

The Culture of Make Belief : Towards Understanding Postdigital
Identity, Platformization and Techno Nationalism through *Infinite
Detail*

By

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the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract/ Executive Summary

This dissertation is a story about our culture of make belief. Due to advent of platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, Google and Amazon, new imagined communities are being born, which are techno-nationalist in nature. Platforms are also reconfiguring our identities and projecting cybernetic governance upon us by shifting sovereignty from the land towards the cloud. The primary focus of this research is the deconstruction of these ideas of contemporary nationalism, Postdigital identity, and the platformization of our daily lives, by focusing first on ‘what’ they actually mean, ‘how’ they operate, and ‘why’ we should care about them in the first place, by situating theoretical texts alongside the novel *Infinite Detail*. The story ends on the note of both practical and philosophical advice, acknowledges limitations and highlights the scope for future research.

Keywords: Platformization; Platform Capitalism; Postdigital; Techno Nationalism; Data Dignity; Digital Capitalism;

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to both the past and the future :

In the loving memory of Professor Emeritus Syed Manzoorul Islam.

In honor of my idol Dr. Sayeed Noman.

In memory of my beloved friend Annas Nazim.

I write in order to fortify our futures from money-hungry corporations, and to protect the
moral and ethical causes of our generation.

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List of Acronyms

BCI	Brain Computer Interface (Musk's Neuralink)
IoT	Internet of Things (Smart homes, Smart watches)
API	Application Programming Interface
BPD	Borderline Personality Disorder
DID	Dissociative Identity Disorder
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
NSA	National Security Agency (of the U.S.A)
MAGA	Make America Great Again
HEMP	High-altitude Electromagnetic Pulse
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

Glossary

Data-Double:	A simulation of a person created by platforms through the data which the person has produced.
API:	Application Programming Interface Think of an application home page as like a menu at a restaurant and APIs are the waiters. When the user(You) gives it a request, such as, take me to the next page, it takes your order and then runs it by the server, which can be thought of as the kitchen. After confirming your order from the kitchen(server), API then brings you back the result(takes you to the next page as requested).
Data Dignity	Data Dignity simply means people get paid for the data which they generate everyday through their online activities.

Epigraph

“But historical forces wait for science, no more than Columbus waited for Copernicus. Each time, through the impulse of new historical forces, new lands and seas enter into the horizon of the collective consciousness, the spaces of historical existence are transformed. At that moment arise new measurements and dimensions of political-historical activity, new sciences, new orders, new life or reborn peoples. Seneca: the hot Indus and the cold Araxes converge, Persians drink from the Elbe and Rhine. Thetis will reveal new worlds. And Thule will no longer be the outer edge of the Earth.” — Carl Schmitt

(quoted in Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt*)

“The goal of future wars is already established: control over the network and the flows of information running through its architecture. It seems to me that the quest for global totalitarian power is not behind us but is a true promise of the future. If the network architecture culminates in one global building then there must be one power that controls it. The central political question of our time is the nature of this future power.”

— Boris Groys (Metahaven, *Uncorporate Identity*, pp.262)

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Sci-fi = Magic

In our globalized world, when we are asked to introduce ourselves to a global audience, most of us state our nationality right after our name. One's nationality still seems to be a core component of their identity, even at a time when Transnationalism is at its peak. This speaks volumes about the power which nationalism holds. Many scholars argue it to be natural, some say it is constructed, but none deny its existence and the fact that it is here to stay. What if this dissertation told you that a handful of money hungry multinational corporations are using our nationalistic sentiments to hijack our identities, turn us into their puppets, and control every aspect of our lives 24/7 ? Yes, this would just be like the plot of famous science fiction transmedia franchises such as Star Wars and Star Trek coming to life. It would most certainly be very enraging, but knowing is the first step to overcoming any problem, as Jacques Derrida proposed, anything which is constructed can also be deconstructed. This research will primarily focus on deconstruction of the ideas of contemporary nationalism(techno-nationalism), Postdigital identity (which relies heavily on digital dependency), and the platformization of our daily lives, focusing first on 'what' they actually constitute, then 'how' they operate, and lastly 'why' they are crucially important research phenomena according to scholars of respective fields.

A key piece of this puzzle is the primary text of this thesis, the sci-fi novel *Infinite Detail* by Tim Maughan, which depicts the problems proposed above with meticulous

perfection. The novel is divided into two time streams, the “Before” stream and the “After” stream. While the ‘before’ time stream depicts a world similar to our 21st century technology rich society, the ‘after’ time stream depicts a world devoid of the internet, which is the prime source of our technological prowess nowadays. Both of the time streams divulge important insights on what is happening around the world right now and what might happen in the future, as that is the charm of sci-fi novels. Science Fiction is a genre which scientists do not accept wholeheartedly due it being part literary or fiction, and literary scholars often frown upon it for being somewhat scientific, or not ‘literary’ enough. But it is often seen that the boundary between science fiction and reality becomes blurry. While both sides use the term “science fiction” as a way of downplaying the position of the other, they claim that their research is the one which is on the verge of transforming human lives for eternity. In such a precarious situation, one has to wonder, which side does one pick? and why can it not be both? A piece of scientific data that is fictionalized may as well turn into reality one day. This fact in itself does not make any science fiction work any less scientific or any less literary.

If the internet were to disappear tomorrow, most of the world would come to a halt. The idea of the ‘internet’ or the ‘intranet’ as it is today first appeared in 1909 E.M. Forster novella, *The Machine Stops*. In the novel’s story citizens live in an underground park, isolated in their chambers, yet communicating with one another almost entirely through a machine controlled communication system, depicting a global network, and as the name suggests, it suddenly stops working. But this is not where the magic of Forster resides. As the machine takes care of humanity’s need for connection, people lose interest in in person communication and confine themselves to self-isolation. In this way, Forster not only predicted the rise of WWW or World Wide Web, but also the social isolation that arises from it. We are now

hyperconnected and disconnected from reality at the same time. But how is it done ? We all live in our virtual reality network, popularly known as cyberspace, such as social media and other online platforms. The idea of ‘cyberspace’ originated from William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer*, published in 1984, even before the invention of the internet as we know it today. Lastly, if we take a look at Douglas Adam’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*(1979), we will see that the entire plot of the novel revolves around this electronic device called ‘the guide,’ which serves as the standard repository for all knowledge and wisdom circulating around the galaxy. Yes, you guessed it right. He was talking about Wikipedia and AI powered smartphones in the 1970’s. If you still need to be convinced about living in a science fictional world, this thesis will do just that.

1.2 About *Infinite Detail*

Infinite Detail was chosen as the primary text of this thesis because of the fact that it resists easy conclusions. The novel presents no clear villain or hero, no singular problem or solution. Instead, it offers readers to delve deep into the multifaceted paradigm of their own technological dependencies with both its potential and its peril. Maughan’s portrayal of the digital collapse is not primarily a spectacle of ruin, but rather an excavation of human vulnerability. In a world where such pervasive technologies are dead, some would find peace while others perish, such is the plot of *Infinite Detail*, a digital Apocalypse. The word “apocalypse” does have a certain colloquial negative connotation, but in reality, it means something completely different. The word originates from “Apokalypsis” in Greek, which

translates to the unveiling or revelation of great knowledge. Therefore, the word apocalypse does not purely denote destruction, but a transition from one world to another, a shift from the old to new, a natural phenomenon. For example, the Norse mythology of ‘Ragnarok’ suggests a cycle of destruction and rebirth. Ragnarok, more famously known as ‘Twilight of the Gods,’ entails an epic legend of a catastrophic battle which results in the destruction of the world and the death of most gods, including the two most prominent and famous ones, Odin and Thor. However, from the debris of this destruction a new fertile land rises, and the surviving gods and humans repopulate this new earth. On the other hand, the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism tell us about the concept of ‘samsara,’ an endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The ultimate goal of life, then, is to liberate oneself from this circle by attaining ‘moksha’ or ‘nirvana.’ There are cosmic cycles in the Hindu cosmology known as ‘kalpas,’ which involve periods of creation, preservation, and then destruction. The story of ‘Noah’s Arc’ is also a valiant example of this phenomenon. Only with the destruction of the old can the new be born and brought forth. Then, is the dystopian world of the novel a blessing or a curse ? Why can it not be both ?

Infinite Detail humanizes technology’s absence and compels us to ask a very daunting question to ourselves, when and if the network fails and the internet is gone, what remains of our shared stories? As readers and writers shaped by both analog memories and digital dependencies, we find in Maughan’s narrative an invitation to reclaim our own agency through resisting erasure by tracing the delicate lines that connect us, one careful stroke at a time. These lines are, in fact, deeply connected to technology. Due to the AI revolution currently booming in the tech industry, technology is evolving at an astronomical rate. As digital technology has seeped into almost every sphere of our lives, and we are now

dependent on these technologies for our survival. This dependency will only increase with time as technology nowadays molds our experiences, shapes our thoughts and desires, and to some extent even our sense of self. At present, we are always connected to the internet, be it at home, or office, or even at a restaurant. Can you imagine not being connected ? Probably not. When we are away from the devices that connect us to the world(our phones, laptops, tabs), we feel a sense of unease, perhaps an anxiety, which is so intense that it is more energy consuming than being connected to the internet 24/7. This form of dependency is mostly known as “Digital dependency.” It is just like Neitzche’s sense of “Morality” in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Just like morality, dependency is a construct which is not fixed, continuously shifting with context, power and perception. George Bernard Shaw observed that, “Both optimists and pessimists contribute to society. The optimist invents the aeroplane, and the pessimist the parachute.” Then, is technology our aeroplane or is it our parachute ? This dissertation tends to this ambiguous question through Tim Maughan’s *Infinite Detail*, where preexisting digital structures which are always known to be absolute, crumble, leaving humanity utterly dismayed, while also providing a chance at restoration and resurrection.

1.3 What is the Post-Digital ?

Although not the one who used the term ‘Postdigital’ at first, Nicholas Negroponte’s “Beyond Digital” is considered a foundational text for early Postdigital thinkers. In it, he professed that digital technology, just like air and water, would become so prevalent that only its absence would make it noticeable. Let us think about this for a second. Whenever we used

to visit someone before, while at their residence, we would normally ask for water, tea or coffee first. But now, it is the Wifi password which we seek initially. And if they do not have a wifi connection, we become perplexed, as we now have to use our cellular data. But this is exactly what Negroponte was talking about. Only when there is no wifi connection somewhere do we start to notice that wifi connections are now everywhere. Then, the best fit for the word 'Postdigital' would be 'beyond digital.' However, the term 'Post-digital' was first coined by a musician named Kim Cascone in his essay "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'post-digital' tendencies in contemporary computer music" in the year 2000. In it, he talks about the shift from pristine, perfect nature of digital sounds towards the creative possibilities of its errors, imperfections, and glitches, which are man made. His focus was primarily on the 'post-digital' in music. In the same year, two academics named Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt published a paramount work on the concept, *The Postdigital Membrane : Imagination, Technology, and Desire*. In the book, they primarily investigate the triad of imagination, technology and desire in the field of visual arts. The book uses the metaphor of a biological cell membrane, which is a permeable cell barrier that both connects and divides the cells, to illuminate how the digital and analog elements of technology intermix in a messy way, rather than being purely straight forward, or progressing in a linear way.

Nevertheless, the most influential Postdigital thinker who provided important definitions and critiques of the postdigital theory is undoubtedly Florian Cramer. He is the one who first examined the term's connection to other "post' terms such as postmodernism and post-history. In his essay, "What is 'Post-Digital'?" Cramer suggests that :

the term 'post- digital' can be used to describe either a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our

fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical — just like the dot-com age ultimately became historical in the 2013 novels of Thomas Pynchon and Dave Eggers. After Edward Snowden's disclosures of the NSA's all-pervasive digital surveillance systems, this disenchantment has quickly grown from a niche 'hipster' phenomenon to a main-stream position — one which is likely to have a serious impact on all cultural and business practices based on networked electronic devices and Internet services. (12)

His essay also argues how Cascone's use of the term 'post-digital' is wrong as he misinterpreted the word 'digital.' His work is vital for this research as he is the one who first used the term in the academic field of humanities and social sciences. The literature review segment of the dissertation will include more recent pioneers of the theory such as Jordan Spencer, Petar Jandrić, and Sarah Hayes.

