

PURPLE LINKS

by MATTHIS FRICKHOEFFER

Every hour a new lifetime amount of content is uploaded to the internet.

The art critic Dean Kissick writes, “Some of my favorite stories I’ve read over the past few years have been published by Patrick McGraw’s *Heavy Traffic* magazine.” I don’t care about the stories – I only care about one. And it’s less the story than the person who wrote it. The second issue of *Heavy Traffic* has instead of a cover a few paragraphs printed on the front wrapper. It reads:

You have to be at least 21 to get a license to open carry in Texas so I became 21. I live in Kirbyville, Texas and this is my true life. Kirbyville has a population of 2,000 and was placed on the border with Louisiana. I was born here but I won’t die here because I’ll die somewhere in Broward County, Florida. I’ve driven to Florida and back three times in the last two years. My name is Buddy Mold.

I sat in my apartment in Hamburg and hoped Buddy Mold was real. I hoped that he’s in Kirbyville, that this piece was autobiographic, but it’s not. I’m a literature theorist and I care for these things. I care for the autobiographical project, the idea that writing can reflect an author’s experience – and I care for the opposite, the assumption that one could write something unlinked to one’s own intertext.

Buddy Mold is a fictional character by Marcus Mamourian. And as it states further in the Kissick interview with McGraw it was published postmortem. Marcus Mamourian passed away in early 2022. The magazine was published early 2023, the Kissick piece around the same time.

On August 14, 2022, at 7:04 PM User-1739726019651910028 asked in the Goodreads forum: “My friend passed away but their account was set to private. Is there anyway [sic.] to override this setting so I can read his reviews? His name was Marcus Mamourian, and this was his account”, followed by a link to a private account with 615 ratings and 75 reviews. I have a screenshot of this post in my notes app.

I am trying to reconstruct how I found out about Mamourian. The above-mentioned interview with McGraw already includes Mamourian’s death, so I was aware of it from the beginning. I read the paragraph about Buddy Mold’s passing and then discovered the death of the author.

So, I am googling Marcus Mamourian as I am writing this. The autofill-in gives me two additional key words – Marcus Mamourian Accident, Marcus Mamourian Obituary. I’ll open *Accident* – I’ve seen this page before. Three headlines:

Addison Independent: Penn. man in car strikes tree near Lake Dunmore.

essays | 101

Vraim Funeral Home: Marcus Mamourian Obituary | May 16, 2022.

Goodreads: My friend passed away but their account was set to private.

I read the first article. This Marcus is from Pennsylvania, he hit a tree in 2019, but he survived. He is my age. The second link, the obituary, is the Marcus I've been looking for. I remember this from the first time I searched for him. There's a picture of him and a description of his life. He went to Brown and Dartmouth, studied Comp. Lit. and German. He even spent a research stay in Berlin. I don't know why I expected him to be of the same age as me. Maybe it's just because of the German connection. But as I'm reading his accomplishments, I question how old he was. After college he went into academia, and it seems like he got accepted into Duke for law school, but this never happened by how I can interpret the obituary.

He adored his sisters, taking great pleasure in their happiness, and he was deeply honored to recently become the Godfather to his nephew, Nazareth Mamourian Thompson. He was extraordinarily well read, loved French film, rare books, his 20-year-old Ford Ranger truck, and nature.

At the end of the website are two links, one sends flowers to the family, the other one plants a tree. One tree costs \$39.95, you can get a reduced prize if you buy three, five, ten, twenty-five or fifty trees as a grove. I can't tell where the trees are planted nor can I choose the species, but it says the funeral home works with Ponderosa Pine, Red Spruce, Long Leaf Pine, Jack Pine, White Bark Pine and Thornscrub White Oak. 43 trees were planted in the memory of Marcus Mamourian.

Every tree purchase is listed with the person's condolences. It's pretty sad reading through them and it's the first time

in this research I feel uncomfortable - so I stop and only skim the names to see if one is familiar to me. It feels like a breach of privacy to have these condolences publicly accessible, to be read from everywhere at any time. I can't tell why I care so much. Researching a stranger online feels like an intimate act, like a pure experience. Maybe it's the curated-ness of the internet, of the artifacts I look at, that makes it real to me - realer than real. I can have this truly to myself. Mamourian is dead and I can choose how I remember him, even if I have no actual memory.

Right before I'm about to close the website and go back to the search results, I see a black button which says *turn music on*. The button is under his picture, right next to the share button for Twitter, Facebook and email. Maybe I'm not often enough on funeral home websites, but none of this is what I expected. In fact, I missed every funeral from every death in my family so far. My sister and I sometimes joke that she goes to the funerals, and I go to the weddings. The music is a piano piece by the O'Neill Brothers. My initial thought was that this would link to Marcus' radio show - but it makes sense that it doesn't.

I believe the reason why I'm looking into all this is that I see Mamourian's writing as truly *online*, as truly contemporary; it's not just the style and content but the mode of its production itself. What it means to be online as a mode of existence - a reflection.

