**Text, Textuality and Digital Media**
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Lecture 23
Robert Coover: The End of Books: Part 1

We are going to read this essay "The End of Books", where we are looking at the ways in which the text changes forms across various genres, across the print and electronic genres, the way the narratives work. The way that narrative is organized, undergoes a certain change along with the various kinds of forms that are there.

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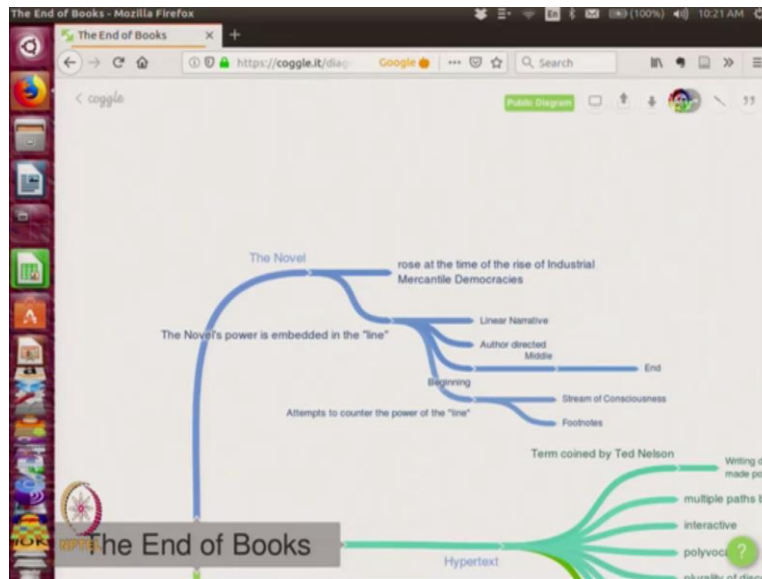
So as we have noted earlier, that each form of technology gives rise to specific genres of writing, of texts, of textual production. As we have noted that within the oral it was poetry that played a very important role because poetry carried with it certain ways of memorizing, of remembering texts through rhyme and rhythm. So suddenly these sound patterns helped bards and creators to tie various strands of the texts together.

They may be changed in exact organization for really long texts. For shorter poems or songs, there could be lesser amount of variation but the repertoire really is let loose in the case of larger oral narratives and the epic form is an important form that emerges out of the oral universe. With the coming of writing, the early poetry within writing, you start

getting more formulaic patterns in the sonnets and others where writing becomes important, the line lengths start getting more and more important.

And as we move along, we find that with the coming of print, one form that really starts dominating the world of the print universe emerging from Europe is the novel. The novel is the form that we associate with the coming of the Industrial society with the emergence of modernity.

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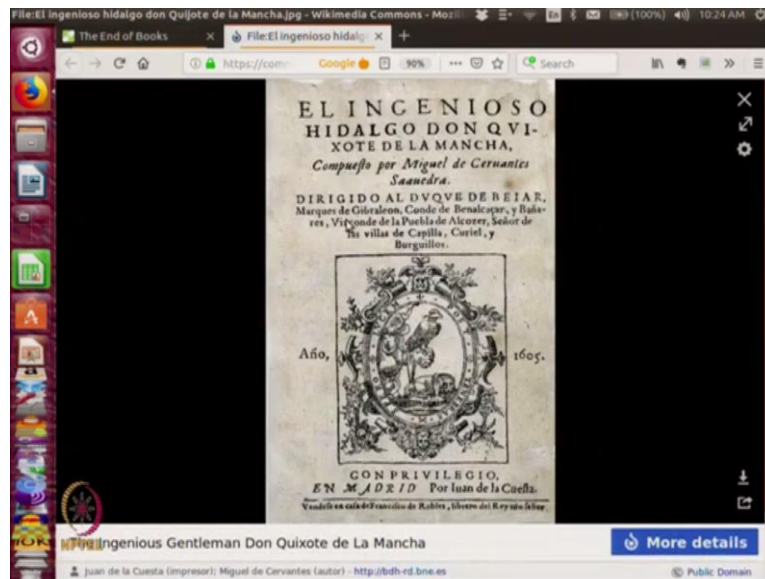
And the early novels really start thriving on the basis of a print universe. And what is the novel form really? The novel form is linked to the emergence of a middle class reading public which requires a certain amount of literacy. And we have seen how changes in the modes of production, through changes in urbanization, more industrial production, have a bearing on literacy. Also we have also seen the coming of print and the emergence of Protestantism and the fight the tussle between, contestation between Protestantism and Catholicism has a very important role to play for increasing the rise of literacy across Europe.