1.4 On Postdigital Identity

Digital infrastructures such as social media and other cyberspace websites have now become a thoroughly researched phenomena. But why is that ? Primarily, social media was thought to be a mere tool for communication and entertainment. But now, disciplines such as economics, political science, data science, and behavioral psychology have incorporated social media studies as an essential research domain. This is because 'online' and 'offline' personalities of a person are not distinct, but different versions of the same lived self. And so by studying each like, click, pause, scroll, and share we can know how the person thinks,

votes, works, shops or feels. This is the bread and butter of an attention economy. Economists and data scientists can use the data gathered from websites to create a model which can predict market behavior. On the other hand, political scientist can read through the social media data locate community and sentiment formation in real time. Then they can use micro targeting and content amplification to nudge the consensus in their favor(Cambridge Analytica: 2016 U.S. Election Hack). However, behavioral psychologists study social media data in order to understand what makes us tick, and thus they can easily alter behavior, habits, attention spans, and consumer choices, which all provide material value. Due to this, most of us using social media have alternate postdigital personalities which were designed by behavioral psychologists to keep us hooked on the app. In the novel, we see the characters also peering into the veil of the same complexities as us, and their postmodern-posthuman-postdigital personas are often different from their actual 'authentic' selves. This is merely a single facet of social media's venomous gale.

Jean Baudrillard exerts in *Simulacra and Simulation* that we live in a hyper mediated, hyperreal world, where the rift between reality and representation often collapses. In *Infinite Detail*, the digital dissolution operates within this exact paradigm. When the internet suddenly stops working, it is not only data which is lost, but an entire constructed reality. This leads the characters to then come to the realization that their identities were, in many ways, mere performances sustained by the 'digital gaze'. Nowadays, almost everyone uses social media in one form or another, be it facebook, instagram or youtube, we are all under the digital gaze, all the time. The fun part is that participation is always voluntary—hegemonic. We willingly choose to upload our all personal data to social media servers in return for connectivity and convenience. Only in two industries customers are branded as

‘users’, one is software and the other one is drugs. Just like the drug trade, it is the consumer who goes to the dealer, and not vice versa. But what could be the effects of being dependent on such technologies which are designed to manipulate, overt, and even control human behavior ? That is exactly what this study discusses, functional effects, be it positive or negative, with the help of *Infinite Detail*, while consulting a few key primary sources such as Shoshana Zuboff’s *In the Age of Surveillance Capitalism* and N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman*.

1.4 Understanding Platformization

Platformization primarily refers to the extreme outcomes of overarching Platform Capitalism, which is the most prominent economic logic of this digital age. Unlike traditional companies that produce goods or deliver direct services, platform companies work as intermediaries that connect producers, users, advertisers, and service providers. For example, Airbnb connects hosts with guests while YouTube links content creators with audiences. These platforms then make money by capturing and monetizing data from these exchanges without owning any of the underlying assets. They also employ manipulative tactics to dominate the market. For example, the Uber app always shows more cars around you than there actually are on the road. This creates a sense of abundance where there is a lack, just so that the user does not get tired of waiting and switch to another app. They also manipulate their drivers by showing surge points on the map, where there are none. This phenomenon was first brought to light in 2015 by two valiant researchers named Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark. In their research article titled “Uber’s Phantom Cars,” the researchers based their

claims on interviews with customers and observations from online driver forums over a period of six months. After the article went viral, Uber officially denied the claims by stating that the cars shown on the app were intact real. But here lies the twist. As public scrutiny and speculations were getting out of hand, an Uber spokesperson contradicted their previous statement by stating that latency and screen clutter can cause minor inaccuracies in the app.

Today, digital platforms have become essential infrastructures of everyday life by serving as dominant intermediaries in the field of value creation and exchange. Platforms such as Facebook, Amazon, Google and Uber now mediate markets, social interaction and even labor. They use user data, network effects, and algorithmic control to accumulate economic and social power, which is then used to reshape industries and labor relations in the process. At the heart of their *modus operandi* lies a very sinister goal. Every platform wants complete monopoly over the cloud market, total platformization, and as a result deploy any means necessary towards achieving that goal. Because of network effects, a process in which the value of a platform rises with more number of users, successful platforms can quickly dominate their market sectors. As the barriers to are high, smaller competitors rarely survive. As a result, a handful of tech giants accumulate disproportionate market shares, which then lead to lobbying power and control over infrastructure. Thus the platform wars, Google vs Meta, Youtube vs Spotify have erupted time and time again within this decade, just over our heads, in the clouds. But why is this concerning for us, the general public ? That is what this dissertation inquires to find out through the help of prominent writers in this field such as Nick Srnicek and Shoshana Zuboff .

Platform capitalism intrinsically relies on the commodification of user data. Platforms continuously collect user data and then monetizes them through targeted ads,

recommendation system and behavioral nudging. This is also known as Surveillance Capitalism. Shoshana Zuboff first coined the term through her book *In the Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. In it, she defines the term as a process in which economic value is extracted from first predicting and then influencing user behavior. As a result, users, quite unknowingly, become both the product and the labor, generating valuable data through their everyday interactions. Early in the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* former Google ethicist Tristan Harris comments on this phenomena by saying, “If you are not paying for the product, you are the product” (00:03:45-00:03:52). Digital labour platforms such as Uber, Task Rabbit, Uber Eats rely on algorithmic control to coordinate and control their workers. This is mostly known as ‘Gig’ work. Even though gig workers are often framed as independent contractors(freelancers), they remain constricted through non transparent rating systems, dynamic pricing algorithm, and automated penalties. This then leads to the erosion of traditional labor protections and contributes a highly precarious and fragmented employment structure. Platform capitalism is now facing heavy backlash due to the labors organizing in the gig economy through platforms like reddit and 4chan. They are asking for data ownership rights, platform cooperativism, and user owned alternatives. Regulators, particularly in the EU, have also begun to push platformization back through privacy laws, anti-trust actions and platform accountability measures. This is merely the surface of the politics of platforms.

As platforms operate globally, they often export their business models to the global south. For example, the largest platform companies such as Meta, Google, Amazon and X have their data centers planted all over the world, yet their headquarters remain in America. For example, Starlink, a subsidiary of Elon Musk’s SpaceX, has recently leased a one acre

plot in Rajshahi Hi-Tech park, and has also secured land in Gazipur and Jashore of Bangladesh, towards establishing their data centers here. In return, Musk promises to strengthen Bangladesh's digital infrastructure and support the growth of its tech parks. As land and labor is found at cheaper rates than the west in a third world country, this seems like a good business investment at first glance. But this form of operation reminds us of a similar western expedition which started from the 15th century and lasted till the mid 20th century, western colonialism. Thus, this phenomenon can undoubtedly be labeled as "Platform Colonialism." Through platform colonialism, western tech firms extract value from foreign markets, all the while maintaining control over data, infrastructure and terms of engagement. These dynamics can worsen digital inequalities and limit local innovation or regulatory autonomy, while promising the complete opposite. This gives rise to another prominent problem which is "Platform Feudalism," which will be discussed in the next part of the thesis. Platform Capitalism is more than just a business model. It is a political economic system that forms how value is produced, who controls infrastructure, and ultimately, how labor and social life are organized. It has become essential for us to draw critical reflection on platforms as they have now become increasingly embedded in the very fabric of our postdigital society.

1.5 Techno Nationalism

Techno Nationalism is the belief that a nation's technological development is vital to its security, sovereignty and supremacy. This is not something new. Early empires such as

Babylon, China and Egypt did not separate technology from power. In fact, they revered it. Technology was always something sacred and state sponsored as well as protected. For example, Babylonian irrigation systems, Egyptian monumental engineering and metallurgy, and Imperial China's mastery of paper making were all state directed enterprises which were supported by taxation, administration and military power. Even in the medieval and early modern periods, mastery over ship building, navigation and gunpowder formed empires and trade monopolies. Techno nationalism became even more prevalent after the industrial revolution. From Britain's protection of textile machinery to U.S led arms race for a nuclear bombs, this pattern of the state politicizing and policing the technologies which matter most persist in almost every nation. This is mainly done to produce "national champions" who go on to write national narratives such as, "We built the rocket," "We are leading in the AI model training market," "We produce the most secure chipsets," and so forth. These later on become sources of pride and legitimacy, and come in handy for domestic politics and international signaling of power. However, this also creates rivalry and tension between nations. In an era when algorithms, biotechnology and chips dictate who commands authority, geopolitical fragmentation is only a matter of natural progression. The challenge for us scholars and policy makers then is to advocate for the developmental benefits of state sponsored technologies while steering clear of the harms that blind techno nationalisms can produce. However, the task is not as easy as it sounds. Because in order to actualize this goal, the most important task is to educate the masses about the potential benefits and perils of techno nationalism. Even a revolutionary politician such as Plato found this task of spreading knowledge which is uncommon or new. In Plato's *Republic*, the "Allegory of the Cave" describes a prisoner who was dragged out of the prison only to discover the beautiful world waiting outside for him. However, when he went inside and told the other inmates about his

enlightenment, he was met with ridicule and hostility from others who were still trapped in their illusions. This suggests that a person who sees beyond their culture's illusions are likely to be disbelieved and misunderstood by the wider population (514a-517a).

As almost no one would take the words of an ordinary researcher to heart, let alone act on it, we would need the help of “national champions” discussed earlier. For example, tech pioneer Ren Zhengfei, the founder of Huawei, turned telecom into a national fortress (China's great firewall), and made 5G a matter of Chinese sovereignty. As the leader of a “national champion” company, he championed the idea of Chinese technological sovereignty to the masses. As a result, this push for self reliance in technology gave both their public and their government the motivation needed to block foreign social media companies, creating a protected market where domestic firms can thrive. On the other hand, in Russia, Eugene Kaspersky, a cryptographer turned cyber security magnate, built digital defenses for his country which doubled as soft power for the Russian state. His cyber security tools are now banned in the US over spying fears. When we combine both of them together, we get Rushdi Mannan, a central character of *Infinite Detail*. Rush is a British hacktivist who plays key parts in both “Before” and “After” time periods of the novel. Before the collapse of the internet, it was Rush who designed “the Flex,” an off grid independent network in Bristol. This network was created to protect their “Independent State of Stokes Croft” from corporate surveillance and big data companies. This is a key element of the novel's themes. The “Flex” network is an attempt to create a more egalitarian and private digital space in contrast to the dominant surveillance capitalist system that Zuboff speaks of.

However, every coin has two sides. Due to the dual nature of worldly phenomena, what is so good for me, can be equally bad for someone else. For example, we are already

witnessing signs of a “splinter-net,” which refers to the balkanization of the internet into nationally fire walled zones. China’s Great Firewall and Russia’s sovereign RU net are extreme examples of the internet split between national lines. As a result, information flows and services are tightly controlled by the governments. This in turn allows totalitarian governments to use the banner of techno nationalism to justify censorship and surveillance. They then seek to control every aspect of public and private life, and then regulate and dominate every facet of society by claiming the cause of digital sovereignty. The Chinese social credit system is a brilliant example of this phenomenon. The Chinese government practices vast digital surveillance to enforce complete ideological conformity. Be it social, moral, or political behavior, the state wants total compliance through a state managed reward and punishment system. This is where the culture of make belief starts to take root.

