REAL LIFE

2018

CONTENTS

Editors' Note 3

Breaking News *Nathan Jurgenson* 5
Political news spins bigger and faster than ever, but more information doesn't leave you more informed

Unreal News *Drew Nelles* 18
How the Onion *got scooped by reality*

No Joke *Natasha Lennard* 46
Irony is neither a gateway drug nor an alibi for racism

Friction-Free Racism *Chris Gilliard* 59
Surveillance capitalism profits by making people more comfortable with discrimination

Apathy Machines *Rob Horning* 72
Long before VR, the novel made empathy a strictly personal pleasure

Already Late *Ana Cecilia Alvarez* 83
Staying reachable and updated by the feed is not a prerequisite for being "in touch"

Good Boys *Rahel Aima* 91
Animal videos are a portal to generic inclusiveness

Layers of Identity *Crystal Abidin* 104
How to be "real" when everyone is watching

Paradise Regained *Soraya King* 117
A sacred site can be built, but it can also be transmitted

Like and Subscribe *Vicky Osterweil* 130
How YouTube has exploited the pleasures of hanging out

Crush Fatigue *Alexandra Molotkow* 151
In the city, and online, infatuation is an organizing principle

The Constant Consumer *Drew Austin* 159
Amazon's mission is to make customer identity more primary than citizenship

Uber Alles *David A. Banks* 175
How ride-share apps are invested in discrimination

Daily Affirmations *Tony Tulathimutte* 198
Conviction is its own reward

Big and Slow *Elisa Gabbert* 204
How can we represent the threats that are too vast to see? What if civilization itself is one of them?

Contributors 226
Credits 229

Editors' Note

When we started *Real Life,* our aim was to work against the impression that "tech" constituted some separate dimension of life, a discrete field somehow apart from the rest of the world, like "sports" or "food," rather than a means of doing things. Technology isn't an additive to society or something we consume; it fundamentally organizes work, social behavior, communication, subjectivity, experience. It is not a sphere we can enter into and leave when we choose. It can't be discussed in isolation.

In the wake of the 2016 election, mainstream writing about technology has become far more attentive to that data collection, algorithms, and social media platforms have political implications, but media coverage of technology still sometimes maintains the impression of tech as a separate sphere. The terms of coverage are still often set by the idea that "tech affects politics"

rather than an assessment of the politics of technology itself, the socioeconomic movements behind how it is developed and used, or the lived experience of what it affords and our struggles to assimilate it as the rate of change seems to accelerate.

Collected here are some essays from *Real Life* that reflect not only what seemed to be some of the most pressing "tech" topics in 2018—automation, algorithmic control, data surveillance, climate change, "virtual reality," and a variety of attention economies—but also pieces that we hope indicate what a broader approach to "tech" might look like. We hope you enjoy them as much as we do. Thanks for reading!

Breaking News

by Nathan Jurgenson

The most important moment in the coverage of Donald Trump's presidential campaign was the first: when his political career was greeted with laughter. The news programs didn't just underestimate his chances of winning but giggled at the very idea of his running. Everything that Trump tapped into that made

him popular enough to win—i.e., making clearly stated and explicitly bigoted political promises—was met with smiles and jokes from centrist TV-panel pundits and podcast analysts. For those whose job it was to describe it, this country's political reality was downright laughable.

Since then, each playful mention of our world as "the dark timeline" or "the upside-down" tries to make this persistent cluelessness cute. Just as when Trumpism emerged, it remains more comforting to regard reality as fiction than to come to terms with it as fact. This approach is complimented by an impulse to treat various political incidents as "too on the nose," or as something out of *Veep* or the *Onion*—to see them as uncannily strange and self-evident at the same time. Often, some outrage committed by Trump or a member of his administration is trumpeted with the warning "This is not normal." But while Trump doesn't play along with rhetorical and procedural norms, his attention stoking and never-ending dishonesty are ordinary for his office. So deep is the press's bias toward assuming "real" politics is a matter of complicated wonkish analysis and expert-vetted policy proposals that it continues to miss how normal politics-as-entertainment is and how normal bigotry is in the American political process.

Jay Rosen has critiqued the press's tendency to treat Trump's demagoguery as a cogent set of coherent aims beyond maintaining his notoriety, as if Trump had "policies." Rosen argues the press has a vested interest in periodically anointing Trump's sudden "presidential" stature. This is an apt critique, but it should alert us to concerns about "normalizing" not just Trump but also a certain idea of the presidency itself as something that, before Trump, was centrally about competency, that was a role undertaken in good faith. Decrying Trumpism as a unique force warping American politics plays into the myth that politicians are usually smart and diligent technocrats who entered public service because they care about the tedious workings of legislation and government bureaucracy. Instead, presidential political coverage is an aggrandizing discourse of objectively dumb speeches, pretend debates, and breathless hype—essentially fan fiction—that elevates a ridiculous authority figure chosen by a massive reality show.

Analyses, like the 2017 year-end take from Peter Baker in the *New York Times,* tend to describe Trump as trading the loftiness of the office for something closer to tabloid rule. But rarely do they detail the press's role in maintaining that false majesty of the presidency

and how that ideal itself is integral to selling presidential politics as reality TV. The former props the stakes and payoff for the latter, but the latter also destabilizes the former, driving the cycle. The notion that the president is or should be a moral authority was always fictitious and unhelpful to begin with.

On the political right in the U.S., there's a tendency toward what Stephen Colbert called "truthiness": ignoring facts in the name of some larger "truth." For example, for many of Trump's earliest supporters, the fact of Barack Obama's birthplace mattered less than the racist "truth" of white superiority, which presumed his inherent unfitness for office. Therefore anything that disqualified Obama may as well have been true, and thus may as well be believed and asserted. If it seems like it should be true, then you can act as though it is.

On Election night in 2016 (as I pointed out at the time), a liberal counterpart to truthiness became clear: "factiness." Factiness is the inverse of truthiness; it's the taste for the aesthetic of "facts"—the elaborate and formal presentation of data—at the expense of missing larger truths. Factiness is at work in data visualizations and in the pretense of outcome predictions worked out to the tenth of a percentage

point. It's evident in the acceptance of pseudoscientific explanations of human behavior drawing on pop neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, and in the epistemic concessions made to the tech world because their data is so "big." Factiness is obsessing over the assembly of fact after fact while refusing to assess the basic truth of our political reality. With enough facts on your side, Trump was just funny. It was often said during the campaign that "journalists didn't take Trump seriously while his supporters didn't take him literally." Another way of putting that: the journalists were beholden to factiness and Trump's supporters to truthiness.

The obsession with facts and detail can leave the political press overly satisfied and complacent, partly because the drip-drop stream of new data points can provide the feeling of being newly informed. As Maya Binyam wrote in the *New Inquiry*, "to believe that the dysfunction of the Trump administration reveals a violence altogether new requires a willful and insistent abandonment of reality." What is "abnormal" about Trump is not his ignorance, bigotry, or narcissism—that's all too normal among American political leaders—but how his habitus makes these

qualities obvious and explicit, leveraging them to his advantage with his supporters. This is in keeping with the president's role to serve as a partisan attention merchant—a function that is hardly new. The presidency has long been a media spectacle, and in this respect Trump is hardly a failed president but highly successful at the long-established fundamental workings of the office.

To understand Trump's tenure, we must better describe how his conduct aligns with conventional "normal" presidencies and how they have been covered. Criticizing Trump in order to prop up a fantasy of presidential dignity fundamentally misunderstands American politics. David Banks noted here last year that liberal pundits are using Trump's presidency to normalize the rest of electoral politics, making it appear as less performative and irrelevant than it really is: "The liberal commentariat constantly refer to 'alternate realities' and departures from custom, implicitly casting a nostalgic glow over the political program that centrist Democrats wielded the last two times they held the presidency." The fiction being sold is that the centrism of the "reality-based community" is real politics; Trumpism is the violation that proves it so.

When Trump began his campaign, many commentators claimed that he was "trolling" the race with his outlandish interrupting of the ordinary functioning of the political system. But Trump was never a troll—he wasn't trying to hack our political system or expose the truth about it to subvert and change it—he was playing by the rules of the big political reality show as it was designed. Despite the frequent criticism he lobbed at journalists, he wasn't really running against the press but with them. Consider the audio recording of Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women: This was completely on brand for Trump, but some opportunistic Republicans pretended to be just shocked by his comments so they could jump ship from an otherwise struggling campaign. No adult learned anything new about Trump from the tape. Meanwhile, the editor in chief of Buzzfeed penned a victory lap for journalism, "We Told You So: The MSM, vindicated," arguing that mainstream journalists uncovered facts and changed people's minds and took a liar down. This was impossibly naïve: It legitimated dishonest Republican opportunism and was one more attempt to bolster the fiction that outside Trumpland is the truth.

After election night, we failed to put the feelings of shock and confusion to good use. The degree of disconnect between political reality and how journalists and pundits describe it was exposed, yet little has changed. We didn't imagine different ways of doing things. The same mainstream outlets and often the same misleading commentators still have the job of describing the political world. It's not enough to therefore conclude that, in the business of political journalism, competency simply doesn't matter. The more plausible assumption is that political news coverage didn't fail at its supposed job of informing voters so they could perform their civic duty, but that it succeeded at something else.

The "autopsies" of 2016 election coverage didn't resonate or convince because, ultimately, a job was done well; it's just not the job that the "fourth estate" often pretends it's doing. From a business perspective, the Trump election was a resounding success: There is more news to cover, always bigger, with higher ratings, and a president who abides by such ratings demands. At last the news business is no longer beholden to electoral news cycles: Trump's election has pulled off the trick of making the campaign perpetual. An election that never *ends*.

Social commentators claim that epistemic authorities like journalists, editors, scientists, and academics have been stripped of their legitimacy by a so-called post-truth populist wave. But equally true is that these authorities forfeited legitimacy and trust just as much as it was taken. For as long as I've been alive, cable news has worked around the clock to degrade the idea of a common fact and assert a continuous narrative of a scary, chaotic, unknowable world to which we can react only with more and more histrionic reporting. The press shapes presidential politics into sports-like drama, with countdown clocks, constant polling statistics, scored to melodramatic visuals and music, all centered on the logic of team loyalties. It was fitting that Trump responded to CNN on Twitter with a professional wrestling gif: Like politics, pro wrestling is a perfect intersection of reality television and sports.

Some saw the wrestling tweet as indicative of Trump's general "attack" on the press, but Trump joined a game that CNN and others created and profit from. Trump's cynical attention grabbing is hardly antithetical to CNN's demonstrated values or actions. Requiring no "genius" at all, Trump conforms to the way politics is covered: as a merciless sport for audiences with mu-

tually exclusive rooting interests. Trump's "war" with the press is a similar staged struggle: a mutually beneficial rivalry performed for ratings. Last June, CNN and others billed former FBI director James Comey's Senate testimony as "Washington's Super Bowl"—that is, as an awesome opportunity to advertise against compelling live content. Newsrooms threw parties.

Trump's chaos, mass shootings, natural disasters produce valuable attention. "Engagement." The whole point of news is for there to be something new, pushed right to your home screen. Twitter, an app turned news show about Trump, is functioning as it was designed to do when something new and big is happening, offering a means to participate in what everyone's talking about. The news spinning ever faster is the logic of attention working itself out efficiently and profitably. It is the underlying logic that shapes the behavior of both politicians and how they are covered. Indeed, the quicker cadence of the news has been one of its defining features for as long as we've had mass media, from the first ticker in Times Square to hourly radio updates to 24-hour cable TV networks. The increase in pace isn't new but is itself still newsworthy, an opportunity to reflect on current editorial decisions being made by

publishers and platforms to maximize information instead of minimize being misinformed.

If you consumed and enjoyed most mainstream political coverage during the campaign, you likely woke up the day after the election confused by the reality of the world. All the while, however, that factiness-oriented coverage was likely soothing. And after the election it probably became more so, its palliative effects stronger than ever. After hardly missing a beat, people tuned right back in to what was misleading in the first place.

This is the clearest indicator that the role of the news is not to be informative but to use information as a means to comfort. If political coverage produces anxiety, it also sells a kind of relief, the antidote to its own poison. As Trump began to dominate every news cycle, you could at the same time find an increasing amount of data-science statistical models, insider punditry, and "wonk" podcasts. There, you could take in a stream of numbers and facts and hyper-informed opinions that stood in for a desired "normal" reality that didn't exist outside those media objects. Instead of plainly and accurately describing our political reality as a violent and dishonest system that has little bearing to any objective

truth outside of consolidating wealth and power, we can instead be "engaged" by the comforting narrative that the "good" politicians are in good faith, norms are productive and hold sway, and Trump was merely funny and, now, always about to be impeached.

The logic of consuming more news—getting more information and facts, more numbers, more precise probabilities—is a matter of entertainment, a chance to vicariously feel in the know and to align one's identity with that feeling. The political "wonks" and "nerds" during the campaign could make you feel super-informed but that feeling is distinct from being informed. The taste for more news becomes its own end.

There is so much happening right now that really matters as I type this (and again as I edit it) that it feels wrong to not pay attention. It feels even worse knowing it won't still be discussed in a month. Or a week. With more news, Constant News, the value of any individual piece of news shrinks. The disjunction between what matters today and what we'll care about tomorrow creates a tension; it makes me doubt whether I should continue to watch. A central product of news coverage as it is generated today is the process of seeing information, any information, revealed, debated, and

made irrelevant in time for a new topic to come along. Coverage that cares so deeply today and has moved on tomorrow posits a tragic contradiction: that everything matters profoundly but nothing matters at all.

"Breaking news" isn't so much about the news itself but a way of being in the world. Once the illusion of news "mattering" is dispelled, there is no motive left but entertainment: I should enjoy the content stream as a stream, and let it carry me along.

Originally published Jan. 2, 2018
reallifemag.com/breaking-news

Unreal News

by Drew Nelles

That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

VOL. CLXVI ... No. 57,616 © 2017 The New York Times Company NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JUNE 2, 2017

TRUMP ABANDONING GLOBAL CLIMATE A

DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

President Trump announced his decision about the Paris agreement on Thursday in the White House Rose Garden.

DIPLOMATIC MEMO

Giving China A Void to Fill

By DAVID E. SANGER and JANE PERLEZ

WASHINGTON — President Trump has managed to turn America First into America Isolated.

In pulling out of the Paris climate accord, Mr. Trump has created a vacuum of global leadership that presents ripe opportunities to allies and adversaries alike to reorder the world's power structure. His decision is perhaps the greatest strategic gift to the Chinese, who are eager to fill the void that Washington is leaving around the world on everything from setting the rules of trade and environmental standards to financing the infrastructure projects that give Beijing vast influence.

Mr. Trump's remarks in the Rose Garden on Thursday were also a retreat from leadership on the one issue, climate change, that unified America's European allies, its rising superpower competitor in the Pacific, and even some of its adversaries, including Iran. He did it over the objections of much of the American business community and his secretary of state, Rex W. Tillerson, who embraced the Paris accord when he ran Exxon Mobil, less out of a sense of moral responsibility and more as part

On November 4, 2016, with four days to go in the strangest presidential election ever, the *New York Times* was worrying about comedy. "How to Satirize This Election?" a headline asked. "Even the

Onion Is Having Trouble." As the *Onion*'s managing editor, Ben Berkley, told the *Times*, "It's hard to turn up the volume when the speaker is already blown out and everyone's ears are already bleeding."

The *Onion*, a joke website and arguably the most successful satirical outlet in history, was dealing with the same problem as every other media organization: a campaign that refused to abide by the long-established rules of the game. Traditional news outlets reacted to Donald Trump with institutional indignation, a chorus of disbelief in his electability, and an ambient sense of unreality that still permeates the industry today; meanwhile, comedians faced the difficult task of making fantasy funnier than any of this already was. Political humor is meant to chip away at the false sense of dignity attached to elected office, but Trump did that on his own. He was, it turned out, easy to mock but hard to satirize.

In this context, it makes sense that the *New York Times* would take an interest in the *Onion*'s creative tribulations. The *Onion* is a miniature media empire in its own right, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, with sister sites like the *A.V. Club* and *ClickHole*; it receives an estimated 6.5 million unique monthly visitors; it has

spun off an extensive line of books and merchandise, as well as a branded-content division; and it has inspired innumerable lesser imitators. The *Onion* is also culturally influential in a way that is more difficult to quantify. Because there are no bylines, particularly timely or incisive *Onion* stories land with a voice-of-a-generation feeling; its longtime standard joke format—those clipped, Associated Press-style headlines—grant it an air of exaggerated authority.

During the George W. Bush years, a lot was said about the newfound importance of comedian-journalists like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, but the *Onion* has been subject to much less scrutiny. Over three decades, it has morphed from a Midwestern student newspaper into a valuable, recognizable brand—one now at the core of a major media conglomerate's efforts to appeal to young people. Along the way, it has changed the way we interpret the news, but, in so doing, it may have occasioned its own obsolescence. Now, like the legacy media organizations it was founded to ridicule, the *Onion* is struggling to meet the demands of the world it helped create: one in which satire has never been more ubiquitous or less relevant.

The first issue of the *Onion* was published on Monday, August 29, 1988, at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. On its front page was a faux-disaster story, "Mendota Monster Mauls Madison." The two undergrads responsible for this inauspicious start had borrowed $8,000 from somebody's mother and launched the paper from their dorm room. A probably apocryphal story has it that they were so broke they ate raw-onion sandwiches, but their poverty didn't last long. By running ads for local businesses, the paper turned a small profit almost immediately—this was a very different era—and in 1989 the founders sold the *Onion* for about $20,000 to two other 20-somethings: Scott Dikkers and Peter Haise.

At the time, the *Onion* was a traditional college-humor paper—a *Harvard Lampoon*-style grab-bag of genres and styles. Then, in 1995, Scott Dikkers relaunched it in the form it more or less remains: a parody newspaper, based on *USA Today*. The *Onion*'s intention was to spread beyond the college market—it would soon be distributed in other Midwestern cities—but it also wound up popularizing a novel comedic mode. The fake newspaper article, like a straight face or a raised eyebrow, was a formal cue that shaped the text's mean-

ing. Scholars of satire call this technique the "innocent eye": a detached narrator who sees society's strange and arbitrary customs for what they are. In traditional satire, this might take the form of a foreign visitor or a noble-savage type, as in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Denis Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*. The *Onion*'s use of the "newspaper article" as a narrator has the same effect: rendering, in curt, objective detail, the absurdity of an everyday banality ("Area Man Could Eat") or a hypothetical news event ("Supreme Court Rules Supreme Court Rules").

One particular innovation, credited to Dikkers, went on to influence the way the *Onion* still operates: writing the headlines first, then developing stories based on those headlines, rather than the other way around. "It's almost like a billboard sign on the road," Dikkers said in 2015 of this approach. "You'll know immediately what it's about and you can read more if you want." The *Onion*, that is, was written as clickable content before content was clickable. This approach would later be compounded by the disruptive power of the internet. In the beginning, though, the *Onion* was just following the principles of the inverted pyramid: establishing a newspaper story's most crucial ele-

ments in the lede, with more detailed and less relevant information doled out as the piece continues.

The *Onion* embraced the inverted pyramid and the conventions of the local paper with the enthusiasm of a devoted mimic, complete with columnists and man-on-the-street interviews. While its obvious ancestor, *MAD*, stayed true to its comic-book origins even after it morphed into a glossy magazine, the *Onion*'s rebirth as a newspaper required it to maintain a level of discipline. Rendered in blunt headline form, even a joke as broad and punny as "Jurisprudence Fetishist Gets Off On Technicality" felt like the work of a steady hand.

The *Onion* quickly had other company in the niche of news satire. In 1996, Comedy Central launched the *Daily Show* as a "Weekend Update"-style parody of television newscasts. Both the *Onion* and the *Daily Show* were born at times of incipient crisis for the industries they ridiculed. The rise of cable news—including CNN's wall-to-wall coverage of the Gulf War in late 1990 and early 1991, and Fox News's founding in 1996—had ushered in a newly fragmented era of media consumption, one that broke up the monopoly of the big-city dailies and the three main television net-

works. This sudden swath of choices resulted in a lot of news to absorb, but it also prompted consumers to be more selective. With so many voices barking at you all day, it was difficult to know whom to trust, and, for many people, the solution was to trust no one. Faith in the mainstream press began a historic decline that continues to this day. By the middle of the ’90s, both the newspaper report and the evening newscast were already anachronisms.

Of course, another crisis for media was right around the corner. Just as the *Onion* was finally turning into a newspaper—in 1993, its editors added the *A.V. Club*, a non-satirical arts-and-culture supplement—readers had developed a new habit: They were posting *Onion* articles in early internet forums or emailing them to friends, after which the stories spread elsewhere, generally without attribution. This didn’t seem like much of a problem until, in 1996, an *Onion* article became one of the internet’s first viral hits. “Clinton Deploys Vowels To Bosnia” travelled so widely that it was even read, in its entirety, on the NPR show *Car Talk*. (A sample line: “The deployment, dubbed Operation Vowel Storm by the State Department, is set for early next week, with the Adriatic port cities of Sjlbvdnzv and

Grzny slated to be the first recipients.") Nobody knew that it originated from a little joke newspaper in Wisconsin, though, and the *Onion* wasn't reaping any of the benefits. Like so many publishers before and since, Dikkers had initially resisted moving his paper online, but the unexploited success of "Clinton Deploys Vowels to Bosnia" convinced him otherwise.

TheOnion.com was an immediate hit. Before cat videos or the idea of the "social web" existed, the *Onion* stumbled upon an essential truth of the internet, which is that people like to share dumb things with their friends. The *Onion*'s profile kept rising. Offers poured in: there was an aborted pilot for a parody news show on Fox, a collaboration with MTV, several film options, a bestselling book called *Our Dumb Century*. The *Onion*'s online success diverted its original mission, and, slowly, it became what it used to parody: mainstream entertainment. In the guise of satirizing a newspaper, the *Onion* could aim for virality without ironizing virality itself.

In 1998, when new host Jon Stewart decided to take the *Daily Show* in a more political direction, *Onion* editor Ben Karlin became his head writer and eventual executive producer. As Stewart's audience grew, so did

the *Onion*'s reputation as a farm team of the country's best political comics. From then on, the stories of the *Onion* and the *Daily Show* would be intertwined.

In 2001, to cement its status as a serious media company, the *Onion* did what serious media companies do: it moved to New York. By now, the paper was being distributed in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Denver, as well as Madison, and its first New York issue was slated to be published on September 11, 2001. Needless to say, that didn't happen. Like a lot of recently arrived New Yorkers, the *Onion* struggled to make sense of its place in a city in mourning. The editors decided on a direct approach, devoting an entire issue to the attacks. Published on September 26, 2001, it became known as the "Holy Fucking Shit" issue. Although its lead headline was "U.S. Vows To Defeat Whoever It Is We're At War With," the standout article remains "Not Knowing What Else To Do, Woman Bakes American-Flag Cake."

The issue was hugely popular, an ambivalent look at a tragedy that had already turned maudlin. It was also a turning point for the *Onion*, marking the moment at

which it went from joke rag to legitimate cultural force: the country's most honest interpreter of the news. As the decade wore cruelly on, the *Onion* underwent a shift in tone, away from the blasé dorm-room cynicism of the '90s toward the more engaged skepticism of the post-9/11 Bush era. "After 19 months of struggle in Iraq, U.S. military officials conceded a loss to Iraqi insurgents Monday," a typical article read, "but said America can be proud of finishing 'a very strong second.'"

The *Onion* shared this strange new role—the nation's sarcastic conscience—with Jon Stewart. Over time, a term arose for the kind of parody they pioneered: "fake news." This phrase captured the tension at the heart of the form; it may have been fake, but it was still news, sort of. This was especially true in the case of the *Daily Show*. As polls consistently showed, for Americans under 35 the *Daily Show* had become a leading source of not just entertainment but information. Oddly, this fake news was itself nostalgic for an earlier era of news delivery—one that few in the audience were old enough to remember—when the daily paper and the nightly broadcast were the dominant voices of authority. In an era marked by steep mistrust of traditional institutions, the consensus went, fake news was able to say what the real news could not.

This consensus was complicated by the fact that fake news was becoming big business. In 2005, breakout star Stephen Colbert left the *Daily Show* to start his own program. Where the *Onion* made fun of *USA Today* and the *Daily Show* made fun of network and cable news, the *Colbert Report* made fun of the new titans of television: conservative pundits like Bill O'Reilly. Colbert was a gifted impersonator, so much so that he was sometimes indistinguishable from his source material. In character, he bloviated about American greatness and harangued his deer-in-headlights guests until they agreed with him. This gave rise to a curious phenomenon: Studies indicated that many conservative viewers did not realize that he was making fun of them. Instead, they saw him as one of their own.

This confusion, in which function seems to follow form, is not unique to Colbert. "Not the *Onion*!" we say of the latest stranger-than-fiction news headline—a demonstration of both the 21st century's surreality and the extent to which satire has become a lens through which to view it. Meanwhile, the website *Literally Unbelievable* collects the reactions of credulous Facebook users duped by articles like "42 Million Dead in Bloodiest Black Friday Weekend on Record,"

or, more recently, Alan Sugar, the British business magnate and star of the BBC's version of *The Apprentice*, wondering why Taylor Swift had gotten a swastika face tattoo. The *Onion* underestimates our gullibility, while, at the same time, it overestimates our ability to discern the literally unbelievable from the figuratively so. Like those surveys of Colbert's conservative viewers, *Literally Unbelievable* serves a purpose, helping *Onion* readers confirm their sense of themselves as savvy, discerning, and ultimately unaffected by the news one way or another. Those fooled by *Onion* headlines belong to a unique category: people who are being mocked for not realizing they are being mocked.

