Datamining Desire: Short-Circuits in the Libidinal Economy

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> To be seen is the ambition of ghosts, and to be remembered is the ambition of the dead.
> – Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

When confronted with a sense of internal chaos, one makes attempts to control the external world; when external chaos rules, grasping for internal control becomes a kind of compulsion, a ritual, a refuge. Crisis feels eternal because we are governed by it. Psychoanalytic thinkers have described how unceasing crisis has become the unreality of a public managed by a form of power manifest in the total synthesis of politics and spectacle.[2] As a result, subjectivity is shaped in a well of entangled and accelerating crises that reinforce individual and collective powerlessness at every turn.

We are trapped in the echo of collapsing democracy – a crisis rooted in a more fundamental crisis at the level of the symbolic order. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described the realm of language, intersubjective relations, meaning creation, and law as the symbolic order – it is here that we encounter the other, normativity, and ideological convention.[3] Since the 1980s, public institutions in the West – structures that have historically worked to varying degrees to produce and sustain social ties – have been in a state of decay. This decay has seeded a new regime of technocratic power and austerity that leaves public infrastructure and services underfunded, the welfare state in persistent deterioration, and workers precarious – their futures undermined by enormous amounts of debt. As Isabell Lorey declares,

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo, The Portable Nietzsche* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 1977), 660.

2 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (NY: Warner Books, 1979), 147.

3 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (NY: Norton, 2002), 83.

we are currently experiencing a "return of mass vulnerability" – navigating an accelerated and abject existence that offers no relief from itself.[4]

To compensate for this sense of acute vulnerability, subjects retreat inward, investing libido in self-objects and withdrawing from the other – the other being the realm of the not-I, "the others," those we encounter in social life. Chronic uncertainty, rapid change, and precarity produce libidinal fields based on energy conservation. In survival, we protect, safeguard, and hoard our energy.

Our condition is not unlike that of a child growing up in an alcoholic home: navigating continued uncertainty, the child is never quite sure what treatment they will receive from parental figures. They make themselves small and self-sufficient. They learn to entertain themselves and stay out of the way. They become skilled thermometers of mood shifts and, in their helplessness, withdraw from the world of the other (primarily parental caregivers in this case) to live in fantasy worlds of their creation.

Most painfully, the narcissism of young children causes them to blame themselves for the tension and chaos in their environment as they stand unable to grasp the complexity of relationships and demands that besiege their overwhelmed or distracted parents. Sensing a problem, the child lives in tension but lacks a concept of its origin. A young child lives in a one-to-one relationship with the world – everything that happens is happening because of me, for me and to me. Unsure of a tension's origin, the child makes themself the problem – they must be upset because of something I did, it must be something inherently wrong with me that causes mom to drink. At this point, it becomes far less painful to live in a realm of fantasy than in the world of others.

Steeped in the confusing and ceaseless chaos of social, environmental and political crisis, we retreat inward. Once we grow bored, overwhelmed or intolerant of the doom and gloom, we escape into fantasy – entrepreneurial fantasies, fantasies of fame, fantasies of omnipotence.

The crisis at hand is multifaceted. In what follows, we will turn to OnlyFans, pandemic life, Moshfegh and Houellebecq to witness its multiple fronts. We will try to understand how declining symbolic efficiency reduces our capacity to desire and isolates us in repetitions of the drive. We will observe how drive is instrumentalised towards capital's aims and the impression this leaves on the human spirit. From there, we will survey the psychological patterns this system rewards and sustains, to then turn our attention towards the pathway back to desire, towards object-love, towards reintegration of the symbolic.

4 Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London: Verso, 2015), 53.

New intrusions

On the external level, crises of capitalism are revealing limits of expropriation. These limits are mirrored by internal crises of psychic oversaturation and exploited drive. The machinations of techno-capitalism tend to datamine processes of desiring to gain information to support the development of technologies to exploit human energy called drive. Subjects can sense their desire predated upon, seduced, and mined for its value. All around, capital's machinations wring natural resources like water, minerals, oil, and attention for profit. This is possible only by breaching boundaries. When capital accumulation meets a limit, it surpasses it by breaching boundaries – attempting to privatise and monetise new expanses and aspects of external and internal space. To seduce participation for these new internal extractions, subjects are promised convenience and entertainment in exchange for their attention and data. This process of seducing attention and datamining desire leave the subject in a state of dissonance – feeling at once overstimulated and empty, catered to but alone. Desire is simultaneously stimulated, solicited and extinguished.

On the material plane, subjects of late capitalism are left without ground to stand on as systems of collective safeguarding have crumbled and wages have stagnated since the 1970s. This hollowing out of protective systems and precariatisation leaves large swaths of the population defenceless – accidents, illness, or unemployment swiftly disintegrate one's remnant economic security.[5] Poverty haunts and compels workers to take on increasingly precarious jobs.[6] Precarity involves a kind of endless navigation of crises – supply chains, viral infection, and social distrust. These conditions demoralise the human spirit and fray social bonds by heightening avoidance, competition and nihilism, and incentivising escapism and numbness.

I'm so tired, I've been desiring all day!

Why is desire so tired? There is an excess of signs. Franco Berardi explains that we live in conditions of semiotic inflation: "when more and more signs are buying less and less meaning."[7] Semiotic inflation constitutes an engulfing aspect of cultural capitalism that absorbs and instrumentalises our despair and, in return, offers intoxicating, fatalistic modes of forgetting.[8] This form of libidinal organisation ex-

5 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Black & Red: Oakland, 2010), 114.

6 J. Benach et al., "Precarious Employment: Understanding an Emerging Social Determinant of Health," *Annual Review of Public Health* 35, no. 1 (2014).

7 Franco Berardi, *And. Phenomenology of the End. Cognition and Sensibility in the Transition from Conjunctive to Connective Mode of Social Communication* (Helsinki: Aalto ARTS Books, 2014), 95–96.

8 Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 156.

hausts desire because it keeps the mind so busy, so full of untethered meaning – meaning without symbolic grounding. Unsupported by collective symbolic systems of meaning, the subject is compelled to swim through a sea of signs, operating as a deterritorialised "debtor-addict" subject – what Mark Fisher describes as a node of consumer power, an object of biopolitical control, and a source of attentional and libidinal energy.[9] As debtor-addict subjects, we experience the world as paradoxically boring yet exhausting, overly controlled yet chaotic.

Byung-Chul Han adds the dimension of competition to this formulation. He identifies the dominant structure of subjectivity emerging in these conditions as the achievement subject.[10] Fixated by markers of individual success, the achievement subject carves out a piece of reality for herself and holds fast to controlling it. This can look like ambition aimed at climbing the corporate ladder, growing one's "influence" online, or striving to some evolved state of perfect "wellness." The coordinates of the achievement subject's desire are highly attuned to predetermined nodes in the consumer market. This makes the charge of drive easy to exploit.