1.6 The Culture of Make Belief

Both tech companies and governments of nations have started to push their “preferred” identities on to users, and citizens. This is the quiet violence of the postdigital age. What used to be soft persuasion has now turned into joint ventures of identity formation. In such a situation, what even stands as “real” or an “authentic” person anymore? A platform’s algorithm decides what counts as “original,” and deserves visibility. On the other hand, governments employ registries and surveillance architectures to decide who belongs in the nation and how citizenship is performed. As a result, our lives have become a choreographed shows in which the platforms and governments do not only influence our identity, but author

it by eroding our sense of personal sovereignty. John Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government*(1689), wrote that, "Every man has a Property in his own Person" (289), which is often cited as a basis for self-ownership. This presents a foundational argument for classical liberalism and critiques the political theories of absolute monarchy. But now, this also makes a case for commodifying the self. If the the person can be treated as property, then their identities can also be rendered marketable. Locke perhaps did not foresee targeted advertising or biometric databases, but his words have come to depict the exact dilemma of the platform age in which we currently are. In this context, nationalism is no longer just a matter of borders and flags, it has become a curated performance as well.

Algorithms decide which stories we see and which histories we remember. Hegemonically, it also decides which identities we choose or have chosen for us. This blurs the line between civic and platform(personal) life, and in that liminal space a new kind of nationalism is born. This nationalism is not shaped by blood or soil, but by software. It is called Techno Nationalism. Alex Capri in his book *Techno Nationalism* clearly states that technology is no longer just about efficiency or progress, it is about power. He defines techno nationalism as, "a mindset that equates the technological prowess of a state's chosen actors with the strength of its national security" (Capri 28). Nations now treat chipset, platforms, and AI just like tanks or fighter jets, strategic assets that can make or break a country's future. Capri insists that governments do not just passively observe tech companies, they "pursue technology as a power multiplier" (28). This means that the right technology amplifies a state's economic weight, military strength, and even cultural influence. This framing fits perfectly with Bratton's idea of sovereignty moving into the "Cloud." When governments see technology as national security infrastructure, platforms stop being neutral players. They

become a part of the nation's defense perimeter, whether they like it or not. This research emerges from this simple but urgent observation that nationalism is no longer just a matter of flags and borders but of feeds and servers. Benedict Anderson famously defined nations as "imagined communities," held together by shared media, first newspapers, then radio and television. But today's shared medium is not just print or broadcast, it is the algorithmic feed, the trending hashtag, the meme cycle. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, and TikTok do more than host conversations. They decide which conversations matter, which histories are remembered, and which visions of the nation go viral. The question, then, is no longer whether the digital matters to nationalism, but, how much so?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Research Questions

In an age when every swipe, click, like and notification defines the forms of our current subjectivity, *Infinite Detail* emerges as an unsettling mirror, reflecting both our dreams and our anxieties. This thesis is an attempt to sift through the digital clutter and find meaning within this paradigm of chaos. To do this, this study has been anchored in a series of influential texts on postmodernism, posthumanism, postdigitality, platform economism, philosophy, sociology and anthropology to dissect the problems' very nature. This allows each source to offer a unique lens on how technology today both fragments and constructs our identity, culture and agency in a postdigital age. Together, they weave an intricate framework for understanding and analyzing Maughan's utopia turned dystopian novel. In this vein, central to this investigation are the following research questions :

1. What are the impacts of platforms on the reconfiguration of our identity in our postmodern-posthuman-postdigital society as portrayed in *Infinite Detail* ?
2. How does platformization transform the traditional link between sovereignty and territory by shifting sovereignty from the land towards the cloud ?
3. In what ways do digital platforms generate new imagined communities, and how do they intersect with or challenge existing national identities?
4. How are states and corporations deploying platform-based cybernetic governance and how does this amplify nationalism or erode it toward transnational platform power?

2.2 Research Gap

Software is deeply interwoven into the very fabric of postdigital society, be it economically, culturally or politically, for reasons both obvious and nearly invisible. Therefore, many scholars in the humanities and social sciences are now finding that for the questions they face, they need an enriched understanding of software and yet, much of the scholarly work produced on software remains overly technical. The dominant discourse around software is largely driven by computer science and software engineering. But these fields mainly focus on optimization, functionality and efficiency of softwares, while disregarding its political and social implications. That is why there is a growing need for literary, social and humanist studies of software which will focus more on software being a cultural artifact that directly affects human society rather than just streams of code. Compendiums and methodologies that analyze a software's design to locate the embedded biases and social implications, where scholars 'read' and analyze software's impact on society is a need of our time, and this thesis is a stepping stone towards that exact direction. Existing body of knowledge either treats this problem as purely economic(platformization-*Platform Capitalism*) or purely as a power problem (*Techno Nationalism*), while this thesis argues that it is both, and sets out to prove how so.

2.3 Theories of Literature

This literature review will follow a linear timeline of progression, and also sort the texts into multiple groups according to their themes. The literary theories which will be used to analyze the primary text are Postmodernism, Posthumanism and Postdigital theory. Postmodernism as a term began to be used heavily by literary critics and architects in the mid 20th century (1950s-1960s). Postmodernism developed less as a theory and more of as a skeptical response towards the failures of modernity. Modernism promised enlightenment, utopian idealism and universal truths. But it all came crashing down after the devastation of World War II, and many found the modernist utopianism ideals and optimism to be irrelevant. Postmodernism heavily influenced French Poststructuralist thinkers such as Jaques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who challenged traditional concepts of philosophy such as knowledge, power and language in the 1970s. As this is a classical theory which predates the later ones, Postmodernism shall be discussed first. Then comes Posthumanism, which is primarily a philosophical movement that gained prominence in the late 20th century(1970s-1990s). The term was first used in literary critic Ihab Hassan's famous essay "Prometheus as a performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture ?" In 1977, and later on popularized by key posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway(*A Cyborg Manifesto*-1977) and N. Katherine Hayles(*How We Became Posthuman*-1999). The most recent theory in this dissertation's arsenal is undoubtedly the Postdigital theory which first came into light in the early 21st century. However, it only became prominent in the field of humanities and social sciences through Florian Cramer's famous essay "What is the Post-digital ?" Which was published in 2015.

But now it is also used in fields such as science and education as new pioneers of the theory such as Petar Jandrić, and Sarah Hayes have established their own peer reviewed journal, based on the postdigital, called Postdigital Science and Education, published by Springer international publishing. As this is the latest theory according to the timeline, this will be discussed after Postmodernism and Posthumanism. After discussing the theories, we will move on to thematic discussions of other primary sources such as Jaron Lanier's *Who Owns the Future ?*, Zeynep Tufekci's *Twitter and Tear Gas*, and Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack*.

2.3.1 The Postmodern Fragmentation of Identity

Baudrillard, while introducing the concept of 'simulacra,' famously asserts that, "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard 3). This observation is clearly evident in *Infinite Detail*, almost like a mirror, as the digital infrastructures that are present in the "Before" timeline of the novel are very similar to ours. Digitized spheres of infrastructure such as social media create a fragmented space where reality and simulation merge into 'hyperreality,' and the users are often bombarded with advertisements and overflow of synthetic information. Almost none of it is meaningful in the sense that it is essential, but useful in the sense that it generates revenue for the ones who are in control. Baudrillard's work is vital for this study as it provides adequate vocabulary to discuss "digital dependency" from a postmodern perspective. Baudrillard gets to the heart of the matter, specifically through "the precision of simulacra," where the copy becomes so hyperreal that it replaces the original. As a way of navigating our postmodern

lives we often have to adopt multiple identities, some out of choice, some out of necessity, and some out of circumstances, and some out of compulsion. And yet in all this performance and pretense, we lose our own ‘authentic’ selves, our original identity, and the substitute or makeup personality precedes the original one, precision of the simulacra.

Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* enhances this discussion further by asserting that, “The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Every thing that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” (Paragraph 1). Reading Debord, no one can help but notice the parallels between his notion of a “spectacle” and the scenes in *Infinite Detail*. In the novel, all the characters live in a postdigital world which seems to be constructed entirely on recycled images and memories, a complete spectacle. This overlap is not coincidental. Rather, it illustrates how even our day to day interactions are mediated by digital representations (seeing someone at a cafe vs seeing them on a video call), reducing the raw immediacy of experience to something that can be endlessly reproduced and commodified (the recording of the video call). While explaining the notion of a spectacle, he says, “The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images” (Debord, Paragraph 4). Debord’s insights help argue that the novel’s portrayal of social media’s mediation is not just about connectivity. Somewhere along the lines, it is also about the erosion of authentic identity, and thus is a ‘spectacle’. However, his critique of passive consumption of the spectacle has now changed its form. Now, identity itself has become a performance dedicated for the gaze of others. Our relationships have increasingly become interactions with online personas. People who engage with our online personas

through likes, comments, shares are considered close friends, and the ones who do not evade being in our minds all together. Debord might have seen this as an extreme extension of the spectacle's function, which replaces genuine connection with manufactured representation.

Michel Foucault enters this conversation with his book *Discipline and Punish*, offering a much needed critical perspective on how surveillance and institutional control actually shape our everyday behavior. In it, Foucault writes "Power is everywhere" (94), which is a simple yet significant statement that brings into light the omnipresent monitoring systems in our digitalized lives. but how do they do it ? Foucault answers, "Visibility is a trap" (Foucault 94), and he is absolutely right in this regard. Thousand of years of evolution were required for us to be present here at this moment. But the human mind has still not evolved enough to be okay with being watched by thousands of people, all the time. How ? Through CCTV cameras, smart devices, and social media. Contemporary social media has become just like Foucault's notion of the "Panopticon," a mechanism that instills self-discipline through constant exposure. Our brains dedicate a significant amount of processing power to detect social cues such as eye gaze. If we feel that we are being watched, our survival instincts kick in, and as a result our attention becomes fragmented. In the panopticon effect, the mind does not know it is being watched at a particular time, and therefore is on the edge constantly. Studies have shown that just being watched by a webcam is enough to reduce a student's test scores. Now imagine being watched by many, continuously, from every angle, everyday 24/7. In *Infinite Detail*, this idea is woven into the very fabric of the narrative of their society. The characters are always aware of being watched, which then leads them to adopt false identities in order to escape punishment. Foucault's work allows us to

delve deeper into this conversation about how digital infrastructures such as social media enforce a kind of disciplinary order which first confines, then reshapes and later redefines a person's identity. It is not merely about technology being invasive, but how that very invasion reconfigures what it means to have an authentic identity in this day and age.

2.3.2 The Posthuman Reconfiguration of Agency

In order to step into the realm of posthumanism, Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* is without a doubt one of the most influential gateways to the theory. Haraway's 'cyborg' embodies the blurring boundaries between human and machine, which is a being of immense possibilities. It is a way of thinking about identity without being pigeonholed into old binaries of human vs machine. She states in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (Haraway 156). Then, can anyone with a prosthetic arm can be considered a cyborg? This is a very clever metaphor signifying the essence of *Infinite Detail*, as Maughan suggests, we are all a bit cyborg. How ? Our bodies and minds are now interlaced with digital networks, all the while our identities are co-authored by both organic and technological influences. For example, the devices which we wear, such as smartwatches and fitness trackers, gather our biometric data (heart rate, sleep patterns, physical activity) in real time and then feeds it into a medical network. An even better example would be implantable technologies such as BCIs. Elon Musk's brain computer interface named Neuralink is able to let the brain directly connect to computers and other

devices. This will help patients with paralysis regain their autonomy, as they will be able to move bionic arms with their thoughts only. From a posthuman perspective, this work reassures us that sometimes the demolition of traditional subjectivities is not always a loss, but can also be an opportunity for reimagining who we are as a species..

N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* adds to this notion by discussing the fluidity, or the flow of information in a world which is dominated by it. In her book, Hayles keenly observes that, 'information no longer flows through an organic body but rather through a medium which is everywhere,' (Hayles 115) and she is right on the money with that. For example, at this moment social media has become the most prominent news vendor by surpassing TV channels and newspapers by a long shot. That too simply because it has successfully become the most convenient medium for everyone everywhere. This idea supports this thesis's central argument that the digital is not only a positive, connective or an economic force, but a transformative one that alters the very nature of anything it touches, be it identity, culture, or agency (hacking elections—US 2016, conspiracy theories—Flat earth theory). Her insights also enable discussion on how the novel's characters navigate spaces which are as much about data and code as they are about flesh and blood.

