mere observer is threatened by how social media helps create and maintain the identity of different characters, especially the protagonist.

Paul's identity is threatened by technology so much so that he is willing to "[shrink] past zero, through the dot at the end of himself, to a negative size, into an otherworld" (Lin 160) in order to undo the binarisation perpetuated by technology. Paul is not a casual observer but an active influencer with his toes dipped in social media. When Paul has an epiphany about how our eyes function as interfaces just like computer screens, he feels the urge to Tweet: "ppl are powerful computers w 2 computer screens & free/fast/reliable access to their own internet" (170). As Morozov states, "The flâneur was not asocial — he needed the crowds to thrive — but he did not blend in, preferring to savor his solitude." Paul relies on the Internet to "[get] things done" (to use Morozov's expression), which range from looking people up he meets in real life to writing against the culture he is a part of. Paul has seen Laura's Myspace page as well as the "viral" video she posted of her cat (Lin 31). Similarly, he checks the past four years of activity on Erin's Facebook wall and "probably fifteen hundred of her

friends' photos" (109) to fuel his obsession. Apart from social media, Paul gets recognition from strangers thanks to his online presence (56, 87).

For Paul, social media is a place where he can meaningfully connect with people and accomplish tasks such as searching for drugs and promoting his work. This sometimes means that his wish for a "refuge that was like a tunneling in his desolation toward a greater desolation, further from others and himself, closer to the shared source of everything" was threatened by its overpresence (40). As Morozov asserts, "Everything that makes cyberflânerie possible — solitude and individuality, anonymity and opacity, mystery and ambivalence, curiosity and risk-taking—is under assault by [Facebook]." A far cry from a flâneur, Paul feels helplessly drawn towards things and sees his search as "choiceless" (Lin 67). He is rendered no more than "beta testing the event by acting like an exaggerated version of himself" (65). With all the likes, comments and views that social media uses to quantify user engagement and the success rate of social relationships, users are trapped in filter bubbles and echo chambers, limiting their possibility of exploring the Internet in the manner of a cyberflâneur. Furthermore, Paul can be seen as an intermediary, an enabling figure for people like Lucie and Daniel as he either hyperlinks their profile for visibility or creates one for them. Paul's participation in the Internet culture (and by extension that of others) can be viewed on different levels. While his engagement with the Internet helps him create, maintain and benefit from his identity as a writer, one cannot disregard his (and Erin's) potential role as social media creators. McDougall sees this part of the novel as Paul's act of "recording of his flâneurie [which] marks Paul as digital archivist of his meanderings" and describes it as Paul "intermediat[ing] between meatspace and cyberspace" (12). This is where Paul starts to become one with the participatory culture as he attempts to produce for the media. With this shift from observer to interactive participant, he moves away from the archetype of the cyberflâneur. Furthermore, as seen earlier, Paul acts as a godfather by initiating other people into social media and the Internet. Thus, while the novel deals with Paul navigating between 'meatspace and cyberspace,' it substantiates his identity not as an aimless flâneur drifting through the maze of the Internet but as someone who is rooted in his networked existence.

The new media and participatory culture

The flâneur in the modern age becomes a conduit of capitalist culture as the shopping mall becomes "refuge of the flâneur" (Goldate). Quoting Shaw (236), Ganley sees the flâneur as the "fieldworker for the capitalist state by 'posting images of exotic destinations on social media sites'" (Ganley 5). Envisaging new