Similar to the subject whose interface with the other takes on painful qualities and opts to live instead in a world of fantasy and daydreams, the achievement subject experiences a retraction of the libido into self-objects. The achievement subject will forgo meaningful relationships with the other in favour of a narcissistic withdrawal into a fantasy of self-empowerment. She compensates for a world whose narratives of progress are failing by scripting a fantasy of progress, growth and improvement of the self.

The achievement subject is voracious in her relationship to the world – everything stands as a potential tool for self-maximisation and expression. Lacking connection to a longstanding, collective narrative, she inhabits a decentralised narrative ephemera. This subject's scale of time is condensed, warped, and narrowed – she inhabits moments, jumping from image to image, dissociating from history. For her, meaning shifts rapidly – the symbolic terrain is unstable, full of terrible history. She is driven by a pursuit of novelty.

The symbolic exists as a recording of history. It is a collection of stored memory, populated by language, ritual, and tradition. With the decline of symbolic efficiency, subjects are severed from longer time scales – detached from practices and myths that carry a sense of duration and collective meaning. Without symbolic rooting, the achievement subject is severed from meaning-production as a historical process – a captive of a dislocated present. Here, her value lies in her ability to adhere to a disposition of flexibility, nomadism, and competition, limiting her engagement with a world that is symbolically mediated.

9 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (NY: Zero Books, 2009), 25.

10 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015), 8.

Technocratic governance dismantles symbolic modes of relating with its promise of liberalisation – it insists with its promise to free the human from dependence on governmental control.[11] Technocracy implies we are governed not by fallible systems of human judgement but by infallible directives calculated by scientific measures. The technocratic experiment has, however, functioned to undermine the symbolic dimension implicit in human decision-making. Symbolic modes of relation require commitment, sincerity, narrative continuity, and communication that exceed the instrumental aims of everyday exchange relations.

Subjects grieve the loss of symbolic identity by taking refuge in imaginary identities – fluctuating, hybrid, transient, and virtual modes of identification.[12] Digital space integrates these new identities into its circuitry of drive and capital quite efficiently. It is at this point that the libidinal economy starts to short-circuit. Virtual space eliminates the negativity through which the symbolic field is forged by circumventing the reality of the other. In digital space, subjects attempt to individuate and connect in a realm generated without negativity, of pure information, but fail. In the excess of self-referential exploration, the subject encounters a crisis of desire.

Lack of lack and its consequences

Lacanian psychoanalysis differentiates between desire and drive. Desire can never be fulfilled; it searches endlessly for a sense of jouissance that can never be attained.[13] Lacan explains that desire is always a desire *to desire*. And yet, this is precisely what moves it – its sense of lack and its continual invitation to find new objects to desire. Alternatively, drive attains jouissance through the repetitive process of never reaching it – drive's failure is its success. It runs in a loop. The satisfaction of drive is derived from its repetition. It is in this way that drive *captures* the subject.

The movement of drive is endlessly compatible with capital's imperative of continuous growth. We are always caught in the ceaseless repetition of drive. Now we navigate digital fields designed to make a profit on every microcosmic flicker of its trace. We are confronted with a psychologically sophisticated infrastructure designed and implemented to organise and direct the flows of human energy called drive.

The fullness of digital capture – the vastness and effectiveness of personalised entertainment – tries to remove and distract from lack with the promise that lack

11 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 28.

12 Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of the Drive* (Malden: Polity Press, 2010).

13 Dean, *Blog Theory*, 40.

can be avoided. This system threatens desire because lack, with its emptiness, exists as the creative void through which desire can emerge. Caught in the repetitions of drive, our relation to the other is reduced in its intensity, complexity and closeness. The circuitry of drive in digital space functions through attachment to self-objects. It is as though the libidinal circuitry of the achievement subject remains partially caught in Lacan's mirror stage – trapped in a space of preoccupation with one's own reflection, generating little interest in the other.

The enterprise of influence

Digital space dominates libidinal flows. In the shift from an industrial economy of manual labour to one of self-enterprise and cognitive labour, desire's object of investment becomes not simply economical but also psychological. The market smoothly absorbs desire's imaginal identifications and embraces the rapid and memetic (repetitious) qualities they confer on production.[14] Here, in the height of self-branding, the digital medium, a field of projection, invites the subject to transform herself into a project – an efficient, attractive enterprise of influence. Here, her libidinal investments follow the flows of the market, making the line that delineates her own desire from the desire of production increasingly difficult to decipher.[15]

As our desire aims more and more towards commodities, towards the self as commodity, the social-symbolic fabric loses its grasp on libidinal flows. As relationships organise around the principles of competition, we begin to divest from symbolic objects and overinvest in self-objects that support the self as an enterprise.[16]

Competition, Berardi writes, implies a "risky narcissistic stimulation" – it carries a mythos that reads, "few are chosen, one's individual initiative is the measure of your person."[17] The competitive schema reduces social reality to a stage of performative calculus, effectively flattening relationships to resemble fragmented and thin exchanges of influence. Narcissistic stimulation implies an abandonment of the other and an attitude of betrayal and indifference – it is a process that sacrifices love.[18] At its roots, a narcissistic social structure proves paranoid and deeply insecure. It operates as a libidinal system short-circuiting on its lack of resonance, its excess of positive charge. Suffering from an entanglement of existential insecurity

14 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 78.

15 Berardi, 24.

16 Berardi, 80.

17 Berardi, 99.

18 Love in the sense of Freud's mature, object-love. See Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, trans. James Stratchey, (NY: Norton, 1989), 553.

and economic precarity, Berardi affirms that the principles of a competitive society reduce the collective dimension of human life to a "skeleton of fear and necessity."[19] From within this fearful vision, the achievement subject over-functions, hyper-invests in self-objects to compensate for a lack of symbolic resonance, burning out on fears of rejection and death.

These conditions initiate and demand a state of forgetfulness – they disincentivise contemplation and curiosity by sustaining an aura of hurried distraction. In delineating the West's transition from a disciplinary society to an achievement society, Byung-Chul Han describes the subject of the latter as ruthlessly turning against himself, exhausted and disgusted with having to become himself.[20] This transition involves a collective movement from a superego that instils manifold "should-nots" to a permissive superego (disguised as the absence of one), demanding innumerable "shoulds and cans" – a superego that regiments enjoyment. Han describes the shift from a "disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks and factories" to a "society of fitness, studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories"[21] where salvation is found in the perfection of one's body and the achievements of one's mind.[22]

These systems produce different spiritual crises. Where the obedience subject of a repressive era suffers from a crisis of inauthenticity (how, in one's conformity, does the spirit assert its authentic desire?), the achievement subject suffers a crisis of engulfment (there is never enough time to do all the things I want to do). The crisis confronting the achievement subject is concocted as capital's imperative towards continuous growth seeps into the very structure of one's being. The symptoms of this crisis are well documented – burnout, depression, addiction, difficulties sustaining attention – experiences shaped by a lost relationship to the creativity of desiring-production. Capital's insistence on unceasing growth is fundamentally hostile to the nervous systems and emotional reality of living beings.