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* echoes almost the same opinion by proposing that, "The posthuman is a synthesis of the organic and the technological" (Braidotti 42). However, Braidotti's perspective in the book do more than just challenge the traditional humanist belief of a singular, stable self. She also provides the theoretical grounding to argue that our identities are constantly being molded by our interactions with digital technologies, and as

mere spectators we have little to no agency in that matter. That sounds very grim. So she also shows us the way to reclaim it. In order to do that, we have to onboard a process of continuous reconfiguration. Nevertheless, this process holds both promise and peril. As we start to merge more with technology, we will start becoming more machinelike than human. As a result our productivity might skyrocket, but we will lose essential human emotions, such as empathy, compassion and sympathy due to the postmodern alienation of our society today. Many psychological diseases such as borderline personality disorder(BPD), dissociative identity disorder(DID), post-traumatic stress disorder(PTSD), may become as common as getting a fever, attributing to the improper configuration of one's own conflicting identities. After the Corona epidemic, this has become more clear for us to see.

2.3.3 The Postdigital Assimilation of Culture

Nicholas Negroponte's "Beyond Digital" is a fundamental essay for Postdigital thinkers as it contains his prophecy which has come true in our postdigital age. In it, he professes that digital technology will soon become just like air and drinking water. It would become so common that only its absence would make it noticeable. For example, nowadays when we visit any restaurant, we ask for the Wifi password before we even ask for the menu, and we went there to get food initially. If the waiter then tells us that they do not have a wifi connection, we suddenly become amazed. Can that even be true ? How can a restaurant operate without an internet connection? This is exactly what Negroponte was referring to in

his essay. Only when there is no wifi connection somewhere do we start to notice that wifi is now, in fact, everywhere.

Kim Cascone in his essay “The Aesthetics of Failure: ‘post-digital’ tendencies in contemporary computer music” first coined the term ‘Post-digital’. In his essay he talks about a shift from the flawless nature of digital sounds towards the creative possibilities of its imperfections. As the name of his essay suggests, his primary focus was on the effects of the postdigital in the field of music. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the errors of the digital is crucial for this dissertation as it points us toward the inefficiencies of digital culture.

Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt were the first two scholars who published a book on the concept of postdigitality called *The Postdigital Membrane : Imagination, Technology, and Desire*. In their book, they mainly examined how imagination, technology and desire come together to produce visual arts. The book is named after the biological cell membrane. It is a fascinating metaphor for the postdigital theory because the cell barrier both connects and divides the cells at the same time. In the postdigital age, we are both connected and disconnected from everyone at once. With a simple messenger app you can connect with anyone over the globe within a matter of seconds, but, would that connection feel ‘real’? Most of our digital connections often feel superficial, consisting of only likes, comments and emojis. But can an emoji fill the lack of the emotional depth of a face to face conversation ?

Even on a video call, often the warmth and the nonverbal cues, and the shared experience of sharing the same time and space that builds genuine empathy and trust are usually missing. Just because it is more convenient to talk to someone over the phone, we often miss a live chat or stroll down the road. This illuminates how the theory of ‘technological determinism’

is no longer relevant in an age where digital and analog elements of technology are not progressing in a linear way.

Florian Cramer is still perhaps the most influential Postdigital thinker, as he provided both timely definitions and critiques of the postdigital theory. For example, he examined the postdigital's connection to other "post" terms such as postmodernism and post-history, and discussed how the postdigital is entirely different than its predecessors. In his essay, "What is 'Post-Digital'?" Cramer suggests that, "the term 'post-digital' can be used to describe either a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical" (12). He also jokingly says that we might as just call it the "Post-Snowden" theory. After Edward Snowden's disclosed to the world that the NSA has omnipresent digital surveillance systems in place, and are currently spying on everyone everywhere who has a digital device, a widespread disenchantment with digital technologies became prevalent in almost every society. This disenchantment quickly grew from a simple point of view to a mainstream position. And as a result, it had a serious impact on all cultural and business practices which were based on networked electronic devices and Internet services. However, this feeling quickly vanished from the minds of the general public due to the constant persuasion of social media. In contemporary time, we are constantly bombarded with new information all the time. This not only makes our attention spans shorter, but also helps divert our gaze from the topics which need our attention the most.

Cramer's essay also tells us about how this disenchantment with new technology is a sign towards romanticizing older technologies such as analog cassettes and vinyl players. Without even reading the novel, Cramer helps us locate one of the most crucial aspects of

Infinite Detail. Due to an act of cyberterrorism, when the internet goes dark, the whole world returns to this romanticization of old tech, as if newer technologies were somehow cursed and did not deserve the same affection. However, this notion of hating a particular piece of technology would seem to be quite foolish, because it is merely just a tool, and does not have a mind of its own. If somebody is to take the blame, it should be the user, or users who use a specific piece of technology with malicious intent and cause harm to others and chaos in the society.

In both of the books *Postdigital Research* and *Constructing Postdigital Research* Jandrić et al. explore the relationship between postdigital theory and research practices, specifically in the field of education. Even though ‘education’ is not one of the central themes of this research, their elaboration on the meaning of postdigital and rigid research practices help us initiate a healthy debate on the topic at hand. In *Postdigital Research* Jandrić et al. assert that the postdigital theory presumes that the digital is no longer new, and it gets us beyond binaries such as online/offline, virtual/real, old/new media, digital/analogue, technical/natural. For example, we can think of the digital as mycelium. When we think of a mushroom, we only think of the mycelium’s fruiting body which is a secondary manifestation. The whole organism consists of many invisible interconnected linkages underground. Similarly, when we look at hardware, software, algorithms, data, etc., we are only looking at secondary manifestations. Like mycelia, the digital is more than the fruiting body. Digitality is deeply woven throughout our contemporary world, and we thus live in a postdigital condition. In *Constructing Postdigital Research* Jandrić et al. express the need for a new research paradigm that willfully embraces the entanglement of the digital, the social, and the material by not seeking universal truths, but critical and participatory ways of getting

to know the very complex world we live in, and this is one of the central themes of this dissertation. At the end of the book, they also add that whether for personal economic condition or with a gaze towards the future, for many, the idea that ‘technological progress is inevitably social progress’(technological determinism) has diminished. Then they lead us toward another key primary source of this thesis by stating that the most prominent concern regarding this is the ‘behavioral modification’ which is done by big data companies, which Shoshana Zuboff discusses elaborately in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

The focal point of this thesis is the relationship between the postdigital and a contemporary novel. Thus, Spencer Jordan’s book *Metamodernism and the Postdigital in the Contemporary Novel* directs this research through proposing how contemporary novels are being enmeshed in the postdigital condition by stating, “Postdigital makes us aware that we have stepped over into a new place, an uncharted terrain, in which our established ways of thinking and doing no longer apply” (162). He also asserts that this new situation that we find ourselves in is actually very useful because the the digital and the non-digital are now blurred beyond separation, and so we can finally stop arguing about its nature and agree on the fact that it is ‘hybridic’ (162). He then sets out five basic propositions that help us deepen and extend our conceptual understanding of what is meant by the word “postdigital :

1. that the postdigital is a ‘coming together’, a hybridization, of both the digital and the non-digital domains, and a denial of any implicit ‘disjuncture’ (2–3), to use Berry and Dieter’s term, in how we experience them;
2. that this ‘coming together’, or hybridization, has two vectors: the movement of the non-digital to the digital and the digital to the non-digital. In other words,

postdigital is not simply the recognition of digital ubiquity. Rather, it is an understanding of something more subtle: that at the heart of the postdigital exists a more open and fluid negotiation between digital and non-digital materialities;

3. that, in this revised configuration of postdigitality, the postdigital operates from two states or positions: within or across the digital/non-digital nexus;
4. that regardless of state or position (within or across the domains), the postdigital remains the dominant modality; and, lastly,
5. that the non-digital domain is subordinate to the digital domain (163).

These propositions are immensely important as to understand why any literary analysis of contemporary novels would remain incomplete without touching upon the postdigital domain. As the postdigital is now the dominant modality, the non-digital domain is subservient to it. Hybridity then is not without hierarchies. “Until very recently, it was the non-digital domain that was dominant: our lives were still mainly non-digital, and so anything that was digital was understood in terms of this normalized, non-digital experience” (Jordan 165). But the Corona epidemic changed this scenario completely. Phenomenon such as work from home, online classes and ebooks became the norm, and this is how the postdigital gained its supremacy.

The first research question of this thesis interrogates the dynamics between postdigitality and our identities. Liam Jarvis and Karen Savage’s book *Avatars, Activism and Postdigital Performance: Precarious Intermedial Identities* speaks about this exact phenomenon and how it gained speed after the Covid pandemic by stating, “Much of our daily actions are subject, more than ever before, to data capture and harvesting” (3). They

also talk about how our own devices have now become pervasive tools of surveillance, “Every smart device, courtesy of their IMEI and IMSI global unique identifiers, is ‘screaming in the air [...] “here I am, here I am”!’ (Snowden 2019), with our phone’s movements becoming a proxy for our own (3). They also agree with this dissertation’s plea for an emerging need of counter hegemonic discourses which will provide visibility to issues which are silenced and marginalized. Towards that goal, they posit an existential question which paved the way for inquiries such as this dissertation. They ask, “In digital culture, as well as material living bodies, we are ‘informational persons’. But are we ‘*our data*(7) ?’ The answer to this is both yes and no. How ? Yes we “are” the data which we generate, but as that data is ‘owned’ by platforms and corporations, we do not have access to what is done with ‘our’ data. Looking at it from the humanities point of view, reducing a person to mere data or a number is highly detrimental, yet this is the process through which platforms earn their keep. They reduce us to mere numbers(likes, comments, shares) and then use that data to generate a ‘data-double’ on which they can experiment their behavioral nudges on. The most noteworthy example of a data-double would be a deepfake. Deepfake videos of important persons such as politicians have started to surface time and time again recently. These videos leverage the fact that we might as well never get the chance to meet that person in real time. Therefore the deepfake video of former US president Barak Obama, to us, is not Obama, and is ‘not’ not Obama at the same time. These are the types of paradoxes which we have to navigate in our daily postdigital lives and thus deserve our immediate and utmost attention, which is what this thesis aims to do.

2.4 Theories of Digital Governance

Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack : On Software and Sovereignty* enters the current conversation by arguing that, "The global system of computation is reshaping the forms of sovereignty and power" (Bratton 112). His contemporary analysis of software as an inherent layer of state control aligns perfectly with *Infinite Detail's* depiction of the 'network' or the 'feed' which works alongside governmental agencies to police the public in real time. Bratton's stack consists of six entwined layers: Earth, User, Interface, Address, City, and Cloud. Within this stack, power always migrates upwards, and thus makes the cloud a storehouse of sovereignty. Within the cloud, platforms based corporations such as Amazon, Google and Meta exercise a form of power which rivals that of independent states. Bratton's work updates the conversation around digital governance by showing us how our cultural practices are now not only mediated by technology, but are actively constructed and regulated by complex, layered state systems. He states, "it is planetary-scale infrastructure that is changing not only how governments govern, but also what governance even is in the first place" (Bratton 24) His perspective gives this research a voice by incorporating the political dynamics of technology, specifically software, into the fray. He explains it brilliantly through this passage :

It is not the "state as a machine" (Weber) or the "state machine" (Althusser) or really even (only) the technologies of governance (Foucault) as much as it is the machine as the state. Its agglomeration of computing machines into platform systems not only reflects, manages, and enforces forms of sovereignty; it also generates them in the first place. Just as for Foucault's technologies, its mechanics are not representative of

governance; they are governance. But unlike for Foucault's archaeology, its primary means and interests are not human discourse and human bodies but, rather, the calculation of all the world's information and of the world itself as information. We, the humans, while included in this mix, are not necessarily its essential agents, and our well-being is not its primary goal. After billions of years of evolution, complicated heaps of carbon-based molecules (that includes us) have figured out some ways to subcontract intelligence to complicated heaps of silicon-based molecules (that includes our computers). In the long run, this may be for the better—and maybe not (48).