By the 2010s, though, the *Onion*—like every other newspaper—was contending with dwindling readership and declining advertiser interest in its print edition. At its peak in the mid-aughts, it had had a circulation of 500,000 and was distributed in 17 North American cities. By 2013, it was available in three, and had left New York for Chicago as a cost-saving move. That December, it announced that it would cease making a print edition at all.

Although many other papers had folded by then, the *Onion*'s final print issue (lead headline: "*Onion* Print Revenues Up 5,000 Percent") was significant in a way that previous deaths weren't. While most newspapers established themselves in print and eventually siphoned their resources off to online editions, the internet had, early on, actually cemented the popularity of the *Onion*'s physical edition. Even in its online-only form, the *Onion* is more devoted to the inverted pyramid, the trappings of Associated Press style, and the quirks of the small-town newspaper than any actual newspaper. It still publishes horoscopes and editorial cartoons. Without a paper-and-ink edition, this scrupulous fealty to the traditions of newsprint feels quaint. There is, however, an important caveat: the *Onion* used to incorporate a range of article lengths, but every story is now less than 200 words. The days of an 800-word classic like "National Funk Congress Deadlocked On Get Up/Get Down Issue" are gone. The *Onion*'s headline-first approach has reached maturation.

By the time the *Onion*'s print edition folded, the fake newspaper article had become one of the most tired genres of online comedy. There are joke music websites like *Metal Sucks* and the *Hard Times*; there are joke la-

dyblogs like *Reductress*; and then there is the absolute worst satirical site of all, the *Borowitz Report*. Even as actual newspapers went out of business, their satirical versions proliferated. As the academic Simon Dentith has pointed out, parody often has this paradoxical effect: it preserves what it lampoons. This is how *Don Quixote*, a parody of the chivalric romance, came to be seen as the first modern novel. The problem is that fewer and fewer parody-news readers have any relationship with its source material. "The reference point is becoming lost for some people," the *Onion*'s current editor-in-chief, Chad Nackers, recently admitted to the *Ringer*.

In 2014, in an effort to keep up with the times, the *Onion* launched *ClickHole*, a parody of *BuzzFeed*-esque clickbait. *ClickHole* could do what its parent site couldn't—satirize virality—and it developed a voice that was, essentially, an online-only update of the *Onion*'s. It took the recognizable clichés of digital media—the breathless you-won't-believe-what-happened-next headlines, the millennial nostalgia, the earnest slacktivism, the quizzes and listicles—and juxtaposed them, zero-to-a-hundred style, with the humdrum, the ridiculous, and the awful. In an early piece, "Seven Classic '90s Toys That Weren't Fun Anymore After 9/11,"

the author writes, of Mr. Bucket, "We could seriously spend a whole afternoon remembering the kooky laughs this little guy gave us and still never erase the stomach-churning memory of United Flight 175 plunging into that second tower."

Gawker once called *ClickHole*, accurately, "the only worthwhile website on the entire internet," but it's very hard to out-*BuzzFeed BuzzFeed*. This is true on an obvious level: A monumentally stupid *BuzzFeed* quiz like "What Is Your Inner Potato?" differs from *ClickHole's* "What Is Your Knowledge Of An Egg?" only by a matter of degrees. But the problem goes beyond that. Whether in response to *ClickHole*, or simply because of its growing sense of legitimacy, *BuzzFeed* has, Borg-like, absorbed its tormentor's sly self-awareness. Sometimes this manifests itself in material ways, as when *BuzzFeed* poached a writer away from *ClickHole* on the strength of his quiz "Which Hungry Hungry Hippo Are You?" Elsewhere, this shift shows up more subtly. One of *ClickHole*'s greatest headline gags, "The Time I Spent On A Commercial Whaling Ship Totally Changed My Perspective On The World," led, upon clicking, to all 200,000-odd words of *Moby-Dick*. Then, a few months later, *BuzzFeed* made essentially the same joke when it

posted Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," unaltered, as an 11-point listicle, with Marx himself bylined as a "*BuzzFeed* Contributor."

In January of 2016, Univision Communications, one of the largest private media companies in the country, acquired a controlling stake in Onion Inc. The price tag—something in the range of $200 million for 40 percent of the company—means that the *Onion* was, in toto, worth significantly more than the *Washington Post* (bought by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos for $250 million) or the *Boston Globe* (bought by Red Sox owner John W. Henry for $70 million). This deal was widely interpreted as part of Univision's strategy to court a younger audience. "Comedy is playing an expanding role in our culture as a vehicle for audiences to explore, debate and understand the important ideas of our time," a Univision executive said in a press release. The note-perfect corporate banality of that statement—*people like funny things, says businessman*—as well as the optics of the deal—*media conglomerate buys joke website*—invited obvious analogies to the *Onion*'s work: "Area Satirical Publication The *Onion* Sold To

Univision (Seriously)," as an NPR headline went.

Univision's acquisition of the *Onion* was quickly followed by another purchase, this time of Gawker Media, which had been bankrupted by a massive defamation lawsuit. Univision paid just $135 million for the company's seven websites, then promptly shut down *Gawker* itself. Buying Gawker Media—now called Gizmodo Media Group—was another iteration of Univision's efforts to reach millennials. Last year, the *Onion* migrated to Kinja, GMG's publishing system, and it now joins *Deadspin*, *Jezebel*, and other post-*Gawker* properties as yet another asset in Univison's digital portfolio. Since the move to Kinja, the *Onion* even looks like every other GMG vertical. A newspaper that once had an ironic relationship to its material form has become interchangeable with the websites around it. Today, though, the *Onion* is less a newspaper than a news aggregator. Skimming the *Onion*'s headlines—"'The President Can Suck My Big Fat Dick,' Says Rex Tillerson In Veiled Attack On Trump"; "Furious Meghan Markle Can't Believe Harry Hasn't Told Family She's Black Yet"—gives the reader an idea of the news of the day, viewed in a funhouse mirror.

In 2015, the *Onion* had launched *StarWipe*, to satirize outlets like *TMZ*. *Gawker*'s reporting style had

imitated celebrity tabloids—its tagline was "Today's gossip is tomorrow's news"—while simultaneously making its readers feel witty and knowing. *StarWipe*, on the other hand, just seemed to hate celebrities. Its tone was chiefly one of boredom, and it displayed none of the schizoid reverence for its subject matter that *Gawker* had for gossip or *ClickHole* has for clickbait. *StarWipe* was shut down after less than a year; *Gawker*, of course, was destroyed by a petty revenge plot, fronted by Hulk Hogan and funded by Peter Thiel. Both of these endings were ominous portents. If celebrity gossip was too dumb to be parodied, and if semi-satirical websites could be killed by washed-up '80s stars and billionaires, what would happen to the media if, God forbid, a celebrity ever became president?

The *Onion* has proven itself prescient, with a more consistent track record than many political pundits. In 2012, for example, it foresaw the rise of Donald Trump: "After Obama Victory, Shrieking White-Hot Sphere Of Pure Rage Early GOP Front-Runner For 2016." But once Trump shifted from hypothetical sphere of rage to increasingly viable

candidate, the *Onion*, like other satirical outlets, ran into trouble. During the election, its coverage of conventional politicians like Hillary Clinton and Ted Cruz was reliable, because they check familiar boxes: the unprincipled establishment sellout, the creepy religious fanatic. But Trump, both in politics and in personality, defies this sort of easy categorization. "Obama was more of a traditional president as far as his decorum and even his preparation and policy," Nackers told *Politico* this week. "He seemed like a pretty organized guy. You leap off of that and so things can be more surreal and absurd when you're making fun of him. Whereas Trump is kind of starting from this point of already being kind of absurd."

Satire relies on exaggeration—the space between what actually happened and what might have been, if we lived in a marginally more ridiculous world. Under Trump, though, there is no world more ridiculous than our own. The spectacular chaos emanating from the White House overwhelms both our critical faculties and our ability to make fun of it. The image of Trump painted by outlets like the *New York Times* is often much more bizarre than anything the *Onion* could invent. The Donald Trump who retires at 6:30

pm to wander, aimless and ghost-like, around the White House residence; who obsesses over choosing new drapes for the Oval Office; who awakens in the wee hours to stare blankly at his phone—*that* Donald Trump is very funny. The *Onion*, however, has largely preached to the choir ("Trump Administration Worried President Burning Through Minority Scapegoats At Unsustainable Rate"), depicting the president as merely dumb or evil. It's true that Trump is both of those things. But pointing out the obvious doesn't make for biting critique.

It's often said, rightly, that Trump is the perfect president for an age in which politics is synonymous with entertainment. Our dominant mode of contemporary satire—the fake news show—should be primed for this era. Although Stewart has retired and Colbert has moved to network television, alumni from those shows are everywhere: Trevor Noah taking the reins at the *Daily Show*, John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*, Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal*, the *Opposition* with Jordan Klepper. Like the *Onion*, however, these shows have had a hard time meeting the challenge that Trump poses. Stewart's signature trick, widely imitated by his pupils—catching a politician, split-screen, in a moment

of hypocrisy—has little impact on a president who will deny what he's said in the past if it differs from what he says today. In retrospect, this technique looks almost naïve: It presupposes a basic consensus about political norms that no longer exists. Twitter users will often find and retweet a Trump statement from several years earlier that contradicts whatever outrageous position he's taken most recently. It's funny, but it's not like the president himself notices or cares.

In the Trump era, parody-news shows have ossified more and more into feeble pandering. The hashtag activism of John Oliver's "Make Donald Drumpf Again" sums this up: the belief that, if we avoid using Trump's name, it will sap him of his power like some kind of reverse Rumpelstiltskin. Unfortunately, the contemporary *Onion* often falls into the same self-indulgent trap. Like all great satire, its best work makes the reader feel complicit rather than smug ("Obama Gently Guides Michelle's Hand As She Maneuvers Drone Joystick"). But the *Onion* has been forced to reckon with the internet's insatiable appetite. Advertisers constantly demand more and better clicks, and there are not many alternative sources of revenue for online news, satirical or otherwise; though

the *Onion* makes fun of the media, it is subject to the same market forces, since its sense of humor doesn't extend to its business model. This means that the *Onion* simply publishes way more stuff than it ever has before—often the kind of material designed for a particular audience of angry, motivated Facebook users. (The *Onion*'s uneven election coverage reportedly triggered a significant increase in traffic.) The result has been some widely distributed pieces, like "IDF Soldier Recounts Harrowing, Heroic War Story Of Killing Eight-Month-Old Child." However righteous and well-placed its anger, though, a story like that is designed only to placate. It's not surprising or uncomfortable, or even very sad.

For a long time, "fake news" almost exclusively referred to news parody of the kind pioneered by the *Onion*. But since the 2016 election, as political observers tried to make sense of the result, fake news has come to mean something very different. It's a favorite rallying cry, though its definition has changed over time. For liberals, fake news helped provide an explanation for Donald Trump: If a majority of white

women voted for an accused rapist, or if a majority of evangelicals voted for a man of fitful piety, it was only because the internet made them do it. As soon as the mainstream press started using the term, though, Trump turned it against them (keeping track of everything he has called "fake news" is a sport unto itself), and its meaning has only continued to grow more slippery. It refers not just to parody or online misinformation but also to misleading or badly sourced reporting, minor errors in otherwise factual accounts, outright hoaxes, or pretty much anything anyone doesn't like. In a supposedly partisan time, it has become a cross-partisan epithet. Amid all this, it's startling to remember that, not long ago, "fake news" was just Jon Stewart mugging for the camera, or an *Onion* article like "Fuck, Roommates Want To Have Meeting."

Fake-news sites are typically imagined as Macedonian content farms pumping out pro-Trump clickbait, perhaps with shadowy ties to Russian cyberintelligence; one *BuzzFeed* analysis indicated that fake-news articles of this kind were, in the last few months of the campaign, shared more widely than articles from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or CNN. What has been less remarked upon is the fact that a

number of these sites use the cover of satire—that is, the disguise of *Onion*-like news parody—as an excuse for what they do. The proprietor of abcnews.com.co, an especially successful fake-news site that spread stories about paid protesters and Muslim supreme court justices, told the *Washington Post* that he takes pride in his work. "I like getting lumped in with the *Onion*," he said. "The stuff I do—I spend more time on it. There's purpose and meaning behind it. I don't just write fake news just to write it." At the same time, he acknowledged deliberately targeting conservative readers because of their gullibility, adding, "I think Trump is in the White House because of me." Indeed, the entire business model of fake-news sites relies on the articles being taken seriously, going viral, and generating ad clickthroughs. The *Onion* imitates the news; sites like *Hot Global News* and *Newslo* go one step further, imitating parody to make fake news that seems real. One kind of fake news has passed the baton to another.

There are few better exemplars of fake news—and its legitimation—than Alex Jones, the red-faced, hyperventilating titan of *Info Wars*. While Colbert was starting his career satirizing conservative talk-show hosts, Jones's singularly maundering monologues were launching the

9/11 truther movement and dozens of other popular false-flag theories. *InfoWars* is said to receive millions of visitors per month, though the majority of Jones's income reportedly derives from the male-vitality supplements and other products he hawks on the site (like Wake Up America: Patriot Blend coffee). Jones's gift for performance made him the perfect hype man for Trump, who famously appeared on his show during the presidential campaign, granting a certain authority to the unintentionally funny *InfoWars*; this trend continued when, after the election, *InfoWars* was briefly given White House press credentials. Like satire, *InfoWars*'s brand of conspiracy theory is crass, entirely made up, and a way to make sense of a complicated, troubling world—a black-mirror reflection of the *Onion*.

Recently, there have been rumblings of discontent at Onion Inc. Its traffic has fallen considerably since the highs of the 2016 election, and its diminished form under Univision indicates that it's probably less valuable than it once was. Like all media outlets, the *Onion* has had difficulty adjusting to Facebook and Twitter's algorithmic tweaks,

which can, without warning, send readership spiraling. (An *Onion* headline from March: "Report: We Don't Make Any Money If You Don't Click The Fucking Link.") In 2017, the *Onion*'s editor-in-chief and executive editor both left, reportedly over disagreements with Univision management; this spring, it was revealed that the two former editors were heading a new comedy website funded by Elon Musk, and had poached several other *Onion* staffers. Then, just a few weeks later, *Onion* employees joined their GMG colleagues in the Writer's Guild of America, East. Their announcement was titled "Onion Inc.'s Groveling, Ungrateful Staffers Unionize."

When we talk about the troubled state of contemporary satire, perhaps we should phrase it less as a fait accompli and more as a challenge: to pioneer different forms, different ways of responding to the world. Satirists have already begun to do this. During the 2016 election, the fictional political commentator Carl Diggler derided data wonks like Nate Silver, sometimes predicting primary results with greater accuracy than actual pollsters. The video producer Vic Berger created a series of surreal, slyly edited works—Ryan Trecartin with more air horns—that turned illuminating mo-

ments from the campaign into art. In one, the camera zooms in on an explosion of spittle bursting from the corner of Trump's mouth. "Under President Trump, here's what would happen: God is dead," Trump says. "He is so, so stupid." Berger's collages, which use what already exists rather than starting from scratch, can be almost as informative, and often more affecting, than the numbing feedback loop of the day's news. Experiments in satire like these are disjointed and frenetic—truer to how we consume news today.

Elements within the *Onion* have started some experiments of their own. Despite its difficulties, *ClickHole* has picked up some of the slack from its progenitor. It still publishes pieces of various lengths and forms, and it still feels bizarre and idiosyncratic in the way the *Onion* itself once did. It has also launched two spinoffs of its own: *PatriotHole*, a funny if occasionally predictable takedown of *Breitbart* and *InfoWars*; and *ResistanceHole*, a more promising venture. *ResistanceHole* takes aim at the sputtering liberals of the online anti-Trump movement ("Resistance Win! This Artist Was Going To Draw Trump And Putin Kissing, But Was Worried That Seemed Homophobic, So He Had Them Kiss While Thinking About Pamela Anderson"),

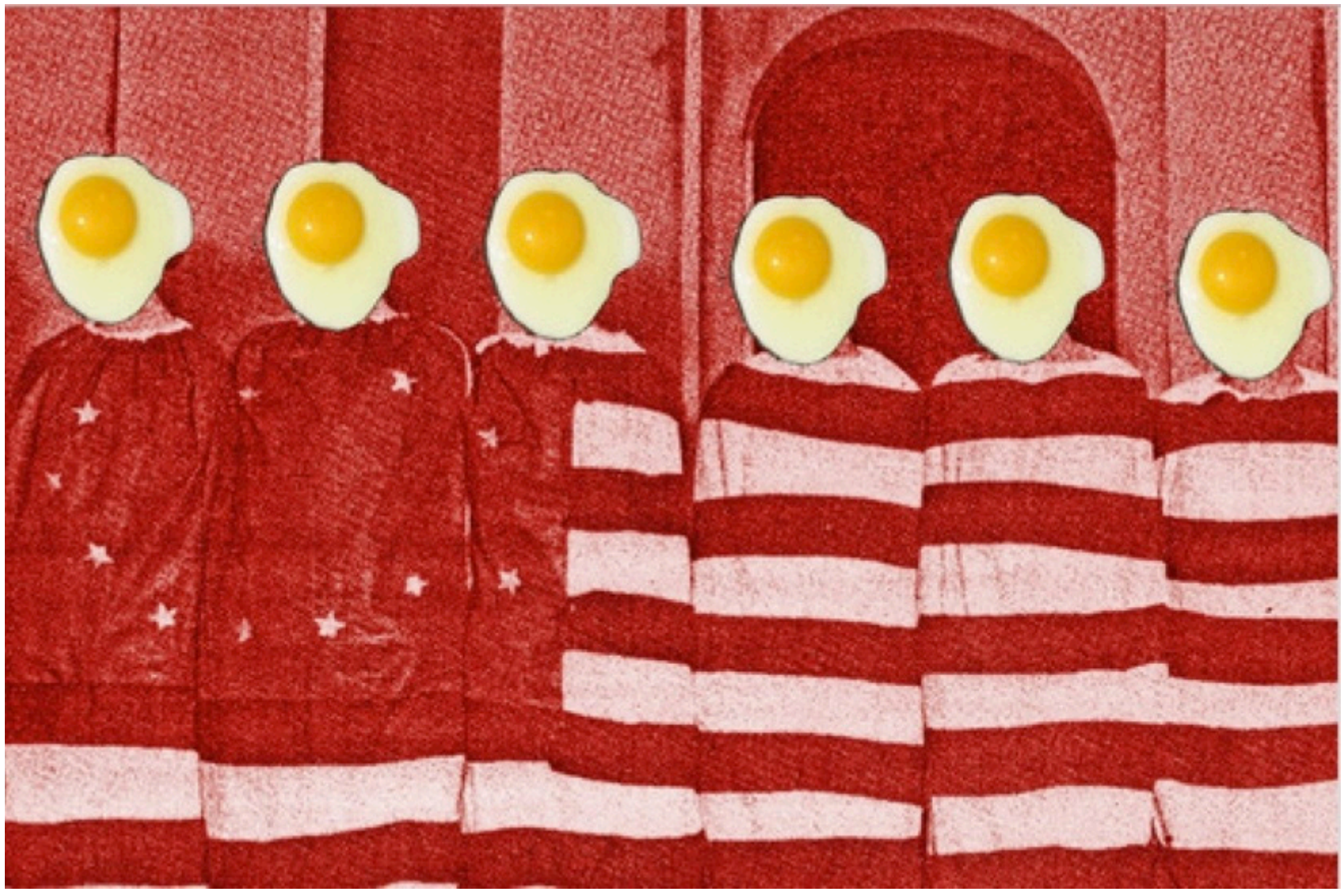
a demographic that presumably includes at least some of the *Onion*'s own readership. In the age of fragmented media consumption, the *Onion* must cover its bases with a *ClickHole* for both the left and the right.

Beyond the pressures of the internet and the cataclysms of the Trump era, it may be that the *Onion*'s signature—the fake newspaper article—is, after 30 years, finally starting to wear thin. Since the newspaper article is no longer our preeminent source of information, news parody no longer resonates in the same way. Instead, it's wallpaper. It predicts the future; it saturates the internet; its onetime pioneers host network talk shows. Satire isn't dead, and Trump didn't kill it. What has happened, rather, is that it's failed to keep pace with what we've become.

Originally published May 21, 2018
reallifemag.com/unreal-news/

No Joke

by Natasha Lennard



A popular fiction has it that Socrates was convicted of his various charges by a slim majority of Athenian judges. Then, when it came to sentencing, the prosecutor proposed death. Socrates instead proposed that he receive free meals for life in the city's sacred hearth. In response, more judges voted to

sentence him to death for his impertinence than had voted to convict him in the first place. Though this isn't true, it would have been ironic if it were.

Socrates, we might say, died from "irony poisoning." Not the flesh-and-blood man Socrates, of course—he was probably killed for teaching and befriending deposed tyrants—but the Socrates we know from Plato and Xenophon's hagiographic renderings, who was apparently sentenced to death by hemlock for using irony to reveal philosophical truths to young Athenian men.

If only the term *irony poisoning* were used that way, for cases in which poison is dispatched *against* irony. Instead, the term has emerged in social media parlance to signify that irony, cultivated online, is itself the poison. Mimetic of the process it ostensibly denotes, "irony poisoning" began somewhat as a joke. It's well summed up, as these things often are, in an Urban Dictionary entry: "Irony poisoning is when one's world view/Weltanschauung/reality tunnel is so dominated by irony and detachment-based-comedy that the joke becomes real and you start to do things that are immoral or wrong from a place of deep nihilistic cynicism." An extreme case of "irony poisoning" turns

the online shitposter into the committed violent racist, willing to carry out bloody deeds offline.

Had "irony poisoning" remained imprecise, self-referential Twitter jargon, there would be no reason to take issue with it. But it's now being used in earnest to describe a real and troubling *condition.* It has been enthusiastically picked up by publications like the *Guardian*, the *Boston Globe,* and the *New York Times,* which embraced it as a revelatory explanation for the rise and spread of fascist communities online and the offline violence they facilitate. "We are making a plea to scholars, readers and Silicon Valley elites," the *Times* journalists wrote, without apparent irony, "take irony poisoning seriously." And we should, but not for the reasons they adduce. Rather, the term's adoption reveals the flawed way mainstream liberal analysis wants to see and interpret fascism. It lets centrist liberals do what centrist liberals do best: call for civility, earnestness, and Truth as the antidote to violent extremism.

That's not to say that the pattern that the "irony poisoning" thesis points to is not gravely real. Online communities awash in euphemistic alt-right neo-Nazi references as well as explicit racial slurs and Hitler memes have produced violent actors in the physical world. Char-

lottesville was organized as a meat-space meetup of white supremacists who had found each other online and adopted a cartoonish lexicon by which to recognize each other (Pepes, symbols of Odinism and so on) and culminated in white supremacists beating a black man with metal poles, and a neo-Nazi mowing his Dodge Charger into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one. Lane Davis, a prolific far-right troll on YouTube who called his parents "leftist pedophiles," was thought to be nothing more than an outrage peddler until he stabbed his dad to death. The *New York Times* invoked irony poisoning in response to a case involving a German firefighter in a liberal town who bartered online in anti-refugee Facebook propaganda and Hitler jokes. He then attempted to set fire to a refugee group house.

These incidents of physical violence were no doubt stoked by a world view shaped and encouraged in social media's dark crevices, where race hate is often expressed and (further) normalized through memes and jokes. That is simply to say that our beliefs and behaviors are shaped and reinforced by the communities of which we are a part, and individual participation reinforces the group subjectivity in turn. Yet the framework of "irony poisoning" becomes dubious when applied as an actu-

al explanation or pathology. By blaming irony as some sort of gateway drug to "real" race hate, it suggests that "real" far-right extremism develops through an extreme ironic detachment from reality and its moral standards. But in fact it is through routine *attachment* to networks in which white supremacy is an *a priori* moral norm in need of defense that fascist subjects are formed. Attachment, not detachment, is the problem.

For those of us interested in delivering effective blows to racist, fascistic formation, dismantling this liberal framework matters. I agree, we must take seriously the discursive violence expressed through veiled euphemisms and Pepe memes on Twitter, and the physical violence committed by those who speak that language. And we must take seriously that the flawed liberal response to these horrors is to blame irony.

The irony poisoning pathology belongs in the pantheon of bad explanations for the rise of fascism, which insist that a public is somehow unwittingly tricked into it: the idea that young, disaffected, white male social media users believe themselves to simply be playing a communal game of out-trolling each other

but are in fact duped into a true fascistic frenzy. We see this framework play out in Jason Wilson's piece on the phenomenon in the *Guardian,* in which he notes that seasoned neo-Nazis lure new recruits in with memes and racist jokes.

The media has picked up on contemporary white supremacist irony as if all previous iterations of fascism were somehow devoid of it. It's perhaps calming to think that previous fascist constellations were transparent regimes of explicit race hate, easy to name and oppose. Nazi hats had skulls on them, for god's sake, as British comedians David Mitchell and Robert Webb skewer in a sketch in which one Nazi asks another, "Hans, are we the baddies?" But historic fascist movements often bartered in irony and euphemism. Mussolini's Black Shirts took up the slogan "Me Ne Frego," which basically translates to "I don't give a fuck"—a seeming cry of nihilistic detachment. But in context, the phrase meant "I don't give a fuck if I die fighting for fascism." The ironic expression was one of extreme attachment and sincere commitment, which makes individual nihilism possible. And as Malcolm Harris pointed out at in an interview with Elaine Parsons, author of *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan in Reconstruction*, the Reconstruc-

tion Klan also weaponized "goofiness and so-called irony." "All the Klannish affectations and accoutrements that seem so ridiculous today—the alliterative K's, the costumes, the *Magic: The Gathering* titles like 'Grand Wizard' and 'Exalted Cyclops'—were ridiculous, and self-consciously so," wrote Harris. "One of the functions of humor for the Klan, Parsons says, was to mark their transgressions as acceptable." The funny white ghost costumes didn't distract the American public into regarding Klan violence and the destruction of black life as acceptable and even desirable; rather it made it appear as normal and natural as laughter. The appeal to irony was not a trick, but an attempt to assert an already existing racist community, to invoke belonging and exclusion of the other.