Perform and obey

Even as principles of achievement dominate late capitalism's libidinal field, elements of a more repressive obedience society still linger in the libidinal economy of the 21st century. As such, the fears and pathology of both structures play an active role for the achievement subject. Where obedience delimits and represses desire, the achievement paradigm overcodes and paralyses it. Together, these forces create

19 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 133.

20 Han, *The Burnout Society*, 8.

21 Han, 8.

22 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 42.

an overwhelming need to *do* something, paired with an uncertainty about authentic action. Here, we oscillate between blindly striving and numbing out.

Christopher Lasch explains in his *Culture of Narcissism* that our transition into a permissive society supplants the parental superego with a harsh, punitive superego that, in the absence of social prohibitions, derives its psychic energy from the destructive, aggressive impulses within the id.[23] This new superego of compulsory enjoyment demands adherence to the rules of social intercourse but neglects to ground these rules in a transcendent moral code. Lasch sees this failure as encouraging self-absorption.[24] Han's demonstration of the achievement subjectivity echoes Lasch's analysis on this front – both describe a subject competing incessantly with oneself, becoming one's own judge and victim. This subject subscribes to a regime of excessive self-monitoring in the absence of objective morality.

Disciplining the nervous system

Lasch suspects that the "self" emerging in these conditions is plagued by a pervasive sense of inner emptiness.[25] He identifies the pathologies of this new self in anxiety, depression, grandiosity, and infantilism. Modern psychiatry might typify these attributes with schemas of "personality disorders," a label commonly prescribed by psychiatrists working with populations who attend addiction treatment programs. Lasch describes a swarm of lost souls navigating an increasingly hostile, complex, and unforgiving world, surviving on false pride and compensation. Rootless, groundless, disoriented, and lonely human beings are often the type who find themselves repetitively involved with substances – external objects that silence the internal noise. Addiction lies on the other side of achievement on the coin of competitive society. It is no coincidence that addictive repetitions are capital's preferred mode of accumulation. Addiction plays many roles in a competitive society – it soothes, sedates, enhances, and stimulates; it gives one an "edge" over their competitor; it compensates and distracts from a lack of meaning. For example, dependence on stimulants to attend to the demands of daily life functions as an invisible, normalised, collective practice. The use of sedatives to come down, numb, and forget is similarly accepted as an essential fixture in surviving the drudgery of late capitalism.

Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* gracefully denaturalises these conditions by pushing them to excess.[26] Moshfegh's unnamed 26-year-

23 Lasch, 40.

24 Lasch, 42.

25 Lasch, 42.

26 Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (NY: Penguin Press, 2019).

old cosmopolitan and artistically disillusioned protagonist responds to the achievement society's demands by foreclosing the possibility of achievement altogether. Sticking to a year of psychotropic-induced sleep and delirium, punctuated by quick trips to the corner store, she embraces abjection by disavowing productive existence and contemporary expectations. In her desire for self-annihilation and sleep, this protagonist embodies the unrecognised, fantasised desire for an end to striving for many. She is "taking some time off" from existence itself.

The secret desire Moshfegh's protagonist taps into – the desire to opt-out, refuse enjoyment, refuse self-promotion, refuse achievement subjectivity – is activated by a profound sense of alienation and rebellion. Moshfegh's protagonist finds comfort in refusal, finally asserting some agency. In choosing isolation and purposelessness, she avoids inevitable failures – collapsed ideals, dreams, and goals despite great effort and hard work.[27] By disentangling herself from the achievement paradigm, Moshfegh's protagonist seeks death but also aims for recalibration. Sleeping all day and night with few breaks, she reflects, "I was finally doing something that really mattered. Sleep felt productive … when I'd slept enough, I'd be okay. I'd be renewed, reborn."[28] This image recalls Jonathan Crary's idea that sleep exists as an "uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism" and thus remains a site of crisis in the global market as it cannot be colonised to produce anything of value (although sleep apps and pharmaceuticals are beginning to change that).[29]

Sleep is a rare opportunity where the achievement subject is not forced to consciously grapple with guilt. The guilt characteristic of an achievement society is not the same as existential guilt, derived from living in bad faith. Rather, this kind of guilt is an instrumentalised, neurotic form of guilt that fuels the performance principle. This neurotic form of guilt antagonises the process of desiring. Having nothing to do with symbolic law, neurotic guilt is precisely what kills desire.[30] Lacan considers guilt for the obsessional neurotic as fundamentally plagued by a crisis of desire.[31] Moshfegh's protagonist is specifically anti-achievement in that she does not see her self-imposed isolation as surrendering to the death drive or an escape from guilt; instead, it is a life-affirming project of self-preservation through hibernation – a recognition of human limitation and an attempt "to save [one's] own life."[32]

27 Moshfegh, *My Year*, 14.

28 Moshfegh, 51.

29 Jonathan Crary, *Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (NY: Verso, 2013), 10.

30 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious. July 2, 1958: You are the One You Hate*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (London: Karnac Books, 2002), 373.

31 Lacan, *Seminar V*.

32 Moshfegh, *My Year*, 7.

The crisis of the symbolic as a crisis of desire

While plenty has been written about individuals wishing to drop off the grid and escape the complexity of capitalist and digital life, Moshfegh's protagonist does not opt-out in search of enlightenment, symbolic restoration, or self-understanding.[33] Instead, she seeks the absolute destruction of her consciousness – a system of programmed drives and alienated aspirations. Submerged in a cocktail of benzodiazepines, tranquilisers, and hypnotics, Moshfegh's protagonist repeats watching the same few films on mute, orders excessive amounts of Chinese delivery and shops for lingerie online. In her attempts to stave off desire, its truth returns in strange symptoms: packages delivered to her door and confused voicemails responding to her winding, incoherent, emphatic voice messages. Moshfegh is clear: desire insists. Her protagonist's unsuccessful mission to erase herself resembles an attempt at symbolic death. This protagonist is not unlike Sophocles' Antigone, existing in the realm between two deaths.[34] Self-exile, disavowal of the erotic, pharmaceutical-induced sleep – Moshfegh's protagonist manufactures a system of symptoms that signal collapse at the level of the symbolic order.

The horror of deterritorialisation

The social field produced by deterritorialisation exists in a realm between two deaths. With disintegration of symbolic networks of kinship, we are exposed to the horror of living among each other without meaningful communication, social-symbolic identity or collective rites. Deterritorialisation is the process of unveiling or demystifying the aspects of existence that sustained an element of mystery or profundity in premodern and modern societies. We can think of this process as occurring in three stages – in three narcissistic injuries to human-centric ontologies. Freud himself recognised these consecutive insults to human narcissism in the Copernican revolution's decentring of the universe, Darwin's decentralisation of life in evolutionary biology, and, finally, in the decentring of thinking in his theory of the unconscious.[35]

The horror of deterritorialisation is witnessed in Michel Houellebecq's novel *Serotonin*.[36] Here, the narrator, Florent-Claude Labrouste, a depressed agricultural

33 For example, Tao Lin's *Leave Society* (2021) or John Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996).

34 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 170.