This passage is not only an explanatory one, but a warning in disguise. It discusses how digital governance works, yet in the process we humans are 'non' essential. Therefore, in the long term, this mode of governance might come back to haunt us. In the chapter "How Platforms Work," Bratton states what this thesis is trying to argue in a single statement. He writes, "Platforms don't look like how they work and don't work like how they look" (171). What looks to us a simple social media website where we connect with others and share our thoughts is actually a data mining project which has the potential to even overthrow regimes. In the next chapter of the book titled "The Nomos of the Cloud" Bratton builds on Carl Schmitt's concept of nomos, which primarily refers to the fundamental spacial ordering of a given society(how the hierarchies play out within that society), for the postdigital age. According to him sovereignty now not only belongs to the states, but also to cloud platforms. Just think about it. Cloud platforms such as Facebook, Google and Amazon can now issue their own form of passports in the form of user accounts, currencies in the form of crypto and in-app credits, and also their own laws in the form of terms of services and user agreements. In this way, the nomos of the cloud cleverly reroutes old forms of territorial sovereignty.

Their forms of jurisdiction are not based on physical borders, but rather creating new forms of jurisdiction through server farms and software protocols. And this is how platformization is becoming the new cartographer of governance world wide.

Evgeny Morozov further strengthens the argument against complete platform sovereignty in his book *The Net Delusion*. He starts off by directing the blame towards a group of cyber-utopian thinkers, which he also was a part of until recently. He states :

Failing to anticipate how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet, cyber-utopians did not predict how useful it would prove for propaganda purposes, how masterfully dictators would learn to use it for surveillance, and how sophisticated modern systems of Internet censorship would become. Instead most cyber-utopians stuck to a populist account of how technology empowers the *people*, who, oppressed by years of authoritarian rule, will inevitably rebel, mobilizing themselves through text messages, Facebook, Twitter, and whatever new tool comes along next year. (The *people*, it must be noted, really liked to hear such theories.) Paradoxically, in their refusal to see the downside of the new digital environment, cyber-utopians ended up belittling the role of the Internet, refusing to see that it penetrates and reshapes all walks of political life, not just the ones conducive to democratization (xiv).

This notion of underestimating the power of internet and its platforms is what this thesis is trying to abolish. On the contrary, as the contemporary world breaths through internet, we need to put more emphasis on digital environments, if not more then at least similar to how much we care about non-digital environments. Social media is a double edged sword, therefore we should wield it with precaution. His book is primarily an anthropological account of the Iranian Green Movement in 2009. He argues that although western media

portrayed the event as a win for social media((twitter, now X), it was exactly quite the opposite. In the aftermath of the 2009 elections, Iranian government used the same social media which protesters used to gather and form to identify and then arrest them. Thus he sees it as more of a tool of oppression than liberation.

Another valiant example of an anthropological account of internet led protests can be found in Zeynep Tufekci's book *Twitter and Tear Gas*. In her book, Tufekci shows us how digital platforms cleverly lower the threshold of engagements at the time of crisis, such as a networked protest, to mobilize a vast number of people without the help of any traditional hierarchies. She writes, ““For many of the Egyptian activists I talked with, especially in the early days of the revolution, Facebook’s ability to reach so many Egyptians felt empowering” (316). The focal point of her studies is the 2011 uprising of Arab Spring that suddenly shook the world. She starts with the formation of networked publics, explains platforms’ and algorithms’ role in the protest, and ends with how the governments fight back using the same technology that the protesters use, only with more force and with little regards to who gets hurt in the process. She illuminates this phenomenon by stating that:

many governments have come a long way in understanding and learning how to control the new public sphere and its digital ecology. Governments have learned how to respond to digitally equipped challengers and social movements—and have even adopted portions of their repertoire. Governments sometimes organize protests to oppose social movements. Nowadays, governments or powerful groups also make rhetorical attacks on bona fide experts by positioning these movements as authorities to be resisted, portraying the media a “a tool of elites (often distant or foreign). In Turkey, the events of July 2016 would also show that governments can even use these

tools to defend themselves against illegitimate challenges, like an attempted coup (496).

The inherent message is very similar to that of Morozov's. Even though they were both studying two different uprisings as networked protests, the results were the same. Why is that ? Because platforms are not neutral players when it comes to the politics of power. They pick the most profitable option available, and that is to play both sides, and always side with the winner.

Angela Nagle's book *Kill All Normies* adds to this conversation by depicting how the governments are 'fighting back,' to use Tufekci's term, using viral content such as memes and videos. They use both ironical and viral content to create online sub-cultures that lean towards the far right(MAGA). This then creates meme wars, the left vs the right, and gives rise to a digital nationalism, which is constantly remixed and rebranded according to who is watching. While in the past nationalist sentiments were only consumed by people, now those people have become 'users,' and they actively contribute as co-producers, and not simple consumers.

Finally, Frank Pasquale's *The Black Box Society* completes this discussion on digital governance by commenting on the 'black box' nature of digital governance and platforms. Although we are all aware of these systems being in place, we know little to nothing about how they work. Why is that ? Is it because we do not have enough body of knowledge on the topic at hand ? If so, researchers and scientists would most certainly have a field day exploring such a huge gap in knowledge. But no, it is not a knowledge problem. It is a secrecy problem. Digital governance firms and platforms hide behind non disclosure

agreements and that is what causes the black box nature of our postdigital attention economy today. Pasquale says, “even as critical power over money and new media rapidly concentrates in a handful of private companies, we remain largely ignorant of critical ways in which these companies interact (and conflict) with public powers” (9-10). He then hints at something more insidious by stating :

Today’s finance and Internet companies feverishly sort, rank, and rate. They say they keep techniques strictly secret in order to preserve valuable intellectual property—but their darker motives are also obvious. For example, litigation has revealed that some drug companies have cherry-picked the most positive studies for publication, hiding those with serious health or safety implications (10).

He then goes on to describe what this thesis is trying to claim, that platform companies are not to be trusted, as their only goal is to deceive and profit, by writing :

Asked about Google’s privacy practices, former CEO Eric Schmidt once said that “Google policy is to get right up to the creepy line and not cross it.” It is probably more accurate to say that he and other Silicon Valley leaders don’t want to be *caught* crossing the creepy line. As long as secrecy can be used to undermine market competition and law enforcement, they will be emboldened to experiment with ever creepier, more intrusive, and even exploitative practices (11).

As it becomes clear from the passage above that platform owners are now not even trying to hide the ‘creepiness’ of their business models and exploitative practices, let us now find out from where they are getting all this confidence from.

2.5 Theories of Platformization

Just as Karl Marx prophesied, capitalism is an ever evolving phenomenon, and its current form can be addressed as digital capitalism. Shoshana Zuboff’s *Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is essential in that regards to both understanding and explaining this new and more pervasive form of capitalism. In her book, Zuboff explains this process of digital currency accumulation by saying, ‘Data is the new oil, and our behaviours are its fuel’ (Zuboff 48). This framing of this phenomenon is crucial to understanding how digital infrastructures now extract, commodify, and then ultimately control our personal data, and thus by extension, control our identities and our daily lives. In *Infinite Detail*, social media professionals such as streamers and influencers serve as a reminder that our digital lives are now embedded in a vast economic system which profits from our every like, click, pause and share. Zuboff’s analysis allows this thesis to critique the technological mechanisms and the broader socio-economic structures that both support and sustain them. It is also a stark reminder of the fact that the digital dependencies that are now part and parcel of our lives are ultimately programmed by corporations of surveillance that are using all the tricks at their disposal to impact our daily lives in a way which profits them the most. It is only natural as

any capitalist economy is driven by profit, and so profit is the ultimate goal, regardless of the process or the harm caused to others. Zuboff defines the term “Surveillance Capitalism” as :

1. A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales;
2. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification;
3. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history;
4. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy;
5. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty- first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth;
6. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy;
7. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty;
8. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people’s sovereignty (8)

What she is primarily trying to argue is that these surveillance capitalist corporations, also know as platforms, have developed means of behavioral modification which can alter our behavior in ways which benefit them. This is extremely alarming in the fact that this process of modification is entirely hegemonic and subconscious, and we have little to no agency in this matter. If we use their products, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, we will undoubtedly succumb to their behavior modification practices. However, she adds a cautionary warning, a warning that this thesis is trying to imbue, by asserting that,

Our effort to confront the unprecedented begins with the recognition that *we hunt the puppet master, not the puppet*. A first challenge to comprehension is the confusion

between surveillance capitalism and the technologies it employs. Surveillance capitalism is not technology; it is a logic that imbues technology and commands it into action.

Therefore, as we discussed earlier, it is not the tool which is to blame for the discrepancies caused by its master. Technology is just a tool, and if we are to blame someone for our current circumstances, it should be the corporations who control it.

Nick Srnicek enters this conversation about platformization, a form of digital capitalism, through his book *Platform Capitalism*, and gives us a list of new terms that have emerged recently, such as, “the gig economy, the sharing economy, the on-demand economy, the next industrial revolution, the surveillance economy, the app economy, the attention economy, and so on” (37). All of these terms refer to new business models which run on ‘data.’ The main problem then for capitalist regimes of today remain that their old business model is not well equipped to extract and then commodify data. But they have sorted out this problem with their new and improved ‘intermediary’ business models. Platforms such as Uber, Amazon and Google now work as intermediaries who connect service providers with customers, and in return charge a small fee(often advertised as free). But do they then accumulate such vast amounts of turnover every year? Srnicek explains :

digital platforms produce and are reliant on ‘network effects’: the more numerous the users who use a platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else. Facebook, for example, has become the default social networking platform simply by virtue of the sheer number of people on it. If you want to join a platform for socialising, you join the platform where most of your friends and family already are. Likewise, the more numerous the users who search on Google, the better their search

algorithms become, and the more useful Google becomes to users. But this generates a cycle whereby more users beget more users, which leads to platforms having a natural tendency towards monopolisation (45)

Due to this tendency towards monopolization, platform corporations such as Google and Meta(owner of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) often enter into feuds, which Srnicek terms as “Platform Wars.” In order to gain dominance over the cloud servers, which are the essential components of any platform based business, platforms are now paying billions in order to secure their server farms. But how are they amassing such vast amounts of wealth by merely being an intermediary? Srnicek informs :

content moderation for Google and Facebook is typically done in the Philippines, where an estimated 100,000 workers search through the content on social media and in cloud storage. And Amazon has a notoriously low-paid workforce of warehouse workers who are subject to incredibly comprehensive systems of surveillance and control. These firms simply continue the secular trend of outsourcing low-skill workers while retaining a core of well-paid high-skill labourers (90).

This is not all. He also adds that, as platforms are incentivized from dataflow and network effects, the ‘winner takes all’ mentality then leads them to modify public opinion for their own gains. For example, Facebook knows that emotionally charged content gets more views and engagement, for example, Therefore, they predict which content get them the most profit and surge it through their platform while minimizing other important content which might be more useful for the general public. As more more companies such as Amazon, Google and Facebook start to decide what is good for us, they become the public gatekeepers, and not the

state or its government. This builds up as a tension between nationalism and platformization which will be discussed in the next part of the review.

2.6 Theories of Techno and Traditional Nationalism

“It was supposed to be freedom, but it was just another kind of prison, only invisible, seamless, and everywhere” (Maughan 56), but what is this prison that *Infinite Detail* is talking about ? Platforms introduced them to us as something of a digital utopia which promises connection, convenience and community, all in a single place. But underneath it all, they were actually building vast infrastructure of control and social influence, which this literature review has tried to demonstrate. Nationalism, in this context, then also has become a mediated performance, in which curated algorithms decide which histories are remembered and which histories are forgotten, which nationalisms we choose and which nationalisms we have chosen for us in a ostentatiously hegemonic way. As a result, the line between civic life and platform life is starting to get blurry, and within that blurry space, a new type of nationalism is being born, a type of nationalism that cares more about software and algorithms than soil or blood. This type of nationalism is what Alex Capri calls “Techno Nationalism” in his book titled *Techno Nationalism*. In the book, he clearly mentions that technology is no longer just about progress and efficiency, it is about power and domination. Capri writes :

Call it ‘techno-nationalism;’ a mindset that equates the technological prowess of a state’s chosen actors with the strength of its national security, its economic prosperity

and its social stability. Techno-nationalism seeks to attain competitive advantage for its stakeholders, on a local and global scale, and to leverage this advantage for geopolitical gain (11).