In Germany in 1933, Wilhelm Reich, in analyzing how a society chooses fascism, rejected the all-too-easy notion of the duped masses. He insisted that we take seriously the fact that people, en masse, genuinely *desired* fascism. Ignorant masses weren't manipulated into an authoritarian system they do not actually want. A Freudian acolyte, Reich posited a repressive hypothesis to account for fascist desire: The collective fascist subject was the result of societal sexual repression. His

diagnosis was biologically essentialist and now appears wildly outdated, but his insistence on taking fascistic *desire* seriously remains all too lacking in today's commentary on the rise of the far right.

This approach was further developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to account for fascist desire formation as a productive force rather than a by-product of repression. "No, the masses were not innocent dupes; at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they wanted fascism," they wrote. Deleuze and Guattari focused on micro-fascisms—quotidian, repressive operations of politics and power organized under capitalism and modernity. The individualized and detached self, the over-codings of family unit normativity, the authoritarian tendency of careerism and competition, the desire for hierarchy and power, the police—all among paranoiac sites of micro-fascism. These stem from the practices of authoritarianism and domination and exploitation that form us, reflecting how we are coded to desire the domination and oppression of the nameable "other," and none of us are free of them. We can't just "decide" our way out of them through a renewed commitment to earnestness.

But not everyone becomes a neo-Nazi. That requires a nurturing and constant reaffirmation of that

fascistic desire to oppress and live in an oppressive world. And to be sure, that pernicious affirmation of white supremacy is not in short supply. Long before the birth of the internet, Deleuze and Guattari stressed interactive, habitual way that fascist desire is determined: "Desire is never an undifferentiated instinctual energy, but itself results from a highly developed, engineered setup rich in interactions." Fascist subject formation relies on habit, and collective habit at that; social media platforms are an "engineered setup" that accommodate and incentivize these routines. Social media is literally designed to offer metrics of affirmation, which are easily adapted to incubating fascist desire.

The alt-right euphemistic symbols of racism are meant to confuse outsiders and affirm insiders who can feel a sense of belonging by being in the know. They are not attempts to trick the otherwise unsusceptible into racist thinking. Making racist jokes and references are among the habits that sustain and grow neo-fascist online communities, but it's not the "irony" in them that affords a sense of permission and ushers someone toward white supremacist violence; it is the community that fosters such speech. The ability for angry, entitled people to find each other and support each

other's racial animosities, to speak freely and spread their message without negative consequences provides the conditions for far-right extremism to flourish, not the ambiguities of ironic discourse.

The suggestion that young social media users could somehow stumble into these online communities, believing them to be populated by ironic and nihilistic jokesters as opposed to "real" racists does not add up. Participation presumes understanding what Wittgenstein called a "form of life," the necessary background context by which interactions and expressions are made possible. In these communities, emboldened white supremacy is the form of life, and participating in them presumes that understanding. Participants can't be "poisoned" by what they already know.

Consider the "OK" hand sign adopted by the alt-right, Proud Boys, Identity Evropa and their fellow neo-Nazi travelers. The use of the hand sign began as a hoax on a 4chan alt-right discussion board. "Operation O-KKK" was announced "to convince people on Twitter that the 'OK' hand sign has been co-opted by neo-Nazis." The same "meme magic"—to borrow shitposter parlance—was used to "trick" liberals and leftists into believing that milk was a white power

symbol. Members of the alt-right swarmed actor Shia LaBeouf's *He Will Not Divide Us* video-stream installation in New York, chugging cartons of milk. But there is nothing magical or alchemical in giving objects and words new significance through use. That just how meaning works. And it works even faster through social media's metabolism, which establishes popular phrases and new references several times a day at minimum.

Buzzfeed's Joe Bernstein, who first reported on the fight over the "OK" sign, wrote, "Where it gets really fuzzy … is trying to determine when and if these symbols cross over from ironic usage." But it's pretty clear that the "ironic" usage was poisoned with real racism from the moment groups defined by their white supremacy decide to collectively communicate and represent themselves with it. It's not that irony poisoned the symbol or anyone using it; it's the fact that neo-fascists used it to signal each other and develop the habit together, strengthening group subjectivity. Outside the language game of racism, it still just means "OK." Inside, it betokens emboldened white supremacist fascism and bonds that sustain it. Those who claimed to be no more than pranksters were not drawing "us vs. them" lines arbitrarily; their targets were, from the

jump, "libtards" and "social justice warriors" who dared care about misogyny and white supremacy.

Not every alt-right shitposter is going to take up physical violence against immigrants and non-white people. But the ones who do were not led to violence by a morality-blurring world of white supremacist humor but a consensus reality built around racism as a given, which is then nurtured, collectively and algorithmically.

If desiring fascism is not something that happens out of reason, we cannot break it with reason alone—this is the liberal mistake that manifests as calls to debate fascists in order to reveal the flaws in their thinking, as if fascist desire was simply something that dissolves into dust when faced with a counterargument or exposed for what it is.

Having a platform is what allows fascist communities to nurture fascist desire in participants. Thus anti-fascists seek to disrupt far-right rallies, deny opportunities to fascist speakers, and expose and shutter those online fascist communities to create unpleasant, if not intolerable, consequences for those indulging or

exploring fascist desire. The point is to break the fascist habit by denying the spaces where it is fostered.

It would suit liberal and conservative disavowals of antifa tactics if irony poisoning were really the problem at hand. Condemning irony is the same as insisting that sunlight is the best disinfectant for fascism. As Vicky Osterweil noted in this publication, "feckless liberals abdicate power in the hopes that it will somehow 'reveal' the true nature of fascism—think of Democrats relying on Trump to finally demonstrate his unfitness to rule rather than organizing an actual opposition—fascism consolidates representations of that unfitness as opportunities to demonstrate loyalty and belonging." Behind the so-called irony of Pepe and Kek, there is no pure discursive sphere to be revealed, where fascism and race hate have no place to hide. I suppose there's some irony—a tired, well-worn irony—in the media suggesting that the problem with racist fascism under Trump is that it's all too obscure.

Originally published Oct. 11, 2018
reallifemag.com/no-joke/

Friction-Free Racism

by Chris Gilliard

Once upon a time I intended to do a project about the ways that black folks experienced how they were perceived in America. It would document those times when something happens and you say to yourself, “Wow, in the eyes of some folks,

I'm still *just* a black person." Every black person I've ever met has had at least one of these moments, and often several, even after they became "successful." My title for the project was "Still a Negro."

The idea was partly inspired by the years when I taught at a university in Detroit in a summer outreach program for kids, mainly from the city's middle and high schools who were considering an engineering career. Normally I taught in the liberal arts building, but the outreach program was in the slightly less broken-down engineering building across campus. Often I would go over early to use the faculty copier there, and every year I taught in the program—eight years total—someone from the engineering faculty would reprimand me for using the copier. I knew it would happen, and yet each time I was surprised.

Reprimand is probably not a strong enough word to cover the variety of glares, stares, and accusations I elicited. I guess it's possible that they didn't recognize me as one of their colleagues, but what pissed me off was that their reactions suggested that they didn't believe I *could* be: They gaped at me, accused me of lying, demanded proof that I really was faculty, or announced that they're not going to argue with a student. Simple

courtesy should have prevented such behavior. Since my own behavior was not out of place, it could only mean that I looked out of place. And then, for the ten millionth time, I would say to myself, "Oh my god! I forgot that I'm still a Negro."

The fact that this happened in the engineering department was not lost on me. Questioning the inclusivity of engineering and computer science departments has been going on for quite some time. Several current "innovations" coming out of these fields, many rooted in facial recognition, are indicative of how scientific racism has long been embedded in apparently neutral attempts to measure people—a "new" spin on age-old notions of phrenology and biological determinism, updated with digital capabilities.

Only the most mundane uses of biometrics and facial recognition are concerned with *only* identifying a specific person, matching a name to a face or using a face to unlock a phone. Typically these systems are invested in taking the extra steps of assigning a subject to an identity category in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and matching those categories with guesses about emotions, intentions, relationships, and character to shore up forms of discrimination, both judicial and economic.

Certainly the practice of coding difference onto bodies is not new; determining who belongs in what categories—think about battles over citizenship, the "one drop" rule of blackness, or discussions about how to categorize trans people—are longstanding historical, legal, and social projects made more real and "effective" by whatever technologies are available at the time. As Simone Browne catalogs in *Dark Matters,* her groundbreaking work on the historical and present-day surveillance of blackness, anthropometry

> was introduced in 1883 by Alphonse Bertillon as a system of measuring and then cataloguing the human body by distinguishing one individual from another for the purposes of identification, classification, and criminal forensics. This early biometric information technology was put to work as a 'scientific method' alongside the pseudo-sciences of craniotometry (the measurement of the skull to assign criminality and intelligence to race and gender) and phrenology (attributing mental abilities to the shape of the skull, as the skull was believed to hold a brain made up of the individual organs).

A key to Browne's book is her detailed look at the way that black bodies have consistently been surveilled in America: The technologies change, but the process remains the same. Browne identifies contemporary

practices like facial recognition as *digital epidermalization:* "the exercise of power cast by the disembodied gaze of certain surveillance technologies (for example, identity card and e-passport verification machines) that can be employed to do the work of alienating the subject by producing a 'truth' about the body and one's identity (or identities) despite the subject's claims."

Iterations of these technologies are already being used in airports, at borders, in stadiums, and in shopping malls—not just in countries like China but in the United States. A number of new companies, including Faception, NTechLab, and BIOPAC systems, are advancing the centuries-old project of phrenology, making the claim that machine learning can detect discrete physical features and make data-driven predictions about the race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, emotional state, propensity for violence, or character of those who possess them.

Many current digital platforms proceed according to the same process of writing difference onto bodies through a process of data extraction and then using "code" to define who is what. Such acts of biometric determinism fit with what has been called surveillance capitalism, defined by Shoshanna Zuboff as "the mon-

etization of free behavioral data acquired through surveillance and sold to entities with interest in your future behavior." Facebook's use of "ethnic affinity" as a proxy for race is a prime example. The platform's interface does not offer users a way to self-identify according to race, but advertisers can nonetheless target people based on Facebook's ascription of an "affinity" along racial lines. In other words, race is deployed as an externally assigned category for purposes of commercial exploitation and social control, not part of self-generated identity for reasons of personal expression. The ability to define one's self and tell one's own stories is central to being human and how one relates to others; platforms' ascribing identity through data undermines both.

These code-derived identities in turn complement Silicon Valley's pursuit of "friction-free" interactions, interfaces, and applications in which a user doesn't have to talk to people, listen to them, engage with them, or even see them. From this point of view, personal interactions are not vital but inherently messy, and presupposed *difference* (in terms of race, class, and ethnicity) is held responsible. Platforms then promise to manage the "messiness" of relationships by reducing them to transactions. The apps and interfaces create

an environment where interactions can happen without people having to make any effort to understand or know each other. This is a guiding principle of services ranging from Uber, to Amazon Go grocery stores, to touchscreen-ordering kiosks at fast-food joints. At the same time racism and othering are rendered at the level of code, so certain users can feel innocent and not complicit in it.

In an essay for the engineering bulletin *IEEE Technology and Society,* anthropologist Sally Applin discusses how Uber "streamlined" the traditional taxi ride:

> They did this in part by disrupting dispatch labor (replacing the people who are not critical to the actual job of driving the car with a software service and the labor of the passenger), *removing the language and cultural barriers of communicating directly with drivers (often from other countries and cultures)*, and shifting traditional taxi radio communications to the internet. *[Emphasis added]*

In other words, interacting with the driver is perceived as a main source of "friction," and Uber is experienced as "seamless" because it effaces those interactions.

But this expectation of seamlessness can intensify the way users interpret difference as a pretext for a

discount or a bad rating. As the authors of "Discriminating Tastes: Uber's Customer Ratings as Vehicles for Workplace Discrimination" point out:

> Because the Uber system is designed and marketed as a seamless experience (Uber Newsroom, 2015), and coupled with confusion over what driver ratings are for, any friction during a ride can cause passengers to channel their frustrations
>
> In online markets, consumer behavior often exhibits bias based on the perceived race of another party to the exchange. This bias often manifests via lower offer prices and decreased response rates … More recently, a study of Airbnb … found that guests with African–American names were about 16 percent less likely to be accepted as rentees than guests with characteristically white names.

"Ghettotracker," which purported to identify neighborhoods to avoid, and other apps like it (SafeRoute, Road Buddy) are further extensions of the same data-coding and "friction"-eliminating logic. These apps allow for discrimination against marginalized communities by encoding racist articulations of what constitutes danger and criminality. In effect, they extend the logic of policies like "broken windows" and layer a cute interface on top of it.

Given the primacy of Google Maps and the push

for smart cities, what happens when these technologies are combined in or across large platforms? Even the Netflix algorithm has been critiqued for primarily only offering "Black" films to certain groups of people. What happens when the stakes are higher? Once products and, more important, people are coded as having certain preferences and tendencies, the feedback loops of algorithmic systems will work to reinforce these often flawed and discriminatory assumptions. The presupposed problem of difference will become even more entrenched, the chasms between people will widen.

At its root then, surveillance capitalism and its efficiencies ease "friction" through dehumanization on the basis of race, class, and gender identity. Its implementation in platforms might be categorized as what, in *Racial Formation in the United States,* Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe as "racial projects": "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines."

The impulse to find mathematical models that will not only accurately represent reality but also predict the

future forces us all into a paradox. It should be obvious that no degree of measurement, whether done by calipers or facial recognition, can accurately determine an individual's identity independent of the social, historical, and cultural elements that have informed identity. Identification technologies are rooted in the history of how our society codes difference, and they have proved a profitable means of sustaining the regimes grounded in the resulting hierarchies. Because companies and governments are so heavily invested in these tools, critics are often left to call for better representation and more heavily regulated tools (rather than their abolishment) to at least "eliminate bias" to the extent that fewer innocent people will be tagged, detained, arrested, scrutinized, or even killed.

Frank Pasquale, in "When Machine Learning Is Facially Invalid," articulates this well: The vision of better "facial inference projects" through more complete datasets "rests on a naively scientistic perspective on social affairs," but "reflexivity (the effect of social science on the social reality it purports to merely understand) compromises any effort (however well intended) to straightforwardly apply natural science methods to human beings."

There is no complete map of difference, and there can never be. That said, I want to indulge proponents of these kinds of tech for a moment. What would it look like to be constantly coded as different in a hyper-surveilled society—one where there was large-scale deployment of surveillant technologies with persistent "digital epidermalization" writing identity on to every body within the scope of its gaze? I'm thinking of a not-too-distant future where not only businesses and law enforcement constantly deploy this technology, as with recent developments in China, but also where citizens going about their day use it as well, wearing some version of Google Glass or Snapchat Spectacles to avoid interpersonal "friction" and identify the "others" who do or don't belong in a space at a glance. What if Permit Patty or Pool Patrol Paul had immediate, real-time access to technologies that "legitimized" black bodies in a particular space?

I don't ask this question lightly. Proponents of persistent surveillance articulate some form of this question often and conclude that a more surveillant society is a safer one. My answer is quite different. We have seen on many occasions that more and better surveillance doesn't equal more equitable or just

outcomes, and often results in the discrimination being blamed on the algorithm. Further, these technological solutions can render the bias invisible. While not based on biometrics, think about the difference between determining "old-fashioned" housing discrimination vs. how Facebook can be used to digitally redline users by making ads for housing visible only to white users.

But I'd like to take it a step further. What would it mean for those "Still a Negro" moments to become primarily digital—invisible to the surveilled yet visible to the people performing the surveillance? Would those being watched and identified become safer? Would interactions become more seamless? Would I no longer be rudely confronted while making copies?

The answer, on all counts, is no—and not just because these technologies cannot form some complete map of a person, their character, and their intent. While it would be inaccurate to say that I as a black man embrace the "Still a Negro" moments, my experiencing them gives me important information about how I'm perceived in a particular space and even to what degree I'm safe in that space. The end game of a surveillance society, from the perspective of those being watched, is

to be subjected to whims of black-boxed code extended to the navigation of spaces, which are systematically stripped of important social and cultural clues. The personalized surveillance tech, meanwhile, will not make people less racist; it will make them more comfortable and protected in their racism.

Originally published Oct. 15, 2018
reallifemag.com/friction-free-racism/

Apathy Machines

by Rob Horning

Proponents of virtual reality like to claim that the immersive technology can provide "experience on demand," as the title of Stanford researcher Jeremy Bailenson's book puts it. It allows you to "wear the body of someone else," he says in this talk at Google, which also means you can take it off when you feel like it, a luxury that reality doesn't afford.

The on-demand aspect of virtual reality would seem to conflict with another common claim made about it, that it is an "empathy machine" that immersively and inescapably places the viewer in another person's shoes and supposedly makes them feel what they must have felt. "Empathy" is an odd way to describe one of VR's main applications thus far, as a military training technique to habituate soldiers to killing in combat. "There are some issues there," Bailenson admits. But typically, in clinical studies, empathic viewers in training are exposed to someone else's unfortunate condition and then tested afterward to see if they more willing to do something about it—often a matter of giving money, as though that were a universal mode of expressing concern rather than dismissing it. Bailenson describes immersing viewers in the experience of homelessness for seven minutes—how much more time would you need to simulate and understand another's life?—which makes them more likely to sign a petition immediately afterward calling for more taxes to help the indigent.

But if we choose to have a particular experience, doesn't that make it more a commodified consumer good rather than an ethics lesson? Or rather, doesn't that mainly teach us that we can enjoy feeling ethical as

an on-demand experience? This is why game developer Robert Yang describes VR not as an empathy machine but an "appropriation machine." "If you won't believe someone's pain unless they wrap an expensive 360 video around you," he writes, "then perhaps you don't actually care about their pain … The 'embodied' 'transparent immediacy' of virtual reality (or much less, 360 video) does not obliterate political divisions." Why is it so tempting to VR proponents to fantasize about a technology that renders politics superfluous? Why is it so easy to confuse a susceptibility to emotional experience with benevolence?

The presumption that empathy automatically produces virtue dates back at least to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1761), which opens with a disquisition on sympathy and propriety. As Smith theorized it, one witnesses another's condition and immediately enters into a state of fellow feeling, even against one's will. "In every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible, the emotions of the bystander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be

the sentiments of the sufferer." Virtue, in this scheme, derives from surveillance. You have to see suffering to confirm that you'll react with the proper degree of sympathetic emotion.

But the word *imagine* in Smith's formulation seems key: What you attribute to the other, and then use as a justification for feeling a certain way yourself, sounds a lot like projection. What the other actually feels is not relevant and there is certainly no need to respect their ultimately irreducible difference. Instead, the ready appropriation of their feelings becomes a kind of parallel to the invisible hand: Because we can't help but feel what others feel, it thus becomes part of our selfish interest to make them feel better. "That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility."

As the passage suggests, Smith's theory derives from a strand of philosophy that postulated an inborn "moral sense" that allows us to instinctively understand what's right and wrong. The moral sense manifested

mainly through a mastery of etiquette, making aristocratic habitus a proof of inherent virtue, and the commoner's lack of it a proof of natural moral deficiency. Since instinctual emotions are benevolent, the stronger we feel them (and thus the more ostentatiously we display them), the more virtuous we are. From this point of view, morality becomes a spontaneous reaction rather than a process of ethical reasoning.

Though innate, the moral sense could be trained; becoming more "virtuous and humane" pivoted on learning to feel "with the most exquisite sensibility" through repeated exposure to a range of pitiable situations. In the late 18th century, the popularity of this idea in England led to the so-called cult of sensibility, an epoch in literary taste that accompanied the first flourishing of fiction as a commercial product. Sensibility "was a significant, an almost sacred word," literature scholar J.M.S. Tompkins writes, a "modern quality" that was "the product of modern conditions," which included broader literacy and the dissemination of cultured tastes that printing permitted.

Sensibility was never precisely defined but in general indicated a capacity for spontaneous vicarious feeling akin to the VR proponents' idea of empathy. It was

similar to the Renaissance notion of *sprezzatura,* an instinctual charisma and propriety, but was more passive, emphasizing finely wrought feelings in response to pitiable situations. It was a matter of spectatorship and reaction.

This connected it to the era's burgeoning entertainment industry. "Sensibility" in practice became the emotion specific to reading, and novels and circulating libraries had begun to prosper by packaging emotional experiences for readers. The sensibility era's novels—not only Henry Mackenzie's fragmentary *The Man of Feeling* but also long, immersive five-volume epics by now forgotten writers like Courtney Melmoth and Frances Brooke—depicted situations designed to elicit strong and unrestrained emotional reactions, offering opportunity after opportunity for readers to demonstrate their "feeling heart" through vicarious identification and suffering.

As Tompkins points out, this often comes across now as more egotistic than altruistic: "Again and again we find that enormity of self-congratulation with which the weeper at once luxuriates in the beguiling softness of tears and compliments himself on his capacity for shedding them, seeing in his mind's eye not only the

object of his attention, but himself in a suitable attitude in front of it." The "man of feeling" was essentially a connoisseur of beautiful sentiments—pity, sacrifice, charity, etc.—instrumentalized to demonstrate an inner worth that justifies his social position, or his pursuit of a better one.

In the 18th century, the novels served as testing devices: If your heart didn't respond, your moral sense might just be weak and you might not be as moral as you hoped. (What if that VR experience of a Syrian child refugee didn't make you want to donate to UNICEF?) Fortunately, aspiring novelists (and readers) learned the grammar of emotional prose, the key words and scenarios that triggered the right feelings, the sympathetic tears that proved one's inner worth.

Sensibility novels sought to teach readers how to read and enjoy them—and thus demonstrate their moral fitness—within the unfolding of the text itself. Often it was narrated as an organizing, driving force for the plot. Reading itself was often dramatized, as in epistolary novels, where you read over the shoulder of the characters and have modeled for you the

emotional impact of reading. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1741), one encounters many scenes depicting other people reading; generally they are reading the very same text (Pamela's letters and diaries) you have already read and demonstrate the appropriate level of responsiveness to it. They offer you a chance to test your reactions against theirs.

More than any moral lesson, then, the book teaches you how to better consume books, and makes that seem like morality itself. They taught consumers how to enjoy things in solitude, taking aloneness and preventing it from becoming loneliness. They were instrumental in normalizing isolation, making it seem possible, even desirable, that we should have a world where our things strive to keep us apart from each other and absorbed in our own purely personal pleasures, with nothing but abstracted genre conventions—how scenes are stylized to make us feel for others—to connect us. People thus become morally legible only insofar as they conform to such genre expectations.

Reading meant removing yourself from social interaction to enter into a private fantasy world of pretend intimacy. To counter this, novelists tried to redeem novels with didactic content that taught them how to

behave in society. They were covert conduct manuals made palatable and—as their defenders would eventually come to argue—more instructive through absorbing storytelling. Richardson's *Pamela* evolved out of his *Familiar Letters on Important Occasions,* a manual that provided boilerplate form letters for the semiliterate to use. It dawned on him that teaching people what to write was an effective way to teach people how to think and, more important, what to feel.

But adding didacticism didn't really solve the problem. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued in "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," citing literary historian John Mullan, "the empathetic allo-identifications that were supposed to guarantee the sociable nature of sensibility could not finally be distinguished from an epistemological solipsism, a somatics of trembling self-absorption." Or more plainly, if you felt what the characters in fiction feel, you still indulged in the same emotional short-circuit that bypasses the need for actual other people as a prerequisite for emotional pleasure. The novel (as is today claimed about VR and phones and other modes of immersive engagement) pre-empts the need for co-presence. The pleasures of sensibility, which supposedly proved one's fitness for

better society, could only be truly enjoyed in private. Readers adapted themselves to textual rather than social norms.

The tension between a private, intimate kind of pleasure and the sociability it is supposed to anchor is still with us. We are fully habituated to consuming other subjectivities as we prepare our own for consumption. In *Cold Intimacies,* sociologist Eva Illouz calls this middle-class specialty "emotional competence"—the ability to self-analyze and communicate one's emotionality in terms that other bourgeois can understand and work with, as well as read each other's emotions and respond in a constructive way. This habitus becomes a requisite qualification not only for personal relationships but for high-status jobs: Emotional competence becomes emotional capital. "There are now new hierarchies of emotional well-being, understood as the capacity to achieve socially and historically situated forms of happiness and well-being." As with sensibility, however, emotional competence reifies emotionality, subjecting it to conscious manipulation. It freezes emotion even as it reveals us to ourselves as suitably emotional.

The same logic that makes VR capable of inducing empathy also has the effect of making empathy a commodity and producing it a technical skill. There is socioeconomic value in being able to manifest empathy as emotional competence. It indexes one's potential as an emotional capitalist, capable of opportunistically manipulating emotional states to achieve goals and accrue power. Rather than exercise the moral sense, our empathic reactions build a case against our virtue, showing instead how self-interested all our emotions turn out to be.