35 Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015), 86.

36 Michel Houellebecq, *Serotonin* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

scientist, spends his days mourning the "disappearance of the Western Libido,"[37] which is at once the loss of his desire and a loss occurring in a world stripped of its erotic quality, subsisting as a "neutral surface without relief or attraction."[38] Where Moshfegh's protagonist seeks an end to the tyranny of her desire, Houellebecq's narrator struggles to accept what he senses as the ultimate defeat of eros – desire's extinction by a fundamentally demystified and de-eroticised world.

Negotiating the forces of global capitalism, Labrouste exiles himself from society and drifts from Paris to rural France, bearing witness to the eruption of class conflict and enduring the plague of loneliness that engulfs him. Placated with manufactured neurotransmitters, Labrouste personifies a libidinal economy organised by the principles of nihilism. He sees his misery conditioned in a complex world populated by simple natures and spends the novel eulogising the lost fantasy of eros. Nostalgia for a more vital moment in time is a motif common to Houellebecq's work, but in *Serotonin*, he is most explicit: the West is suffering a collapse of the erotic, and this loss is directly related to foreclosed meaning-making systems that exist outside or beyond consumer capitalism.

Desiring misery

Various thinkers have attempted to express the contemporary experience in which human beings suffer the loss of a libidinal glue to hold us together at the level of meaning and affect. In his analysis of the capitalist libidinal economy, Bernard Stiegler refers to this state as one of "symbolic misery." Symbolic misery describes the annulment of singularity and the elimination of desire – a subjection of "existence to subsistence."[39] For Stiegler, the symbolic exists as a logical and semiotic horizon that conditions a circuit of sensibility, which is the principle process in unfolding individuation.[40] We can also think of symbolic misery as a collective experience of soullessness, drawing on Berardi's understanding of the soul as a container of affective and libidinal forces that "weave together a world of attentiveness: the ability to address, care and appeal to one another."[41]

This process appears frequently in Žižek's work on the decline of symbolic efficiency or what he sometimes describes as the crisis of the big Other.[42] The decline

37 Houellebecq, 286.

38 Houellebecq, 304.

39 Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 2: The Katastropē of the Sensible* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 119.

40 Stiegler, 31.

41 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 10.

42 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Do Not Know What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (NY: Verso, 1991).

of symbolic efficiency is a process through which meanings from cultural memory are extracted from social systems, commodified and projected through the logic of exchange as opaque fragments of humanity's lost relationship to higher orders of metaphysical, spiritual, and social significance. At the experiential level, this appears in the loss of ritual, ceremony, and rites-of-passage. Conditions of declining symbolic efficiency heighten doubt with regard to expressions of sincerity, belief, and desire. This doubt leads to apathy, which sustains a kind of denarrativised life, like that of Houellebecq's narrator, who is exhausted with having to live a life "deprived of reasons to live and reasons to die."[43] Without external realities to cast down meaning from beyond, the subject retreats inward, perhaps seeking psychotropic relief to avoid falling into a state of complete and abject despair.

The crisis of desire constitutive of both Moshfegh and Houellebecq's protagonists is a function of a symbolic collapse occurring at a particular historical moment of ambient fatalism and withdrawal. Central to this collapse is the loss of the ability to believe. Stiegler regards the "liquidation of belief by capitalism" as a process that initiates the "liquidation of desire."[44] Beliefs operate as intimate pacts between subjects and the big Other, so that the contingency, incompleteness and incoherence of the Real can be concealed and, thus, tolerated. These pacts are undermined by scientism and scepticism and general processes of deterritorialisation.[45] Without belief, subjects get trapped in an infinite loop of drive and encounter fewer opportunities towards individuation. The call to *become* within the context of the other and the beyond can be avoided.

Lacking opportunities to individuate, we forget how to desire.[46] Unsure of how to use this muscle, we look to cultural authorities to tell us how and what to desire. To our despair, or perhaps relief, we are instructed to turn away, shut down, numb out. Indeed, Houellebecq's Labrouste laments, "civilization just dies of weariness, of self-disgust – what could social democracy offer me? Nothing of course, just the perpetuation of absence, a call to oblivion."[47]

Stiegler sees symbolic misery as the loss of "aesthetic participation."[48] He describes the loss of the producer's working knowledge (technical skills) and the consumer's deprivation of the opportunity to participate in "aesthetic occurrence" as a consequence of work's transformation by machines, starting in the 19th century.[49]

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43 Houellebecq, *Serotonin*, 73–74.

44 Bernard Stiegler, *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism* (Malden: Polity Press, 2014), 12.

45 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 71.

46 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 40.

47 Houellebecq, *Serotonin*, 137.

48 Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*, 23.

49 Stiegler, 23.

This leaves the subject excluded from circuits of sensibility and the process of individuation. Individuation, for Stiegler, is a process entailing continuous yet contingent generative expressive acts. In these acts, she (the subject) is always more than herself. This excess is the "very manifestation of her existence," in which she becomes what she is by exteriorising herself, which is also to say, exclaiming herself. As she exclaims the "sensational singularity," she participates in creating desire.[50]

This "exclamation," following lack's transformation into excess and the positing of an object of desire, is a pathway through the "circuit of affects," weaving "the motives" of psychosocial individuation. Symbolic misery blocks this process as soon as individuals have become "indifferent to the flux," nihilistic about expression's potential, inhibited, without a vision for the "sensational singularities" that persist and often without the motivation to understand why. Such misery is born of the human's relegation to that of an assistant or appendage to machines and her internalisation of an inferior or redundant position.

The model of capitalism under analysis here is akin to what Stiegler calls the aesthetico-libidinal model of capitalism – a system that consumes libidinal energy to reproduce itself in channels (for decoded flows) designed with limits and controls. This system is an effective manager of libidinal flows. We are managed through the seduction of our attention. Inhabiting this system creates the fear of becoming redundant, if not totally "burdensome" – statuses imbued with a sense of economic insecurity and existential anxiety. Houellebecq depicts the heights of such anxiety in *Serotonin* with the collision between French farmers, facing redundancy in a world of globalised free trade, and France's riot police.[51] Labrouste fixates on the suicidality of the farmers as it parallels his own. While the former represents a crisis in material and political life – industries collapsing in a hostile, deregulated market – the latter marks a spiritual collapse, a deflated reaction to social-symbolic redundancy, a nihilism symptomatic of a crisis of meaninglessness. Houellebecq connects the same process that outsources production to countries with fewer labour protections, lowering the cost of production, so is libidinal energy outsourced to technological devices to lower the intensity of affect encountered in the Real. Production's intimacy is hidden away in free-trade zones and digital networks so that we can safely experience consumption and emotion without encountering its entire truth.