Techno nationalism is primarily concerned with technology and its power over nationalism. However, Capri demonstrates in his book how this is not something new, in fact an ancient phenomenon, which has resurfaced more extremely recently due to chipsets and AI arms race among nations, specifically between China and the US. Commenting on their influence, Capri states :

Semiconductors and AI are now the most publicly contested technologies, with hundreds of billions of dollars being spent collectively in China, the U.S., South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the E.U. But the implications of losing out on cleantech are just as serious, as these technologies are also important geopolitical power multipliers, (15)

This means that nations now treat chipsets(semiconductors) and AI powered platforms just like tanks and fighter jets. Just as this dissertation has tried to argue, this effect of tech based supremacy gained new heights after Covid 19. Capri shares the same sentiments. He states :

Consider that during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019 to 2021—a time, if ever there were one, for nations to come together and fight a common enemy—China, the E.U., the U.S., the U.K. and India all restricted the export of protective gear and medical equipment. This was quickly followed by vaccine nationalism and then vaccine diplomacy, with developed nations leveraging their stocks of vaccines as bargaining chips with poorer nations.

Just like the notion of Capri's "vaccine nationalism," techno nationalism has now become an essential component of our time, and failure to understand or to compete would result in severe consequences for any nation. However, as this research is more centered towards platformization and data-geopolitics, let us focus on how Capri comments on this phenomenon. About platformization he says,

The strategic value of data in the global digital commons, especially that of private citizens, has motivated government intelligence agencies to target social media and messaging platforms as well as e-commerce and other sources. Governments now show the same appetite that the for-profit surveillance capitalists have for data—indeed, they often buy it directly from the data capitalists. As the Internet-of-Things (IoT) turns billions of devices into transmitters, content creators, and recipients of data, everything from electric vehicles to household appliances has been pulled into the geopolitical data vortex.

This explanation fits well with this dissertation's thesis that governments have now joined hands with platform capitalists causing the phenomenon of complete and totalizing 'platformization'. This is a new age for nationalism, but to understand it completely, we must take a look at how we got here in the first place. In order to do that, let us look at traditional theories of nationalism and how it spread as both an ideology and an emotion among the masses.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is perhaps one of the most influential texts on nationalism. It provides us with important vocabulary, as well as an understanding of how nationalism as an ideology is configured. In the book he writes, "the members of even the most smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, yet

in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). But how was this image circulating amidst their minds in the first place ? According to Anderson, it was engineered through print capitalism. Printed materials such as daily newspapers, books and pamphlets were used to circulate the image of this single ‘imagined’ nation which he talks about in his book. He highlighted the fact that mass media has the power to make us imagine things which we would otherwise have a hard time believing in. The same thing is happening in the digital age, just the medium of imagination has changed. People rarely read newspapers nowadays. Everyone gets their hunger for news and new information met with social media and Youtube. Thus, it would be right to argue that if the printing press made the nation thinkable back in the 1980s, then the algorithmic feed of social media in the 21st century is now making new forms of political belonging thinkable, forms which are more fragmented, more globalized, and more volatile.

Eric Hobsbawm, in his book *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, attributes the spread of nationalism as a political ideology to the “invention of tradition.” Traditions such as singing the national anthem daily and reading the daily news, or even listening to it over the radio is enough to make us ponder in nationalistic thought. This reminds us that national rituals and symbols are often recent constructs designed to legitimize modern states. This is echoed in the digital era, where hashtags, profile picture filters, and viral videos serve as invented traditions that can be adopted overnight and discarded just as quickly. Eric Hobsbawm’s focus on invention of tradition helps us understand phenomena like hashtag campaigns (#PrayForParis, #IndiaAgainstCorruption, #JulyRevolution) as new ritual forms. These digital rituals are transient but potent, providing moments of collective enthusiasm that

reinforce belonging, but just as discussed earlier, they are forgotten just as fast as they were constructed through social media.

Partha Chatterjee's book *The Nation and Its Fragments* adds another important element on the discussion of traditional nationalism. He argues that nationalism is not something that we inherently possess, but is rather a 'category of practice.' Which goes hand in hand with Hobsbawm's theory of invented traditions. He also states something completely opposite to Hobsbawm that is also true. He argues that these practices are not something which are permanent, but rather situational. In the era of techno nationalism, this aligns perfectly well with the episodic nature of platform based nationalism that can quickly flare up during a border conflict, a cricket match between rival nations, or at the time of general election, than completely vanish until such a trigger event takes place again. Thus, this dissertation is trying to argue that, platformization and techno nationalism go hand in hand, and they are in no way a replacement of traditional nationalism, but rather, to use Hobsbawm's term, a 'reinvention' of it. Just as Anderson's newspaper once forged nations, now it is platforms such as Facebook which hosts the drama of national belonging.

2.7 Philosophical and Technological Solutions

Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* provides the philosophical framework needed to neutralize the malice which platformization's impacts produce on our society. The book asserts its usefulness in the current discussion by dismantling binary morality. Nietzsche asserts, "There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena" (Nietzsche 27). Rather than seeing something as purely a black or white issue, we should step back and notice the grey area in between. This point of view helps us understand that technology is neither inherently good nor bad, rather, it is shaped by context, power structures, and human agency. Maughan's novel embodies this Nietzschean philosophy by refusing to paint the digital collapse as purely dystopian or utopian. While some characters find meaning in the return to an analog world, others experience profound loss and disconnection. Thus, the ambiguity of any digital landscape is never a black or white issue. It is a fluid, evolving condition which demands pluralistic interpretation.

Jaron Lanier in his book *Who Owns the Future?* provides more of a material solution to our current predicament. He states, "In a world of digital dignity, each individual will be the commercial owner of any data that can be measured from that person's state or behavior" (27). But what is this concept of 'digital dignity' and how does it work? Lanier explains :

In the event that something a person says or does contributes even minutely to a database that allows, say, a machine language translation algorithm, or a market prediction algorithm, to perform a task, then a nanopayment, proportional *both* to the degree of contribution *and* the resultant value, will be due to the person. These nanopayments will add up, and lead to a new social contract in which people are motivated to contribute to an information economy in ever more substantial ways.

This is an idea that takes capitalism more seriously than it has been taken before. A market economy should not just be about “businesses,” but about everyone who contributes value (27-28).

According to Lanier, everyone who contributes value should be compensated, and that is only fair. But even today, social media companies pay individuals such as bloggers, influencers and content creators who have amassed a large number of following, and thus generate a gigantic amount of data everyday. This partiality only serves to keep the economic discrepancy prevalent in our society to rise, as the rich get richer and the poor remain caged to their economic condition. Anyone with enough money can buy a certain number of followers on social media and start earning, but about the common people who contribute through their interactions everyday ? Lanier Argues “A new kind of middle class, and a more genuine, growing information economy, could come about if we could break out of the “free information” idea and into a universal micropayment system” (20). Recently, Lanier has reworked the name ‘digital dignity’ into ‘data dignity’ in most of his scholarly articles and has included the topic of AI which will be the focal point of this dissertation’s discussion section.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This dissertation is anchored in a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology which combines close textual analysis with critical theory and reasoning. The thorough process involves a meticulous reading of key texts on Postmodernism, Posthumanism, Postdigitality, Platformization, Techno Nationalism, History, Philosophy, Data Ethics, Anthropology and Sociology, alongside Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail* and identifies recurring motifs, narrative structures, character representations. It then connecting them to the broader theoretical frameworks of surveillance, power and control. This thesis intentionally employs the socratic method of investigation in order to stimulate critical thinking and deepen understanding. It starts with introducing the core concepts which in turn familiarizes the reader with new terminologies and streams of thought. Then it moves on to the most important part of this dissertation, the literature review, which houses the research questions and also the vocabulary needed to discuss the answers of these questions. The discussion section addresses the answers through selected case studies that are specifically chosen for their explanatory power. Each case demonstrates a distinct aspect of the reconfiguration of identity, relocation of sovereignty, the generation of new imagined communities, and cybernetic governance. Lastly, the conclusion segment of the thesis provides a final summary and synthesis of this research, highlights the contributions and significance, acknowledges limitations and paves the way for future research through recommendations.

Chapter 4

Discussion

4.1 Fractured Identity

This research frames Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail* not merely as a speculative fiction novel, but a mirror through which we can glimpse our digitized future and find our fractured identities, our cultural debris, and the shifting forms of our agency. In the novel, we find the characters in a digitized society which is teetering between collapse and reconstitution. It would be a disservice to analyze this novel solely through a single character, like Mary, or Rush because of the broader ideological questions that the text invites us to confront. Therefore, this discussion takes a holistic approach to the novel by threading together its multiple narrative strands, Rush, Grids, Mary, Tyrone, Anika, and others into a composite portrait of postmodern, posthuman and postdigital identity, which is continuously shaped and reshaped by the presence, and eventual absence of digital infrastructure. The world of *Infinite Detail* is deeply embedded in postmodern conditions, where meaning is elusive, reality is mediated, and individual subjectivity dissolves into fragmented performances. For example, the central character Rushdi Mannan, who is an avant-garde net artist turned anti-surveillance insurgent, exemplifies the Baudrillardian subject who is always caught between rebellion and complicity, authenticity and simulation,. His artwork is the sovereign state of Stokes Croft, which is designed to reflect and resist the shackles of the surveillance state. But paradoxically it becomes another node in the very spectacle which it seeks to subvert. We see Rush detained at a U.S. airport, which suggests Foucault's "docile

bodies” under disciplinary power, as his body and devices are confiscated,. And yet, even in those claustrophobic moments, what remains most unsettling is not the state’s gaze, but his own internalization of it. Currently, most of us live in smart “data” cities which constantly surveil us with the help of panopticons of CCTVs that carefully monitor our every step. In such circumstances, we can never be our true authentic selves unless we are in a private, safe, unmonitored space. But in our postmodern-posthuman-postdigital world, no such spaces exist. Every space has become a consumer space, every moment has become a piece of data to be fed to the algorithms of platforms. Throughout the *Before* timeline of the novel, identity remains something which is always streamed, surveilled, and performed. As the novel progresses, Maughan’s London and Bristol feel less and less like cities and more and more like sentient databases which gather data for corporations to feed on.

Every character’s past is tagged archived, and documented, which makes their memories a cloud-based service to be accessed by anyone with the proper technology from anywhere. As readers, we are haunted by the knowledge of how entangled our lives are with a system we barely control. Almost all of us are on social media, and as a result, we share the same fate as the characters in the novel. In the novel we see everyone using AI spectacles called “Spex” (similar to Meta Glasses, Apple Vision Pro) which showcases sensitive information such as names, addresses, recent pictures in social media platforms of others. This can be seen as a complete erosion of one’s privacy, as their entire lives are on display. But this erosion of privacy too, just like ours, is a hegemonic process. Just as we choose to upload our personal information into the cloud based platforms, the characters of the novel also chose to do so. But there are exceptions. The character named Frank in the novel is by profession a ‘canner.’ He collects cans of Pepsis and Cokes which people throw away after

drinking and then sells them at pawn shops. But as the society starts to digitize, the government inserts chips into the cans which can verify who bought it. As a result, only the buyer can redeem the benefits of pawning the can. While explaining the process to Frank, Rush says, “They got some tiny chips in the cans now. I think the city did it in partnership with the drink companies and Google” (Maughan 35). Listening to this baffles Frank as canning has been entire life’s work. As the basis of livelihood and identity evaporate in an instant in front of his eyes, Frank is last seen jumping off of a bridge. The most recent example of this happening in our postdigital society would be the sudden disappearances of old Cinema halls. With the advent of platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, people rarely go to theaters to watch films or even live performances. This is leading an entire industry full of people, just like Frank, to be jobless and thus identity less.