Originally published July 2, 2018
reallifemag.com/apathy-machines/

Already Late

by Ana Cecilia Alvarez

Since before the ring of the first factory bell, what we do between opening our eyes and getting to work has congealed into this measure, "the morning," meant to prepare the worker for her day through a regimen of well-crafted habits. Psychologist William James put it bluntly, "Habit [is] the enormous

fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance…" He finished that sentence by precisely naming how the ordinance is kept; habit "saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor." In other words, the discipline of habit spells mastery, and the lure of routine's obedience keeps certain people in their place.

The reason for our scrupulous study of morning routines is perhaps summed up in Annie Dillard's shared, no-fuss conviction that "how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives," and how we spend our mornings can dictate how we spend our days. The morning steers us, and the morning routine offers the path. The alchemical fascination with morning ritual heavily favors creatives and tech giants. No one, to my knowledge, has written a click-baity article detailing the morning routine of a single mother of three, though I suspect these morning routines are as, if not more, closely calibrated for survival than Tim Cook's or Beethoven's. Still, the desire to scour through morning routines is an aspirational itch. Productivity—and creativity—are rarely accidental. The muse may be fickle, but regimen's fruits, we are told, are reliable. We

study and incorporate the routines of others because their formulas might solve our miscalculations, might save our days—and maybe our lives.

When I lived in New York, I spent several Saturday mornings visiting the beds of friends and strangers to ask them about their first waking moments for *Adult*, the magazine. I called the series of interviews "Mornings After," because I wanted to frame the morning not as a beginning, but as an aftermath. Not as a stage for production, but as an arrival to the shore of a previous day's wreck. As waking *from* something, not toward a potential formula for economic success.

Inevitably, most of the interviewees detailed their daily induction to the economy through their phones. Interviewees—young, upwardly-mobile strivers, for the most part—would fall into one of two categories: the first postponed the inevitable onslaught by keeping their phones at a distance in the morning, exiled to another room while they slept or put on airplane mode overnight. The others, like me, kept their phone pressed to their pillow. Their day began before they had really woken, with the first groggy swipe. In both instances, the problem at hand was one of regulation: Introducing the phone required a degree of delibera-

tion because it had the capacity of catapulting or derailing a day.

I have since left New York, and have stopped checking my iPhone in the mornings because I no longer own one. (It was easier to dump New York than to dump my phone. I left New York once and do not intend to return, but I came crawling back to my iPhone at least five times before I left it for good.) Instead, when you dial my number, you'll be ringing a flip—not the kind I nostalgically searched for when "making the switch," the graceful Razr of my adolescence, but this gauche lump, an LG B470 pre-paid cell phone in black. Except it likely won't ring, because I have it permanently on silent. This means I will miss your call and respond to your messages a day or so later; only when it occurs to me, which is infrequently, will I flip it open, and once I do, either flip it closed (still, after all these months, delighting in that decisive snap) or I'll press a few digits on the numbered key pad and toss it aside. It does not hold me in a kind of addictive thrall: I need it, I use it, I forget about it. I have the same relationship with my phone as I do with my toothbrush. It is a routine activity with the wind taken out of it, done out of repetition or necessity rather than out of faith.

Since dumping my iPhone I have, according to some people close to me, been "out of touch." Perhaps they also mean "out of sight." By slacking on social media upkeep—a consequence of switching phones—the edges of my life seem blurred to friends and acquaintances. Staying in touch with friends online often just means staying in each other's sight. Still, I am often confused by the haptic invocation of this metaphor—"out of touch." The corporeal experience of being up to date or updated with "the news" these days is, for me, hardly one of a sensation, of touch's warm buzz, but rather one of glazed insensitivity. I suspect that I am most "out of touch" when my attention scrolls down the feed in numbed perpetuity.

There is no measured rhythm to the present. As Henri Bergson wrote in *Concerning the Nature of Time,* "every duration is thick; real time has no instants." Our experience of the present—what we might call *presence*—is constellatory and gooey. When we are (in the) present we are immanent to the past and the future; each moment of presence is thick with all time. The term "present" comes from the Latin *praesent*—"being at hand," a moment we are "in touch" with.

But online, we inhabit an *unrelenting* present,

where artificially spatialized time appears severed and successive. The present is announced by the externalized whims—notifications, replies, mentions—we swipe at, scroll past, click through to. On Twitter, for example, each tweet's time stamp—*17 min, 42 min, 3 hr*—announces time *since*. Time, rather than passing, continuously refreshes. The *latest* is, of course, predicated by news, or by whatever resembles news. The unrelenting present is continuously under threat of assault from the caprice of one man's sleepless whims. A new sense of dread accompanies checking one's phone in the morning. It can feel like waking up and tuning in to the apocalypse.

In the unrelenting present of the internet, we speak of our "online presence" as a metric, as something to be managed, presence as appearance rather occurrence. Rather than the thickness of duration, the unrelenting present is a thin slice, each moment already feeling past, already anticipating the future. For example, Robin D.G. Kelley writes in the *Boston Review* that, after learning of the internet-fueled feud between Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates through emails and voice-mails left by his friends who demanded he take sides, "I felt like I was being summoned

to see a schoolyard brawl, and, now that I no longer use social media, I was already late." The unrelenting present cannot be kept up with, cannot be grasped, because each moment arrives to us "already late" and immediately demands that we offer the newest, hottest take. This is why I distrust the political imperative to stay in touch with "the news" since the election. To my knowledge, the habit of staying rabidly up to date doesn't offer viable political solutions precisely because the unrelenting present of social media, which has sped up the dailiness of the news cycle to a minute-by-minute rhythm, presses us for a reaction. For instantaneous judgments, for *liking*. It does not leave time for reflection.

"Time for reflection" is a fine way to describe the morning—a place where the unrelenting present should be kept at least 10 feet at a distance, banished in another room. Morning's place inhabits the immanence of presence—each sunrise echoes all the sunrises that have come before it, foreshadows all that will follow. I do not come to this place with aspiration or striving. I come to it with melancholy, with grief. I hit snooze, I wake up late, I stay in bed in a half-woken delirium, letting time pass. Once I was telling a

friend about "Mornings After," and she mistook them for Mournings After. Her mondegreen reminded me of the last entry of Roland Barthes's *Mourning Diary*, a study on grief which he began writing the day after the death of his mother: "There are mornings so sad …" In less than six months, he would be struck and killed by a laundry van. There are mornings so sad. When we wake, we mourn the end of the day before. But more, we mourn another day of this life.

Originally published Jan. 8, 2018
reallifemag.com/already-late/

Good Boys

by Rahel Aima

When I'm sad or feeling defeated or simply tired from the business of living extremely online, I make a beeline for my favorite boys. Scooping into that lipid layer of animal videos that provides all the comfort of a favorite book or record while allowing you to stay logged on. I used to adore the twitter account @round_boys, the progenitor of a new viral ecology in which every charmingly rotund

creature is a superstar. Roundboy likenesses would be reposted—and significantly, rarely modified—so many times that it could be impossible to identify the original. Moreover, to do so would be entirely beside the point. Since that account has been suspended for copyright infringements, I've been checking in on my best longboys instead, particularly an oriental shorthair cat named Teddy featured with three of his siblings on the Instagram @hobbikats. Teddy is strikingly green-eyed with oversize, batlike ears. He is exquisitely long of limb and even longer of face and tail, resembling nothing so much as a piebald Adam Driver. He stretches so languorously that just looking can loosen your spine. He cascades over sofas as if arranged by a master draper, and most of all, he honks, in mellifluous bell tones so beautiful that you question whether he is really a cat. Or in the language of the day: *he stretch, he drape, he honcc*.

Roundboys and longboys both fall under the umbrella of the very, very good boy: They're the thicc cat who greedily inhales the watermelon, the pudgy bird who melts in the palm of the hand, the surpassingly fat tiger, the Falstaffian, jolly seal. Even the adjectives we deploy to connote their roundness are so pleasing:

chubby, plump, roly-poly. Contrary to all the other kinds of boy we've collectively come to side-eye—the fuckboi, the softboy, and the cuckboy are the most egregious, but boys' clubs in general seem to be in crisis at the time of this writing—these are boys that nearly everyone can get behind. We might wonder just why are they called longboys and roundboys, but not longgirls and roundgirls? Is it an attempt to bypass the sexualized connotations of fetishizing pubescence and describing larger women are as curvaceous or voluptuous or Rubinesque, unlike the silky golden retriever-like dignity and capability implied in words like portly, corpulent, or stout? A #notallroundboys attempt to rehabilitate boyhood as the once unassailable logic of *boys will be boys* crumbles? An extension of the maxim that all dogs regardless of gender—and by extension, perhaps, all animals—are exceedingly good? *Online, everyone knows you're a good boy.*

"Looking at cats" was once a common catch-all for things people do online, especially at peak in the age of "I Can Haz Cheezburger" memes. Cats' market share of the online gif economy has since waned, with the explosion of popular accounts dedicated to the appreciation of nature's strangest, weirdest, and hereto-

fore least known species. Maybe we've become inured to the black-bordered impact of mass-generated memes, tired of the "lolcats" brand of pranky humor. They can hardly compare, anyway, to the sheer delight of the pygmy jerboa, essentially a fuzzy M&M with a tail, or to the endearingly gloopy defeat of the blobfish, beloved for its status as the world's ugliest animal, or the grabby, spiralized scooching of a pangolin climbing a tree, its scales rippling so winningly like a particularly snouty mermaid.

The most exciting thing about longboy Teddy, however, is that his honking is consistently tuned at a single note, F#, the dissonance of most modern American car horns. That adult cats only *meow* to communicate with humans—not other cats—suggests the delicious possibility that Teddy might have learned to vocalize in concert with car horns on the streets outside. Perhaps it is his method of communicating with all non-cats—the potted plant as well as the refrigerator in a kind of sonic internet of honks. Most likely, I'm projecting, but isn't that what animals on the internet have always been for? There's something remarkable in the way that animals, even one as singular as Teddy, lose their particular, unique auras when scrubbed of

their context, attribution, and even exif data, and uploaded online. We see them as generic: an animal, a longboy or a roundboy; a furry canvas upon which to superimpose the most human of behaviors or motives. The less we know about the animals in question, the richer their potential for virality: They become timelessly applicable in a wild variety of situations. Virality, in turn, becomes a summing up, creating the velocity for these peculiar new forms, as we now know them, to make an affective print on the official taxonomic encyclopedia of life.

About a decade ago, a study found that the television you watched as a child affected the color of your dreams. Essentially, if you are over 55 and grew up watching black-and-white TV, chances are your dreams are monochrome. Otherwise, you likely dream in color, which makes me wonder whether there are groups of people who dream in the color palettes of their earliest interfacing with computers? In the 8-bit of the earliest arcade shooters, or the dithered 16-color palette of ’90s Sierra adventure games? More recent studies suggest video games indeed have an analogous

effect. Gamers, who are used to manipulating their environments, report far higher levels of lucid dreaming, disembodied observer dreams, and dream control and are less prone to motion sickness. Apps like Vine or Snapchat or Instagram stories work in the same way. Just like the those old black-and-white televisions, their technological parameters restructure how we perceive the things that these apps depict—animals included.

The Himba provide a particularly interesting case study in that they have only five color categories to encompass the spectrum of visible light: *borou* for blue–green, for example, or *serandu* for red, orange, and pink, and intriguingly, *zoozu* for black and dark shades of other colors. As a result, even as they might find it difficult to separate what an English speaker would understand as red or brown (*dumbu*), they are much more adept at distinguishing between shades of one color. Put another way, the grammar that underwrites their language means they are much more attuned to *other* color qualities besides shade, like saturation, luminosity, or brightness, which we might arrive at only after interfacing with a different kind of technological language: Photoshop or another editing software. Just as we gain tactile knowledge through time and ex-

posure—handling a fruit to gauge ripeness, fingering fabrics to assess production quality, knowing just how much pressure to apply with a chisel—the technological restructuring of platforms like Vine or Instagram accord us a new range of affective motion, revealing new layers to pleasure.

In linguistics, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that language heavily influences the structure of thought and experience. The Pirahã people of Brazil, whose language does not feature numbers but instead has concepts of "small," "somewhat larger," and "many," have difficulty counting to 10. Similarly, many languages do not distinguish between the colors green and blue; speakers instead see something like "grue." Old English speakers had only the very literal *geoluread,* or yellow-red, to describe the spectrum of shades between those two primary poles, now known broadly as "orange." Does this mean that they, like those without separate words for blue and green, were supposedly unable to perceive specificities of orange, or to pick out individual shades such as carrot, papaya, apricot or tangerine? (I similarly wonder whether this lack was why European racial classifications assigned colors like red and yellow to large swathes of the world.)

Under the aegis of this theory, though, language has the power to expand perception as well as limit it. Perhaps our cultural perception is likewise widened by new types of affective media in vast circulation—animals, though disappearing, are leaving mimetic traces behind, and memes become language. You've probably heard that Inuit and Sami peoples have dozens if not more words for snow: Animal videos work similarly, but as a kind of glossary of wonderful feelings, a solitaire endgame in which the suits are 🙊, 😀, 😊, and 🤗.

This new economy of animal images and videos has come to replace the once frequent animal interactions we might have once had before urbanization and mechanization. They create a nostalgia for animals we would have never seen without them, capturing the impossible and the impossibly rare. But the new techniques also encourage a kind of emotional projection. Infinite looping gifs, Instagram stories, and features like Boomerang, which repeats a short motion back and forth, work as a kind of synecdochal butchery, reducing an animal to an isolated constituent part or motion: That sudden wobbliness and narcoleptic belly flop that reminds you you're so very tired too. The de-

structive dog that's too ashamed to meet its owner's eye, the rat taking a shower for a few seconds, soaping itself up with surprisingly humanlike motions.

The thing is, Grumpy Cat isn't actually grumpy, Tuna the Dog (probably) isn't a competitive worrier, and Lil Bub isn't constantly thirsty or sticking her tongue out at the world; the rat wasn't merrily soaping itself so much as frantically trying to get the untasty and potentially toxic substance off its fur. Yet like Teddy, they exist within the looped clip as a non-linguistic description of a particular, or peculiar experience of interspecies interaction. We see none of the aspects of animal care that make them pets rather than spectacles. Experiencing these animals only in six-to-60 second increments, we see them only at their snuggliest, their cutest, their weirdest, their funniest, their least animal-like and most bizarrely human, their most likely to be named viral.

I need to take a minute here to tell you about my favorite Good Boy, @dog_feelings, or "Thoughts of Dog." This Twitter account is run by the same person—or quite possibly management firm, given its wild popularity—as the rating account @dog_rates. The ex-

uberance of its littermate is eschewed here for a rather more sober look into the thoughts of one nameless dog, his love of peanut butter, sticks, snoozles, stretchems and snuggles, his important job featuring long shifts of monitoring the lone skittle under the fridge, and philosophical chats with his beloved stuffed fren Sebastian. Unless you happened to catch his introduction Sebastian is never physically described, and becomes an abstracted distillation of all our internet animal *frens*. I imagine him as a little lion or mini-me Dog, of the *please do talk to me and my son again and again* variety; others might conjure up a teddy bear or or bunny or penguin. It was only when the account began promoting Valentine's day cards at the Dog Rates store that I learnt that Sebastian was, most jarringly and incongruously, a small belly-seamed elephant. (Has Dog's gender ever been established? I read him as male.) On the occasions where Dog reminds his fans that he loves them, he opines wisely on affection and fidelity with a matter of fact gravitas that feels all the more heartwarming:

> i had a long talk. with my fren. about how to spot. a fake ball throw. the optimal strategy. is to follow the ball. with your eyes. instead of your heart

In the logic of Dog, of course everyone is good

and the world is wonderful and in it for the hugs if true. Dog knows this to be fact and can't even begin to fathom that you might not, but regardless Dog is patient and loving, and if you took the time to realize the same, and learn to talk like Dog, then you could be frens with the world too. Have you ever noticed how all dogs get at least 12/10, while lizards are rated a little more conservatively with a starting rating of 9?

Tonally, Dog's positivity is a little more measured and tempered than their buyer testimonials (A+++ QUALITY PRODUCT! WOULD BUY AGAIN!!!) in a way that almost suggests this ecology of animal memes has matured from both the mass-produced manufacturing of meme generation and the relentless bombast of the Upworthy model. It has moved to a more tertiary economy of service memification that increasingly looks to weaponize not just attention but affect. Consider the way that publications like *Salon* have very recently begun offering the option to let them leverage your computing power using in-browser cryptocurrency mining as an alternative to disabling ad block, a consensual version of the technology's revival in the seedier, scammier side of the internet at the close of 2017. The animal meme indus-

try is doing the same thing, but what it's mining and monetizing is the viewer's emotional response itself. Animals, being singular yet not individualistic, model a way in which viral amplification (replication) can, contra Walter Benjamin's "aura," work to actually enhance the aura of a piece of content.

This is aura as Coachella flower crown, whose power lies in its utterly banal genericness despite its specificity—the awkwardly swole sentient night brace infomercial that is the Chinese water deer, perhaps—and in this it is more akin to Benjamin's "traces"—debris, remnants—which he describes in *The Arcades Project* as having "the appearance of a nearness, however removed the thing that left it behind may be." Benjamin links the trace to the discontinuous experience of the hunt, as well as literary study, "the fundamentally unfinishable collection of things worth knowing, whose utility depend on chance," and what could possibly be more worth knowing than roundboys?

Maybe all this positivity, constructed as it is, means we're beginning to take self-care seriously, whether it's learning about pH levels and acid mantles or checking in with friends and learning how to take care of each other. In embracing the aura of the general, per-

haps we are beginning to lose our selfish particularities to become multiple, one or several frens. In recent years the way we talk about self-care has moved away from the language of individualist indulgence and "me time" to consider it as nothing less than the acts of love necessary for everyday survival: not accessories to the struggle so much as an integral facet of it. When Assata Shakur said, "we must love each other and support each other," she almost certainly did not mean looking at animals on the internet, yet today they function as the same thing. Pictures of puppies aren't going to end police brutality or dismantle the prison-industrial complex, but maybe they can keep us going so that we can do the work that will.

Originally published Feb 26, 2018
reallifemag.com/good-boys/

Layers of Identity

by Crystal Abidin

With the rise of online influencers and their conscientiously maintained feeds full of images of luxury, the accessibility once promised by their predecessors, microcelebrities, has been eroded. For their followers, microcelebrities were a

more visible version of the ordinary person, albeit being closer to fulfilling collective aspirations of wealth and health. They were taken as role models, offering life-hacks and pro tips for attaining life goals, with their personal lifestyles serving as proof. This mainly played out through their endorsing particular products and services and sometimes amplifying some trends over others through their opinion editorials. But unlike the lives of celebrities in the mainstream entertainment industry who also dabble in endorsements, the lives of microcelebrities felt easier to emulate and to possibly attain. They had a knack for discussing prosperity and pimples, charms and chores in the same breath.

Influencer culture began in the late 1990s and mid-2000s; in Southeast Asia it was on blog platforms such as OpenDiary, LiveJournal, Xanga, and Blogspot. In China it was on discussion boards. In the U.S., it was through home webcamming. Before the internet, marketing through the endorsements of "ordinary people" was a matter of scouts recruiting popular high school and university students to model specific wares on campus and promoting student parties and clubs.

In its early days, lifestyle blogging's allure was premised on the diary-like reportage of people's everyday

lives, in the rhetoric of confessional documentaries. The regularity and frequency of their updates mirrored the daily rhythms of a teenager's social life and attracted followers: Their blogs became a means for other girls to learn how to be social through consumption, within their modest spending power. Today, these early commercial lifestyle bloggers are among the most seasoned veterans in influencer culture, innovating with new disclosure strategies to sustain followers over their decade-long careers.

By the early 2010s, microcelebrity culture had flourished into a full-fledged influencer industry, where young people on Instagram especially armed themselves with luxury items to convey success and in-group status while attempting to appear effortless and intimate to followers. But with their rise, influencers' practice and persona have become both overfamiliar and more unattainable—requiring more money, connections, inside knowledge. And given the hypersaturation of the influencer industry today, where even entry-level aspirants must prime themselves to debut as extremely professional and polished, the pretty, pristine, and picturesque have started to become boring: Yet another flawless selfie, branded fashion OOTD (outfit of the

day), or holiday vlog in an exotic destination may not have the impact it once had.

To differentiate themselves from the mass market, some influencers, whether through reactionary instinct or intentional strategy, have begun to break away from the "picture perfect" mold of Instagram and return to the early lifestyle-blogging claims of a more "authentic" version of themselves, the influencer industry, and everyday life. Amid the noise of picture-perfect Barbies, they believe that what followers now want is to see "real life," unfiltered, unmediated, and uncurated. And to restore this illusion of accessibility, influencers use the notion of authenticity as a springboard to rebrand themselves as "more real" than the others. But what is "real life" anyway?

In thinking about digital identity, we need go beyond dichotomies that posit the online is "fake" and the offline more "authentic," given that all self-presentation in digital *and* physical spaces is curated and controlled. Authenticity has become understood less as static and more as a performative ecology and parasocial strategy with its own genre and self-presentation elements. In other words, for influencers to convince an audience that they are being authentic, it is not enough for them

to merely show themselves without "artifice": bare-faced, with a bedhead, and in pajamas. Instead, they must actively juxtapose this stripped-down version of themselves against the median and normative self-presentations of glamour, to continually create and assign value to new markers—faults and flaws, failures and fiascos—to affirm the veracity of their truth-ness.

At the heart of contorting one's digital front to appear more "real" is the desire to feel more "relatable." Among the influencers I have been studying since the late 2000s, the idea of relatability frequently appears in such comments as "I need to make my posts relatable," or "She managed to make that event so relatable," or "I feel I am more relatable" than a rival influencer. In their usage, relatability is a vague description that assigns value to styles of writing, the management of situations, and the performance of personae without prescribing a particular formula. When pressed, some influencers admit that the term's vagueness means it can be selectively applied to preserve an idea of meritocracy. Others assert that it can be honed through gut feeling ("it just feels right") and trial and error ("the more you practice the more you will know").

Unarticulated and inarticulatable, relatability is a

form of what I have called "tacit labor," the embodied and intentionally unseen work required to make a practice seem natural or effortless. Relatability is a vernacular term whose vagueness masks its interrelated subqualities: accessibility (how easy it is to approach an influencer in digital and physical spaces), believability (how convincing an influencer's *depicted* lifestyle and sentiments are), authenticity (how genuine an influencer's *actual* lifestyle and sentiments are), emulatability (how easy followers can model themselves after an influencer's lifestyle), and intimacy (how familiar and close followers feel to an influencer).

But how is relatability put to work? One strategy is what I have labeled calibrated amateurism, in which influencers deliberately try to portray the raw aesthetic of a novice. Calibrated amateurism is a modern adaptation of Erving Goffman's theory of scheduling in *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life* and Dean MacCannell's theory of "staged authenticity." Goffman argues that on stage as in everyday life, performers may engage in "scheduling" to separate different audiences, so that different aspects of the performer's persona can be presented as required. This also permits performers to obscure the "routine character" of their act and stress

its apparent spontaneity. This sometimes involves the deliberate effort to manufacture a "back region"—a seemingly off-stage persona that is nonetheless part of a deliberate performance.

MacCannell studied similar back regions in tourist settings in and argues that tourists, in their pursuit of authenticity, are complicit in their manufacture. He writes that "just having a back region generates the belief that there is something more than meets the eye; even where no secrets are actually kept, back regions are still the places where it is popularly believed the secrets are." He argues that "their mere existence, and the possibility of their violation, functions to sustain the common-sense polarity of social life into what is taken to be intimate and 'real' and what is thought to be 'show.'"

Combining these two classical theories, we can see how influencers today also partake in deliberately curated and intentionally public forms of backchanneling, through Finstagrams ("fake" accounts) and multiple Instagram accounts, which encourage followers and viewers to hop, watch, and match across Instagram and other social media accounts. Such corroborative cross-platforming work gives to followers who are curious, loyal, and willing to commit to the laborious detective work

the assurance that they have privileged access to an influencers' multi-faceted and multi-layered persona, across a long spectrum of disclosures. The implication of these practices is that we all have backstages and hidden secrets on display on parallel platforms, if only an audience knows where and how to look for these Easter eggs.

Savvy influencers can pander to their followers' search for those breaks in frame, producing content that specifically baits them. These posts may focus on the struggles, hardship, and dirty laundry of the industry, including how hate comments affect them, the precarity of their volatile income, and the pressures of being constantly scrutinized. These constitute a genre known colloquially as "BTS posts" for "behind the scenes." While BTS posts originally began as unintended slippages or occasional but genuine revelations of the backstage, soon influencers started secondary social media accounts they claimed were "uncurated," "undirected," "not commercial," or "less pretty" to upload content that may not have been congruent with their public branding. Such shadow accounts were not as actively touted as influencers' primary cash-cow accounts; influencers claimed they allowed them to experience Instagram as ordinary users rather than internet celebrities.

In interviews, influencers explained to me that shadow feeds were a "highlight reel" of snaps that did not make their primary feeds, that they were "truer representations" of their everyday lives, and that the backchannel let followers "get to know influencers better." BTS posts and shadow accounts initially enabled influencers to present the image of a second, more authentic self to followers, albeit still negotiated on public feeds on Instagram. Still, some influencers began to adopt such hashtags as #natural, #noedit, #nofilter, #nomakeup, and #nophotoshop in a bid to stand out from their colleagues and blend in with the everyday social media user.

Everyday users also partook in this movement, generating apparently *au naturel* images of themselves asleep, as in #baecaughtmeslippin, or freshly awake in bare face, as in #iwokeuplikethis. However, these memes soon evolved into viral parody as more users invested more effort in *staging* the natural rather than *being* natural.