50 Stiegler, 42.

51 Houellebecq, *Serotonin*, 217–225.

A realm between two deaths

In conditions of symbolic misery, ideals held in the past seem to disintegrate under any close examination and the project of imagining new ideals to replace them and motivate action feels overwhelming. Nostalgia feels cheap, tired, and unsatisfying, while the terror of the climate crisis compromises aspirational visions of the future. Without an object of desire (an object of libidinal investment that presupposes a future reward), there is little left to bind the particular to the universal, humans to each other or the present to future. Lasch sees the "widespread loss of confidence in the future" as generated by the fact that competitive society leaves the working class in a state of "living for the present" where a "desperate concern for personal survival, sometimes disguised as hedonism," grips the population.[52] Here, in the space between symbolic and material death, time contracts to produce a series of tedious, denarrativised, discontinuous presents.

The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic brought parts of collective grief to consciousness. Many lost material security or toiled in "essential" jobs for poverty wages. Some others, with access to more resources, seemed to embrace self-isolation and enjoy the novelty of disruption. There was comfort in seeing one's internal fear and private chaos manifest in the external world as a shared, collective phenomenon. Suspended in crisis mode, we could now witness those around us reflecting on the lack of meaning endemic to their lifestyle and question its ultimate aims. In the first few dream-like weeks of the pandemic, we saw celebrities and social media influencers publicly confronting existential questions of aloneness, meaninglessness, and non-being. This was a moment in the haze of uncertainty, a softening of the performance principle, consumer excess, and achievement imperatives. While transiting a world-historic moment, subjects were invited to share a purely digital, fragmented, and incoherent (imaginary) form of solidarity.

Within the privileged class, the opportunity to obey government orders, practice solidarity, and perform a Social Good simply by staying home, cancelling plans, and spending time with loved ones fulfilled an inner wish. The ability to spend time with one's family, in the garden or practising hobbies was restored, granting the achievement subject an opportunity to opt-out guilt free and take a vacation from injunctions to perform, develop, succeed, etc. Still, it did not take long for the imperatives of achievement and obedience to creep back into social conscience (see, for example, Figure 1). Subjects were encouraged to use this pandemic as an "opportunity" to learn a new skill (coding, graphic design), start a side hustle (online business) or finish a project they are working on (the manuscript, the cookbook, the home renovation, etc.).

52 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 129.

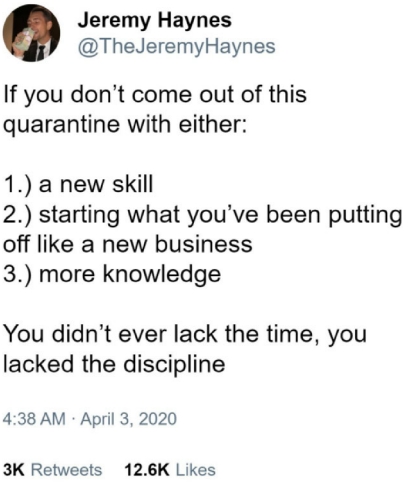

Figure 1: Tweet by Jeremy Haynes, April 3, 2020 (https://twitter.com/TheJeremyHaynes/status/1245767684484202496).

The people desired quarantine?

Wilhelm Reich famously understood that desire aims at its own domination. It was with this formulation that he asserted, controversially, that the people desired fascism.[53] By extension, we can posit that, exhausted by the performance principle and competitive society, the people desired quarantine. The months and years preceding COVID-19's viral disruption were characterised by accelerating political and affective feedback loops – a tireless sprint towards sense-making in an increasingly complex media environment. The working class subsisted by perpetually treading water in the infinite depths of debt, and the professional-managerial and entrepreneurial classes contended with mechanistic and meaningless striving. Those permitted to self-isolate found their life structured by a kind of leisurely obedience: stay home, teach yourself how to earn an income online, self-brand, grow your influence.

Elevation of a cosy, private, and self-focused lifestyle to the status of fulfilling a kind of dire social obligation let the achievement subject forego all the corporeal complexities of solidarity to discover an isolated, obedient, and performative form of solidarity in negativity: the removal of possibility rather than its affirmation. This total separation of public and private is, however, a privilege exclusive to cognitive

53 Wilhelm Reich, *Mass Psychology of Fascism* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

labour – society organised around a division between those who "worked from home" and those who served the people who worked from home. Those workers deemed "essential" (from fast food workers to medical staff), and those living paycheque to paycheque or laid off, could not experience the self-congratulatory enjoyment of the former category. This class became removed from others whose very "existence became a factor of insecurity."[54]

On this level, the pandemic revealed a truth of material deprivation. Self-isolation measures exposed whether or not one's living conditions were genuinely liveable. People in cities discovered their reliance on public or private-public spaces (coffee shops, bars) to avoid spending time in small, overpriced, dilapidated housing. The decade-long housing crisis in most major cities that forces workers to accept run-down, close quarters for more than half a month's earnings came into sharp focus. You could no longer deny that, for those living in cosmopolitan environments, private, personal space is reserved for the wealthy. Realities of class – divisions of labour, distributions of space – became impossible to ignore. Further, the intrusions were not simply material. Crises of capitalism are responded to with increasingly intimate forms of colonisation. It is not only the space of one's home or car that exchanges of capital have gained access to, but now, intrusions are made into one's internal landscape – psychic space is for sale.

Monetised intimacy

As previously mentioned, capital responds to crises by breaching boundaries, extending its appropriative efforts towards capturing new resources. Seeking eternal, continuous growth, capital targets natural resources like water and air, in addition to social resources like care and attention to extract a profit. Stiegler affirms that "capturing and harnessing libidinal energy is now the basis of capitalism."[55] As public space continues to wither and private entities envelop further territory, intimate space – regions that contain one's inner experience – become sites of monetisation. This means that the loss of public space is accompanied by an additional loss of intimate, private space. For example, customised advertising tracks and influences our individual and collective patterns of free association. As a result, space – space to think, dream, and live outside a commodified schema – is difficult to come by. It must be intentionally cultivated. Personal space, both internal and external, have become sites of privilege.

Digital platforms like Uber, Airbnb and OnlyFans permit the public to enter the very fabric of one's private world. These instruments allow the space of one's vehicle,

54 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 104.