roles and responsibilities of the cyberflâneur, she sees the need for "redefining the cyberflâneur as an androgynous, ungendered entity, that exists beyond an online network and that may not necessarily be human but crosses all boundaries and exceeds all limitations" (5). However, it can be argued that rendering flâneur in such a transparent and objective light risks their individuality and subjective agency which would nullify their (role of) mediation between 'meatspace and cyberspace.' This is one of the many limitations of viewing Paul as a cyberflâneur whose participation is minimal, and whose impressions (and observational interior monologues) reduce him to a mere recorder or archivist. Paul's identity cannot be boiled down to capitalist consumerism; on the contrary, Paul actively improves (for better or for worse) his surroundings (ecology) and plays (or wants to believe he does) a significant role in the lives of his specific community. The extent to which new media not only change but "*transform* [the culture] completely" (Valcanis 33) can be gauged from a deeper analysis of its role in the novel. The characters in *Taipei* are both implicitly and explicitly interwoven into what Dijck sees as "participatory culture" which stands in opposition (in a sense) to capitalist consumerism. Owing to the cultural/technological shift, they are able to make what Paul calls "internet friends" (Lin 94). When Fren wants to celebrate her birthday, she creates a "Facebook listing" despite having no friends (67). Doing so gives her a sense (or illusion) of belongingness as well as a ritualistic experience. The same is evident in Charles's use of the Internet as a refuge from real people as he participates in sharing his experiences online. Charles later becomes a victim of Jehan, the episode he calls "*Avoiding Jehan*" (86). When Jehan attempts to locate and get in touch with Charles on social media, it takes him to Paul's Goodreads profile where he adds him (229). Jehan is thus woven into the network that links Paul and Charles. Social media also enables Paul to meet Erin thanks to her bouts of Internet activity which coincide with Paul's continual Internet usage. For Paul, this continual usage is an act of waiting as explicit in the title he wants to give to one of his books "I Don't Want to Sleep but I Don't Know What I'm Waiting For" (90). This renders his Internet usage absurd but not meaningless. Thus, the Internet becomes a way of waiting for meaning in his existence through his "choiceless searching." This search is a reaction against a meaningless world which also suggests why he feels abnormal when not on drugs (149).

As an "extensive aesthetic [experiment] in… social media," (Hsu 192) *Taipei* gives ample space to the new media as the characters liberally use social media, blogs, emails, websites and wikis throughout the novel. Paul's inability to come to terms with his desires and emotions in real life leaves him with his Internet friend Charles to fall back on. Hsu sees Paul's inability to communicate

in real life as autistic. We also get to know that it is only through his mother's emails that he can momentarily free himself of depression (Lin 227). In fact, emails from his mother become a written record for him to be sure of his existence. He, therefore, "[rereads] emails from his mother" (156) to keep track of his "recent history and narrative *context*" (35; emphasis added). Rereading texts becomes his means of connecting to his past which otherwise seems inaccessible to him (83) as he feels "like a digression that had forgotten from what it digressed" (67). In Taiwan, Paul and Erin decide not to speak, which is given to the reader as a parenthetical aside: "They'd agreed to type, not talk, whenever one of them, currently Paul, felt unable to speak in a friendly tone" (242). If, for Paul's mother, "the Paul in the video was not the Paul" she knew (143), then the Daniel on the phone is also not the same as Daniel over emails (58). Paul sees his emails with Michelle as a kind of time travel in which his timeline takes quarterly jumps. Explaining his manner of emailing Michelle, he tells Erin that he emails her "like once every three months…. But in a manner like we're emailing every day" (137). Moreover, this atemporality is Paul's way of keeping his conversations with Michelle on an anachronistic level (text-only and analogue) which resembles "the rear-view mirror" (to use McLuhan's term) of distant communication through letters.

As Valcanis confirms, the "new media technologies… [have], for the most part, transformed the global culture, at its fundamental essence, into a *participatory culture* that sees the computer not as the new 'steam engine' but [as the] … new 'mechanical clock'" (39). Participatory culture is a direct result of the ecology created by "new media technologies" that come with the possibility for an average user "to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins et al. 8). Christopher Cayari's study of "YouTube effect" shows how "[t]echnology affects the way people create, consume, and share art, media, and performance" (3). Jenkins elsewhere sees participatory culture as a direct contrast with the "older notions of passive media spectatorship" (3). It is a result of the ubiquitous technology that makes sharing a seamless experience of production and consumption. In other words, "the interactive and user-oriented nature of these technologies have given rise to a participatory and 'mash-up' culture in which the ways of producing and accessing content are deconstructed, uploaded, mixed, converged, and reconstructed through computers and smartphones mediated by online platforms" (Valcanis 39). *Taipei* deals with characters who are involved with simultaneous consumption and production vis-à-vis the Internet, nullifying the dichotomy. *Taipei* does portray the "explosion of users of social media platforms" (Valcanis 40), especially towards the end when Paul wants to have a sense of micro-community as he and his friends—Calvin, Maggie, Erin— go to the Union Square Theatre "to 'group livetweet' whatever movie fit[s] their schedule. They

would sit separately during the movie and communicate only through tweets, in service of making the experience 'more fun and interesting'" (Lin 231). They create their own participatory microcosm which can be seen as a networked world that is parenthetically shut off from the broader, noisier world of Twitter (now X). Although Paul creates the hashtag "#xmenlivetweet" so they can keep track of each other's tweets, he forgets it: "I forgot the hashtag also. We're all just going to keep forgetting it. What're we going to do?" (232). The tragic import of his helplessness is driven home as he repeats, the narrator informs us, "pessimistically" to himself, "We're all just going to keep forgetting it" (232). As they livetweet, they are lost in the labyrinths of a postapocalyptic catacomb with Twitter as the sole means of communication. However, the scene takes a parodic turn with the group's 'live' commentary of what is happening to them:

> "i can hear someone snoring ~8 seats to my left #xmenlivetweet"
>
> "feeling lonely #xmenlivetweet" and "i am in the bathroom con templating chugging my beer,"
>
> "where is every i'm sitting in darkness near the women's bathroom #xmenlivetweet"
>
> "just stood up, lost 'all control' of left leg and fell into an arcade game, making a loud noise and 'yelping' #xmenlivetweet"
>
> "someone just said 'we did it!' while seeming to float in an indoor 'future area' #xmenlivetweet"
>
> "is this world war 2, i don't understand anything #xmenlivetweet" (234-235)

His invention certainly made the whole event fun for his company that would otherwise wish to be left alone. Paul as the creator of the circle can be seen as the ambassador of participatory culture.

Prosumers in *Taipei*

It is with the collaborative act of recording themselves that Erin and Paul are explicitly defined as what Alvin Toffler calls a 'prosumer' which is a portmanteau of the roles of producer and consumer. While for Erin and Paul, recording a question-and-answer session which features people "answering the same questions sober and on hallucinogens" (115) is an exercise meant as an amusing parody of the videos they have been watching on YouTube, it has deeper connotations for Paul, perhaps on a subconscious level. As Paul keeps "clicking new videos" (115) on the same theme, he feels the need for answers from himself (both sober and on drugs) to make it relatable to his own experience. YouTube, therefore, according to Burgess and Green, becomes the "access point into a

wider discussion of questions surrounding participatory culture" (Dutch 45). Moreover, it is a way of collaboration and partnership between Erin and Paul. Recording their impressions and subsequently replaying them is a way of looking at one's image in the new media. Hansen sees it as "the simultaneous amputation of a hitherto internal faculty (interior memory) and its supplementation by an external technology (artifactual memory)" (4). Paul and Erin reach the climax of making parodic videos as they start to act like tourists and experts by assuming "the voice" (Lin 132) which is described as a "National Geographic—style voice-overs… almost the opposite, especially for Paul, of the quiet and literal and inflectionless voice they normally used to speak to each other" (132). This casts them as interpreters rather than "the passive 'viewer' or 'victim' of media" they consume (Miller 104). They start to storm the haunts of so-called intellectual elites like Barnes & Noble and other workshops.

With the "blurring of boundaries between 'producers'… and 'consumers'" (104) and the collaboration between different participants, it becomes easier as well as viable for the prosumers to inject their input into the circulatory system of sharing the networked society. Miller avers that the "increasing power on the part of the user or consumer of media as an active agent using tools in identity construction, self-creation and relationship formation" (104) has academically been recognised as the feature of new media. Paul therefore allows himself to be immersed and integrated into the powerful persona social media has helped him create. As Chambers avers, the creation and sharing of "online content has become a fundamental resource for managing one's identity" (qtd. in Jarai 223). Sturgeon's observation of Tao Lin can be applied to Paul to understand his behaviour as he "shrouds himself behind an avatar, a veil of media that obscures the *real* Tao Lin from public vision." As Paul and Erin collaborate "intimately again, looking out at the world from a new and shared perspective" (Lin 213) they start seeing everything with an ironic detachment which ironically fosters a sense of solidarity between the two. It is during these activities that one sees them working in unison at the cost of their solitary lives.

Conclusion

As Paul explains to Maggie, whom he and Calvin are persuading to make a pornographic film, "It's not worth doing at all if it's not filmed" (223). Paul's desire to be one of the "pro-ams [professional amateurs]" (Jenkins et al. 116) arises from his ability to produce a parodic narrative of the elitist manners of "a small minority or elite allied to specific interests" (Miller 105) by using *the voice* in his "documentary" (read mockumentary) filmed on his MacBook and suitable only for the small screen of social media. When the novel is read as a statement of how the Internet leads to participatory culture as well as an increased sense of

prosumerism, it is not difficult to see how cyberflânerie as a theoretical framework fails to engage in a meaningful critical dialogue with the text. Not only does cyberflânerie not account for how the characters interact with and interfere in each other's lives in meaningful ways, but it also fails to appreciate how the foundation of a virtual economy with its hybrid forces of consumption and production was being laid during the late years of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The Internet of '90s was nothing like that of the new century.

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