And literacy is something that is necessary for reading and the novel form thrives on the reading. You cannot usually do not think of novels which are in the oral form. You usually do not consider reading of novels which are reading aloud in a particular mass setting. Reading of a novel is a solipsistic occupation. People usually read novels silently

in their mind, they are not to be read aloud. Even in the age in the era where the novels really start emerging in the 17th century, even by the 18th century the end of the 17th century we looked at Mac Flecknoe and also in the early parts of 18th century manuscript circulation continued to be a very important source of literary circulation.

Within the manuscript circulation people will be reading out short passages or poems to each other in particular gatherings to be able to entertain themselves within a collective setting but we never really look up on the novel as a form which is parttaken in a collective universe.

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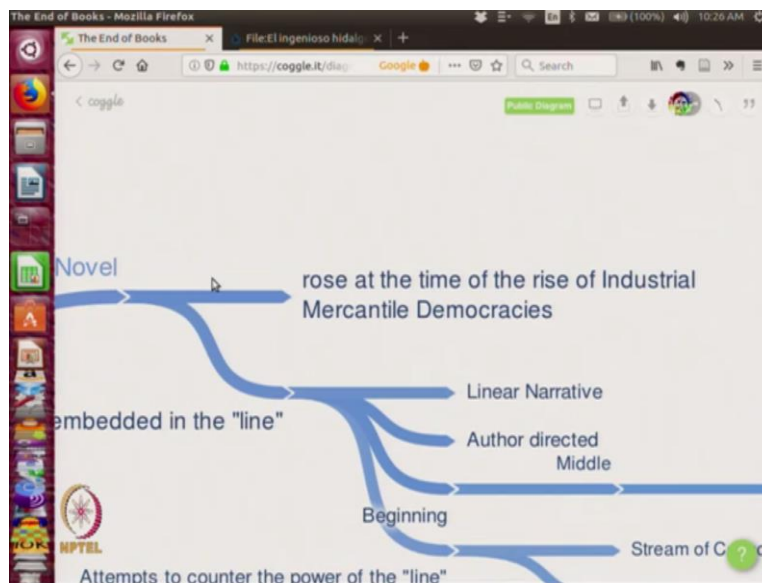
Yes, many people can read and then discuss a particular novel together, and the novel also thrives on this culture of the circulating library. As libraries increase, people issue out novels and the novel also thrives with the increase in readership amongst women and certainly of the non-aristocratic classes and they keep borrowing books from the circulating libraries and keep on watching it. So there are certain kind of systems through which certain kind of institutions certain kind of historical moments through which the normal form is really shaped.

So the novel really rose at the time of the industrial mercantile democracies and this is incidental as I said. These few centuries were epoch-making. They brought about many changes in the way the world is lived, perceived and reproduced and we cannot point out

any single reason which leads to the rise of the novel. There are multiple factors which actually leads to the rise of the novel. The novel actually represents, becomes the epitome of these various changes which are there.

Now, as we have noted even with the coming of manuscript with the coming of writing, it brings into language a certain linearity, it brings into communication a certain linearity which in the oral it is not. Now what you are seeing on the screen right now is a digital form and within a digital form I can very easily change the associations. I can actually re-route. I will not show them to you right now on this particular map because it will disrupt the mid map but this mind map I can actually take one text out and put it at a different place.

This is similar to the mechanisms of cut and paste, cutting and pasting which many of us are used to when we are writing. We take texts from one place, put it in another place so the digital form allows that. Whereas when you are writing on a piece of paper it is more difficult to actually do that kind of cutting and pasting, we can try to do that prototyping by putting certain marks and put an asterisk. This is the passage that should be inserted here kind of notes to the proof reader to the type setter that could be there.