55 Stiegler, *The Lost Spirit*, 29.

home, and body to integrate seamlessly with monetisation. The economic relations between public consumers and private contractors are brokered by corporations that offer immaterial supports (i.e., platforms) for transactions involving material elements. Despite the lack of labour protections or guaranteed income, the people offering these services often defend the platforms that host them, citing the freedom these new flexible economic relationships afford. Someone working an eight-hour shift in the service industry might spend three to four hours driving people around in their vehicle for Uber or delivering food on their bicycle before retiring for the night. The flexibility of the gig economy makes exploitation much smoother. It entertains no threat of organised labour and avoids all accountability for its workers. This system allows statisticians to exclaim that unemployment has decreased based on the fact that people are working two or three jobs simultaneously. Precarious labour in the gig economy comprises most of the new jobs in the post-2008 market. This new arrangement profits greatly on the structure of the achievement subject. Reliance on income generated through these increasingly intimate services only intensifies in moments of crisis, as indicated by labour trends following the 2008 economic recession and COVID-19 pandemic.

Peer-to-peer services overcode the intimate sphere with transactional relationships. Several years ago, after losing my housing, I stayed a few nights in an Airbnb room rented out to me by a young family. The house was modest, just outside city limits, and the room I had rented was across the hall from the parents' bedroom. On my way out one morning, I found the father feeding his toddler breakfast in the kitchen. I sipped coffee as he explained how renting out their spare room through Airbnb generated the necessary income that allowed the family to pay their mortgage in the hostile housing market of the Greater Vancouver area. This transaction was not unlike typical rent relationships except for the nature of the guests. The family hosting me accepted a different set of strangers into their home on a nightly basis – they continually shared their home with people they had not personally vetted or known in the slightest. My stay was one of many intrusions into their intimate sphere. I speculated that this kind of anonymous exchange occurred multiple times a week and risked subjection to considerable discomfort, and, at the very least, the underlying stress that comes with the loss of truly intimate, uninterrupted privacy.

For such intrusions into the intimate sphere to remain tolerable and continue, everyday life must undergo a kind of gradual de-eroticisation. The life instinct must be educated towards death, towards conformity to mechanical, polite modes of interaction. Deleuze and Guatarri famously identified that "what civilised modern societies deterritorialise with one hand they reterritorialise with the other."[56] The compulsion to enjoy – enjoy oneself, one's neighbour, enjoy one's exploitation – operates

56 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 257.

in response to an erosion of the symbolic and erotic dimension of collective life. Dissociation from the rhythms and emotion of the body and elevation of the mind to the site of all "motivation, competition, optimization and initiative"[57] effectively sanitises the libidinal economy of all its less governable attributes. That we manage to accommodate the intimate intrusions of technocratic survival labour so diligently implies our internalisation of capital's mandate to disregard interruptions of personal desire in favour of a more consistent, machinic sensibility. The body has been excluded in this formulation (an impossibility), but exists as an instrument, mediated through digital forms. It is here that we encounter a systematic reduction of desire to drive.

OnlyFans started as a digital platform designed to enable celebrities and influencers to share exclusive content with paying subscribers (one-to-one conversations, photos, videos). It quickly morphed into a platform selling exclusive access to content produced by sex workers. These workers noticed that OnlyFans offered a safe way to garner a following, receive payments for content, and avoid otherwise unsafe working conditions. In February 2020, the platform hosted the content of 200,000 creators. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, migration of workers to the platform was exponential. In March 2020 alone, OnlyFans reported 3.5 million new signups, 60,000 of which were content creators.[58] By May 2020, the platform's chief operating officer announced that the site saw 200,000 new users sign up every 24 hours.[59] This movement occurred in step with labour's split between the work-from-home-crowd and the "essential workers." Naturally, precarious workers caught in the middle of this chasm searched for new income streams. Navigating the wave of uncertainty introduced by the pandemic, one content creator explained, "OnlyFans is the best way to make money, period right now, unless you have a normal 9 to 5 job that you're working from home."[60] What, then, does the labour of a content creator involve?

The content creator exemplifies the tenets of achievement subjectivity. Creators are rewarded highly for directing all libidinal investment towards self-objects. Posting and sending explicit images to subscribers requires dedicated and daily attention to your appearance, the messages in your phone from fans and, as one user explains, 45 minutes of prep (hair, makeup, etc.), a photo session of up to 300 photos (narrowed down to ten), and time strategising whom to send what to.[61] This form of

57 Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (NY: Verso Books, 2017), 39.

58 Annie Vainshtein, "Coronavirus Took Their Jobs Away. OnlyFans Let These Bay Area People Monetize Themselves," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 4, 2020.

59 Otillia Steadman, "Everyone is Making Porn at Home Now. Will the Porn Industry Survive?" *Buzzfeed News*, May 6, 2020.

60 Vainshtein, Coronavirus Took."

61 Vainshtein, "Coronavirus Took."

sex work circumvents the possible transience, "rough treatment," and dependence on male authority characteristic of other forms of transactional intimacy.[62] Still, the exchange does not wholly liberate workers from economic insecurity nor does it offer any kind of labour protections. Digital sex workers share a fundamentally precarious structure of success based on a "never ending necessity of seducing the public and men anew" with all sex workers.[63] Moreover, digitally mediated sex work does not do away with intrusions of biopower in the slightest. While not imposing the exact extent of biopolitical control asserted by previous iterations of procurers, pimps, and madams, for example, OnlyFans, as a platform, exercises what Byung-Chul Han defines as smart power over its users by inviting them endlessly to share and participate in the generation of profit.[64] Work and life are indistinguishable – becoming a mingled stream of desirable output, an unending effort to concoct images to lure and sustain attention. OnlyFans takes a staggering 20% of all earnings generated by creators who depend on its infrastructure to host their content. Han explains that by operating as a permissive force, smart power intends to *guide* subjects' will rather than forbidding or depriving it.[65] It does this seductively, with the promise of pleasing and fulfilling subjects – smart power aims not to make subjects compliant but *dependent*.[66]

After witnessing two world wars, Simone de Beauvoir identifies in *The Second Sex* how the exchange of sexual services for money "only increases during wars and subsequent social disorders."[67] De Beauvoir points out that it is not any particular moral or psychological situation that makes sex work challenging to bear but the hostile material conditions – navigating the exploitation of pimps and madams, the spectre of poverty, and bodily risks – that make this kind of exchange most brutal.[68] She describes a specific form of sex work that is now, just as it was when she was writing, reserved for the most vulnerable and exploited classes. To highlight this fact, she opposes this hostile form of sex work with the exchanges undertaken by the hetaira, an ancient Greek courtesan much like the geishas of Japan. The hetaira endeavours to generate income and recognition for herself as a singularity – de Beauvoir uses this term to designate "all women who treat not only their bodies but their entire personalities as capital to be exploited."[69] Movie stars epitomised this category at the time of de Beauvoir's writing.[70] In a society dominated by self-enterprising and

62 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (NY: Vintage Books, 1974), 622.
63 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 635.
64 Han, *Psychopolitics*, 33.
65 Han, 33.
66 Han, 34.
67 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 623.
68 De Beauvoir, 629.
69 De Beauvoir, 631.
70 De Beauvoir, 630.

spectacle, the class of hetairas has been democratised. We are all invited to transform ourselves into living capital.

