

DIGITAL DYSTOPIA



UC Irvine Libraries

EXHIBIT ON DISPLAY
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Science Library
Second Floor Exhibit Gallery

DIGITAL

DYSTOPIA

The world is increasingly succumbing to *digital imperatives*, with technological solutions and tools forcibly imposed on our everyday experiences. More and more, we interact via virtual mediums, such as smartphones, the metaverse, and AI chatbots. At the same time, a comprehensive system of digital tools is optimizing efficiency across all human activities, further removing us from physical experiences. An estimated 92% of the world's money now exists only in digital form, as we conduct scholarship through digital materials, communicate via text, shop for clothes using virtual overlays — the list goes on and on. As the South Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han put it, "We no longer inhabit earth and dwell under the sky; these are being replaced by Google Earth and the Cloud. The terrestrial order is giving way to a digital order."

This exhibit highlights four international works of fiction that predict dystopian consequences when the real yields to the unreal (or virtual). Spanning more than 175 years, these books and stories have inspired other important works in different mediums by writers and artists from around the globe.

Viewers are challenged to critically examine the contemporary virtual culture that increasingly governs our daily lives. The ultimate question is, do we even need reality anymore?

CONCEPT OF THE DOUBLE

In virtual reality, an avatar, or replicated self in a digital form, doubles as the self. More daring than the real you, this double figure can act on suppressed desires and dormant yearnings. Sigmund Freud argued that an uncanny effect or eerie feeling occurs when the boundary between fantasy and reality blurs, such as when primitive beliefs we thought we'd outgrown — like the idea of “living” dolls or doubles — suddenly seem to come alive. How would you react if you met your double in real life?

“[A]n uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.” — *Das Unheimliche* [*The Uncanny*]

THE SANDMAN by E.T.A. Hoffmann, 1816

Hoffmann was a German author of fantasy and gothic horror whose stories highly influenced 19th century literature. According to Freud, he was “the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature.” Hoffmann’s novella *The Sandman* (originally published in German) follows Nathaniel, who is haunted from childhood by the Sandman, whose terrifying existence is embodied by multiple double figures. Later in life, Nathaniel falls in love with Olympia, a humanlike automaton, which leads to his disillusionment and madness.

“Nathaniel stood paralyzed, for he saw that Olympia’s waxen deathly pale face had no eyes, but black holes instead. She was, indeed, a lifeless doll.”

1. **E.T.A. HOFFMANN** (1776–1822).
2. **THE SANDMAN** by E.T.A. Hoffmann, 1816.
3. **TALES OF HOFFMANN** by E.T.A. Hoffmann, illustrated by Hugo Steiner-Prag, 1943.
4. **GRAPHIC VERSION OF “THE SANDMAN.” THE WOUNDED STORYTELLER**, illustrated by Natalie Frank, 2023.
5. **TALES OF HOFFMANN** by E.T.A. Hoffmann, illustrated by Mario Labocetta, 1932. On loan from Cheryl Baltes.

THE UNCANNY by Sigmund Freud, 1919

Freud was an Austrian doctor and the founder of psychoanalysis. His work is still influential within psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, and across the humanities. In his 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* (originally published in German), Freud defined the uncanny as something that is secretly familiar, has undergone repression, and then returned from it.

"Everything is uncanny [*unheimlich*] that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light."

6. **SIGMUND FREUD** (1856–1939).
7. **THE UNCANNY** by Sigmund Freud, 1919.

S U P P L A N T E D B Y T H E V I R T U A L

Can props and entities in virtual reality intrude upon the real world? Such is the thought experiment conducted in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Since its original publication in 1940, terms like mixed and augmented reality have become commonplace. Think of the game Pokémon GO, where virtual characters manifest in real settings via a smartphone lens. What will happen if the line between the virtual and the real keeps blurring?

"The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world... [A]lready a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty — not even that it is false." — "Tlön , Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

"TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS" by Jorge Luis Borges, 1940

A central figure in Latin American literature, Borges was an Argentinian short-story writer, essayist, poet, and National Library of Argentina director whose works have contributed to philosophical literature and the fantasy genre. A creation parable, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (originally published in Spanish) is one of Borges's most popular stories. The narrator discovers a mysterious encyclopedia entry about a nonexistent country, Uqbar. That leads him to a massive, multigenerational conspiracy to invent a planet called Tlön. In the end, artifacts from Tlön begin to appear in the real world, and its seductive, orderly system starts to systematically replace human history and reality itself.

