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Text is dead, long live text!

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We live in the age of screens. The age of data. The age of machines. The cultural conversation is dominated by the digitally multimodal, platforms where imagery, sound and interaction frame the act of storytelling. But text remains foundational to culture, to society and the self. Text remains a major part of how we construct, tell and digest stories, how we share and consume information, how we communicate, how we flirt, argue and confess. It is often through text—however intentionally or unintentionally—that we form and perform ourselves.

The prevailing discourse is one which would have us believe that text is dying. And in many ways, we are, as a collective, beginning to reject text. How someone writes, what it is that they have to say, is a window to the soul, and yet our society is one in which people choose partners based on the swipe of an image, they watch short, polished videos critiquing content rather than engaging with the content themselves, and they favour trite emojis over fuller, more wilful expression. It would seem that we are no longer concerned with the soul. There is often great substance in that which is visual, but there can be vapidity to how it, like anything, is rendered: attention is one of the most lucrative types of cultural capitals of the day, but nobody likes to pay attention. The issue is depth. That text offers endless scope to challenge or reveal, that it might be aesthetic for no purpose other than the sake of grace, is not enough to overcome the hyper-attention which has permeated the general populace. Text must be confined to 280 characters. Text must exist in the folksonomic servitude of some filtered image. Text, well-formed and privileged as it once was, just will not gain and hold enough attention these days.

But text does live on. The swiping of images is only a precursor to that first communicative exchange, and there, one cannot hide behind visual appearance. There are many occasions which demand that one writes. The capacity to write competently demonstrates a capacity to read properly, and an ability to read is perhaps the most important skill which anyone might acquire. *Reading* is not about the extraction of essential information from correspondence; that is communicating, and while logistically vital, communication has far less to offer the self than reading. To be deprived of *reading* is to be deprived of all that lies beneath the facile surface of text as blocks. Those who can read can see information for what it is, they can what words pretend to say, sunken ideas that were never intended to be present or exposed. And this condition of knowing has always been present, such that we can say that text is unchanged. Text remains what text has always been; what has changed is what we do with text.

What has changed are those waveforms through which text is now likely to pass. The potential in words is in their arrangement, how they are brought together to form signage systems. Part of the act of arrangement is the waveform selection, the choosing of those apparatuses through which reception will be facilitated. Words on the page can act in certain ways while words on the screen might act in others, and there are different kinds of pages and different types of screens. But no matter how an arrangement is presented, no matter the waveform selected, text is text. When the first words were committed to paper, nobody envisioned the emergence of interactive fiction or generative writing, nobody would have predicted the communities of practice and aesthetic movements that have emerged around the great many of forms of digital fiction and electronic literature. Text has persisted throughout much cultural fermentation, and whatever waveforms have existed, do exist, and are yet to exist, we can be almost certain that text will continue as long as humanity.

We will do different things with it. We will do old things with it. We will do everything and nothing with it, but it will be there. The future of digital text is quite simply its past. Text is dead, long live text!

Biographical Note

Dr James O'Sullivan lectures in the School of English & Digital Humanities at University College Cork. He has previously held faculty positions at Pennsylvania State University and the University of Sheffield. James is the author of *Towards a Digital Poetics* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) and he has also edited several collections, including *Reading Modernism with Machines* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016). His scholarship has appeared in a variety of respected publications, including *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, *Digital Studies/Le Champ Numérique,* and *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. James has also had writing in *The Guardian, The Irish Times* and *LA Review of Books*. For more, see jamesosullivan.org.