As Maughan pushes further into the posthuman terrain of hybridization, he portrays the self in *Infinite Detail* as fundamentally hybridized. One’s identity is co-authored by code, systems, and implants. Characters like Anika and the unnamed American contractor with 3D-printed prosthetics are examples of this phenomenon. They are no longer purely organic subjects but walking networks, their subjectivity mediated by both biology and embedded computation. Thus, it can be said that Haraway’s cyborg metaphor is realized in flesh and code in *Infinite Detail*. In our postdigital world, the technologies seen in the novel are not alien, in fact, they are available for purchase at this very moment at Alibaba or Amazon. Anika plays a crucial role in the ‘*After*’ timeline as a refugee of the digital crash and one of the few who understands the true extent of what was lost. She carries the remnants of the cloud platforms which are imbedded in her, but not as data, instead as emotional residue. Her body remembers what her devices once remembered for her. Maughan writes, “Stokes Croft

is a deserted, shattered shell, strewn with bodies and dust. Again to Anika it is a dozen distant histories—Syria, Iraq, Hue, Beirut, Dresden—alien landscapes that could never happen here, nation-state-scale karmic retribution right on her doorstep” (228). Through her, Maughan challenges us to think of posthumanism as an ontological reorientation, and not just as a technological evolution. A becoming that implicates our identity, memory, and agency by becoming a being which is truly hybrid in nature. This notion is can also be understood as postmodern as it rejects a “pure” or “one” true self. The same notion is echoed by postdigital as it rejects bio-technological binaries, and relies on hybridization to express our current condition.

4.2 Cloud Sovereignty

Sovereignty has always had components which are material in nature, such as armies, borders and ports. But today, platforms have instilled sovereignty through data centers, identity databases and AI controlled supply chains, which are all hybrid in nature. Although they have physical components, their nature of business is directed through the cloud. This digital nature of infrastructure is what Alex Capri says the nations are now fighting around in his book *Techno Nationalism*. A full scale war is not needed as a simple cyber attack at the heart of a nation’s data center can immobilize it for an unprecedented amount of time. This exactly what we see in *Infinite Detail*. An act of cyberterrorism destroys the very fabric of their postdigital society which is based upon the 24/7 availability of internet. The same thing could happen to China today, as most of their ports and supply chains are AI operated.

Knowing the risk, the country has spent over a trillion dollars in the last decade to secure their cyberspace. Not just China, almost every developed nation now is spending more on digital technology such as AI and cyberspace management than physical components of sovereignty such as armies and missiles. Another example of this would be India's Aadhaar system which is completely digitized. To prove one's social membership or citizenship in India, one has to successfully pass through their biometric registries. Failure to do so would result in revoked welfare schemes and banking access. If a citizen is unable to pass through the database gateway through their biometric initials, they cannot even buy a sim card in the country. This exemplifies the phenomenon of sovereignty now migrating towards the cloud. The state in this case acts more like a system integrator than a magistrate. While citizenship is mediated by APIs, authentication failure feels as real as a cancelled passport.

Moreover, semiconductors, data centers, and AI controlled supply chains are not only industrial anymore. They are strategically hybridized for maximum efficiency. Even though all of these establishments have a physical location, their primary work is done on the cloud. Therefore, there is little to no need for human employees in such establishments anymore. A port that once needed thousands of people to operate, is now only guarded by few. The machines are doing all the work, and uploading the data into the cloud. The policy toolkit Capri calls "weaponisation of supply chains," primarily means export controls, re shoring, and friend shoring, which operate as a quiet form of blockade. How ? When you Deny a rival nation the most advanced semiconductors or chips, their capacity for digital governance or cyber warfare diminishes. This is the age of sovereignty which is run by latency and fabrication, not by a diplomacy treaty or friendly troop movement. Platforms themselves have become checkpoints. Regionalized app bans, content moderation regimes, and account

suspensions have become contemporary border controls. Banning platforms such as TikTok in India and the Us,, and the intentional restriction or blocking of services of certain platforms during protests illustrate how control over a platform can act as a digital political switch. The most recent example of this was seen during the Student Protests in Nepal, which took place just a month ago. The government of Nepal tried to shut down the operations of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter by dissolving the country's internet servers. Another valiant example of this was seen in the 2024 July Revolution of Bangladesh. As students were heavily dependent on Facebook for promoting solidarity against the fascist regime, the government contacted the platform organization and requested them to turn off Facebook services in Bangladesh indefinitely. When the Facebook denied the government's request, they turned off the internet first, and later the electricity connection as well. These scenes seem almost identical to Maughan's novel's post collapse scenario. Just as Negroponte said, these dependencies are only visible when they are absent. Just like *Infinite Detail*, what these case studies of student protests are trying to demonstrate is that, now, control over digital infrastructure equals to control over political governance, which is akin to one of the central claims of this dissertation that sovereignty has moved from land to the cloud.

4.3 Digital Imagined Communities

Platforms are not spaces which merely host conversations anymore. Now, they decide what the conversation should be about, and structure it according to how it benefits them. How are they doing it ? Through three simple algorithm mechanics. Firstly, platforms incentivize viral content as they generate more revenue for them. Viral memes and videos are

both social and cultural artifacts. Thousands of people share their opinions through likes, comments and shares on a particular piece of content, as this gives them the communal feeling of belonging (everyone is talking about the same thing). This is Anderson's imagined communities 2.0. Whereas before people would be reading the same news on the newspaper, or listening to the same broadcast on a radio which helped them imagine their nationalistic connection with one another, nowadays what is trending on Facebook dictates the emotional feeling of togetherness, which in turn helps them imagine their digital nation. Memes that hit a certain point of virality by spreading humor, surprise or outrage quickly become reference points for the entire nation to gather together under a single post. Secondly, doing something extremely simple on social media such as reposting a hashtag, joining in on a TikTok dance trend, or just changing the profile picture with a specific trending filter can become an instant communal ritual. This process can be thought of as low cost ritualization which is easy, visible and contagious like wild fire. The third and the most effective way platforms generate that feeling of communal belonging is by fine tuning and personalizing a user's news feed. The algorithm decides what the user might prefer to see at this time of the day and shows them exactly that, which makes them feel at ease. Also personalized suggestions and nudges such as 'people you may know,' 'posts you may like' give the user the nationalistic feeling of being together with people who think and act alike. And because they are sharing their attention at the same moment, on the same topic, people feel like belong together even if they never meet (Anderson 6).

In both '*Before*' and '*After*,' Maughan shows us that this technological dependence has become culture itself. Postdigital culture, in ways both overt and direct, imposes the use of technology such as social media upon its inhabitants, as anyone failing to do so will be

subjected to alienation and communal rupture. It is a kind of doomed if you do, doomed if you do not situation. But Maughan offers us a way out of this situation through his imagined post internet world. He proposes a simple return to our analog lives before the social media age. Doing so will result in the reconfiguration of our values, community, and meaning of existence. In the novel, the collapse of the internet does not just bring blackouts, it also brings about the erosion of digital cultural norms, rigged economic systems, and constant modes of surveillance. This opens up the space for new ways of being, which are pluralistic and more authentic. This is how the novel renders a sense of deep temporal rupture. The “After” sections feel very familiar to those of us who grew up without internet or digital technology. It almost feels like a return to the past. Without internet network, communities like the Sovereign States of Stokes Croft in Bristol rebuild themselves through analog rituals such as barter and rumor. Mary’s shop becomes a shrine to past day’s digital ghosts, and this communal engagement with memory echoes Nietzsche’s dismissal of moral absolutes. But the same collapse that liberates some characters also devastates others. As Srnicek mentions in *Platform Capitalism*, we are currently witnessing a generation that has grown up with digital technologies such as social media, and without them, they will surely feel lost. Platforms are aware of this, and as a result have boosted their efforts to not only control our culture, but to become culture itself.

Platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, 4chan and Tumblr are filled with homogenous groups that have over a million members. For example, if you search for ‘Flat Earth Society’ on any of these social media platforms, you will see thousands of groups, the most dominant ones having over 500,000 members. All of the people in these groups believe that the earth is flat, and due to believing in a common myth, they have come together to form their own

nation of flat earthers. Members of these cult like groups feel like they have more in common with their fellow group members than their neighbors. Angela Nagle in her book *Kill All Normies* talks about more insidious groups that exist on 4chan and reddit. As these two platforms promise complete anonymity, even criminals such as drug dealers, murderers and pedophiles have assembled groups under pseudonyms and fake profiles. As she surveys such groups with a fake profile of her own, she notices the bond which these group members share to be more solid than that of siblings. This is the power of an imagined digital community. Another valiant example of this would be the #MilkTeaAlliance on Twitter, now known as X, in 2019. One simple hashtag created grassroots solidarity across the citizens of four countries, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Myanmar. No single state or a political party could ever imagine to accomplish such a feat. And yet a networked regional identity which is glued together by shared hashtags, fan art, memes, and livestreams managed to do so within a matter of months. The Milk Tea Alliance is a transnational, youthful, and platform native group, just like the flat earthers, where the members amplify solidarity through viral aesthetics and borrowing each other's symbols. Make America Great Again, or the MAGA as a memetic movement is another prominent example of this phenomenon where a certain ideology meets memecraft. GIFs, ironic trolling, Pepe and other aesthetics elements made of hardcore nationalist messages feel both "edgy" and mainstream at the same time. This is one of the most successful social media movements which turned viral affect into real world rallies and, crucially, into electoral muscle which helped Donald Trump win not one, but two election campaigns. The final example of a social media movement directly affecting society and culture has to be the #MeToo movement which is a robust display of cross cutting power. A viral ritual such as sharing the testimony of victims online that produced both communal

sympathy and support alongside institutional consequences such as court trials and public resignations in many contexts. Although not every viral platform based movement succeeds this way, but #MeToo shows how the digital imagined nation can bring about real world accountability. In some cases, these digitally imagined nations are more powerful than the ones Anderson spoke of because of their real time organizing capabilities and leaderless movements strategy.

Just as Eric Hobsbawm argues in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* that nations remake themselves through “invented traditions,” platform rituals now have become the new ‘invented traditions’ through which our Postdigital society remakes itself. Platform based hashtags have now become digital flags, viral memes have become digital anthems, and community guidelines and terms of services of a given platform have become digital constitutions. As these digital flags and anthems spread in minutes and can be produced on demand, these new rituals or invented traditions proliferate fast. Due to the postdigital nature of our culture, platform belonging feels intensely real and authentic. For example, a meme can make thousands of people laugh, cry and take action within the same hour. Therefore, platforms can not simply play the role of neutral broadcast channels, and become editorial machines. A platform’s algorithm decides which stories are promoted, which photos trend, and which voices are buried in the chaos. This editorial power is so crucial that it is able to shape collective memory. The algorithm decides whose martyrdom becomes a viral narrative and which historical grievance is revived this week, not because it cares, but because of the intense emotions it stirs up and ultimately leads to user engagement. Calling it just editorial power would then be wrong. This is clearly political power, the power of an imagined nation. As platforms dictate what an imagine community feels or remembers on a given day, they

decide how that community imagines itself. Therefore, understanding how platforms operate have become crucial for our time. By studying algorithms and memes just like earlier scholars studied patriotic festivals, newspapers, and radio broadcast, this thesis has tried to unmask the effects that platforms have over nationalism now. Nationalism has now way ended, but it has been rebranded and remixed, reimagined by one viral ritual, one meme, one hashtag at a time.