8. **JORGE LUIS BORGES** (1899–1986).

9. **"TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS"** by Jorge Luis Borges, 1940.

THE DOOM PATROL by Grant Morrison, 1989

The Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison is known for nonlinear narratives, humanist philosophy, and countercultural themes. Dubbed “the craziest superhero story ever told,” his comic *The Doom Patrol* follows three unlikely heroes: a manic robot with a transplanted human brain, a bandaged pilot who is possessed by a mysterious Negative Being, and an ex-movie starlet whose life and career have been ruined by size-changing powers. Mirroring Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the episode “Crawling from the Wreckage” follows the heroes as they fight the Scissormen, entities who crossed over to the real world from a “man-made” one called Orqwith.

10. **GRANT MORRISON**, MBE (1960–).

11. **THE DOOM PATROL**, written by Grant Morrison, illustrated by Richard Case et al., 1989.

BORDERLANDS: NAVIGATING THE VIRTUAL AND PHYSICAL DIVIDE

by Hannah Smith Allen, 2020

The artist book *Borderlands* came about after American multidisciplinary artist Hannah Smith Allen discovered glitches in Google Street View’s US/Mexico border that allowed people to slip through the wall and cross into foreign territory. The book uses an accordion format to map digital distortions against physical reality, showing how the digital can cross over to the physical realm and wreak confusion and disorientation.

12. **HANNAH SMITH ALLEN**. Photo credit: adelphi.edu.

13. **BORDERLANDS: NAVIGATING THE VIRTUAL AND PHYSICAL DIVIDE** by Hannah Smith Allen, 2020.

ARTIFICIAL INTIMACY

A romantic “relationship” with AI is all the rage nowadays. As of early 2026, nearly one in five adults in the United States has reported having an intimate chat with AI, with the highest rates among 18- to 24-year-olds. If you get used to an AI romantic “partner” that is programmed to pander to you at all times, will you be able to sustain a romantic relationship with a living human being?

“To be on an island inhabited by artificial ghosts was the most unbearable of nightmares; to be in love with one of those images was worse than being in love with a ghost.” — *The Invention of Morel*

THE INVENTION OF MOREL by Adolfo Bioy Casares, 1940

Adolfo Bioy Casares was an Argentinian fiction writer, journalist, diarist, and translator. His most famous novel, *The Invention of Morel* (originally published in Spanish), is the story of a fugitive who escapes to an island but then realizes that its inhabitants are only recordings, or “artificial ghosts.” A special machine not only records 3D images, but also voices and scents, making them indistinguishable from reality. After falling in love with a woman from one of these recordings, he in turn records himself to give the illusion that they are in love, forever repeating for posterity.

14. **ADOLFO BIOY CASARES** (1914–1999).
15. **THE INVENTION OF MOREL** by Adolfo Bioy Casares, illustrated by Norah Borges, 1940.
16. **ILLUSTRATION IN THE INVENTION OF MOREL** by Adolfo Bioy Casares, 1940.

LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD by Alain Resnais, 1961

The Invention of Morel was an inspiration for the French film *Last Year at Marienbad* [*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*] and for the American TV series *Lost* (2004–2010). Alain Resnais's movie, which is set in a park near a palace that has been converted into a luxury hotel, features an unnamed woman and man who may or may not have had an affair. They bicker over what actually happened versus what may have been imagined. Everyone in Marienbad is a holograph, imprisoned in an endless cycle.

"You never seemed to be waiting for me. But we met at every turn, behind every shrub, at the foot of every statue, by every fountain's edge. As though in all this garden there was only you and me."

17. **ALAIN RESNAIS** (1922–2014).

18. **LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD** by Alain Resnais, 1961.