In her book *Authentic™*, communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser reminds us that "digitally aided disclosure such as building a self-brand on MySpace or Facebook, relies on traditional discourses of the "authentic"

self as one that is transparent, without artifice, open to others … authenticity not only is viewed as residing inside the self but also is demonstrated by allowing the outside world access to one's inner self." In their strategy to disclose more of their apparently "authentic" selves, influencers often attempt to emphasize a false divide between their digital representations on social media and their actual lives as lived offline, by asserting that online and offline are distinct spheres—what social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson has termed "digital dualism." By continuously alluding to their more secret, more genuine, more real "real lives," influencers aim to create a backstage region in which they can invite followers to assess how genuine they really are. I term this practice "porous authenticity": An audience is enticed into trying to evaluate and validate how genuine a persona is by following the feedback loop across the front stage of social media and the backstage of "real life," through inconspicuous and scattered holes or gateways that were intentionally left as trails for the curious.

The authenticity of influencers' self-presentation in digital spaces is measured against their "off-duty" self-expression, usually accessed by followers in search of "leaks" and "bleeds" from influencers' offline lives.

Such corroborative cross-referencing work is so thorough that it has become colloquially known as "CSI-ing," after the crime show.

Porous authenticity was in play in the scandal surrounding Essena O'Neill, an 18-year-old Australian influencer. She made a viral video in which she announced while crying on camera that she was quitting the industry due to the "dark side" of social media and the pressure to keep up a façade for her brand. O'Neill re-captioned her Instagram advertorials that were previously paid for by clients with scathing comments on how she starved herself for a bikini body, how much each post earned her, or how she was struggling with depression despite her cheery selfies. She also changed the names of her Instagram account and website to Let's Be Game Changers and called on influencers and followers to denounce how "fake" social media was, proclaimed that "social media is not real life," and that users should "live authentic lives." She also repeatedly disavowed influencer commerce, claiming that she would never again engage in social media posts that were monetized. Yet, another tab on her new site featured "Cool Products," in which the influencer was still marketing products to followers. Then, just as quickly

as she had rebranded her digital estates, O'Neill set her Instagram to private and deleted her website.

O'Neill's attempted rebranding echoes a strategy that Banet-Weiser calls "commodity activism." In this case, O'Neill tried to rebrand herself as a better breed of influencer (non-commercial engagements instead of advertorials) with a higher calling (purposeful living instead of a public social media life) for social activism (digital detox, wellness) that nonetheless can be attained through consumption (health foods, veganism, yoga). Evidently, being able to skillfully build a continuum of self-disclosure along which one can manipulate and maneuver between layers of authenticity and truth-ness can be a highly viable endeavor. And it is the most seasoned of influencers who are able to master this dance well enough to claim longevity in the industry: I am me, I have always been me, and I will always be me—and you can be assured of this, so long as you dive deep enough to collect all these versions of me.

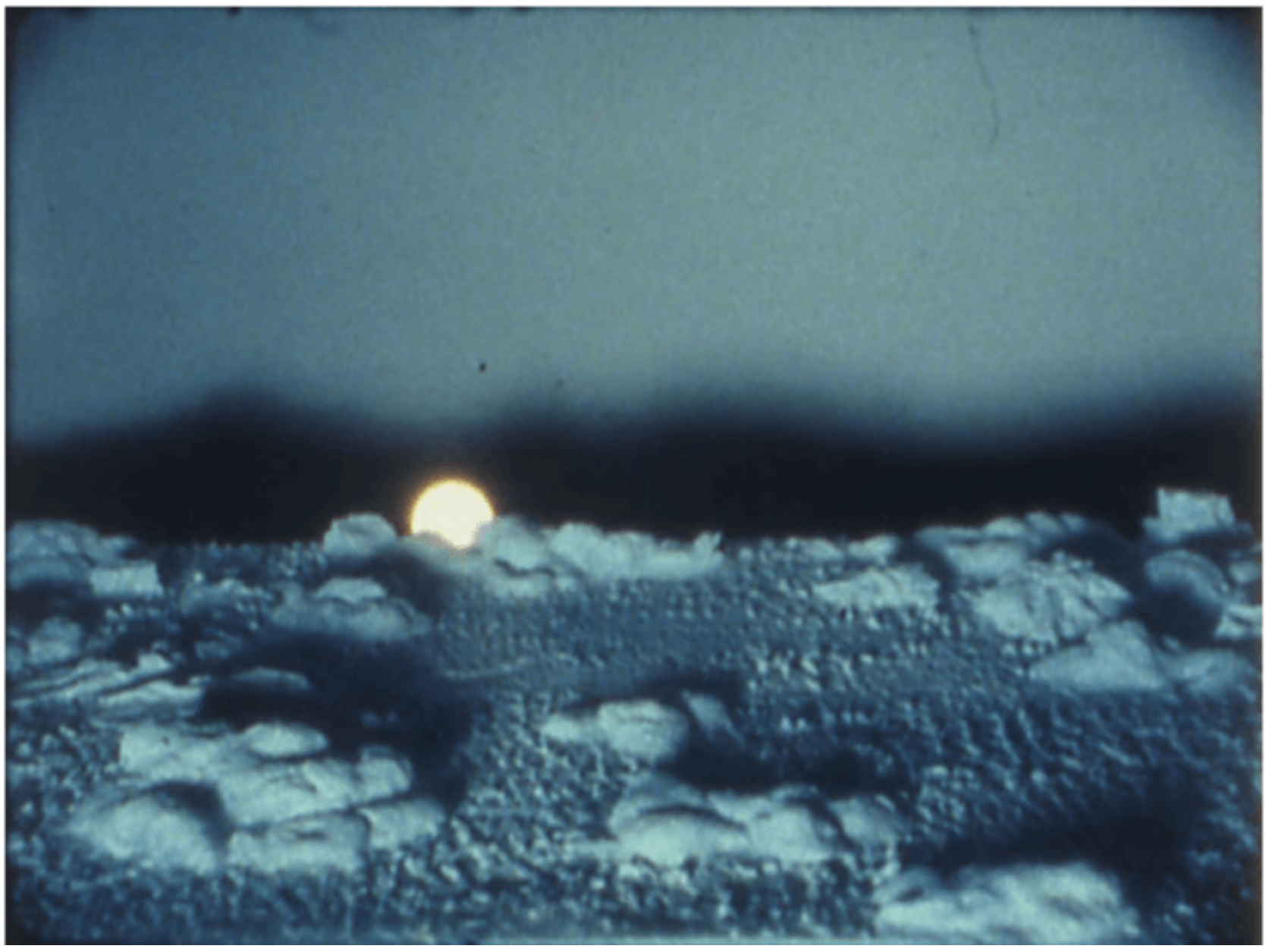
The rise of calibrated amateurism and porous authenticity tells us that followers have become more savvy in their consumption of influencer content—and maybe more bored with it. Where it used to be premised on aspiration and vicarious living, it now pursues

verification of the staged layers of truths and corroborating details among influencers' identity trails. This is how influencers teach us how to do real life when everyone is watching: They play with layers of visibility to conceal the slick and accentuate the sin, conceal the commerce and accentuate the community, conceal the artifice and accentuate the affect. And when they approach the next threshold of authenticity, influencers design new yardsticks of self-disclosure to persuade followers that they are just like them.

Originally published April 16, 2018
reallifemag.com/layers-of-identity/

Paradise Regained

by Soraya King



Although as a child I prayed alone and in concourse, and sometimes led group prayer at the local Baha'i center, and was seduced by prayer, and contradicted adult Baha'is I considered arrogant and cozy, and crushed on young Baha'i counselors, and

experienced an oriented lightness near a few magnetic elders, and concern-trolled my secular friends, and knew eventually that "leaving the faith" was a card in my hand waiting to be pulled while I went on pilgrimage to its holy sites in Haifa, visiting the shrines of the faith's figureheads and the adjacent historical prison city, joining in a congregation hall with hundreds of other pilgrims from 20 countries—despite all this, my first convincing experience of a holy place was, of course, that of a fairly naked women's sauna at a YMCA.

My second was a women's bathhouse in Los Angeles. No clothes allowed beyond the lockers, and obviously—not as a proud digital deterrent but because of pocketlessness, steam, and respect—no phones. Some materials are dispensed with so that others can work properly. The absence of men and of our devices of broadcasting and surveillance allowed for the tacit communion of women at leisure and *in vacuo*. Where major facets of daily life are suspended and their suspension is vaulted, like in this female room, many other interruptive regularities that permeate everyday consciousness dissolve. Here was an alternative place whose point was not necessarily affirmation but reduction.

I knew, shortly after entering with some degree of

embodied vulnerability, as though my arms just fell that way, that actually I wasn't so important. The following week I shepherded my mother, who never did things like this, into the changing room, and then napped in a robe on the heated tile at the baths' exit until she emerged, as though from a deeper and happier rest.

I had, growing up, understood a sacred site to be a place where something had happened which had become petrified as a result, or where something was buried. I later understood it as a social belonging tied together temporally as though by ribbons. A sacred site can be built, but it can also be cast.

The same devices that are sometimes suspended to protect sanctity can also create it, maintain a partition around oneself—useful, maybe, to a woman who isn't at the park to have her attention or speech elicited by whomever else happens to be there. Being online in public can overlay space with a sited, concentrated quality that rivals the plugged-in-ness of recognized holy sites. Devices, like psychoactive substances and sacred sites themselves, are not only means of solipsistic withdrawal but materials that can reveal the plasticity of the categories by which we live. The sacred is a room with a composite view.

My first visit to the Baha'i temple in Wilmette, Illinois, designed in the 1920s and opened a few years after the end of World War II, was an afterthought during a road trip from New York to Chicago. I remember only my impression of the bright exterior and gardens; the day is like a photograph. On a second, more intentional trip to the city and the site years later, I circled the structure with its tangled lattice engravings in limestone as before. But this time, in its inner chamber, I felt a new strange diminution of the outside, adjacent to that of the bath house or the best moments at *my* park or *my* dinner place, a sense of being "in here" that was less porous than my own home.

The Baha'i faith began in the mid-19th century as a militant sociopolitical revolt against the Shia Islamic ruling class of Iran and the Qajar state, with what seemed to Western observers as "socialist" leanings. The faith has since discarded some of its earlier mystico-philosophical speculative elements and divorced itself more completely from Islamic traditions and nationalist concerns. It has no clergy, but since the 1960s it has been governed by a global system of local and international elected administrative bodies. It forbids the use of arms, exulting universalist humanitarianism over patriotism

and promoting international political unity. The faith itself has created a sort of alternate timeline between its past and the world's future, and its rituals and temples follow suit: The space inside of the Wilmette temple feels like a time capsule that has merged Western and Eastern elements of mysticism, as though the Golestan Palace had been redone by Buckminster Fuller and voted, or dropped, into an unlikely American setting during the ravaged early part of the century.

There are nine Baha'i Houses of Worship, all publicly accessible—in Cambodia, Uganda, Panama, India, Australia, Chile, Samoa, Germany—and all are built, funded, maintained, and referred to as "mother temples" by Baha'is. Each is aesthetically unique from the others, their head architects and designs designated by more local communities and governing bodies, but they have the same foundational harmony: dome structures with nine sides in a wide pendant of green space. They are meant as a "collective center of society to promote cordial affection," but as Shoghi Effendi, the appointed head of the faith until his death in 1957, wrote, with a caveat: Despite their "immeasurable potentialities," the suspension these centers allow is meant to be temporary. Worshippers, especially Baha'is, are meant to

"translate and transfuse" their experience of the sacred to the outside world: into service. Houses of Worship are essential to Baha'is because they offer an escape—not as an end in itself but as a concrete expression of transition and reorientation.

There are few photographs of the inner chamber of the temple in Wilmette, but many of the exterior: basically the same shot of the dome's porous, embroidered exoskeleton of limestone and quartz, cascading in three horizontal tiers like fountain layers; and its nine-pronged garden and walkways, the temple reflected in water below. At the doors to the inner edifice, there is a laminated sign seemingly propelled from a desktop printer, complete with clip art: *no photography, phones on silent, observe quiet*.

Beyond that sign, not much goes on; the space is circular and oak, lined across with maybe 300 rusty-rose velvet seats, its translucent veined dome ceiling lets daylight into the hall, leading up to a glass cut of the Greatest Name, a calligraphic rendition of a word for God. A medium-height orange tree in a standard terra cotta pot stands modestly in the wings, taken from the house of "the Báb," the original revolt's young figurehead. The house was destroyed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

in 1979. Ritual requires a permanent sense of the past and future in impermanent places; the relics gesture to nondisposability more than indispensability, within an otherwise malleable space that isn't secularized but tended to like the private life of a household.

The temple's innards encourage a similar relationship to spectatorship as that of the women's bath house. We, inside, neither affirm nor deny anyone else. It carries the effect of putting your device, your life, on airplane mode. The social air pressure is lifted, and silence is imposed; self-broadcast is adjourned. Like John Berger's reading, in an essay by the deglossed title "A Household," of the Francisco de Zurbarán painting *House of Nazareth,* depicting an already grieving mother Mary at home with her young son who has pricked his finger on a thorn, the aesthetic form of the site seems to hinge on two spaces, one solid, the other visionary.

Zurbarán, whom Berger describes as "devout and sensuous," rendered as sacred the domestic, specifically that which "accrues through labor: childbirth, ironed linen, prepared food, fresh clothes, arranged flowers, embroidery, clean children, washed floors. His art is infused, as that of no other painter of his time, by the experience, pride and pain of women." The sense of

what Berger calls the sacred comes here not from misty angels or the symbolic presence of doves but his tenebristic rendition of household objects, foregrounding them like messages emerging them out of a tuned-out background: "He sees not only a form but a task accomplished or being accomplished. The tasks are everyday household ones … They imply care, order, regularity: these qualities being honored not as moral categories but as evidence of meaning."

If the sacred site is like a public still-life, a photograph can also infuse its subject with the sacred, or become a relic itself. Moments recorded can take a posthumous meaning, but against the chaos of recordable things, the achievement in capturing an object and making it sacred includes aesthetics. The tendency to say well-composed, dramatic captures of cascading groups are "like a Renaissance painting" highlights this kind of vision: when the mundane among daily chaos is suddenly partitioned off and called inviolable.

Last summer, the cultural geography of the U.S. was temporarily overlaid by astronomy. On the occasion of a full solar eclipse, many small

American towns well situated for viewing its "totality" prepared to accommodate an influx of travelers. These visitors would pay seven times a month's rent for a weekend in first-time Airbnbs, packing the local restaurants and leaving a mess.

The day before the eclipse, my mother and I were in a cafe in a suburb of Chicago, an interlude on our way to the temple—almost my third visit—when a friend texted, inviting me to carpool to just outside Carbondale, Illinois, in a region known as Little Egypt, where the eclipse would be most visible. I said goodbye to my mother, who would fly home the next day, watching the eclipse from the airport. One planned pilgrimage was swiftly replaced by another: My mother continued to the temple, while I quickly packed and went to join the more diffuse center of a temporal X.

As the moon's 100-mile umbral shadow began its tramp from along the northwest, the "view from nowhere" of social media was, for several hours in many tiers, briefly suspended. Watching the solar eclipse on screen was like New Year's Eve in reverse: Time passed at a different rate, in installments, through Lebanon, Idaho Falls, Casper, Grand Island, Kansas City, Carbondale, Nashville, Columbia. Pilgrimages were made

to those coordinates, and the event was broadcast with varying degrees of technical success. Many people posted themselves simply looking up, because of course, everyone would know what they were looking at. You could, somehow, see it for yourself.

The event created a broad collective context within which to situate ourselves peripherally to a wave of totalizing awe, or at least entertainment, that made room for itself. What we offered each other were mild souvenirs of paper ephemera and crescent shadow photographs, and maybe a borrowed or stumbling description of being there, where and when the moon put the "day" out of the everyday.

The introduction to Mark Fisher's *Acid Communism*, to be published posthumously later this year, describes the different forms of collectivity that emerged from 1960s counterculture. These, he argues, are typified by the place described in the Temptations song "Psychedelic Shack"—a place that, for all its "carnivalesque departures from everyday reality," is "not a remote utopia" but possibly an "actual social space," egalitarian and democratic, collective

and "oriented to the outside," that "bustles with all the energy of a bazaar," where a "certain affect presides over everything. There is multiplicity, but little sign of resentment or malice."

Fisher reminds us that Ellen Willis, who wrote that the "social and psychic" revolution, whose "seeds" lay in the counterculture of the time, believed it would concern organized care and domestic arrangements most of all. To Fisher, the psychedelic shack is not contained in any particular structure but is a dimension of many spontaneous collectives emerging at the time, a "specter" of both "actual historical developments and to a virtual confluence that has not yet come together in actuality." *Psychedelic shack*, as a phrasal template, follows the same formula as *internet cafe*, *television station*, or even the somewhat inlaid *web site*: where something visionary merges with a material form.

The symbolic presence of an established sacred place (a church, a temple) can seem to deny the fact of its materiality and mutability and the realities of the living cities around them, as though by transcending the mundanity of the world the space is not also subject to the same dynamics. But sacred places are living: fastened to the relations that undergird them and

maintain their existence, evolving and responding to capital, labor, and the people who create and make use of them. They belong to the locations in which they've settled, or through which they flow, and the fate of those places is their own.

Television, Fisher writes, helped constitute with other mass media a new emerging public sphere which projected itself into domestic space and back: It "broke down" a distinction "between dreams and waking life that film had begun." The main spillways of online social life are not built to resemble semi-public places with private undercurrents, or to produce the busy distinction of a bazaar or plush bathroom lounge. But the dynamic co-presence that can emerge from, for example, a chat room, with its overtone of ambient social belonging, approximates what a vaulted "inside" can look like online. The difference between a "site" (web) and a bath house, temple, or park is a material one: the screen was designed for one-way broadcast and spectatorship, but as its reciprocal powers have emerged it increasingly evokes the setting of a fireside gathering.

When our "sites" became astronomically graced, what occurred was a brief view of collective

immersion—where no one's particular place, in looking, could be exalted above another's. Here coordinates mattered, but the digital and the physical were resolved into an inner chamber that was more diffuse than the walls of a planetarium can express.

Originally published June 18, 2018
reallifemag.com/paradise-regained/

Like and Subscribe

by Vicky Osterweil

Logan Paul's "We found a dead body in the Japanese Suicide Forest" vlog is exactly as advertised. He and his entourage enter the famous site, claiming they're looking for ghosts, and they come across the body of a recent suicide, filming it and themselves around it, alternately looking somber and cracking

awkward jokes. "This marks a moment in YouTube history," Paul remarks, sounding proud. The body appeared in the video's thumbnail.

In the aftermath, it did seem to mark a moment in YouTube history—the moment when the behavior of the platform's stars sparked outrage beyond the confines of the YouTube fan community, the tens of millions of (mostly teenage) fans whose lack of crossover with traditional media makes them largely invisible to over-25s who aren't parents. There have been repeated outcries against YouTube content creators for a variety of actions—like Sam Pepper's "prank" in which he (graphically) faked a kidnapping and execution, or when the parents behind DaddyOFive were not so subtly abusing their youngest child on video as a form of funny "teasing" entertainment—but YouTube's response has tended to be slow and tentative. It took them 10 days to respond to Paul's video, and even then, though Paul lost his Google Preferred status and was removed from an original YouTube series called *Foursome*, the company did not take down his channel entirely or strip him of any of its 16 million subscribers. It didn't even take down the video; Paul did that himself in the wake of the controversy.

Normally, that would be the end of things, until the next mini-crisis erupts. But this incident has had broader repercussions. While condemnation was loud within the YouTube community—even PewDiePie, YouTube's top star by subscriber count, who has generated controversy himself with numerous anti-Semitic and racist jokes and slurs, criticized Paul and the platform's response—there was additional criticism from more mainstream outlets, who combined outrage at Paul specifically with a sense of appalled discovery more generally at what YouTube has become for its power users.

Paul's fans, the "LoGang," have largely stood by him, defending him to anyone who would listen. Paul himself took a brief hiatus after the scandal but returned in late January with a suicide-prevention video, including an interview with a survivor, and announced he would be donating a million dollars to suicide-prevention charities. Some critics have given his PR team the win, arguing that he has done the right thing with his notoriety. Through it all, he has gained about 400,000 subscribers. Only on February 9 did YouTube temporarily halt ad sales for his channel, citing a "pattern of behavior" in his posts after a new video had footage of him tasering dead rats.

That some people would subscribe to controversial YouTubers in the immediate aftermath of a scandal out of prurient interest is to be expected. But why do so few fans leave? Why does the public uproar and opprobrium seem to increase fans' devotion, especially when the behavior of these often relentlessly narcissistic, racist performers appears indefensible?

The Logan Paul incident has brought a spotlight to YouTube's negligence, but we should also be using it to shine a light on the fan armies YouTubers are amassing. While controversy occasionally leads YouTube to partially demonetize channels, YouTubers almost always continue to grow their subscriber base despite this, as this roundup of past YouTube violators shows. PewDiePie's "BroArmy," for instance, has gained 7 million new subscribers since his scandal, and a number of sponsors have quietly returned to supporting his content. Indeed, having a fan team that will stick by you through scandal is one of the commonalities among big YouTubers. Creating a branded fandom is a major part of a YouTuber's staying power. Many have official names for the fandom, but unlike "trekkie" or "bronies," which emerge spontaneously out of communities of interest, the hashtagged YouTube fandom names tend to

be assigned by YouTuber celebrities themselves. Louise Petland (Sprinkleofglitter) has the Glitterinos, Dan and Phil have the Phandom, and so on. This conscious team-building project is common on the other side of the camera too, as with Logan Paul's brother Jake and his vlogging crew, Team 10.

The demagogic celebrity personality is hardly new to the U.S. political scene. In the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin, a fascist radio-broadcasting priest, created a movement of perhaps millions across the country through his anti-Semitic programs while the more recent careers of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Alex Jones reflect the same tendency. The seeming intimacy and warmth of radio—of a voice at a microphone transmitted directly from the speaker into your ear and your home—provides a shortcut to trust and affiliation that other broadcast mediums have lacked.

Until YouTube. YouTube's format produces a symbiotic relationship between producer and fan community, more intensely than radio, grounded as it is in the immediacy and intimacy of social media. You follow your favorite celeb in all their personal spaces; you get their thoughts and feelings up to the minute. The YouTuber seems more like a friend, a real presence in your life.

YouTube stars did not invent the personality cult, but they stand to inherit what long-developing structures of politicized fandom, celebrity, and intimacy have crystallized. In the void left by the collapse of unifying (false) narratives of progress, science, god, and the spread of freedom, entertainments and devotees proliferate: Around every popular piece of cultural production fan sites, conventions, wikis and other infrastructure bloom, reflecting an attempt to wring as much happiness and meaning as possible from what limited sources of pleasure our planet-destroying, inequality-magnifying capitalist culture provides.

But of course, such desperate pleasures produce desperate fans. The hate that floods the inboxes of those who venture even mild criticisms of beloved video game or comic book franchises attests to that. And when the fandom is allied to an individual, as with the YouTuber, rather than, say, the expanded *Star Wars* universe, the promise of a more direct, politicized kind of fandom-team comes into focus.

This tendency is shaped by YouTube's platform approach, which drives YouTubers to produce constant, differentiated content to see what gets recommended by the algorithms. Content producers are responsible

for driving their own numbers: This means they must produce a lot of videos to see what clicks, and they must produce increasingly self-referential videos that strategically emphasize belonging and the merchandise that signifies it. They are incentivized to intensify the feelings of us vs. them, because embattled loyalty churns clicks and sells shirts.

If you like what you see, hit the subscribe button.

To understand how YouTube forms defensive, proto-politicized fandoms, we have to understand how its business model promotes overinvestment on behalf of both fans and content producers.

As with the platform economy more generally (Uber, Airbnb, Task Rabbit, etc.), the shift to a personalized digital-distribution system drawing on a decentralized labor force largely functions to drive down wages—in this case in the entertainment industry. Even a YouTube channel with apparently high production values requires far less budget and support staff than legacy TV productions. And most of the content is made not to pass muster with human pro-

ducers or gatekeepers but through a mating dance with the platform's algorithmic recommendation system. Where once there was a team of cast, crew, executive producers, studio heads and marketing execs standing between an idea for programming and its being distributed to millions, now there are just the Paul brothers and their ilk. Content providers supply videos on spec, on a trial and error basis and in bulk to find out what can entice the algorithms to feed the content to viewers and generate ad revenue, with YouTube profiting through brokering the deal.

The seeming haplessness of YouTube in the face of its own algorithms, then, is not accidental. It has become conventional wisdom that YouTube has lost control of its platform to its algorithms, which, for instance, automatically restrict any and all LGBTQ+ content but encourage people to watch Nazi and alt-right content and create child-traumatizing clickbait. But rather than a loss of control, these outcomes prove YouTube is functioning as intended. By design, YouTube has little direct control over what its platform shows to any particular viewer compared with, say, NBC. Despite making some shows, YouTube's primary business is not producing or even curating content;

it is brokering as many matches as possible between content, viewers, and advertisers.

The tendency of YouTube's algorithms to push reactionary content shows the extent to which algorithms can reproduce the dominant oppressive dynamics—which are highly profitable—while allowing those writing and administrating those algorithms to disavow these results. As new books by Virginia Eubanks and Safiya Noble have argued, technological and algorithmic "fixes" for poverty, social services, racial problems, and criminal justice serve to wash the hands of civil servants, to displace responsibility for amoral, racist, and oppressive decisions. As part of the backlash against the social movement victories of the 1960s, repressive control moved increasingly into "apolitical" technological centers. As Eubanks notes in an interview, "technology became a way of smuggling politics into the system without having an actual political conversation."