4.4 Cybernetic Governance

The digital infrastructures in *Infinite Detail* function just like Bratton's "stack." As underlying mechanisms of control, they host invisible layers of computation that regulate not only data but identity, agency and ultimately culture. In one of the most powerful sections of the novel, Maughan explores how computational cloud sovereignty operates at the level of the human body. He also agrees with Zuboff's notion of surveillance now not being passive, but predictive. The digital surveillance mechanism which the state has in place in *Infinite Detail* can anticipate one's actions before they even make them, just like platform algorithms. Platforms, by analyzing our personal data create a data double of us. Then by showing us what we want to see through suggested news feeds it gains our trust. Then it tells us what we think we want, and also gives us recommendations from where to buy the things that we think we want. The process is entirely hegemonic. It first creates desire where there was none, and then satiates that desire by proposing modes of purchase. An application knowing what you want before even you know what you want should be alarming enough to cause

debate. Tim Maughan, through *Infinite Detail* is trying to do just that, to initiate conversation on the topic, and warn us of the consequences. These are not abstract warnings, in fact, they are embedded in the plot of the novel itself, specifically in the Dronegod hacker's email, "What's different is that the massive inhuman artificial intelligence wasn't enslaving us with nuclear bombs...but by finding the best ways to sell us stuff. SkyNEt is real, and it wants to sell you shoes made by child slaves" (Maughan 180). Whenever we enter [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or Facebook marketplace, we have to remember that it is not in fact a market, just an algorithm showing different options and different products to different people, based on the data it has gathered over them. Two people can search for the same item at the website at the same time, and it will show different results to both. Whenever we make a purchase at such sites, a huge commission, sometimes even about 40% of the price of the product goes to platform via the seller. This is Nick Srnicek calls 'Cloud Rent' in *Platform Capitalism*.

Platform architectures are wired by feedback systems which operate through large scale data collection, which is then fed into predictive models to inform and thus sort content ranking and ad targeting. According to Shoshana Zuboff's 'instrumentarian governance' logic, governments now operate by steering social behavior towards their preferred outcomes, and platforms help them do just that. A valiant example of this phenomenon would be the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which the government used the agency to micro-target citizens according to their psychographic profiles. In 2015, Cambridge Analytica surveyed about 500,000 people online to locate their preferences and choices. Alex Capri calls this 'the art of hybrid conflict,' where there is actually no conflict involved, only coercion. Capri states, "Gaining access to large swathes of data yields geopolitical leverage that transcends borders" (209). But what was the process of this coercion ? Each voter was shown an ad of

Trump promising to solve the exact problem which they mentioned during the survey. For people concerned about outsiders taking their jobs, they showed Trump vowing to close the borders if he wins. For people who were concerned with the leftist liberal culture, they showed Trump vowing to make America great again. In this way, they won over voters, one targeted message at a time.

Another example of pure cybernetic governance would be China's social credit system. The Chinese government has all pervasive surveillance system in place that successfully monitors the public and private life of Chinese citizens. They have created a feedback loop that is highly institutionalized and can produce either rewards or punishments. If someone is loyal to the government, and behaves according to their wishes, their social credit goes up, and they can enjoy rewards such as good schools for their children, lower public transport fee, annual gifts and so on. But if someone goes against government policies, be it in public or private, the government finds out through their constant surveillance systems, and then penalizes the individual through lowering their social credit score. Lower score means that they can not get a good job, increased fee for public transport, and in severe cases, even banishment from the society all together. Even in liberal democracies, governments are using targeted messaging and algorithmic policing with the help of platforms to create a hybrid form of governance, a government and private mix which is unlawful to say the least. Many states have already figured out how to make the people tick through applying platform tactics and mimicking the viral online rituals by rebranding them into their own colors. Governments always opt for platform services which serve their agendas better. For example, influencer campaigns are paid through government fundings, in which all that an influencer has to do is promote governmental messages. Another way

governments are capturing consensus online is by deploying bot armies which produce patriotic hashtags such as #MAGA and #VoteforTrump, and continuously share and re-shares them till the entire platform is flooded with their targeted messages. The postdigital statecraft has turned into memecraft and that too with likes, shares and trending posts.

From personal AI which dictates which products to buy, to facial recognition software that targets protestors, to supply chain AI that governs what goods are available, sovereignty in *Infinite Detail* is both networked and multilayered. When the network is deliberately dismantled through an act of terrorism, what we witness collapsing is not only communication, but also governance, infrastructures of control bleeding into chaos. Zuboff's surveillance capitalism looms large throughout the narrative. Data is not only tracked, it is first extracted, then weaponized, and lastly commodified. Even in the "After" time stream, remnants of this constant surveillance persist. People still carry themselves as if someone, somewhere, is still watching them through cameras, and if they do not act right, they will be penalized. This ghost surveillance haunts the people of Stokes Croft even long after the network is gone for good. This is exactly the kind of behavioral hangover that demonstrates how deeply these systems of pervasive surveillance reconfigure our identities and sense of self. The novel describes these broken systems quite poetically. The recurring motifs of trace and echo and the idea that even after collapse traces of digital life remain in memory, in routine, and in gesture show us that our digital dependencies are probably forever, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. The way Rush still seeks connection despite knowing how the network betrayed him, and the way Mary lays broken crayons on her desk as offerings helps us see that technology is not the enemy here. It is the people who use technology to gain unfair advantages over others who are to blame. The novel is, above all, an elegy for a world

built on the illusion of seamless connectivity, and in that elegy, we see ourselves reflected, as a reader, a thinker, and a person shaped by both handshakes and hyperlinks. To some extent, in *Infinite Detail* Tim Maughan does answer the question of whether technology is our airplane or our parachute. This dissertation also agrees with Maughan's answer that it is both. And yet, in the novel he also makes us realize how it is feels when the sky opens up and both of them are missing. That thought in itself should be enough to change how we connect, how we reflect, and how we write the next chapter of our own digitally entangled, postdigital lives.

Lastly, what this thesis is trying to argue is that any form of infrastructure that has in built mechanisms of control affect our human society directly, and therefore demand our pluralistic interpretation and utmost attention. As platforms and governments join hands to dissuade the public from the moral, ethical and democratic causes, it is up to us to build a counteracting strategy to save our nations and its children. This dissertation is in no way a call of despair, but a call to repair the broken systems which operate freely within our societies, just as the characters in *Infinite Detail* did. We should employ practical tools such as algorithmic transparency to rid the platforms of their black box nature. Digital laws such as 'Digital' or 'Data Dignity' should be implemented as soon as possible to reduce the economic disparities between classes of people. Investment in community owned platforms is a must if we are to hold larger platforms accountable for what they are doing. Last but no the least, international cooperation is critical to keep the supply chains open and give everyone a fair share of what they deserve. The remedy to overthrow any toxic fascist regime starts with acknowledging and knowing the fact that one is currently inhabiting one. Then, by

highlighting the current problems of our postdigital society, this thesis is attempting to secure a robust, fair and democratic future for the imagined communities to come.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Science Fiction is a relatively unpopular genre because it is generally frowned upon by scientific scholars such as biologists due to it being part fiction, and literary scholars do not accept it wholeheartedly due to it being part scientific. Both sides use the term “science fiction” as a way of downplaying the position of the other in the field of research. Both parties claim that their research is the one which is most important as it is on the verge of transforming human lives for the better. In such a contradicting situation, one has to wonder, is it essential to pick a side ? Why can it not be both? Scientific data which is fictionalized as a novel’s premise often gives us a plausible reality among many others in the multiverse, a glimpse of a near possible future. Machines that once existed in sci-fi novels and movies are now part of our material reality. William Gibson predicted in his novel *Neuromancer* a certain form of “cyberspace” in 1984, which we see as platforms today. Tim Maughan shows us through *Infinite Detail* a kill-switch to the internet in the form of an E-bomb(Electromagnetic bomb) or H.E.M.P.(High-altitude Electromagnetic Pulse), which possesses the capacity to disable every wireless technology on the planet. Although a bomb of such caliber is unprecedented, smaller versions of it do exist and are used by the military of developed countries in cases of espionage. For example, the first confirmed use of such an EMP was in 2003 when the US air force deployed an E-bomb to disrupt Iraqi tv broadcasts.

With Maughan's imagined bomb, one single push of a button is enough to devastate all the civilizations, all at once. This can be thought of as a digital pandemic. Similar to Covid-19, which raised questions and speculations regarding bioterrorism and bioweapons of mass destruction, Maughan discusses an imagined digital pandemic in his novel to raise awareness about digital WMDs and cyberterrorism. Yet, even in the darkest of hours, humanity always finds ways to survive. Just as the world recovered from the Corona virus, the postdigital world of *Infinite Detail* also recovers from the apocalypse that rids their world of all digital data. As Charles Darwin famously said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." Through showcasing the adaptability that Darwin speaks of, the characters of the novel rebuild and reinvent their identities, culture and agency in new forms, even as the world around them stops abruptly. This adaptability, this responsiveness to change, is the single most important human trait which has helped us evolve and survive for centuries, molding us into the postmodern-posthuman-postdigital humans of today. Perhaps this dependency on technology is something malicious, but it can also be a blessing in disguise.

In a postdigital world where people are alienated to the point that 'social media suicide' rates are on the rise, technology offers us some form of connectivity, even if it is virtual. But as more and more people try to fill the gap created by the lack of authentic human connection with technology, newer forms of problematic phenomena such as 'social media suicides' are starting to erupt. This notion of making a 'spectacle' out of self sacrifice can also be seen in *Infinite Detail* when the leader of the resistance force blows themselves up in front of a large audience, all the while streaming it for the general public to see. Psychologists have attributed this sort of self depreciating behavior with not having any loved ones or

friends, such is the alienation of a postmodern society. Nowadays people are opting for AI friends such as chatbots(ChatGpt, Grok) to rid themselves of their loneliness, thus echoing the posthuman notion of human-tech synergy. But this is also a very big challenge for us. As the world around us changes at a drastic pace due to technological advancements, we also have to adapt faster than ever in order to survive. But can humans survive in a world without internet? Maughan would argue that we can, however, it would not be the optimal or ideal solution to the issue at hand. Platforms knowing what we want might actually make our lives a little bit easier, but at what cost ? The issue of transparency remains. If we do not know how, why or who are making these decisions for us, how would we then know that they are for our benefit?

Instead of seeking definitive answers, this dissertation illustrates the impacts of postdigitality on identity reconfiguration, platformization and techno nationalism. In other words, this thesis does not speak about what is morally good or bad, right or wrong, instead, it reflects and highlights what ‘is,’ as opposed to what ‘should be.” This study weaves theoretical texts (*The Stack, Platform Capitalism, In the Age of Surveillance Capitalism, Techno Nationalism*) with concrete case studies such as Aadhaar and biometric governance in India, platform bans and their geopolitical consequences, China’s great firewall and social credit system, Cambridge Analytica and its psychographic targeted messaging, and by reading *Infinite Detail* as a narrative allegory highlights that platforms are now responsible for four interconnecting phenomena. Firstly, platforms have reconfigured our identities according to their benefits and even the government of many countries are using their help to do just that. Secondly, as a result, sovereignty has shifted from land territories to the cloud. Thirdly, platforms have engineered a new kind of nationalism, which is known as techno

nationalism, through a networked imagined community. And lastly, platforms have now enabled a cybernetic mode of governance which both enables and destabilizes nationalistic projects at the same time. In order to protect our nation's digital sovereignty it is imperative to understand the technologies that mediate contemporary national life, platforms. The good thing about this is that platforms are designed artifacts, and therefore redesign-able. This dissertation has tried to illustrate the problems inherent in platform politics, although at a limited scope, due to both time and resource constraints. It seeks to pave the path for future research through proposing a simple, yet urgent solution. Jaron Lanier's concept of 'digital' or 'data dignity' should be implemented, now more than ever, as platforms such as chatgpt are using our data to train their large scale language models. However, the main goal of this thesis was to initiate a discourse on the topic of platformization at academia. Oscar Wilde says in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "for there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about (Wilde 9). As more and more academic works are published on the injustice of platforms, more vigorous solutions to platformization shall emerge.

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Appendix A.



Fig 1 : Milk Tea Alliance

“MilkTeaAlliance.” *The Economist*, 23 Oct. 2025, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2021/03/24/what-is-the-milk-tea-alliance>



Fig 2 : Social Media Suicide

“Student Suicide.” The Daily Observer, 23 Oct. 2025, <https://www.observerbd.com/news/412971>