The synthesis of capital and persona embodied by the influencer culminates in the total monetisation of the subject. OnlyFans attracts influencers who already possess a large social media following and recognise the chance to monetise themselves at a significantly higher price point. As experts of the attention economy, the influencer "seeks to captivate the world for [their] own profit"[71] – given the tools afforded by the platforms that host them, influencers are incentivised to entrance a mass of anonymous admirers from whom they can extract a profit. Their cult of personality grows in step with their magnetic pull for brand partnerships.

The influencer is compelled to organise the day's activities in conformity to the performance principle. No intimate moment can remain uncaptured, wasted or unobserved – all is ripe with potential to stimulate interest and exact attention. The influencer exists as a digital canvas by integrating brand messages into a stream of intimate self-stylisations, not unlike websites that generate profit by selling ad space. Within this synthesis of capital and persona, life oscillates between work-like leisure and play-like work. The self is indistinguishable from objects of consumption – one's phone exists as a medium of entangled business correspondence, intimate exchanges, communicative capitalism and personal enjoyment. The economic conditions experienced by OnlyFans content creators exemplify the economic conditions that await workers in general. Economic relations of the future will exhibit similarly smooth, intimate transactional dynamics that incorporate the worker's whole being.

Parasocial jouissance

Transactions of digital intimacy are becoming more and more common.[72] The pandemic's restructuring of the libidinal economy accelerated the process of disinvestment from external objects (people, places, things) and intensified investment in digital self-objects. This process intensified the popularity of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are nonreciprocal but involve two parties: a performer and an audience[73] – celebrity worship is considered the parasocial's

71 De Beauvoir, 632.

72 Consider the popularity of mental health apps like BetterHelp, an online counselling platform that simultaneously offers text message–based therapy while selling its users' data to Facebook. Thomas Germain, "Mental Health Apps Aren't as Private as You Think," Consumer Reports, March 2, 2021, https://www.consumerreports.org/health-privacy/mental-health-apps-and-user-privacy-a7415198244/.

73 Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956).

original form. Parasocial relations can be understood as reterritorialising attempts to inhabit the meaning and security afforded by the big Other by relating to another human being. Universal cravings for interpellation cause us to search for the presence of an Other who can, in a generalised, objectified way, confer symbolic identification onto us.[74] The big Other is precisely the object through which desire is coordinated and symbolic certainty is achieved – Žižek explains that this object functions as a "retroactive illusion," structuring social reality and masking "the contingency of the Real."[75] In flight from this traumatic void at the centre of subjectivity, the parasocial supports the fantasy of omnipotence on behalf of the performer and fosters a fantasy of belonging on behalf of the audience, producing a feedback loop of projection, satisfaction, and simulation – smooth interpellation with reduced interpersonal risk.

Parasocial relationships facilitate the development of an audience's attachment to an idolised object without any of the risk involved in intimate attachment to an other. The performer is attached to reflections of her own image – using the audience as a mirror through which she can refine and instrumentalise her image. From this perspective – of the streamer, podcaster, influencer, or poster – content produced is consumed and discussed by an anonymous mass.[76] Content creators vary in how they choose to address their audience. Some employ a register of affectation, some react with disdain or pity, and some express immense gratitude. Similarly, the attachment a follower has to a performer also varies. A follower may not admire or even like the person they follow. They might derive a kind of parasocial jouissance in the repetitive engagement with and curiosity about a performer to whom they feel magnetised.

Nonetheless, both parties enjoy this simulative relation, whose attachments are organised on purely projective terms. Parasocial dynamics serve as a primary mode through which human intimacy can be simulated and monetised. Through the parasocial, the isolated achievement subject, suffering in an "epidemic of loneliness," finds human conversation, humour, information, entertainment, and understanding. She can stand in relation to the other without sacrificing control over her image. She can *feel* seen without taking on the risk of *being* seen. Still, she possesses some awareness that this relationship is not complete. It falls short on the basis of stimulating drive by failing to fulfil desire.

Within the parasocial, we are at once both too close and too far away. This mode sharpens proximity and erases boundaries. The distance that characterised previous

74 Žižek, *For They*, 109.

75 Žižek, 71.

76 Referring to Twitch and other streaming platforms, podcasts with a large following like True Anon, Red Scare, Chapo Trap House or the Adam Friedland Show, Instagram, YouTube and other image-based apps, and Twitter, respectively.

iterations of the parasocial – celebrity worship, identification with a film or sports star – has been dissolved. Performers are no longer creative producers but exhibitionists and entrepreneurs of personality. Verging on a state of overproximity, the whole existence of the performer is sought after as a site of projection. One's habits, hobbies, products used, emotional life, inner world – every detail is rendered relevant and potentially monetisable. An influencer's "personal brand" might attract "brand collaborations" from mindfulness apps, clothing companies, meal delivery or online therapy services, audiobook apps, etc. Thus, her appearance, the food she eats, the entertainment she consumes, and the moods she feels are sites of value. Capital mediates the entire relationship between performer and audience. If it is not the more indirect insertion of brand advertisements into an influencer's photos and videos, it is the direct transaction of capital for subscriptions to exclusive content. The influencer must internalise the notion that in a parasocial culture, "creation of the self" functions as the most rewarded form of creativity.[77]

While the possibility for self-creation via constructing a "personal brand" may release the individual ego into a zone of freedom vis-à-vis commodification, these relations are organised based on projections that alienate and distract one from the truth of one's experience. While the subject's hyper-commodification under conditions of communicative capitalism may appear as aesthetic and expressive freedom in a permissive society, the limits of this freedom, contingent on the capitalist mode of production, dictate that true freedom of self-determination remains unavailable. The achievement subject is self-abandoning, compelled to generate economic obedience in a culture obsessed with the signification of achievement.

TFW no internal good objects

This economic model of libidinal organisation attracts and sustains the psychological structures that benefit it. In turn, it also reproduces and intensifies these structures through a system of rewards. With so much libidinal investment in self-objects, two dominant and complementary psychological structures prevail. The achievement model rewards narcissistic performance and accommodates schizoid states – these being two sides of the same coin. For decades, psychoanalysts, beginning with Freud, have speculated on the shared characteristics of schizoid and narcissistic structures. Freud begins his essay *On Narcissism* with comments about the paraphrenic's "withdrawal of libido from people and things in the external

77 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 168.

world."[78] It is from these reflections that we have come to understand how the schizoid structure replaces external objects with internal objects.