19. **MOVIE STILL FROM LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD, STARRING DELPHINE SEYRIG AND GIORGIO ALBERTAZZI.**

DISEMBODIED CONSCIOUSNESS

For many of us, digital cards and fobs open doors and start cars, not keys. We stream movies and music instead of playing physical DVDs or CDs. Handwritten letters are becoming a thing of the past. Some stores no longer accept cash. Many physical items are endangered species. In this age of incessant digitalization, nothing is safe from extinction. Are our bodies safe from disappearing as well?

“When our left legs first disappeared, we were thrown off balance and didn’t know how to manage. But once our entire bodies were gone, no one seemed particularly upset.”

— *The Memory Police*

THE MEMORY POLICE by Yoko Ogawa, 1994

Yoko Ogawa is a Japanese writer whose work has won every major literary award in Japan. In her novel *The Memory Police* (originally published in Japanese), physical objects disappear one by one — stamps, perfumes, birds, emeralds, harmonicas, ferry boats — along with people’s memories of those things. There are still a few who remember, but the memory police persecute them. Eventually, even body parts begin to disappear as well, until human beings are nothing but disembodied voices.

“When our left legs first disappeared, we were thrown off balance and didn’t know how to manage. But once our entire bodies were gone, no one seemed particularly upset. They seemed more coherent now that they had fewer parts, and they adapted easily to the atmosphere of the island, which was itself full of holes.”

20. **YOKO OGAWA** (1962–). Photo credit: Getty Images.

21. **THE MEMORY POLICE** by Yoko Ogawa, 1994.

NON-THINGS: UPHEAVAL IN THE LIFEWORLD by Byung-Chul Han, 2017

Byung-Chul Han is a South Korean-born philosopher, Catholic theologian, and cultural theorist living in Germany. His work centers around critiques of neoliberalism (an economic and political theory that favors free-market capitalism with minimal government intervention) and digital order and their impact on society and the individual. *Non-Things* (originally published in German) begins with a reference to Ogawa's *The Memory Police*: "In Ogawa's dystopia, the world is gradually emptied out. Ultimately, it disappears. Everything is seized by disappearance, by a progressive dissolution." Han's nonfiction book offers a scathing critique of the relentless digitalization of "things" and highlights the price we are paying for our preoccupation with digital initiatives.

22. **BYUNG-CHUL HAN** (1959–). Photo credit: Michael Hudler.

23. **NON-THINGS: UPHEAVAL IN THE LIFEWORLD** by Byung-Chul Han, 2017.

THINGS THAT DISAPPEAR by Jenny Erpenbeck, 2025

This collection of interlinked miniature essays by German novelist Jenny Erpenbeck explores the phenomenon of disappearance on both large and small scales. From everyday objects like socks to more ephemeral ones, like close friends, social norms, common courtesies, and physical sites such as the East German Palace of the Republic, Erpenbeck offers philosophical observations about memory and everyday life.

24. **JENNY ERPENBECK** (1967–). Photo credit: New Directions Publishing.

25. **THINGS THAT DISAPPEAR** by Jenny Erpenbeck, 2025.

RELICS OF THE REAL

The incessant creep of digitalization into our daily lives is rendering many physical objects obsolete. In the future, we may not own anything, just “subscribe” to and “visit” their digital substitutes. Consider this small collection of items. Has anything been lost by their obsolescence? And what might be next?

26. **THE WONDER BOOK OF WHY AND WHAT**, edited by Harry Golding, c. 1921.
On loan from Cheryl Baltes.
27. **ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA**, 1980. On loan from Richard Cho.
28. **FAMILY PHOTO ALBUM**. On loan from Richard Cho.
29. **THOMAS GUIDE, LOS ANGELES AND ORANGE COUNTIES**, 2007.
On loan from Zach and Phyllis Smith.
30. **LIBRARY CHECKOUT SLIP INSIDE NONSENSE AND HAPPINESS**,
by Peter Handke and translated by Michael Roloff, 1976.
31. **HANDWRITTEN LETTER AND STAMPED ENVELOPE**, 1995.
On loan from Richard Cho.
32. **ROTARY PHONE**. On loan from Jennifer Stout.
33. **ASSORTED CDS, DVDS, CASSETTES, AND COMPUTER DISCS**.
On loan from Richard Cho.