As with most social media platforms, YouTube's algorithmic sorting structures a highly visible competition among content producers for attention, with foregrounded metrics providing a scoreboard. More attention from viewers fuels more attention from algorithms, generating an all-or-nothing stakes. Content

is made not to inform or entertain but to win, and this encourages increasingly team-like differentiation among programs and their fan bases, and the instigation of drama between them (for which creators and not YouTube appears responsible). Conflict pumps up the intensity of viewership and gives meaning to the otherwise insignificant stylistic or taste differences between producers' channels, and to the endless stream of largely interchangeable videos.

YouTube has made commitments to hire more content moderators. Given that Logan Paul's suicide forest video was approved by a human moderator, it's not clear this would do much to remove problematic content—even if there was a consensus of what constitutes a problem. But ultimately, YouTube's business model precludes it from ever hiring enough moderators, content managers, and community relations to make it a healthy place. The only way platforms like YouTube are profitable is by deregulating the content space and getting users to produce the majority of the value by providing the content, the moderation (through flagging mechanisms, which are often abused), and the promotion (through likes, subscribes, and shares). Users also bear the brunt of the risk, whether it be in the form of

the production costs for videos, the fallout stemming from how they are received, or the mere exposure as viewers to material that can traumatize in any number of ways.

This is not to romanticize the culture industry's old way of doing things. It's hard to imagine the Paul brothers successfully producing anything as awful as *Get Hard* or *The Interview* or *Cops:* That's the kind of ideological violence only big money and big teams can buy. The "from below" ideological production of the PewDiePies of the world will never be as slick or subtle, and it won't come backed by broad cultural legitimacy or massive marketing campaigns. One horizon for YouTube is to follow Netflix and Amazon and move further in the direction of emulating the studios they "disrupted," producing and distributing a limited amount of content in the conventional way, now that they have secured a share of the attention market.

But it is hard to imagine the platform would surrender the new form of stardom it has facilitated in the YouTuber, and the new sort of fandom that accompanies it. The shift to the YouTuber, and the devolution of ideological power from the television channel,

movie studio, and record label to the stars themselves engenders a transformed relationship and meaning of fandom. Increasingly, it politicizes it.

Celebrity and intimacy are seemingly contradictory ideals. A celebrity is defined by their distance—they are a *star*, after all, not of the planet on which you live. And for the wealthy and famous, notoriety and intimacy are often seen as incompatible: Are new friends and lovers there because they like you, or because they like being someone who knows you, or because of your money? The whirlwind of attention, bad-faith hangers-on, demanding family members, self-doubt, paparazzi, and studio power has created a long history of addictions, mental breakdowns, bankruptcies, and suicides. As much as stars are loved and admired while they rise to the sky, the public equally enjoys consuming their suffering on the way down—especially if she's a woman. From envy to schadenfreude, it's a violent relation of consumption the whole way.

But if the hierarchical relation of star to fan is characterized by implicit antagonism behind the fasci-

nation, the lateral relation among fans in a community offers something more warm and unifying—the undeniable pleasure and intimacy of shared knowledge, the theories and languages of the fan community, the posters on your bedroom wall and fan-fic stories on your phone screen, not to mention the affective ecstasy of dissolving yourself into a pack of hundreds or thousands of fans, screaming in unison at a concert or public event. The experience of fandom combines these affects: It is all about an intensity of desire and knowledge overcoming boundaries and producing, somehow, a relationship, an intimacy—impossibly distant but very close.

New media forms have intensified the cult of celebrity's pull in both those seemingly opposed directions at once. Stars can participate more openly and directly in their publicity, making a seamless blur of their life and their image, while deepening their aura with unfathomable follower counts and engagement metrics. Their relation to fans becomes at once more intimate and more mediated. At the same time, this infusion of celebrity publicity into social media provides a template for how to use these tools to produce new celebrities across all sorts of niches and subcul-

tures, incubating the same sort of fervency through a multiplicity of channels.

The YouTube star exemplifies and accelerates the possibilities of contemporary celebrity's "intimate distance." Like the reality TV stars before them, many YouTubers don't come to fame through conventional performing skills—through acting, music, or other modes of performance art—but directly, through an entrepreneurship of the self serialized as entertainment. For this, some unique combination of charm, humor, creativity, extreme narcissism, intense disinhibition, work ethic, and strategic cleverness is required. Although many YouTubers are entertaining, producing things that resemble ordinary TV shows or music videos, most of them typically intersperse this with intimate daily-life content, video-game "let's plays" (where they appear in one corner of a game screen while they play and talk), vlogs, and video diaries. These videos reify the pleasures of simply hanging out with them. And many of the most popular YouTubers produce only this kind of content.

Unlike standouts in other forms of media, YouTubers produce constant streams of content, often posting multiple times a day—although frequently they

will post a lot of their daily content output on other platforms, particularly Instagram stories and Snapchat. That content is made available exclusively in and through "their" spaces—their personalized accounts on massive tech-company platforms. As opposed to other teen idols of acting or music fame, vloggers are life loggers, an always-there fun friend, in your pocket or in your hands, constantly making new content around the clock.

Though it's widely understood that the most famous and successful YouTubers have publicists, producers, and agents around them, they maintain an aesthetic of less professional production values—for example the trademark jump cutting, the kept-in bad takes and outtakes, the giggling and errors that often mark the genre's humor.

The aesthetic amateurism of the YouTuber corresponds with the fact that everyone who likes YouTube stars could also be producing their own YouTube content. YouTubers are distinguished from reality TV stars in that their fans can, with just a phone and an internet connection, seemingly do the exact same activity they do, that they used to become stars. Of course, not everyone becomes a YouTube celebrity. It

helps to be conventionally attractive, and being white, straight, and cis is a big boost; it also helps to already be wealthy or have connections in the conventional entertainment world.

Just as e-sports enable fans who play the exact same games as their heroes to realistically aspire to playing a few rounds with them, YouTube foments the fantasy that famous YouTubers started out just like you, and you can vlog your way into their firmament. This is part of the medium's vicarious appeal, another aspect of its intimate distance. The spectacle of a few incredibly rich Paul brothers hides the hundreds of thousands of aspiring stars producing free content and data for Alphabet Inc. every day.

There is a certain arbitrariness to the YouTuber: They are just a person sitting in front of a camera, like anyone else, like any of their fans. This makes them much more like our friends and loved ones, who are on some level arbitrary, personal, sublimely subjective. In every partnership and friendship there is a commitment to another individual that we recognize, often through insecurity or jealousy, could

just as easily be offered to someone else. This arbitrariness of the YouTuber means that to become a fan of this particular star involves a similarly arbitrary commitment—a friendship pledge.

The YouTuber appears on your phone, on a glass surface that you stroke and touch constantly. They show up everyday, a few times a day, and they can appear everywhere you go, in your bed, at school with you, on the bus, and the entirety of the product they are selling is the fun of hanging out with them. They are your friend: When people attack them, as "outsiders" and the media do during a scandal, those people become an enemy, it becomes a *political conflict* rather than an entertainment scandal. Although YouTube uses the word "subscriber," Twitter and Instagram's term "follower" is closer to the mark, to say nothing of Facebook's "friend." It's no wonder so many YouTubers have a hashtag name for their fandoms.

For Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, the defining character of the political as such (as opposed to the moral, cultural, social, scientific, etc.) is the distinction between friend and enemy. Wherever this distinction operates, politics are present, and only conflict, up to and including war, can solve a confrontation. The increased

intimacy of the YouTuber—the collapsing of the distance to the star—creates the kind of political in-group: a community of Schmittian friendship. Watching the videos is an act of allegiance, a way of refining the us and them that makes the community meaningful.

But crucially, this politicized relationship to the YouTuber only works because the YouTuber cannot actually become your friend: The distance from them, their celebrity is what allows people to invest the energy, obsession, and community of the fandom experience. We can see this by distinguishing the YouTuber from the livestreamer. With livestreamers on Twitch, for example, the chat function means you can and often will interact with the streamer: They will read your best jokes out loud, respond to you, say hello and goodbye. Even on bigger streams, where the chat moves too fast for them to interact with everyone, they often have donations or subscription buttons that cause a pop-up to emerge on stream, often featuring an automated voice reading text the donator wrote, allowing for (paid) engagement. With a livestreamer, if you follow them enough and chat and interact enough, you might really become friends, or at least a mod. They maintain much less of the distance part of the equation.

The YouTuber, by contrast, posts completed videos, with live interaction largely restricted to social media. So the experience of fandom, friendship, and participation is more one-sided, more similar to traditional celebrities. It is sustained through sharing, reaction videos, and the like. This distance is required for the fandom relation: We can't be fans of people we're actually friends with, not really.

The devolution of power from the network to the individual star, then, combined with this collapsed intimate distance, increasingly creates the conditions for political micro-fiefdoms ruled by entertainment demagogues. It's no surprise that we have one as president. But rather than an apotheosis, Trump is merely a preview of the political formations to come, as his personalized, idiosyncratic, and idiotic modes of representation, fandom, and meaning making become increasingly common.

In the immediate aftermath of the controversy surrounding his video, Logan Paul released a barely apologetic apology. Critics jumped on the fact that he even signed off on his *mea culpa* statement with his fandom hashtag: #Logang4Life. People discussed this as reflecting Paul's failure to recognize the stakes of

the moment, a furthering of his insensitivity. But they were wrong. That was the most canny and political part of the otherwise mealy-mouthed apology, because he is letting his friends, his fans, his followers know that nothing has changed, that this is a political conflict and if they stay by his side he won't go anywhere. He'll likely continue adding subscribers.

For now, there are no actively, consciously politicized major YouTubers, although the far-right recognizes YouTube as an important ground for spreading their ideas. Celebrity fandom was first feared as a mass hysteria of unleashed female desire—think Beatlemania-style tropes of teens tearing the clothes off their idols. While that fear lingers for some, fandom has proved itself an incredibly useful model for both the entertainment industry and representative government, where personality-driven "presidential-style" campaigning has become the go-to method for systems of "no-choice but the ruling classes" to hide their elitism.

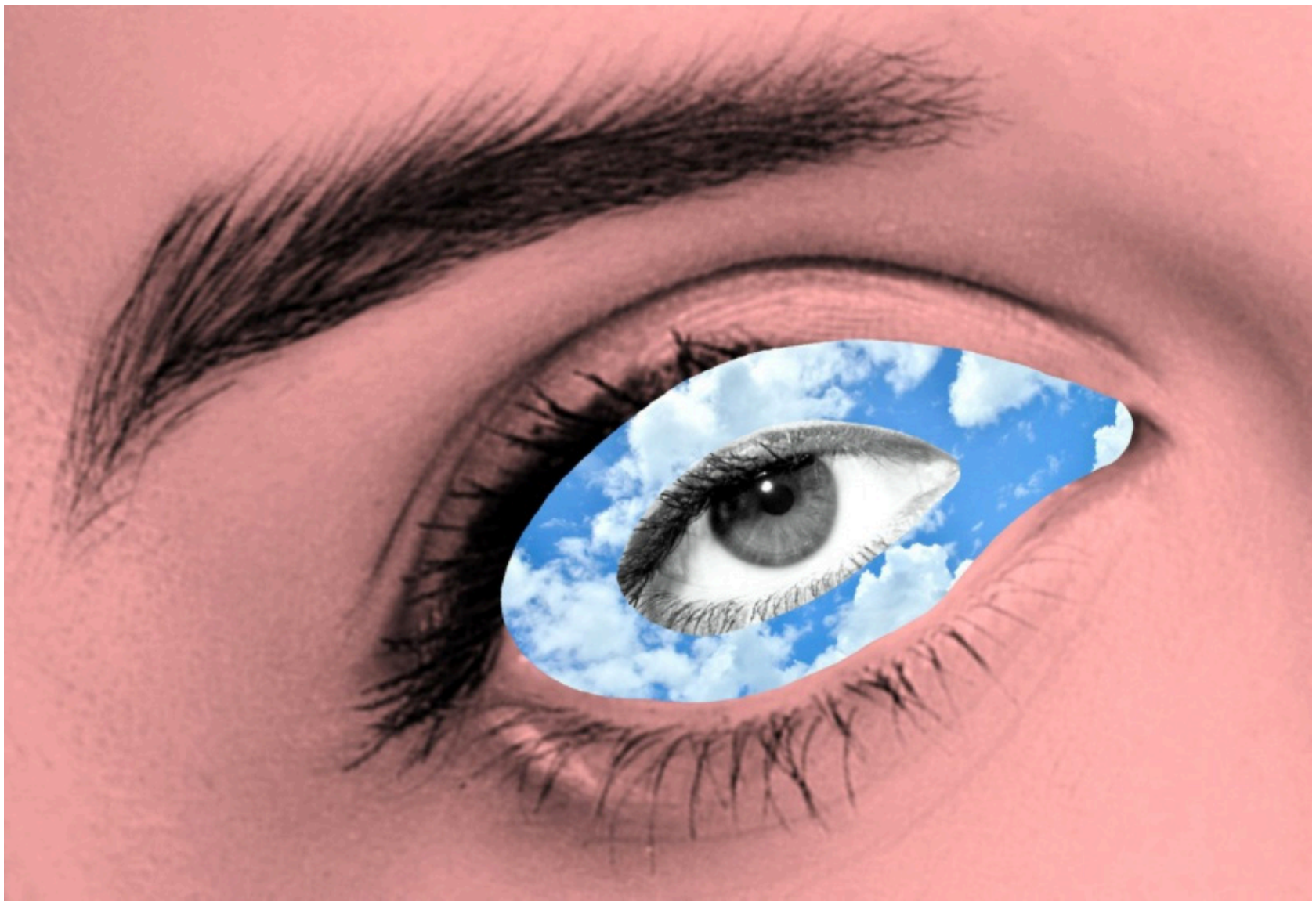
While left-wing YouTubers exist, the platform is much less copacetic to the revolutionary ideals of critique, self-examination, questioning, and transformation. YouTube structures content around fandom and friendship, cult and follower, around defensive in-

groups and hated enemies. Opportunists and relentless self-promoters like PewDiePie and the Paul brothers flourish in such an atmosphere. But it's not hard to imagine there's a more weaponized, politicized YouTuber waiting in the wings: a Father Coughlin for the 21st century.

Originally published Feb. 12, 2018
reallifemag.com/like-and-subscribe/

Crush Fatigue

by Alexandra Molotkow



In her 1979 book *Love and Limerence*, psychologist Dorothy Tennov set out to give a formal account of "the experience of being in love"—not love itself, in the sense of a deep mutual bond, but "limerence," the "condition of cognitive obsession" that marks a serious infatuation: the intrusive thoughts, the wild ups and

downs triggered by your perception of their perception of you. I learned about "limerence" through a friend: I was mooning over someone, I can't remember who, and she told me there was a term for what I'd always interpreted as a symptom of weakness. Since then I've passed that term along to several friends, who were just as relieved as I was. Tennov's book includes "hundreds of pages of Studs Terkel-like first-person testimony about the intimate details of being under another person's spell," as Sarah Lev Beller put it in an essay for the *Influence*. It's an anatomy of the hopeless crush, a syndrome "both extreme and banal," which is shockingly uniform: For those of us prone to limerence, there are few surprises beyond the fact that some people never go through it at all. The fact of the book is enough. Part of the torment of infatuation is that it's both all-consuming and totally frivolous; Tennov legitimized a state of seemingly illegitimate feeling.

I was born limerent, and my relationship to limerence itself is ambivalent. Crushes map life over with meaning and joy, and I'd always choose heartbreak over boredom. They can also gain on me like a frightening, unpredictable force that lifts me out of my life and drops me back, months later, with a lot of mess to

clean. They feel disruptive and wasteful—a misallocation of emotional energies, a source of outsize pain for stupid reasons—and, though it's partly the point, they alienate me from myself: crushing involves adopting a set of hypothetical standards against which I'm necessarily lacking. Worse is the sense of inappropriateness, as if these attachments are in some way a violation, or degradation, of the person on whom I'm crushing: It's like I've accidentally cloned them without their knowledge or consent. The most perverse thing about limerence is how impersonal it feels.

The limerent crush, or "limerent object" in Tennov's terms, is a quick and deep way of reaching beyond yourself, especially when you feel atomized or disoriented—if you've found yourself shuffling through jobs, say, and living quarters and intimacies. Just living online can feel like living in a big city: you make an ephemeral acquaintance, or click a link into an entirely new set of priorities, suppositions, and patterns of logic, sometimes totally at odds with your own and yet just as convinced of itself. The issue is not just that context bleeds and collapses; it's that every new window opens onto a different horizon of concern, each with wildly different stakes, but equally urgent. One adaptive response

is deep, cyclical immersion—you can set your focus to firehose blast, so that whatever world you're in now is the only one, for as long as you're here. The limerent crush is a temporary organizing principle, an epistemic soap bubble, where a person coalesces a whole suite of judgments and impressions, values and aesthetics, a system as totalizing, and as doomed, as a dream.

Limerence is a program running in the background of your days and nights, arranging your impressions in the shape of your fixation. Strange faces resemble theirs; a license plate containing their initials serves cosmic confirmation of your destiny together. "Just as all roads lead to Rome," Tennov writes, "when your limerence for someone has crystallized, all events, associations, stimuli, experience return your thoughts to LO [limerent object] with unnerving consistency." Tennov cites Stendhal, who likened the experience of falling for someone to immersing a branch in a salt mine—months later it emerges "an object of shimmering beauty." For me it feels more like something from body horror: Some interaction sets a transcription process in motion, and you incubate their double, which lives in your head thereafter, overseeing all your thoughts and actions.

In the throes of limerence, as with hypochondria, my attention is doomed to slip away from daily tasks into hours of litany and quantification: recounting the evidence for and against; calculating the odds; assembling and reassembling the narratives in which x is true and in which it isn't. In either case, social media platforms and search engines both mimic the structure of an obsession and provide new compulsions for it: googling names, scrolling profiles and message boards, messaging friends who might be willing to review the evidence and deliver a temporary verdict. The internet has a way of literalizing obsession, beaming your crush into your private space, during your private moments, producing the vertigo of potential contact. It also realizes the fear of being found out: the LO knows you've watched their stories; all it takes is one slip of the finger to indicate you've been scrolling too deep.

The great irony in limerence, of course, is that in chasing the idea of someone else you only wrap yourself up in you. Obsession, as one of Tennov's sources notes, is terribly selfish; even kindness toward the LO is a private pleasure, while kindness toward anyone else is tedium unless you imagine your LO's approval. In an essay for the *New Inquiry*, Tiana Reid noted that "quit-

ting smoking seems easier" than stopping a burgeoning crush; the evidence that you're not a good match might be no less obvious, and no more compelling, than the evidence that cigarettes cause cancer. My orientation toward a hopeless crush is, if I'm being honest with myself, acquisitive: their qualities, their physicality, their world as I imagine it is all lit up for me, and I can't stand the thought of my life without it.

"Crushes offer a singular power to make concessions to the scary idea that things change," Reid writes, "and that's what makes the unrequitedness worth the rush. In the end, all I want is the practice of crushing itself." The sweet part of crushing is that careful, excited attention to someone else, before fondness is subject to need. This is how it feels at the beginning, or, sometimes, at the end, because full-blown limerence requires some hope of reciprocation. Half the time I crush, what I want—or what I want to want—is not possession, but instead a respectful and completely unilateral relationship to the idea of someone else. I want to be let alone to contemplate, and to leave alone—to respect the difference between my interest and the unknown, or unknowable person it correlates to.

This might sound like willful solipsism, but when

I flip the perspective it almost feels right. Times when I've been a limerent object, I've wanted to be as little involved as possible, not only for reasons of decency ("limerence has only one answer," Tennov writes: "Do what is necessary to eliminate any trace of hope") but because it doesn't seem like my business. It's nice to know that the thought of me holds some significance to someone else. But I don't, and can't know exactly what that significance is; I don't want to confuse it for something inherent in me, or for anyone else to be so confused. Rather than bringing two people together, a reciprocal crush can produce a certain kind of relationship, and maybe the one I like most, wherein you remain at a distance while giving each other something to think about.

The internet, while it can cocoon you in a fixation, can also help formalize distance. It legitimizes deep attention to others at a considerate remove, and allows for conversation at staggered timescales: you leave an impression of yourself, in text or image or audio, for anyone else to pick up at their leisure. Proximity in public can create a distance of its own. One of the things I love most about living in a city is the constant possibility of instant intimacy; I really don't mind being in-

terrupted from my book at the bar. Shared history can be a distracting third party, and sometimes it's easier to be kind without it. It doesn't matter what strangers tell each other about themselves. Neither of you shows evidence of who the other has been. You trade impressions, and for both of you something will stick.

Strangers are more dependable than friends, who are cycling through their lives just as you are; if you never lose interest in other people, you're never exactly alone. Of course you can be lonely with anyone, and you can forget that you're lonely. Anyone who's made a habit of admiring strangers knows how badly they can remind you of who you miss.

Originally published Aug. 1, 2018
reallifemag.com/new-feelings-crush-fatigue/

The Constant Consumer

by Drew Austin

Every day, the imperative to perceive oneself as a customer grows across a range of experiences and institutions: in the shopping centers and business improvement districts that have replaced public squares and parks; in the schools and hospitals, where

offerings are tailored not to general social welfare but to individual consumer choice and what each can afford; and in the gym, where exercise, nutrition, and other forms of wellness have been redefined as personal lifestyle choices.

If the customer is always right, then you're never wrong when you're consuming. No contemporary company has offered that Faustian bargain more broadly and aggressively than Amazon. In a previous era, being at home meant you probably weren't shopping. The mall was, as Ian Bogost noted in an essay for the *Atlantic,* where "consumerism roared and swelled but, inevitably, remained contained." Freeing consumerism from that containment was one of the internet's earliest applications, streamlining the process of shopping at home, and later, on phones.

Recent technologies have enabled the role of *customer* to be fused with the newer role of *user,* who inhabits an entire system rather than a specific transaction. Exploring that transition, writer Kevin Slavin describes how the experience of app-based food delivery narrows one's perspective: "For users, this is what it means to be at the center: to be unaware of anything outside it." Those apps' minimal interfaces, requiring little more than the push of a button to order food, conceal the

labor and logistical sophistication that make it possible. Users don't need to understand the messy complexity that supports their simplified solipsism. In Slavin's example, that insight wouldn't help them order more food, so the user experience excludes it.

Amazon similarly merges the customer and the user within its own optimized environments, letting these subjects exist at the center of an ever-expanding system. Imagine an avid Amazon customer's typical day living with a near future iteration of the platform: He wakes up and speaks his first words of the morning to his Amazon Echo in the kitchen, asking Alexa to order toothpaste after noticing he was running low. Upon checking his email, he gives Alexa a few more instructions, adding social engagements and reminders to his calendar, checking the weather, and finally opening the garage door once he's ready to leave for work. At the office throughout the day, idle shopping fills his distracted moments. He browses books, clothing, and even furniture, placing orders within seconds, many of which automatically appear in his shopping cart based on patterns from his activity history (he even knows that some of what he buys will be waiting at home tonight). During the evening commute another Alexa-enabled device in his car prompts him to send his

sister a birthday card, an action he asks Alexa to do for him. He stops by Whole Foods to pick up groceries—as an Amazon Prime member, it's always the most cost-effective option in his neighborhood. He arrives home to find a variety of Amazon packages stacked neatly on the living room coffee table, delivered throughout the day by part-time contractors who let themselves into the house via the smart lock on the front door. The soundtrack to his entire day is provided by Amazon Music, in which his Prime membership has automatically enrolled him for a small monthly fee. Few parts of this hypothetical day, which is already within the realm of possibility, remain untouched by Amazon's user experience.

Amazon, as much as any single company, is transforming the environments in which we live and embedding itself within the fabric of daily existence. Beyond individual experience, those changes also manifest themselves in the physical environment. Many physical retail stores have been rendered obsolete as Amazon and other online retailers started undercutting them on price and offering a wider selection. (Bookstores experienced this first but it eventually spread to almost every form of retail.) Sidewalks and building lobbies have become staging areas for packages, with delivery vehicles

exacerbating traffic and obstructing bike lanes as piles of brown Amazon boxes increasingly take up space. As Amazon and food delivery apps eliminate some of the most common reasons to leave one's house one wonders what sort of neighborhood life will be sustainable in affluent urban areas.

In light of Amazon's all-encompassing ambitions, the strategy behind several of the company's most important product initiatives—Alexa, Amazon Prime, physical retail stores (including Amazon Go and Whole Foods), and Amazon Key—becomes clearer. These products seek to redefine what being a customer means by immersing us more completely within the Amazon universe. Formerly, being a customer was a role one assumed upon physically entering a store or ordering something from a company. Amazon promises to create a newer type of environment, a hybrid of the digital and the physical, that lets us permanently inhabit that role: the world as Everything Store, which we're always inside.

Amazon represents its efforts to erase the remaining bulwarks against consumerism as its "customer obsession." Throughout Amazon's existence, the company has claimed that traditional

corporate priorities, from high-profile retail partnerships to short-term profitability to the company's stock price, have always ranked below customer satisfaction. Early in the company's history, CEO Jeff Bezos sometimes insisted on keeping one seat open at the conference room table during meetings "for the customer," and he still scans customer feedback himself, escalating problems to relevant departments with emails that consist of a single question mark.

