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Waves Of Becoming: Radio As Posthuman Catalyst In Anthony Doerr's *All The Light We Cannot See*

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Abstract:

The paper aims to explore the role of radio as a posthuman catalyst in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, foregrounding how nonhuman technologies mediate identity, ethics, and relationality in wartime conditions. Drawing on posthumanist theories by Rosi Braidotti and N. Katherine Hayles, the paper argues that the radio functions not merely as a narrative device or technological artifact, but as an active agent within a distributed network of cognition, care, and resistance. Through its capacity to collapse temporal and spatial distances, the radio enables new modes of becoming that transcend the limitations of the human body and national ideology.

For the blind protagonist Marie-Laure, the radio acts as a prosthetic sensory extension, facilitating epistemological and affective access to the world. For Werner, an orphaned German boy enlisted into the Nazi war machine, radio transmissions disrupt ideological indoctrination and awaken a relational ethics rooted in empathy and shared vulnerability. The paper examines how sound waves and disembodied voices constitute a posthuman ecology of connection, challenging humanist binaries such as self/other, body/machine, and presence/absence. The radio is both a weapon of surveillance and a tool of subversion, revealing the ambivalent entanglements of human and nonhuman actors. In treating radio not simply as historical context but as a posthuman node of transformation, Doerr's novel reimagines resilience, memory, and moral responsibility in a technologically mediated world.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Radio technology, Anthony Doerr, Werner, Wartime communication, Nonhuman networks, Ethics of connectivity

In moments of crisis, technology often becomes an extension of the human will, amplifying both destruction and survival. Among such technologies, the radio emerges as a device that not only carries sound but also carries the weight of hope, memory, and resistance. In wartime narratives, especially those situated during the upheavals of the twentieth century, the radio acts as a powerful medium of connectivity, bridging physical distances, ideological divides, and personal isolation.

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* places the radio at the heart of its narrative, not simply as a backdrop to historical events, but as a living presence that intervenes in the lives of its characters in deeply transformative ways. Through the story of Marie-Laure, a blind French girl in Nazi-occupied Saint-Malo, and Werner, a gifted German boy whose technical skill with radios draws him into the Nazi war machine, Doerr explores the moral and emotional power of invisible waves and disembodied voices in shaping the course of human lives.

The paper takes a posthumanist approach to the novel, framing the radio as a nonhuman agent that reconfigures the boundaries between technology and subjectivity. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Rosi Braidotti and N. Katherine Hayles, the analysis resists traditional humanist readings of technology as merely instrumental or secondary to human agency. Instead, the radio in *All the Light We Cannot See* becomes a posthuman catalyst, an interface through which distributed cognition, ethical entanglement, and affective resonance unfold. The radio mediates not just sound but memory, identity, and ethical relation, fostering what Braidotti would call 'zoe-centric' modes of becoming beyond anthropocentric confines. "a zoe-centred way, requires a modicum of goodwill on the part of the dominant party, in this case anthropos himself, towards his non-human others" (Braidotti 88). By focusing on how the radio both empowers and destabilizes its users, functioning as a prosthetic extension, a transmitter of resistance, and a haunting echo across time, the paper argues that Doerr's novel offers a nuanced vision of technological co-agency and resilience in the face of human and planetary crisis.

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* is a deeply lyrical and intricately woven novel set against the backdrop of World War II. It follows the intersecting lives of two young protagonists: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl living in Paris and later in the walled city of Saint-Malo, and Werner Pfennig, a German orphan with a talent for engineering, particularly in building and repairing radios.

As Nazi occupation spreads across Europe, Marie-Laure and her father flee to Saint-Malo, carrying a potentially cursed diamond known as the Sea of Flames. Meanwhile, Werner is recruited into a brutal Nazi military school and eventually becomes part of a unit that tracks illegal radio transmissions across occupied territories. Through alternating chapters, the novel reveals how both children navigate the terrors of war and how their paths ultimately converge.

The novel emphasizes the inner lives of its characters, the sensory details of everyday survival, and the small, often overlooked acts of courage and connection. The radio becomes a recurring motif and a crucial lifeline, Marie-Laure uses it to broadcast resistance messages, while Werner is both captivated and haunted by transmissions from a mysterious French professor who once spoke of science and wonder. As

their worlds collide in the bombed-out ruins of Saint-Malo, the novel meditates on themes of memory, morality, perception, and the invisible forces, both human and nonhuman, that shape existence during times of catastrophe.