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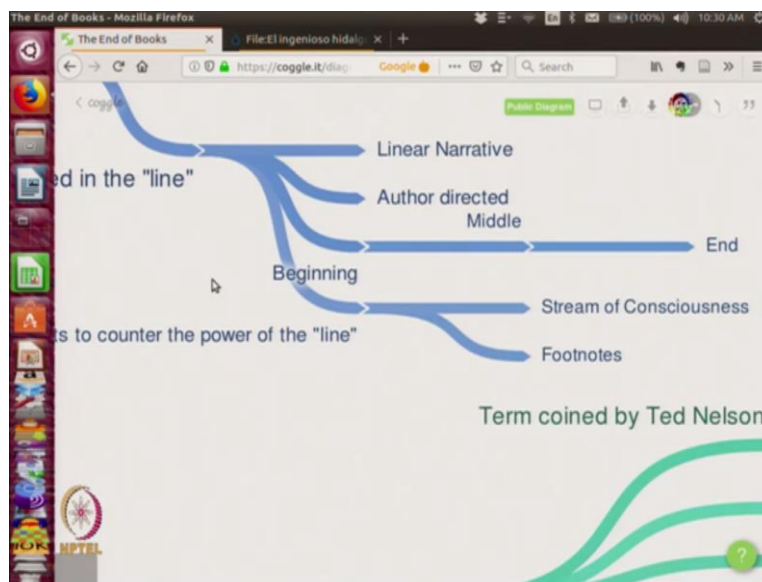
But otherwise by and large you can say the written from is a linear form where words and pieces of text, blocks of text occurs in sequences and the novel really thrives on this kind

of a linear narrative and this linearity is something that is directed by the author. It therefore follows this kind of system of the beginning middle and end to the narrative. A beginning middle and end which not there before coming of writing within an oral narrative.

Look at the story the Ramayana for example. I mean it is not necessary that you begin at the beginning of the Ramayana. You can begin at the middle of the Ramayana. A particular story may have a certain trajectory, it leads to a certain conclusion, but in between you can go anywhere you can refer to any particular story in between.

So there is no clear sequence which is there. The sequence could be broken, other things could be included and it becomes a more nebulas sequence but with the novel it is not possible. With the novel certainly that linearity is maintained. Yes of course there have been attempts through various kinds of techniques like the stream of consciousness techniques to break this linearity of the form.

But even for the stream of consciousness novel that linearity it cannot escape because ultimately it is written in the form of print. The ultimate escape from linearity is the coming of digital where digital texts can break the linearity of the texts.

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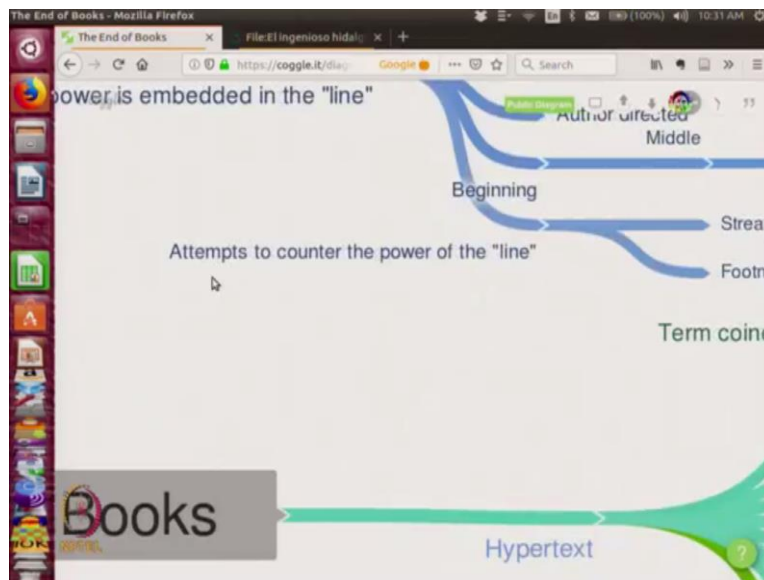
So there are attempts to of course counter the power of the line this linearity as we say through the stream consciousness and through the use of footnotes and notes.