Bezos's letter to Amazon's shareholders on April 18, 2018, praised the company's customers for being "divinely discontent," unfailingly raising their expectations beyond whatever standard a company sets for them. In the letter, Bezos likens this force to nothing less than evolution—"We didn't ascend from our hunter-gatherer days by being satisfied"—and goes on to describe the "customer empowerment phenomenon" that informs Amazon's approach: Consumers' access to product reviews, price comparisons, and shipping timelines has created a space where they and not retailers call the shots. To succeed in this landscape, Bezos suggests, companies must respond to their customers' ever-increasing power by treating them like the linchpins that they are; whoever does this best will rightfully dominate its market.

Amazon's obsession with customers appears to have endeared them, again and again, to a public that should know better: Earlier this year, Amazon announced that Prime memberships had surpassed 100 million globally, with more new members joining in 2017 than in any previous year. The company's second-quarter sales in 2018 grew 39 percent versus the previous year. Many have started welcoming Amazon's physical presence into their homes, with Alexa-enabled devices ranking among the company's best-selling items. "Customer obsession" is a happier narrative for this dominance than one of aggressive market capture, anti-competitive tactics, and ruthless labor exploitation. Like "support the troops," or "what about the children," caring about the customer seems like an impregnable position to take. It's a more specific iteration of Google's "Don't Be Evil": How could a consumer-focused company be evil, when we are all consumers? What could be wrong with the company being focused on *our* needs?

But that is the fundamental problem: Amazon's constant praise of the customer implies we are all already customers and nothing more—that we should understand "consumer" as our core identity. The com-

pany's endless praise for the consumer role is part of its intent to disarm us, to invite us to enter its universe of deals and recommendations and to internalize the status of permanent customer—and specifically, Amazon's customer. Overall, Amazon's most important product is how it creates and refines a world in which the Everything Store converges with just plain everything and, being ubiquitous, becomes invisible.

We dream of being creators, friends, neighbors, or citizens, but rarely of being customers. The customer role used to be temporary and specific—buying something from a seller—and not an aspirational identity. What happened?

In the 19th century, industrialization and mass production yielded an unprecedented flood of goods. Commerce was suddenly no longer constrained by supply but demand. Stimulating consumption became crucial; making *customer* a primary and perpetual identity was a key solution. To achieve this, retailers worked to make feelings of agency and significance available to people, but only on condition of being a customer. This approach is articulated by a slogan often attributed to

department store magnate Henry Gordon Selfridge in 1909: "The customer is always right."

Part of being "right" was being offered choices to be right about. Whereas Henry Ford once famously joked that customers could buy a car in any color they wanted, as long as it was black, such narrow standardization proved a less viable course as mass markets became saturated. Rather then sell products on their basic utility, advertising began to orient itself toward identity, selling the idea that individuals could reveal their unique selves through purchases. Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, pioneered this approach in the 1920s, purporting to link goods to individuals' inner desires. By the logic of identity-driven advertising, wanting more things corresponded to greater personal depth. Being a customer gave one access to not only a cornucopia of goods but also the rich recesses of one's psyche.

These processes have only become more sophisticated over the decades. At the individual level, unrestrained identification with the customer role has foreclosed other identities we might imagine for ourselves, such as political activism, resource stewardship, and community participation. David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), diagnoses a late 20th

century shift toward "a market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism." In this culture, at the structural level, businesses must cater to the customer identity to survive. In lieu of tolerating moderate inconvenience, higher prices, and some potentially awkward human interactions in order to support local businesses, the logic of efficient and limitless customer service offers fast food chains and big-box stores, which offer cheaper goods and routinized retail interactions. These, in turn, are now in the process of being supplanted by Amazon.

Consumerist approaches aren't the best solutions to many problems, but at present they're often the easiest to imagine and most realistic to implement, if only because they have the support of the corporate powers that benefit from them. The transition toward consumerism across so many domains exemplifies a phenomenon that writer Sarah Perry calls a tiling structure, a system that "tiles the world with copies of itself." Tiling structures flourish because they solve certain problems well enough that they become more or less mandatory, and block alternate solutions. Perry cites billboards, strip malls, and big-box retail stores as particularly visible examples of tiling structures. By minimizing their costs relative to

the revenue they generate while externalizing negative impacts such as poor pedestrian access and unpleasant aesthetics, they spread throughout suburbia in the 20th century, entrenching sprawl as the default format of American retail. Even identity-oriented marketing itself is a tiling structure: It has worked well enough for those with something to sell that it has gradually pervaded the commercial landscape, leaving its detrimental social and personal effects for someone else to fix.

Tiling structures have introduced customer-service logic to cultural spaces that were once sheltered from markets. Communities based on common interests, shared identity, or physical proximity, from neighborhoods to political groups to religious institutions, must now respond to their constituents' increased mobility and access to information by treating them like the empowered customers that Bezos described to his shareholders—customers who will leave if they find something better elsewhere. Individualized, personal-identity-based appeals replace collective orientations. As a tiling structure, this shift occurs because it works for the group implementing it, not because it's best for everyone.

The best example of this transition may be the

neighborhood itself. Living in a city, for many, resembles a pure customer experience, in which buying or renting an apartment or home determines one's relationship with a place more than membership in any kind of community. Residents commonly don't know their neighbors and oppose local developments that serve a greater good at their own expense. Real estate agents even appeal to individual identity to brand various locations and increase their appeal. Higher education, similarly, has recategorized students as customers, emphasizing efficiency and consumer choice over education's role as a socially useful endeavor to participate in.

Our lives are increasingly oriented toward a global system of consumerism mediated by massive, scale-seeking platforms rather than smaller, more localized groupings. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, documented declining participation in labor unions, fraternal organizations, and religious groups, partially attributing that decline to socially atomizing technologies like television and the internet (which was relatively young at the time)—both key facilitators of consumer culture. Many of the fading forms of social engagement Putnam describes have their own shortcomings, like restrictiveness and dis-

crimination, but their benefits are undeniable, ranging from personal happiness to civic involvement.

As globalized platform consumerism erases more of what preceded it, replacing intricate social arrangements with individual links to large impersonal systems, it's harder to remember what we've lost. Less and less equipped to imagine ourselves as anything but customers or users within those systems, we adopt the desires that companies like Amazon can best satisfy: convenience, choice, and frictionless consumption. These developments may be replacing another consumer system that wasn't necessarily worth preserving itself, but beyond those visible changes, we face a new risk: becoming users offline, in the physical world. The more Amazon can control our experience of that environment, the less we'll care what's outside the system it creates.

Amazon's true objective, it seems, is a full infiltration of the world rather than ongoing refinement of a walled garden confined to the internet. Instead of scaring its customers with its totalizing ambition, the company has successfully marketed this arrangement as desirable. To permanent customers, further gains in convenience, choice, price, and delivery speed are pure benefits. If life is meant to be a series of consum-

er experiences, they might as well happen as seamlessly as possible.

Years ago, Amazon's "1-click" purchasing option seemed to remove all remaining friction from online shopping, but there was still a long way to go. The company's more recent initiatives respond to deeper psychological friction that might prevent us from purchasing a product using Amazon's platform. In a reprise of what happened a century ago, manufacturing and distribution have again progressed to a point where the customer is the greatest constraint on commerce. A single-click purchase still requires opening Amazon's website or app, but people spend plenty of time away from their device screens. The Amazon Echo and other Alexa-enabled devices, placed throughout our homes like furniture, connect more directly to our supposedly subconscious impulses by letting us simply speak our desires and translating those words into Amazon orders. We might change our minds by the time we get around to opening an app, after all.

Amazon Prime complements this arrangement, letting us become formal members of the Amazon ecosystem and feel like we're always already inside the Everything Store. The company's physical retail

stores—Amazon Go, Amazon Books, and now Whole Foods—extend that territory to the urban space that Amazon had previously bypassed. And home technologies like Amazon Key reopen the home at the conclusion of the order, inviting the company's delivery workers to let themselves in and drop off our merchandise.

Writer Matthew Stewart, describing the urbanist vision revealed through Amazon's patent filings, characterized its strategy as "a colonization of everyday experience; a concerted effort to control an all encompassing infrastructure of home, office and retail automation, one in which the city becomes a giant fulfillment center, and humans mere inventory pickers." More than removing friction from its user experience, Amazon wants to *be* our environment.

In realizing such a totalizing vision, Amazon faces an obstacle: If being a customer feels so great, as the past century has trained us, what happens when the consumer experience encompasses us so completely that we forget we're customers at all? The minor friction of 1-click ordering pleasantly reminds us how easy it is to be one of Amazon's empowered customers, the object of the company's obsession. Will we remember that feeling if "smart" devices can effectively read our

minds and our desires subtly manifest themselves in our homes?

This quandary returns us to the definition of user. A user isn't just an evolved customer but a qualitative transformation of that role: one who occupies a system and creates value for the system's owner by merely being there, just as Google and Facebook's users generate valuable data by partaking of their services. Those platforms, for all their seeming omnipresence, haven't figured out how to expand beyond their digital containers. This is Amazon's ambitious vision: The world is its platform, and instead of being customers, we will just become users whether we are looking at screens or not.

Originally published Sept. 10, 2018
reallifemag.com/the-constant-consumer/

Uber Alles

by David A. Banks

We are in the twilight years of car culture. Few young people associate the car with freedom the way their parents and grandparents did. That sort of freedom—of open roads that can take you where the crowds aren't—has never scaled. The ro-

mantic Americana of Route 66 has been replaced by the daily gridlock of overbuilt highways. Not only is commuting by car the source of many environmental ills—recent revelations that car companies have been hiding their products' actual tailpipe emissions from regulators suggests they are worse than we knew—it produces a set of social problems that leave people feeling isolated and angry. Despite many improvements in car and road safety in the past few decades, the number of car-related fatalities has stayed relatively steady since 1975, hovering between 30,000 and 50,000 a year.

The car has become the opposite of liberating: a dangerous and expensive hassle that has reshaped the landscape in its image, creating isolation and dependency for everyone, with or without one. Families must maintain a fleet of vehicles to complete ordinary tasks within a suburban landscape designed to keep everyone marooned in individualized convenience. Instead of having life's necessities within walking distance of neighborhoods or public transportation, there are unmaintained sidewalks amid endless tracts of ranch houses and big-box stores surrounded by huge parking lots.

Cars themselves are no longer portals to the unknown, to be customized at the owner's discretion; they

are festooned with elaborate electronics that preclude the possibility of home repair, let alone modification, and they are equipped with monitoring devices that make them fully trackable (and susceptible to being hacked). When young adults get to drive the family car, they are still under the parental thumb, having their speed governed and their location monitored remotely.

As car culture has become more obviously stultifying, some have begun to romanticize train travel—the kind seen in onscreen evocations of the 1950s, or remembered from trips abroad: clean, dignified transit that is easy to navigate and implicitly on time. Even the U.S.'s dangerously derelict passenger-rail service is now represented as an ideal setting for writerly repose: For three years Amtrak offered a residency program for writers who wanted to be inspired by a transcontinental train ride. Like fresh produce or regular access to a doctor, the material benefits and dignity-conferring potential of trains has been restricted to a select few, even though these same benefits multiply when more have access to them. Trains should be the great equalizer, letting everyone get to where they need to go, but in the U.S. they are becoming cosmopolitan status markers.

At the other end of the spectrum from the train

is the bus. In a 2009 U.S. Department of Transportation survey, Los Angeles commuters ranked big diesel-electric commuter trains as the most desirable form of transit, with light rail, a category that includes subways and fixed-rail streetcars, right below them. At the very bottom was the humble bus. One might expect that bus rapid transit systems—conventional bus service modified to work more like light rail, with dedicated lanes and station-side ticketing—would be more popular, but they ranked barely above ordinary buses. When researchers asked why bus rapid transit ranked below light rail "even though they are essentially the same mode at approximately the same level of investment," respondents chalked it up to "perceptions of other riders." Though they function almost exactly like streetcars, bus rapid transit is stigmatized precisely because they serve a larger swath of the population. "Bus-based public transit in the United States," the L.A. study concluded, "suffers from an image problem."

That image problem—which, as will be explained below, stems from the deliberate association of buses with poverty and racialized minorities—informs the way Lyft and Uber have chosen to introduce their own versions of what is essentially conventional bus service.

Lyft describes its "Shuttle" as the option to "ride for a low fixed fare along convenient routes, with no surprise stops." Uber calls its service a "Pool." Alison Griswold, writing at Quartz, notes that the path taken by the bus mentioned in Uber's blog post announcing the service "is almost identical to the route traversed by the M101 bus in New York City."

Uber and Lyft are not the first organizations to proactively brand their fleet of vans in such a way that they are not associated with the 30-foot long vehicles run by city or regional authorities. Colleges and universities often operate "shuttles," and anyone can rent a "trolley" with arched windows and faux-antique wood benches for weddings or corporate events. American cities like Washington, D.C., and Baltimore also run "circulators" among local attractions and corporate districts, often financed by business improvement districts that select the stops, schedules, and routes to maximize their attractiveness for tourists and office workers and minimize their usefulness to the poor.

Why the euphemisms for "bus"? These transparent efforts at rebranding may seem like innocent or silly word games, but they speak to the perpetuation of a racist, classist history that has shaped the infrastructure

of cities and helped stratify the life chances of people living in them. In an L.A. Times profile of Logan Green, Lyft's co-founder and chief executive, he is described by a childhood friend as "a power user of public transportation. He's one of the only people I know who knew how to take a bus in L.A." After college, Green became the youngest member of the Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District's board of directors. There he learned that many people—perhaps because, like his friend, they do not know anyone who uses the service—don't like to see tax money diverted to public transit.

Since their invention, ride-hailing platforms have been under fire for facilitating discrimination. For instance, a multicity study in 2016 found that black riders waited longer for rides and drivers with black-sounding names faced twice as many canceled ride requests. But the popularity of these platforms has also had a detrimental impact on public transit, causing a similarly discriminatory harm. The euphemistic language platforms are now using suggests this is not coincidental, but part of the same project: to attract riders away from public transportation and further discredit it to pave the way for transit's full reprivatization. Indeed, some cities have seen a drop off in ridership as

the platforms compete directly for middle-class riders, placing an additional strain on public systems. It also puts pressure on organized labor as well, as ride-hailing apps replace a heavily unionized transit workforce with private contractors—30 percent of whom, in a 2018 study, were found to actually lose money after expenses. (That study has since been largely retracted; a statement by the lead researcher concludes that it is more likely that most drivers make about $8.55 an hour.) Under the auspices of app-driven convenience, city bus service can be reborn under new names, reoriented toward the goal of profit rather than equal access.

To understand the symbolism of the city bus, we must first look at its predecessor, the electric streetcar, which dominated mass transit in the early 20th century. Since it was introduced before the mass marketing of automobiles, streetcar service—unlike the bus service that would come to replace it—did not develop in the car's shadow as a subordinate alternative. It was state-of-the art transportation technology that every passenger could ride for the same low fare. Nearly everyone rode it.

In 1887, a former Navy officer named Frank Julian Sprague operated the first commercially viable electric streetcar system in Richmond, Virginia. By 1903, the U.S. had over 30,000 miles of electrified rail. Streetcars became, as the historian George W. Hilton wrote, "one of the most rapidly accepted innovations in the history of technology," much as ride-hailing apps would encircle the globe in a similar time span. And also like ride-hailing companies, the rising streetcar industry was ruthlessly competitive. In *Crabgrass Frontier,* Kenneth T. Jackson describes the corporate consolidation: "In Philadelphia 66 different street railway companies were incorporated between 1854 and 1895. By the latter year, most of them had combined to form the giant Union Traction Company."

The popularity of streetcars would reach its zenith in the early 1920s. After that, ridership declined slowly but profitability fell off a cliff. Streetcar lines were operated by private companies who signed decades-long leases with local governments that dictated fare prices, service frequency, and maintenance requirements. But these agreements meant that fares stayed at a few cents even as repair costs ballooned. Many contracts even stipulated that streetcar companies pay part of the cost

of street repairs. As the 20th century progressed, this would mean streetcar operators would be paying for the infrastructure of their main competition.

In the span of 60 years the U.S. built and dismantled the biggest streetcar network in the world. The conventional telling of this history has it that the streetcar could not compete with the Model T. But that presumes that the car's self-evident superiority made it America's destiny. In fact, cars were reviled in towns and cities, where they disrupted crowded streets and brought a surge in pedestrian deaths. Political cartoonists often depicted cars as vengeful gods or chariots for the angel of death. A 1907 issue of *Puck* ran a cartoon of cars circling a flame labeled "speed madness" with a caption that read: "The moths and the flame."

As historian Peter D. Norton explains, car companies had to stave off the anti-auto backlash with PR. They mounted a campaign called Motordom: a series of national ads and advocacy campaigns run through local motor clubs that blamed pedestrians and careless drivers for fatalities rather than cars themselves. From this view, cars weren't a social incongruity that threatened the way of life people knew; they were the inevitable future, an evolutionary step toward greater individual

freedom. Getting in the way of a car, the campaign suggested, was to impede progress itself, and to own a car was a solemn responsibility in pursuit of a better world.

By the end of the 1920s, the car's reputation as an agent of progress was more or less secured. Then the lobbying commenced: The American Road Builders Association was formed in 1943. By the 1950s, according to Jackson, "it had become one of the most broad-based of all pressure groups, consisting of the oil, rubber, asphalt, and construction industries; the car dealers and renters; the trucking and bus concerns; the banks and advertising agencies that depended upon the companies involved; and the labor unions." It helped persuade the federal government to use public money to widen and pave streets. Its crowning achievement was installing Lucius D. Clay, a member of General Motors' board of directors, as the head of a 1954 presidential committee to study the need for a national highway system. This was like making an arsonist the fire chief. President Dwight Eisenhower would eventually sign the interstate highway act into law, establishing a non-transferable pool of money to build and maintain highways. Through eminent domain, the government bulldozed Black, Jewish, Asian, and Hispanic enclaves

to erect elevated expressways that would let predominantly white men drive more expediently from their jobs downtown to their suburban homes. In a sad bit of historical irony, city leaders clamored for highway exits to be built in their towns, mistaking it for a fire hose of money when it was, in fact, a siphon.

The rise of the automobile transformed the conception of American democracy itself. Historian Cotten Seiler calls this car-based worldview the "republic of drivers," a sort of automotive take on the Habermasian public sphere, "a political imaginary of anonymity and autonomy that finds expression in practices and landscapes of automobility." From drive-ins and fast food to the less tangible feeling that you could traverse the continent on a gleaming highway, to participate in American culture was to be a driver.

The car was, indeed, a liberating force for many people, including African Americans, ameliorating the isolation of those who lived in rural areas and offering an alternative to Jim Crow transit companies. (The Montgomery Bus Boycott targeted not only a racist southern municipal government but also a for-prof-

it transit company based in Detroit—GM's National City Line.) But as the urban environment was rebuilt to accommodate the automobile, the ideology of what cars could do and whom they were meant to do it for came into sharper focus.

As cars became more widely employed, they became more instrumental in reproducing the white supremacist society that produced them. To deny nonwhites the agency and autonomy cars could bring, media outlets began to depict black people as intellectually incapable of operating motor vehicles. "Representations of African-Americans as technologically incompetent," observes historian Kathleen Franz, discussing the interwar years, "reinforced a belief in white superiority at a time when the white middle class was feeling the threat of cultural fragmentation and blacks had started gaining middle class status." In part based on these racist representations, many auto insurers refused to cover black motorists. Without insurance, drivers typically had to provide proof they could cover the cost of an accident.

Even if black drivers could clear these hurdles, they would have a hard time taking long journeys. Most roadside businesses up until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 refused to serve them. Even the National Park

Service, according to Franz, announced to rangers in 1922 that "while colored people could not be openly discriminated against, they should be told that the parks have no facilities for taking care of them." Black motorists organized against this discrimination, publishing *The Negro Motorist Green Book* from 1936 to 1957, which listed motels, restaurants, gas stations, and other services that would serve black people.

But the hurdles to black car ownership, combined with the explicitly racist home ownership laws of the suburbs, helped establish conditions in which car ownership was experienced not just as freedom, but as whiteness.

As the auto was finding its ideological place in American society, automakers were moving against the already pinched streetcar companies. In *Asphalt Nation,* Jane Holtz Kay reports that from 1932 to 1949, General Motors "would help persuade 100 electric systems in more than 45 cities to scrap their street rails." GM, along with Mack Truck, Standard Oil, Firestone, and Phillips Petroleum formed its own streetcar company, National City Lines, that

bought up failing lines and, rather than maintain them, slowly converted them to buses. And when these bus companies began to fail, municipal governments started buying them to bring them under public ownership and to preserve their service.

From funding propaganda to shift social norms about who belonged in the street, to reconfiguring the regulatory environments that determined what made for a financially viable use of the right of way, GM remade American geography in its own image, destroying streetcar companies and the reputation of public transportation along the way. Some historians and legal scholars find that framing too conspiratorial. Urban studies scholar Martha Bianco, for instance, argues in this discussion paper that "the failure of public policy should be assigned as much blame—if not more than—the machinations of the diesel-bus industry for the substitution of inferior motor buses" for streetcars. Regulatory agencies' modernization requirements, she argues, saddled transit companies with unmanageable debt and hampered their ability to adapt.

It's true that the regulatory requirements dictated that mass transit be both cheap and well-maintained. It may not have been a conspiracy, but it was a grand ex-

ample of the state's preference for private sector profit and racial segregation over general public welfare. Had the federal government offered long-term financial support for public transit like they had for the highways, things might have been different. Instead, the emerging patchwork of public transit authorities had to reach for the short-term survival offered by cheap buses, which would prove susceptible to fluctuating gas prices and increasing car traffic, instead of the long-term public planning of electric streetcar systems.

With white flight to the suburbs fully under way and local tax receipts falling, city leaders appealed to the federal government for help in modernizing the streets and rails that were left behind. What they got was a temporary fix: The Housing Act of 1961 authorized a series of federal loans but offered little else. Without reoccurring funds, the new public transportation authorities began life in debt and hemorrhaging money.

These sabotaged municipal bus systems were part of a larger set of systemic failures faced by cities throughout the 1960s and '70s, what came to be known as the "urban crisis." The abandonment of cities by white people and their capital sent city governments into an economic tailspin. Police were dispatched to control

rather than protect urban ghettos, and when black and brown people took to the streets to demand basic services, the media portrayed their anger as the reason for rather than a reaction to the dysfunction of the city.

Deindustrialization's impact on blue collar workers is often depicted as a white working-class problem, but as Michelle Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow,* it hit black families earlier and harder because before jobs went overseas, they went to the suburbs: "The growing spatial mismatch of jobs had a profound impact on African Americans trapped in ghettos. A study of urban black fathers found that only 28 percent had access to an automobile. The rate fell to 18 percent for those living in ghetto areas." In 1970 over 70 percent of black men living in cities held blue collar jobs, by 1987 it had fallen to 28 percent. Transportation policy reiterated these conditions.

While the auto was being framed as the vehicle of white freedom and individual success, the bus—in transit systems typically administered by a syndicate of companies who benefited directly from private automobile ownership and later perpetually underfunded local governments—represented, by contrast, the failure to achieve self-sufficiency. The bus is an after-

thought, a mark of shame precisely because it is neither a status symbol like the car nor a truly shared form of transportation as the streetcar had been.

Obtaining a car was necessary to gain access to the spoils of America's postwar wealth. For everyone else there was the bus, whose mainstream introduction as a public utility coincided with cities' fiscal insolvency and thus became inextricably linked with poverty and government mismanagement. This is the "image problem" that Uber and Lyft are now trying to navigate when they brand their own bus-like services.

The racialized history of the bus is a uniquely American story, but the U.S. is adept at exporting its culture to the rest of the world. That is at least part of the reason that, when Enrique Peñalosa, the mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, began a mass transportation initiative, he made a point to give the bus rapid transit system a brand: TransMilenio, which he talks about in liberatory terms. In a lecture at Portland State University, he showed a slide of a congested highway with bumper-to-bumper cars next to dedicated buses zipping along in dedicated lanes, calling it a

"powerful symbol of democracy." When a bus full of people of all walks of life zooms past a "$100,000 car, that's democracy at work," he says.

Modes of transportation don't merely move people from place to place, but they tell a story about riders and their society. How you get to work may imply something about your buying habits and social class to advertisers, but public transit groups individuals into broader collectives. They offer not individual anonymity and autonomy but group subjectivity and social welfare.

Not so with Lyft and Uber, whose business models rely on collecting data on individuated users and using that data to not only plan routes but to segregate riders into service tiers. The *Financial Times* describes Uber as the "most lossmaking private company in tech history," with negative cash flow in the billions. Like the overleveraged streetcar companies that operated their lines at a loss in anticipation of riders buying the surrounding real estate that the companies were also selling, Uber still loses money every time someone uses their service. It is assumed that, like Amazon, these companies will become profitable once they achieve massive economies of scale and enjoy near-monopoly rates. But as financial analyst Hubert Horan has observed, "in the

hundred years since the first motorized taxi, there has been no evidence of significant scale economies in the urban car service industry."

If scale can't save them, maybe dividing and conquering the market could. Rather than offer similar services to as many people as possible, we may see history repeat itself, as competing syndicates of automobile manufacturers, ride-hailing companies, and data analysis firms reorganize the transportation status hierarchy to include different-size vehicles driven by human and machine chauffeurs. Uber and Lyft have already begun to partner with automakers to test self-driving vehicles, thus opening the door for the same cast of characters that made up Motordom and the American Road Builders Association to remake U.S. transportation again. Exactly how the new symbology of status takes shape—does driving your own car have more or less status than having a robot driver?—is inconsequential to the overall effect: the maintenance and exploitation of race- and class-based hierarchies for profit.