> The action happens primarily in Paris and Saint-Malo, France, and Germany. As the war intensifies, Werner's paths cross in Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure has taken refuge. Werner is sent to the town to track down a radio broadcast that he believes is being transmitted from the location. Meanwhile, Marie-Laure hides in the city, trying to escape the Nazi occupation. (M. SRUTHI SRIEE, Dr. M. KANNADHASAN a3)

The radio, as a medium of sound transmission across invisible frequencies, emerged in the early twentieth century as one of the most revolutionary communication technologies of the modern era. During the interwar and World War II periods, it became a crucial tool for broadcasting news, propaganda, music, and scientific knowledge. Its ability to transcend national borders and reach both urban and remote populations gave it unprecedented cultural and political power. Unlike written or visual media, the radio operates through disembodied voice and auditory experience, fostering intimate, affective connections between speaker and listener across vast distances. It became not only a political instrument but also a domestic presence, entering homes, shelters, and battlefields as both a comfort and a weapon.

> Cheap radios were also important for the war effort in Britain, although for different reasons. Thanks to records such as rationing stamps and unusual wartime recipes, many of us are aware of food shortages across the UK during the Second World War. However, the stress of war meant that supplies were short for everything—including the parts used to make radio receivers. (Television and radio in the Second World War)

In literary and cultural contexts, the radio represents more than a historical artifact; it serves as a metaphor for invisible influence, transmission of ideas, and sensory augmentation. In the novel, the radio is central to both the narrative structure and the characters' development. It enables cross-border communication, serves as a tool of resistance, and shapes ethical consciousness in ways that blur the boundaries between human and machine. From a posthumanist perspective, the radio can be read as a nonhuman actor, a technological agent embedded in a network of relationality, cognition, and affect. Its presence in the novel is not passive but catalytic, activating new modes of perception, memory, and identity for the characters who interact with it.

Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism emphasizes becoming, relational subjectivity, and the zoe-centric reconfiguration of life beyond anthropocentric and individualistic models. For Braidotti, the posthuman subject is a 'relational assemblage', entangled with nonhuman actors, technologies, environments, and other species. In *All the Light We Cannot See*, the radio allows subjects like Marie-Laure and Werner to enter into transversal connections across space, time, and ideology. The act of listening of receiving disembodied voices, enacts a form of ethical becoming, where subjectivity is shaped not by autonomous

agency but by openness to the other. The radio thus participates in Braidotti's idea of affirmative ethics, offering a way of sustaining life, empathy, and resistance amidst catastrophe.

N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), critiques the notion of the liberal humanist subject and advances the idea of distributed cognition, where thought and perception are not confined to individual minds but extended through networks of human and nonhuman agents—including machines. She argues that intelligent systems, such as computers or communication devices, challenge the mind/body dualism and blur the boundary between organism and machine. "the distributed cognition of the emergent human subject corre lates with-in Bateson's phrase, becomes a metaphor for-the distributed cognitive system as a whole, in which "thinking" is done by both human and nonhuman actors" (Hayles 290).

Hayles' theory invites us to read the radio not as a neutral medium but as an active cognitive apparatus, a partner in meaning-making and ethical orientation. Werner's expertise with radio circuits and his internal moral struggle shows how his thinking and identity are co-constructed with the machine. The radio becomes a technological prosthesis that stores memory (the voice of the French professor), mediates knowledge, and influences decision-making. For Marie-Laure, the radio operates as a sensory extension, reinforcing Hayles' argument that embodiment can be technologically mediated in ways that expand rather than limit human capacity. Werner Pfennig's fascination with the radio is one of the most defining aspects of his character in *All the Light We Cannot See*.

As a young orphan living in the impoverished coal-mining town of Zollverein, Werner encounters a broken radio and teaches himself how to fix it. This moment is not merely a plot point; it is the beginning of a profound, transformative relationship between Werner and technology, one that will shape his identity, future, and moral trajectory.