I've studied German Literature by now for eight years. But in the last years I got more into comparative approaches, looking at literature across language borders. That's the online discourse anyways - it's connected, cultural hegemony.

So, I got into reading the aforementioned *Heavy Traffic* Mag., because I was looking for this aesthetic, for the online experience. People socialized on twitter getting into prose. Posting vs. writing. But

Mamourian did this way earlier. A lot of the *online* discourse in literature got accelerated through Covid. But I find these motifs and *sujets* by Mamourian way earlier. There's a poem he wrote together with Alec Mapes-Frances for the *College Hill Independent*, some New England Alt Lit Mag., published in 2016. It's called "Cease N. Desist" and looks like a collage of different headlines, links and hypertexts. It was hard to find, the actual piece as an image file because of the odd formatting. Google did not read it as text for my search request and therefore did not recommend it. I read the piece as a stream of consciousness but not in a 1929-Berlin-Alexanderplatz-Döblin kind of way but as truly contemporary; again, as a representation of being online. All the fragments resemble a state of mind. I never googled the other author Mapes-Frances. I don't care for him right now.

So, what is online writing besides a set of aesthetics and motifs derived from posting? It's saying *this text is part of something bigger*, it says *the online/offline distinction is over*, Baudrillard was right - it says *I don't care if you don't know the references, if you don't get it, because it's time-based anyway, it's based. It's frantic, it's chopped*. Online writing means: We're strangers to ourselves - *etrangers il nous-memes*.

Since everything is stored, I can search my phone to figure out when I first read about Mamourian. I find the following chat history from the 17th of January 2024:

7:38 you saw the cover of issue 2?

yes, that's the one i wanna read 7:38

7:44 the text is called buddy mold by Marcus Mamourian

 ty i'll do some digging 7:49

7:53 i found zero

7:54 keep me updated

nothing- makes sense it would only be available where it's published haha 8:11

did find his obituary :(8:11

8:30 yo what?

8:30 u sure its him?

I am confused about the time stamps. Maybe the chat history got messed up in between sim cards and time-zones, but the person I was writing to was in Boston, six hours behind my timezone in Hamburg. And I was not looking at this in the morning either, or was I? I thought I knew longer about Mamourian. I know I thought about him for a long time.

Mamourian wrote: "I flew from JFK to CDG and stayed at an Airbnb that I think was in the 13th but I won't check because I'd have to read old emails and I never read old emails out of principle. [...] Paris, it seemed to me, was just like any other place, only maybe prettier. [...] Nothing anywhere really ever changes. Everywhere you go, there you are." It's finally autobiographical - no more Buddy Mold. In this piece Mamourian briefly describes going to this one club as an 18-year-old first time visiting Paris. The club is on a boat on the Seine. I was there in 2022. I'm certain it's the same. But more importantly does Mamourian later write it was 2014. We are/were actually the same age, born in 1996. I had a feeling. The confirmation makes it even more sad. I am now 28, two years older than he will ever be.

Scrolling down the Google search result list again, I find another Marcus Mamourian buried at the same funeral home. I'll call him *Marc*. Marc was buried on the 24th of March 2020. He was 102 years old. His parents were Armenian immigrants. He lived most his live in Philadelphia, he was sent to Europe in WWII. Seven trees were planted in his name.

His funeral service is also included on page 11 in the quarterly published newsletter *Looyoys* of the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church. There's a pdf of it called HTAC-Looyoys-Spring-2020.pdf - most of it is about the church and Covid. I can't tell if Marc was a regular here, his name is not listed on the members' birthdays page in the issues before his passing. On page 25 and 26 is a quiz to *Discover your spiritual gifts*. You answer twenty-one questions and then get assigned one of the following: prophecy,

servicing, teaching, showing mercy, encouraging, giving or leading. I wonder if I can take the test online.

On the second page of Google results I find a website stating: New Scholarship Established in Memory of Marcus Mamourian. This is *my* Marcus again. His parents founded a scholarship in his name to support students preparing for priesthood at St. Nersess Seminary. But the more relevant part is the description of his life. He was born in New Hampshire, which makes sense with what I've read before and his connection to the Manhattan literary scene. However, his parents are active members of the St. Sahag and Mesrob Armenian Church in Wynnewood, PA, which is only a 30 min. drive from the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church in Cheltenham, PA, of the old Marc.

I ask Chat-GPT who Marcus Mamourian was. I get a random text about some Mamourian who was some sort of CEO. I specify I mean the Marcus Mamourian from New Hampshire who died in 2023. Chat-GPT says "Marcus Mamourian from New Hampshire was a 35-year-old man who passed away unexpectedly on February 17, 2023 [...] He lived in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and had a significant impact on those around him." The rest read like a generic obituary. I am confused and annoyed. Where does the 35-years come from, what about Portsmouth? I don't know if this is fact or fiction and I cannot test it. But I realize I gave the algorithm the wrong year - Marcus Mamourian already died in 2022. I'll correct the date and ask again but I only get in return: "It seems there might be some confusion regarding the name and details of the individual you're asking about. The name *Marcus Mamourian* does not appear to widely correspond with any publicly documented figure from New Hampshire who passed away in 2022." This makes me think that Portsmouth-Marcus might be real (?). I close Chat-GPT, it was a bad idea to start asking.