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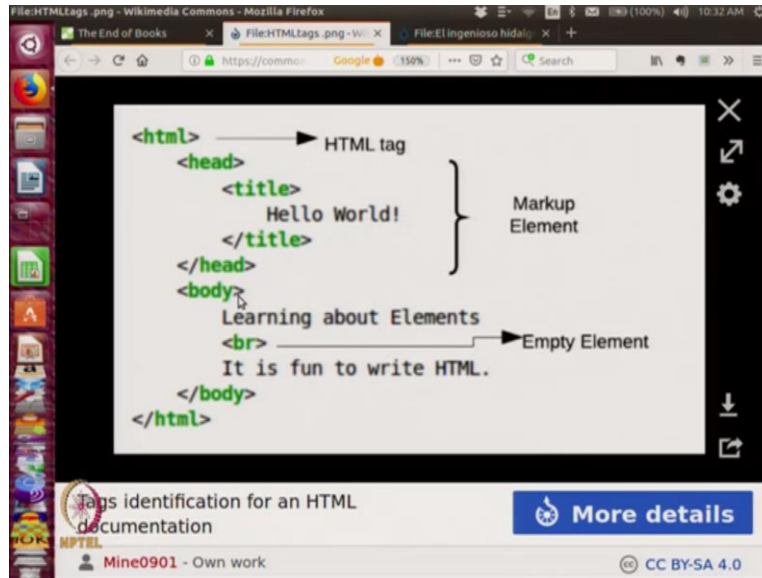
And once we come to the discussion, we shift to the discussion on hypertext. When we understand hypertext, this is how the text actually looks. If I can increase the size a little bit more you will be able to understand. What hypertext actually does is, hypertext is HTML Hypertext Mark-up Language. If you take any webpage and you view the source code of the web page this is what it looks. It's a mark-up language. What the mark-up actually does is tells the machine that this part within this so you see those tags which are there.

The open tags and the closing tags, the closing tags are the ones with a backslash. So, within any text within those two tags the open tag and the close tag, it says with a word written title. The machine knows that it is the title and there is a certain code which the machine knows that the title has to appear have a certain kind of appearance. So, and there is that the head of the text and then there is a body of the text and there is the end of the entire code which is the end of the HTML code.

Now this can go much more complex you can actually format the text in dynamically very different sorts of ways. This is a way for the machine to understand the various elements within the text. Now books have always the printed material have always tried

to use this kind of mark-up through the creation of paragraphs or using bold or italics or headings or indentation to differentiate quotations from the body of the text, but what the mark-up language does is it presents all these kind of marking of texts in a machine readable format in a way in which one can communicate with the machine and the machine is able to dynamically understand these texts.

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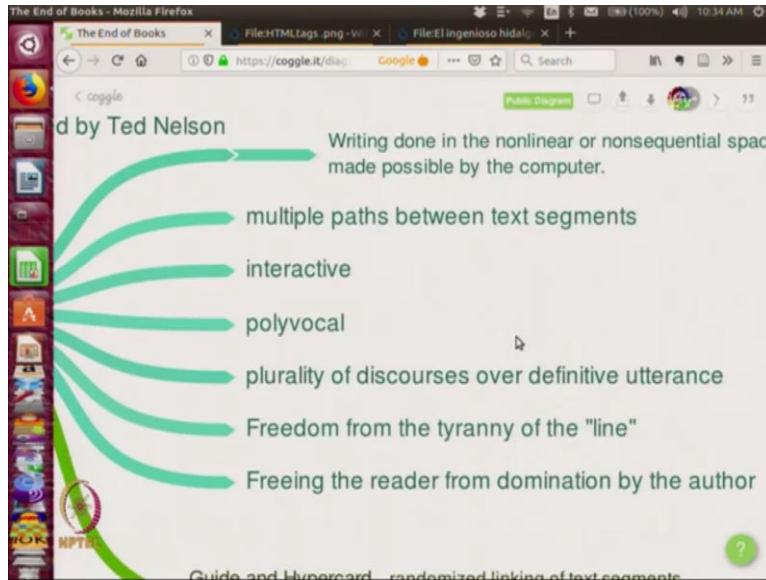
So how does hypertext actually change the way the narrative or writing is perceived. So there is now possible to actually do writing in a non-linear or non-sequential space through because within hypertext it is possible to actually create linkages, hyperlinks they are called, hyperlinks between different parts of the text or across different kinds of texts. So the paths become multilinear. There could be different points of entry and different points of exit or different points of moving around between the various nodes of the text.