The radio becomes, for Werner, not only a machine but a medium of wonder, knowledge, and escape. Through it, he accesses the distant, poetic voice of a French professor who speaks of science, nature, and the unseen world, planting in Werner an early sensitivity to the invisible forces that structure both life and ethics. "Werner is driven by a deep-seated desperation to escape his circumstances and forge a better future for himself. His desperation is fuelled by his passion for science and technology, which he sees as a means of transcending his humble origins and achieving greatness" (M. SRUTHI SRIEE, Dr. M. KANNADHASAN a4).

Werner's love for the radio signifies a deeper entanglement between human and nonhuman agency. His cognitive development is not independent but distributed, formed in conjunction with wires, frequencies, and signals. The radio is not just an object he repairs; it is a partner in his becoming. This relationship resists the humanist idea of technology as a passive tool, positioning the radio as an active agent in Werner's epistemological and emotional growth. Even as he is later co-opted into the Nazi regime's use of radio for surveillance and violence, Werner's ethical struggle reflects a deeper ambivalence about the medium he loves. His longing to return to the innocence and wonder of those first transmissions

from the French voice underscores his enduring belief in the radio's potential as a force of connection rather than domination.

> The radio purrs and the woman laughs and Herr Siedler looks almost nothing, Werner decides like his neighbors, their guarded, anxious faces – faces of people accustomed to watching loved ones disappear every morning into pits. His face is clean and committed; he is man supremely confident in his privileges… "Good with tools," Herr Siedler is saying. "Smart beyond your years. There are places for a boy like you. General Heissmeyer's schools. Best of the best. Teach the mechanical sciences too. Code breaking, rocket propulsion, all the latest." Werner does not know where to set his gaze. "We do not have money" (Doerr 84)

For Marie-Laure LeBlanc, the radio is not merely a tool of communication but a vital extension of perception, agency, and resistance. Blind since the age of six, Marie-Laure navigates the world through heightened auditory and tactile senses; the radio thus becomes a crucial sensory interface, an invisible thread that connects her to distant voices, knowledge, and the possibility of survival.

In the attic of her great-uncle Etienne's house in Saint-Malo, Marie-Laure uses the radio to transmit coded messages to the French resistance, transforming a domestic object into a weapon of subversion against occupying Nazi forces. The same attic once served as the broadcasting space for her grandfather's science programs, and by occupying that space, Marie-Laure inherits a lineage of sonic resistance, transforming passive listening into active, life-sustaining communication.

Her use of the radio exemplifies how technological embodiment can enable agency beyond physical or sensory limitations. Her relationship with the radio illustrates technologically mediated resilience, wherein the machine does not merely assist the human subject but co-produces her experience of the world. The act of transmitting and receiving signals becomes a means of participating in an invisible ecological and ethical network, affirming life and solidarity even amidst violence and siege.

Unlike Werner's conflicted relationship with the radio, Marie-Laure's engagement is ethically grounded from the beginning, positioning her as a node of care, resistance, and relational becoming. In her hands, the radio becomes more than a wartime instrument, it becomes a conduit of presence, a prosthetic of empowerment, and a bridge across the light we cannot see.

Anthony Doerr has described his fascination with radios as stemming from their capacity to transmit voices invisibly across space, a phenomenon that struck him as 'magical'. In interviews, he notes that part of the novel's genesis came from contemplating how two people, separated by vast distance, could connect with one another through something they cannot see. This led him to think of radio waves as a powerful metaphor for invisible interconnectedness, an idea he beautifully weaves into the lives of Marie-Laure and Werner.

The radio becomes a device of wonder, a way to resist despair during wartime. He deliberately emphasizes the fragility and hope embedded in those transmissions, often describing the radio as a beacon, a lifeline, or even a form of spiritual persistence. The science programs Marie-Laure and Werner listen to are filled with awe and curiosity, signaling a worldview based not on fear or ideology, but on shared human yearning for knowledge and connection. By portraying radios as both tender and dangerous, connective and destructive, Doerr presents technology as part of the ethical and emotional fabric of human life, not something external to it.

Future scope of reseacrh could explore the role of sonic technologies like radio in other wartime or post-crisis narratives. Comparative studies may examine how nonhuman communication systems shape ethics, memory, and resistance across cultures. Further inquiry into assistive technologies in literature could deepen our understanding of embodied cognition. Expanding this framework to digital media may reveal continuities between historical and contemporary techno-human entanglements.

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