On the first page of the Google search for *Marcus Mamourian Accident* it says that there are ca. 591 hits in the search engine. I don't know why it's a precise number but phrased with uncertainty. It took Google 0,21 seconds to find these pages. F5. Still 591 hits but the time got faster: 0,18sec. F5. 591 in 0,17. All the links are purple.

"In the early morning hours of September 5th, 2006, before the sun came up, Facebook, [...] changed from an interactive library of individual profiles to a customized, algorithmically curated fluid space," writes Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman. "It's called the News Feed, and our relationship with the Internet and with each other was changed forever." This marks the shift away from chronology to what we now understand as the for-you-pagification of all things online - the end of history.

My Google results are *my* Google results. I cannot sort them; they are chosen based on my browsing habits. Newsfeed meant alienation and the disruption of the communal aspects of *social* media. With this implementation we were for the first time alone in the online, everybody on their own.

There is a piece touching on this which I can vividly remember reading when it came out 5 years ago. Half theory and half metaphor, Yancey Strickler argues that the internet nowadays is like a forest at night: it's quiet and one cannot see far. Wandering alone in the dark forest feels like there is nothing out there because of the absolute silence. Nothing moves, nothing makes a sound. But we know that the forest is full of life. All the life is in hiding from predators - and the metaphor continues that the rise of trolling, tracking, and ads pushes the online users away from the mainstream, away from the open platforms and newsfeeds, into private communities, niches subcultures, small hiding places - so nobody can reach them, see them, hear them, like the life in the dark forest.

I got his piece via email - that's why it stuck with me. The email is intrinsically part of his argument, as he wrote: "This theory is being shared on a private channel sent to 500 people who I know or who have explicitly chosen to receive it. This is the online environment in which I feel most secure. Where I can be my most *real self*." I have this saved in a folder on my email program. Yancey says he can be his truest self online and I assume that the years of lockdown and alienation that followed this email did not change, rather intensified, this feeling - as for most of us.

Now writing this down I wonder who the other 499 bcc'ed were. Five hundred is probably an estimate. I don't believe he actually selected a specific number of receivers rather than that the stated 500 were just his newsletter subscribers like me. Maybe Mamourian was one of them - I'll never know. This is somewhat like the internet-*theorycel*-version of Shellac's *Futurist* album from 1997. The band released 799 copies of the record to 799 selected friends of the three band members. The cover artwork is just a list of all 799 names. It was never commercially available. If you were one of the 799, they circled your name on the LP-cover and gave it to you. When Steve Albini, Shellac's guitarist, died earlier this year this record surfaced on my newsfeed. I think about it as an *almanac of cool people*. I only recognize three or four of these names, and I only know one of them personally.

Mamourian wrote a piece called *Bomb Vest* for the zine *SURFACES*. There is no publication date online, the first sentence reads: "I am now going to disappear and there will be nothing left of me." Followed by an essay on film and nihilism. He writes on the *desire of disappearing in the modern world* visualized by contemporary directors. All the discussed films are on suicide and the leaving of remains/tracks/relics to be remembered by. The last paragraph concludes:

It's nearly impossible to leave without a trace. But we can try. Disappearing is not escaping, it is not about leaving with the possibility of returning at some later time. Disappearing is a Kantian absolute – it's forever. It's more than death, because it refuses any possibility of resurrection, Christian or otherwise. The excess of pure disappearance is its own divinity.

But is he disappearing? Will it become harder and harder to find his traces online, until his writings are buried in the search results? In the dark woodwork of the algorithm, overgrown where no light ever goes?

One of the editors of Mamourian's work wrote: "After Marcus' death, friends from all periods in his life started compiling a bunch of his work in a Dropbox folder: fiction, poetry, art, theory, radio shows. Stuff he'd produced and shared with friends from like 2015 to 2022. I hope that that other work can be shared publicly, too, some day." I think about this Dropbox a lot. But I don't need to know what's in there – its very existence is enough. I don't care if more Mamourian will be publicly available. I support his concept of absolute disappearance, which also renders disappearing as a morale. Maybe it is an obligation.

One disappears in the dark forest, 43 trees to remember.

Another writer from the same discourse – and I believe the same social scene – is Honor Levy. I read somewhere something about a connection between Mamourian and Levy. I can't find it anymore, but I am certain that they knew of each other. Levy has a piece in her first book *My first Book* called *Internet Girl*. She writes about the same topics as Mamourian, with the same existential dread; alienated, online and confessional:

If you look up #RIP____ and you fill it in with your name and you see all those other people, all those dead people with your same name. Then you will forget about the questions Google can't answer. You will forget that you are the best. You will become little again. I have wanted for so long to be little. I prayed for it.

One can go to honor.baby/internetgirl and use the password *imsorry!* to read the whole piece. Afterwards I open twitter (now X) and check: #ripmarcus has 1000+ hits, #ripmatthis has zero.

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