It's not that you have to move from chapter 1 to chapter 2 to chapter 3, you can move through an infinite permutation of sequences of various textual blocks. And this adds to the kind of interactivity that could be there between texts and the text becomes therefore poly-vocal. That is, the text does not speak from a single voice the text can speak from multiple different points of view depending on…

So imagine the way in which a usual crime thriller novel or a detective novel actually operates. Where the suspense is maintained by actually holding back some crucial

information from the reader and the reader has to decode it along with the detective and the detective novel really becomes a certain kind of game. With the given the same amount of data can the reader predict can the reader work out decode the who done it, who committed the crime.

That is the test on which a detective novel really thrives. So the sequencing of the various textual elements the various segments of the text becomes very important. If one reads the final chapter at the beginning one knows who done it and therefore the interest of the text would be gone.

So you are so typically what happens is that in a detective novel the reader and there are multiple ways of narrative techniques multiple narrative techniques that could be followed. There are different narrative techniques like that of the omniscient narrator with the narrator the all-seeing the narrator and therefore the reader is also all seeing or you could follow a particular narrator within the text some character within the text whose point of view is being perceived so the reader always remains at the same level of consciousness to that privileged character.

So, the written text becomes retains that kind of that particular point of view. Speaks from the point of view of that particular character and really it is a point of view that is chosen which is directed by the author, that particular linearity is directed by the author. So in a detective novel typically there could be many sorts of ways in which a detective novel could be said told.

Typically, one follows the information said that is available with the detective. Or in order to actually withhold some information from the reader not reveal to the reader everything that the detective knows, to hold back to that crucial set of information crucial information set, you have the companion of the investigator, the companion of the detective who is actually writing, who is actually narrating, who actually seems to be writing the story or documenting that particular case.

So very often we know the most famous one is that of Sherlock Holmes and his companion Doctor Watson. So they would be within stories, in most of the cases Watson is present there at the point of time when the case history is being discussed, when a

client comes and visits Holmes and Watson basically after that follows Holmes everywhere or if he is not following Holmes, Holmes comes and reports to Watson exactly what had occurred in the interim but there would be certain stories in which Holmes disappears.

Holmes goes somewhere, does a certain degrees of investigation and it is only right at the end that Holmes reveals what has undergone. And he reveals what has undergone either after the rest or the indictment of the criminal or the wrong doer whatever or the revelation of the who done it. Or leading up to the revelation that actually he discusses this final note which has been withheld from Watson and therefore the readers.

So the text always in the novel form always speaks from the point of view of a single character. Of course there have been experiments within the novel writing form where people have tried to speak from different points of view through the text. One very useful example is that of Ghare Bhaire by Rabinranath Thakur (Rabindranath Tagore) where each of the chapter carries the title of three crucial characters within the novel and there is that kind of multivocality which is developed within the text.

One could also talk about some of Jane Austen novels where the letters become a very important source through which the points of view of different other characters come in. Sometimes these letters actually question Elizabeth`s, I am referring to Pride and Prejudice the wisdom of the lead character. Elizabeth Bennet becomes the important narrative point of view for Pride and Prejudice.

So we follow the novel according the to the point of view of Elizabeth and this is the way Austen`s novels actually are organized along with the point of view of the principle character. But the principle character's point of view is questioned through the arrival of the letter. In Pride and Prejudice one of the important letters is that of Darcy where Darcy questions Elizabeth`s view of things and that brings the novel to a certain kind of climax.

So though there could be these instances of polyvocality within a novel, in reality the reader does not have any freedom to move beyond the chosen path that has been chosen by the author. This is a given no matter how much the author has tried, at the end of the day, the printed book comes from page number 1 to the last page and the chapters are

organized, they are bound, the volumes are bound together in a particular kind of sequence.

So, that polyvocality does not exist. The way in which the text is organized remains in that sequence as one chosen by the author certainly. However, in the case of hypertext documents, in case of digital text, there could be possibility of this multiple paths between text segments. Each reader can go through multiple bits of the link and therefore this linearity is organized very differently.