A person operating from a schizoid position has "renounced objects" – objects that exist as internalisations of external objects perceived from the position of a "neutral observer" or "detached spectator."[79] This internalisation of object relations links narcissism to the schizoid condition. Object relations theorist Harry Guntrip affirms this link, listing narcissism as one of the key attributes of the schizoid type. As with narcissism, the schizoid's love objects exist inside himself.[80] We can think about narcissism more neutrally as simply "the ego itself cathected with libido"[81] – a plane of self-objects. These two structures, the narcissist and the schizoid, mirror one another and work together to produce a short-circuiting parasocial feedback loop that reinforces investments in the ego-libido. The parasocial exists as a kind of short-circuit in the libidinal economy, sustained on the promise of fame and belonging – a promise of love. Generated by the energy of drive, this relation is experienced as repetitive, addictive, empty, and inherently unsatisfying.

Positioned as an object to be incorporated into the schizoid's subjectivity, the narcissist prepares their "nervous system as an active receiving terminal for as much time as possible."[82] Podcasters, streamers, and Youtubers know that the more content they produce, the more engagement they receive and the more capital they accrue. The influencer or online performer reveals personal information, thoughts, ideas, and imagery to invite viewers into their inner world and, thus, to identify with them. To effectively sell a form of intimacy, the performer must also invest significant libidinal energy towards internal objects. The self is configured as a vessel of confession and disclosure – internal objects are commodities to seduce the attention of others.

Freud writes that the narcissist's charm exists in his "self-contentment and inaccessibility."[83] The narcissist wants to be loved – they crave the other's desire and validation not as an act of craving the other but as an effort to incorporate the other as a good internal object. Narcissistic desire aims towards adoration at a distance.

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78 Referring to "paraphrenia," Freud's term for what Bleuler termed "schizophrenia." "Para" meaning "beside," "apart from," or "beyond," and "phrenia" meaning "mind." Similarly, we might interpret "parasocial" to mean "beyond the social" – a social relation that does away with the Real of the social to enter a zone of pure identification and projection – an Imaginary social. See Freud, *On Narcissism*, 546.

79 Harry Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self* (NY: International Universities Press Inc., 1969), 18.

80 Guntrip, 42.

81 Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, trans. James Stratchey (NY: Norton, 1989), 753.

82 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 90.

83 Freud, *On Narcissism*, 555.

It functions best when faced with thousands, if not millions, of anonymous "followers" with whom one interacts with on a purely generalised, imaginary basis. This simulation of intimate relating allows the performer to avoid the other's gaze – they are left gazing and speaking to their own image, directing their affectation towards an abstract base of admirers. They interact with an abstracted gaze, a mirror. The schizoid stares at his own reflection as well, relating to the performer as an object to be incorporated into the self. They stare in one another's direction but gaze past each other.

This can go on forever, but it does not lead to the process of individuation. It is by passing through the gaze of the other, encountering the negativity of the other, that we individuate. For example, if we did not receive the gaze of our mother, our first (caregiving) other, as infants, we spend considerable energy through the remainder of our lives searching for the mother's gaze in everything we encounter. We act out, entertain, seduce. We fix our efforts on attracting surrogate gazes – those abstracted gazes mediated by the spectacle. The endeavour ultimately fails to meet the need for recognition because it does not incorporate the negativity necessary to water the seeds of individuation.[84]

Just as the narcissist hunts for others to incorporate as internal objects, the schizoid searches for an object that excites him, that he can pursue and draw away from at will, should the object attempt to engulf him.[85] Both prefer to instrumentalise the other to derive satisfaction from a comfortable distance. While the schizoid hungers after intimacy, he fears the loss of his ego (engulfment) and thus finds his ideal object in the "desired deserter" with whom he can withdraw when the threat of his desire (the object's desire) becomes overwhelming.[86] The schizoid is relatively content to incorporate the generalised, projected desire of performers into his internal landscape. His libidinal investments are concentrated and manipulated within the intimate object par excellence: the personal smartphone.

Parasocial dynamics are a response to a social field organised by competition, performance, and fragmentation. In varying degrees, we are all called to withdraw our libido from the external world to invest in digital self-objects. The compulsive online exchange of intimacy compensates but does not resolve a social-symbolic crisis of desire.

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84 It is worth speculating on the impact of a father's absence here as well. The father's gaze also aids and guides the process of individuation. The father is a primary other, a social-symbolic avatar – perhaps his gaze is sought not so much for attention and affirmation of one's existence but for his approval. While the mother's gaze affirms, "yes, you exist," the father's gaze may suggest, "I see you and you matter."

85 Guntrip, *Schizoid Phenomena*, 24.

86 Guntrip, 27.

The task of loving

In his essay on narcissism, Freud explains that we must begin to love so as to not fall ill.[87] Indeed, if we do not educate desire, turning it towards object-love, we are doomed to sickness. The psychoanalytic project resists the achievement imperative in its dedication to facilitating the movement from ego-libido to object-libido – a process of sacrificing one's narcissism for loving the other. Because the decline of symbolic efficiency so ruthlessly exposes us to the meaninglessness of flattened imaginary relations and the void of the Real, we must undertake this movement. We cannot survive the brutal objectivity of the Real without symbolic mediation – we cannot find social or spiritual satisfaction in the narcissism and one-dimensionality of the imaginary register. As we move from narcissistic love to object-love, we initiate the process of individuation. Through this process, we are invited to create and inhabit new symbolic formations that account for the mythological and narrative dimensions of collective experience. If the crisis of desire is simply a crisis of turning away from the external world, the external world must be reanimated as a symbolic field again. Our antidote can be found in reterritorialising with a curious, contemplative mode of attention. We can educate our desire to relate on terms that exceed purely transactional aims and engage the body in its most honest and expressive capacities.

As the libidinal glue of civilisation, the symbolic order must remain a constant negotiation between people at the level of physical, psychical and spiritual experience. Flight from the Real into the imaginary is inherently avoidant and unsatisfying as the imaginary register is sustained by internal, ephemeral, and performative relationships. To inhabit a symbolic system, we must inhabit our bodies. The removal of corporeality shelters us from the charge and complexities of jouissance. However, this sense of disembodied happiness is, Berardi states, "a naturally frigid and false one."[88]

Collective psychic and political futures depend on the extent to which we relearn to *weave the unconscious into lived social fields intentionally*. Intention sustains the movement towards love and waters seeds of individuation. Deleuze and Guattari remind us that desire is a problem for groups – to get where we want, we must know what we want and be unafraid to ask for it.[89] As we take responsibility for our desire – educate and socialise it – we begin to individuate and participate in a more significant social process of transindividuation. For Stiegler, transindividuation is "energy circulating as exclamation"; it is "the socialisation of the psychic … the realisation of

87 Freud, *On Narcissism*, 553.

88 Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, 104.

89 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

sublimation"; it is our ability to remember and transform on a collective level.[90] This potential lies in the creative will to remythologise everyday life. We are tasked with finding ways to articulate collective desire and mobilise towards it – we are asked to symbolise, ritualise, and remember. Rich with the discomfort of change and charged with egoic resistance, this is the pathway to human intimacy. Our courage to love induces death pangs of a new world.

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90 Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*, 155.

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