So typically one can think of various kinds of text which could be there in the form of in digital form. So one kind of reflection of the detective form could be in the form of a video game. Now video games rely on narratives they rely on a certain story through which the game is played and the task of the player is to actually go through these multiple nodes and choose a certain path and explore and try to solve the mystery which is there in one particular genre of the games.

And how far you are able to do that is dependent on what exactly what kind of evidence that you have looked through if it is a who done it genre of the game, then the evidence can be organized very differently. It no longer has to work from a single point of view it can actually operate from multiple points of view. In this particular case the player has a certain point of view and the player instead of the reader has access to the multiple points of view from within the world of the text. So, there is possibility of a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and one would claim that there is a certain freedom from the tyranny of the line.

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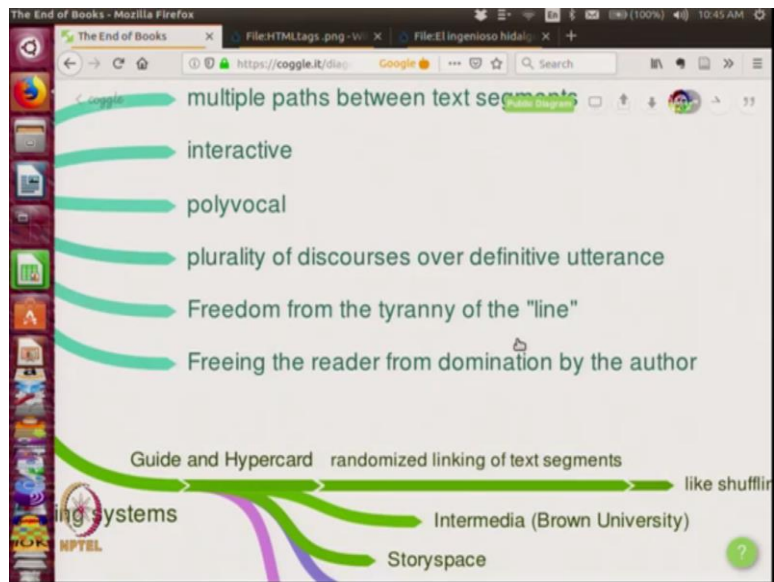
That what the text does is that it moves the reader away from this tyranny, that reader can actually go through and can actually read through various paths of a particular text and one would say that this is sort of freeing the reader from the domination of the author. Though these issues have been questioned as to whether the hypertext brings about any real freedom because at the end of the day the number of nodes remain a certain finite, newer nodes are not created. Certainly the paths between the nodes are more multiple and more varied but the number of nodes, the total number of nodes which are being laid out within the text these remain finite in many instances of electronic texts but, that is the certainly the story of web 1.0.

In web 2.0 things move further because the reader instead of being a reader becomes the user if you are thinking of more social media. Whether user becomes someone who is actually also simultaneously creating the text. Even if the text is there, there would be commentary, there could be you can also add your own posts.

So therefore the number of nodes become more infinite and with this the problem that the issue that can come across is how do you navigate between these various nodes. And therefore there is the devising of algorithms which will try to direct your attention towards certain nodes more than one. The emergence of the search engine is something that is born at that point of time where user creation of user generation of content

becomes important, becomes a norm. Before that still the number of nodes which are present within a particular text are finite because they are still being created and published in a web format. This is the early days of the digital medium, that is web 1.0.

Web 2.0 is one where the readers become users and therefore they are also adding to the creation of text and therefore the number of nodes which are there keeps on increasing exponentially across time. The number of videos which are getting created and uploaded on online platforms are mind boggling. The number of hours of video which are being added as we speak is mind boggling. The number of social media posts which are being published as we speak at every moment is absolutely enormous and which the human eye cannot perceive and therefore search algorithms become very important.

Sophisticated search engines become very important for us to make find our route through these nodes and thereby then if the reader has now been freed from the domination of the author, the Reader or the user now becomes comes within the fold of the domination by the algorithm. The algorithm is one which helps while helping the user navigate this infinite amount of material that social media or digital media the modern internet is producing, actually controls what each user sees.