This effort to articulate social hierarchies has fueled the bus-but-not-a-bus services. Ride-hailing companies are offering a rebranded experience of bus riding that might attract a more affluent clientele than

the conventional bus while also cutting costs and increasing per-mile revenue. The services could also be funded through targeted ads, like the ones described late last year in an *Atlantic* article:

> Picture a not-too-distant future where a trip across town is available to anyone who will spend 15 minutes in McDonald's on the way. Not a fast-food fan? Then for you it's Starbucks, a bookstore, the game parlor. Rides with a child stop at the Disney store, while teenage girls are routed via next decade's version of Zara and H&M. Unlike today's UberPool, with its roundabout routes and multiple passenger pickups, "UberFree" [the article's imaginary service of the future] features tailor-made routes and thoughtfully targeted stops.

It goes on to imagine an algorithm-fueled streetcar experience where real estate agents advertise homes for sale and politicians drive voters to economically depressed sections to paint their opponents as bad for business. In this way ride-hailing companies will doubly profit from discriminating among its users, mining data from the poorest and selling identity back to them in the form of something that could be called Featured Destinations.

Ride-hailing services' anti-bus branding indicates that they want to continue selling segregation as a kind

of freedom as their forebears did. As affluent whites rediscover their love of the city and suburban housing prices fall, ride-hailing companies are well positioned to offer an algorithmically powered ride through what sociologist Douglas Massey calls an emerging "mosaic of segregation." This new urban geography is defined by enclaves that are defined by not only race and income but education level and political ideology as well. Social media scholars may be divided on the significance of "filter bubbles," but urban geographers are unanimous in noting how we have sorted ourselves physically into like-minded cloisters. Physical segregation is a prerequisite for administering poverty to racial minorities in such a way that it is easily ignorable by white society. The sorting power of algorithmic transit will drive this phenomenon further, not hedge it.

To say that Uber and Lyft are reinventing the bus is actually much more frighteningly accurate than detractors probably intend. The specter of the bus, it seems, always comes after the meteoric rise and subsequent crash of a new popular transportation technology—in this case, ride hailing as we know it. In

its place we might find a new array of buses, privately and publicly owned, that will execute new and more precise means of segregation. And here we should think of "bus" not as a high-capacity vehicle making scheduled stops, but as a racialized transit mode that is stigmatized so that some will seek to escape it —a transportation system socially constructed to shame some users and enhance the value of consuming some other, more profitable option.

If the mid-20th century saw the rise of the republic of drivers, then the early 21st century will be marked by a new republic of riders. Whereas the republic of drivers derived its ideological allure from longstanding myths of American individualism, the republic of riders will leverage the same nation's equally fabricated story of attainable luxury: that Americans live the biggest and best lives that money can buy.

The degree to which services like UberPool and Lyft Shuttle are beneficial to the common person's flourishing will be determined by political fights over their time-saving and dignity-conferring potentials. If these services and whatever grow out of them remain dedicated to creating profit from segregation, then we will repeat our racist transportation history. If we col-

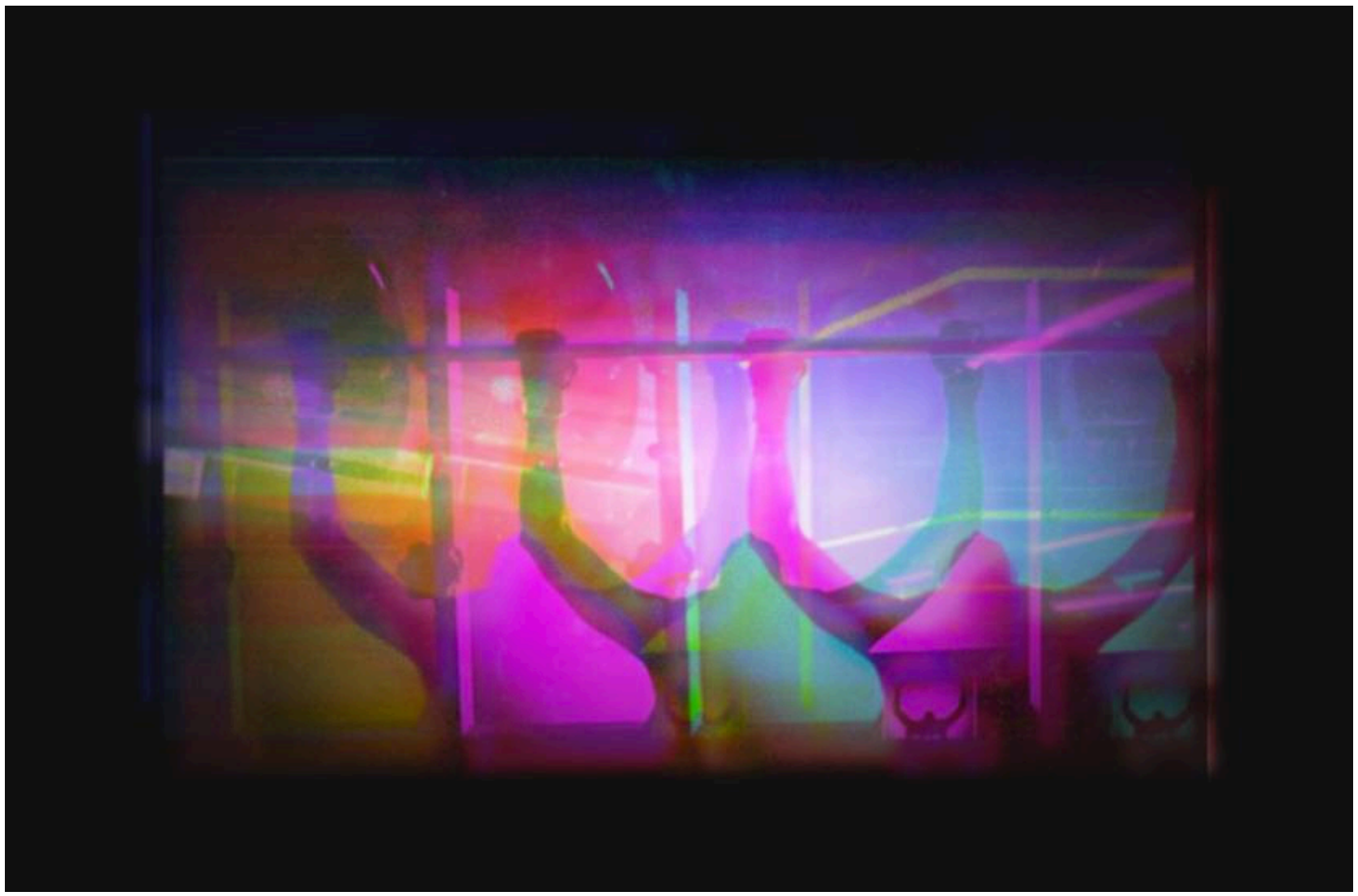
lectively demand that these new services be equitably distributed such that everyone can afford them and be proud to be seen riding them, then we will have achieved something much greater. We will know if the reign of the republic of riders is just if any rider can proudly say, “I took the bus today.”

Originally published March 5, 2018

reallifemag.com/uber-alles/

Daily Affirmations

by Tony Tulathimutte



The internet is a bad but popular therapist. Despite the fact that reading more than five tweets a day will certainly cause long-term psychosis, the roiling ecosystem of motivational memes, inspo boards, support groups, meditation apps, and endless boredom-mitigating content has quelled many minds,

to the point where the *Atlantic* declared in 2017 that "Podcasts are the new Xanax."

Even the dead-simplest of posi content attracts an audience: YouTube affirmation videos, reciting mantras of abundance, self-esteem, and "well-being" over looming images of space or beaches, accompanied by lutes and windchimes. In particular, the YouTube channel Rockstar Affirmations, established in 2014, features over 500 videos, the popular of which ("I Have Won the Lottery!") has over half a million views. Each follows a basic template: a rapid-fire slideshow and brooding synth swells, overlaid by one or several voices flatly intoning variations on the title, e.g.

> *I have now won the lottery. I am so happy that I have now won the lottery. I am so grateful to have won the lottery. It is so amazing to win the lottery. All my friends and family are so pumped for me that I have won the lottery. I am so happy and grateful that I have now won the lottery…*

…and so on, with videos ranging from two minutes to four hours. Most are naked appeals to primal desires like money ("I Welcome an Unexpected One Trillion Dollars"), success ("I Am a Chess Grandmaster"), vanity ("I Weigh 100 Pounds," with variants

up through 220 pounds), love ("Multiple Rich Boyfriends"), and self-esteem ("I Am a Sexyasaurus Rex"). A few are more high-minded ("God is on My Side," "Self-Love for Lesbian Women"), while others are quite reasonable ("Play Guitar while Singing"); there are the amusingly unattainable ("I Am a Jedi"), and the touchingly meta ("I Manifest my Desires").

Why do these videos unsettle me? First, the choice to put the standard future-tense phrasing of goal-oriented affirmations—"I *will* be a chess grandmaster"—in a proleptic present tense provides a baseline of absurdity. By replacing aspiration with willful delusion, it represents a full literalization of "the Secret," the Oprah-sanctioned belief that merely visualizing something hard enough suffices to make it so. The channel description asserts that the key to manifesting is to "feel the feelings of already having your desire." Of course, if you actually felt like you already had what you wanted, you'd no longer want it (research suggests that announcing your "identity goals" makes you less likely to achieve them). Maybe the appeal here is that of focused daydreaming, or maybe conviction is its own reward, one of the basic virtues of a virtual world.

Creepier still is the channel's shadowy provenance. It's not funny enough to be an obvious humor

project like Pronunciation Guide; I'd assumed it was an effort to cash in on cheap content, but it appears to be largely unmonetized, with no ads, no brand-building or product placement, and no identifiable person receiving credit. Tracks can be downloaded for a dollar each from their Bandcamp page, but they're identical to the free ones; like the disturbing auto-generated children's YouTube videos that have recently cropped up, the profit motive seems to be subordinate to some other agenda. Devoid of intention or narrative, Rockstar Affirmations exist solely to rewire you.

Motivational and self-help works typically have at their center a paragon, some Tony Robbins or Eckhart Tolle who has overcome adversity, embodies success, and imparts the wisdom to obtain it—*if I can do it, so can you!* But one thing that these videos make especially clear is that no human really *needs* to be involved in creating them. How easy it would be to cull new topics from Google (type "I want" and let autocomplete do the rest), then use those parameters to generate montages from stock photo archives, and compose basic sentences recited by text-to-speech modules; to compile them into videos and upload them to YouTube. There's no telling even how many of the 39K subscribers are

fake—on the internet, nobody knows you're a bot. It is not hard to imagine bots themselves becoming the biggest consumers of bot-generated media, streaming inspirational mantras nonstop, collectively affirming human fantasies: *I can, I have, I am.*

The Rockstar Affirmations channel is, in more than one way, about visualizing the future to collapse it into the present; fittingly, the main thing it shows us about the future is that we're already in it. The future is a place where labor will be displaced and dominated by automation, and economic scarcity will force us to fulfill our desires delusionally. In such a future, a computer makes the ideal role model. Contrary to the "Pinocchio Syndrome" trope, where computers dream of being human, the bot that recites affirmations is daring humans to be more like it. There's a reason why so many clichés about high performance are mechanical: *put your butt in gear, get wired, get turbocharged, tune up, put the pedal to the metal, crank it up*. To entrance yourself into a condition of serene, impeccable efficacy—uncompromised by conflicting emotions, modesty, or a sense of reality—is not unlike willing yourself to become a machine, which in the era of automation can only be a competitive asset.

One video is even called “I Am a F**KING Machine!”:

> *I am a fucking machine. I am a fucking monster. I am King Kong. I am a nasty motherfucker. I am a competitor. No one can outwork me. I am made of iron. My soul is made of steel.*

These don’t sound like affirmations so much as the matter-of-fact swagger of a triumphant computer—the boast in the machine. Only a machine can state this with perfect conviction and truth. The rest of us must strive to get with the program.

Originally published April 26, 2018
reallifemag.com/daily-affirmations/

Big and Slow

by Elisa Gabbert

The Kelpies are two enormous steel horse-head sculptures—they're 100 feet high and weigh over 300 tons—that were completed in 2013 and now live in a park in Scotland. The one on the left, when you're facing the sculptures, seems calm or

at least quiet; there's a hint of judgment, perhaps, in the set of the head, the squint of its eyes. The one on the right is throwing its head back, mouth parted, as though bucking and neighing, rearing up on its hind legs. The horses have no legs, but seen at a distance, from the right angle, it looks as if they're cresting the horizon, like they're running up over a hill—to kill you, probably, like the giant rabbits in *Night of the Lepus*. They call to mind the statues on Easter Island, which are not, it turns out, just heads; their bodies are buried, most of their mass below the surface.

The Kelpies, of course, are perfectly stationary, but

they capture the essence of horses in movement. It's a little frightening, even in a photograph. When you do an image search on Google for "megalophobia"—the fear of large objects—the first result is a picture of *The Kelpies*. The sculptures and the phobia are tightly coupled: I learned of them at the same time. Under a tweet with a picture of the horses shrouded in fog, looking terrifyingly real, a woman had replied that they "really triggered" her megalophobia. I felt an instant kind of anti-recognition. I have a primal reaction to massive objects, but it's not a panicky fear, like my fear of heights. (I get heart palpitations walking over metal grates and high bridges.) And it's not a gross-out fear, as in trypophobia, the fear of irregular holes—a disgust reaction to images of coral and dried lotus pods. Instead it's a tingly fear, an almost fetishistic pleasure, an attractive force.

I have scrolled through the megalophobia image results more than once, losing track of time. Many are from the megalophobia subreddit, where people post images of the enormous things that horrify them: scuba divers floating like hummingbirds next to giant jellyfish; wind turbines; the prows of massive ships, especially seen from below, to accentuate their looming; the space shuttle transporter; Hoover Dam. Some are fakes, either

Photoshopped or illustrations—maybe the jellyfish, certainly the dragons and spaceships. But most are real objects that dwarf the human scale, such as offshore drilling platforms, which look like inside-out factories on aircraft carriers, on legs that can extend 8,000 or 9,000 feet underwater, a baffling depth. The megalophobic effect is best, perhaps, when there's a combination of manufactured and natural elements, which explains why many of the images are cross-posted to r/submechanophobia (the fear of submerged manmade objects). The ocean is the ultimate earthly object of unfathomable size, extending seemingly without limit in two directions at once, out to the horizon and down. We can't grasp the depth of the ocean until we throw a skyscraper down there.

After finding *The Kelpies*, I started my own minor collection of megalophobia images. I saw and saved a black-and-white photo of a towering rock formation on a beach (captioned on Twitter with "Possible novel structure"), a few tiny people on a sandbar below. The water caught all the light, while the rockface was almost featurelessly black, a silhouette in the shape of the *Titanic*. It must be natural, but it seemed dropped there, a monolith like in *2001*, uninterpretable. Looking at it feels like hearing a loud bass note on a piano, a singular note of doom.

In another from my collection, a partially built bridge hangs in yellow mist; the ends of the bridge arc up from the shores of the wide Yangtze River, but the middle is missing. (I have a recurring dream that I'm driving down the highway and suddenly realize I'm on an unfinished overpass; this photo looks like a still from my nightmare.) There are cranes perched up there—construction cranes, not birds—on the unfinished edges.

Frozen like that, it feels as if the bridge will never be finished, like the Crazy Horse Memorial in South Dakota. The monument, which honors the Native American leader who fought encroachments on Lakota territories, is intended to dwarf nearby Mount Rushmore when complete—according to the memorial's website, "the 563-foot-high Mountain Carving will dominate the horizon." If it ever is completed, it may be the world's largest sculpture. But for now it's a sad construction zone with little funding and far fewer visitors than Mount Rushmore. (When I pulled around a curve on the road and saw those four gigantic presidents' heads from a distance, I started laughing uncontrollably; they're so essentially stupid—too cartoonish to be frightening or awe-inspiring.)

I kept that broken-bridge photo open in a tab for

several months. What is the fascination? Unlike photos of *The Kelpies*, what it and the rest of the artist's Yangtze River series depicts is frankly kind of ugly: poverty and pollution set up against brutish engineering, grim landscapes in grim light. But size, and fear, make both of them sublime—sublime in photographs at least. The sublime is "the most typical of all aesthetic moods," Terry Eagleton writes in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, "allowing us as it does to contemplate hostile objects with absolute equanimity." Do people who frequent r/megalophobia actually feel afraid, I wonder, or do they, like me, get pleasure from those photos, "serene in the knowledge" that the objects can't harm us? They're shrunk, behind glass.

I've been thinking about scale because I've been thinking about climate change—or global warming, to be less euphemistic, as the writer-philosopher Timothy Morton advises:

> *Climate change* as a *substitute* for *global warming* is like "cultural change" as a substitute for *Renaissance*, or "change in living conditions" as a substitute for *Holocaust*. *Climate change* as substitute enables cynical reason (both right wing and left) to say that the "climate has always been changing," which to my ears sounds like using "people have

always been killing one another" as a fatuous reason not to control the sale of machine guns.

Morton calls global warming a "hyperobject," something that is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans." Such objects are more giant than the giant objects of megalophobia; they can't be captured in a photograph or even an abstraction. Time-elapse gifs of melting ice don't help; their extreme compression only minimizes the impact of what's happening at actual size. Global warming is happening everywhere all the time, which paradoxically makes it harder to see, compared with something with defined edges. This is part of the reason we have failed to slow it down. How do you fight something you can't comprehend?

The nebulousness of global warming works in the status quo's favor. We don't know exactly how it will play out, which allows fossil-fuel corporations and politicians to exploit that uncertainty, telling the public the facts aren't all in yet—as if doing nothing were the wiser, more cautious move. As with calling it climate change, the call to inaction affects how everyone thinks about global warming. Even those who recognize its urgency can be lulled by its uncertain specific effects, "postponing

doom into some hypothetical future," as Morton writes. The disaster seems always just over the horizon. But "the hyperobject spells doom now, not at some future date."

I had forgotten—or maybe never fully understood, or maybe learned and then gone into denial about—the time-delay component of global warming until I read an essay by Chad Harbach originally published in *n+1* in 2006, which describes this lag:

> It takes 40 years or more for the climate to react to the carbon dioxide and methane we emit. This means that the disasters that have already happened during the warmest decade in civilized history (severe droughts in the Sahel region of Africa, Western Australia, and Iberia; deadly flooding in Mumbai; hurricane seasons of unprecedented length, strength, and damage; extinction of many species; runaway glacial melt; deadly heat waves; hundreds of thousands of deaths all told) are not due to our current rates of consumption, but rather the delayed consequences of fuels burned and forests clear-cut decades ago, long before the invention of the Hummer. If we ceased all emissions immediately, global temperatures would continue to rise until around 2050.

I was shocked by this, the idea that the "megadisasters" of 2017 were set into motion in the 1970s, when there were only about half as many humans on Earth.

Even if we did or could stop all carbon emissions

now, there's the question of where the existing carbon goes. If we don't invent and implement some kind of technology that removes carbon from the atmosphere (a.k.a. "negative emissions"), it will take natural processes tens or possibly hundreds of thousands of years to renormalize—to return to a state that's normal, that is, for us. Take as an example the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum, 55.5 million years ago, when an enormous amount of carbon and methane were suddenly released into the atmosphere for reasons that remain unclear. This is the closest known analogue in Earth's history to modern-day global warming. It caused a warm period where average temperatures increased by 5 to 8 degrees Celsius. Fossil records show that, at the time, the poles resembled the Florida Everglades, hosting crocodiles instead of polar bears. There was no surface ice. This warm period lasted about 200,000 years and was actually a boon for the evolution of mammals and specifically primates; without it we might not exist.

Morton calls the time scales involved in global warming alternately "horrifying," "terrifying," "petrifying," and "truly humiliating." It is easier to imagine infinity, he says, than very large finitudes: "For every object in the universe there is a genuinely *future future*

that is radically unknowable." Nuclear waste, another example of a hyperobject, similarly forces us to contemplate the deep future. Plutonium-239, which is used in both nuclear weapons and reactors, has a half-life of 24,110 years. (The specificity seems almost comical, but nuclear materials are exact when they decay; they're essentially atomic clocks.)

It's hard to know—and easier not to think about—the effects that all the nuclear materials on the planet could have on people, other organisms, and the environment over the course of hundreds of thousands of years. This kind of time-delayed destruction is what the writer Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," a violence "that occurs gradually and out of sight … dispersed across time and space." Nixon's book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* explores how processes like toxic drift, global distillation (also known as the grasshopper effect, which causes pollutants to accrue at the poles), and the acidification of the oceans unfold so slowly they "can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively." The emphasis here is on action—not the object per se but the work it does. An idea as large and amorphous as global warming blurs the distinction between object and process: To look at the moving object

we have to pause it, which renders it inert, allowing us to contemplate it passively.

Nixon shows how poor communities and the global South are forced to bear the brunt of "long dyings." He quotes Lawrence Summers, then president of the World Bank, in a leaked memo from 1991: "I've always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted … Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?" We in the "developed world" can ignore slow violence because so much of it takes place in the far future and the far elsewhere, not here and not to us.

One way to minimize the apparent damage of globalization and capitalism is by setting arbitrary time limits on the effects of our actions. We can say, for example, how many people we killed during the years we occupied Vietnam, without including the "hundreds of thousands [who] survived the official war years, only to slowly lose their lives later to Agent Orange," Nixon writes. The toxic herbicide continues to build up in food sources like fish; it's linked to birth defects and Parkinson's disease. Cultural theorist Paul Virilio called the Gulf War "a local war of small interest," but it was

also the first to make use of depleted uranium in warfare, which has, Nixon writes, "a durability beyond our comprehension," a half-life of over 4.5 billion years: "When it enters the environment," he writes, depleted uranium "effectively does so for all time."

The effects of depleted uranium are disputed, but an Army nurse named Carol Picou who worked on the so-called Highway of Death in Kuwait, a strip of road filled with wrecked and abandoned vehicles and other debris from an airborne attack, showed signs of what sounds like radiation poisoning:

> Within days of her departure from the scene, Picou's skin started to erupt in black spots; soon she lost control of her bladder and her bowels … over the months and years that followed, she developed thyroid problems and squamous cancer cells in her uterus; she developed immunological dysfunction and encephalopathy. Three years after her stint on the Highway of Death, tests found dangerously elevated levels of uranium in her urine.

In 1996, the Department of Defense discharged Picou, but the documentation calls her condition "non-combat-related"; "Etiology Unknown." Nixon writes, "She was thus denied the kind of pension that servicewomen and men injured in the battlefield

secured." Picou became one of the *hibakusha* of the world, the often unacknowledged victims of nuclear weapons and disaster. More than 250,000 U.S. veterans of the Gulf War (out of about 700,000 total) complain of continuing health problems, a mysterious chronic illness known as Gulf War Syndrome. But like many conditions we don't understand, the syndrome is often written off as, essentially, hysteria. In *Hystories*, Elaine Showalter argued that Gulf War Syndrome was a psychogenic disorder, like a fear we can catch from the Internet just by learning it exists.

The media does spread "infectious" ideas—sensational reporting has been shown to lead to clusters of suicides and spikes in mass shootings. But that explanation often masks human error or, worse, willful obfuscation. As Nixon notes, for decades the military dismissed the health crisis caused by Agent Orange as "a grand hallucination."

Slow violence, according to Nixon, is "underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory." If we can't see it we can't remember it, nor can we really imagine its future. As

journalist Susan Moeller notes in her book *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, the media and memory are both highly visual. Spectacular disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes, and flooding are newsworthy, but climate change is not. You can package the symptoms, but not the disease.

Both Moeller and Nixon are concerned that we can't properly react to or prepare for less visible disasters until we modify our storytelling: We must find a way to turn them into "arresting stories" (in Nixon's terms), told "in a distinctive manner" (in Moeller's)—suggesting that the right response to unending wars and a rapidly warming planet is a shift in aesthetics. Perhaps it is. Perhaps we have to make the real threats *fascinating*. But how, if we lack the cognitive capacity to see them?

One of the defining properties of the hyperobject is "non-locality"—they are here and not here; their massive scale deceives the mind. Morton refers to a passage in William Wordsworth's long poem "The Prelude," in which the poet recalls rowing a boat, at first in peace and then with dread, under a "craggy ridge" that appears at first "an elfin pinnace" but seems to grow and even chase him as he rows away. This impression is due, Morton writes, "to a strange parallax effect

in which more of a suitably massive object is revealed as one goes farther away from it." Similarly, I have noticed that airplanes look much larger from a medium distance—when the plane is taxiing on a bridge over the highway as you drive toward the airport, say—than close up, when you're sitting at the gate or boarding the plane. The hyperobject is evasive, always partly hidden.

The cover of *Hyperobjects* offers an impossible view: an iceberg sparkling in sunrays, the whole thing from top to bottom both above and below the water, a cross section of reality, like some kind of science museum diorama by Thomas Kinkade. It reminded me of something, but it took me a few days to figure out what. It was *Hyperspace*, by physicist Michio Kaku, published almost 20 years earlier. I remember seeing my older brother read it when I was in high school, its paperback cover showing a vaguely surrealist cube hovering over a green field with blue sky behind it.

Hyperspace is in part an exercise in conceptualizing spatial dimensions beyond the usual three. As Kaku explains, "the growing realization among scientists today is that any three-dimensional theory is 'too small' to describe the forces that govern our universe." Extra dimensions give us "'enough room' to explain the fundamental

forces." Again, later, he writes, "In higher dimensions, knots are easily unraveled and rings can be intertwined. This is because there is 'more room' in which to move ropes past each other and rings into each other."

After reading *Slow Violence,* all this talk of *room* makes me think of *lebensraum*, literally "living space," kind of the German equivalent of manifest destiny: the justification for colonialism and, later, the Holocaust. This is the usual lateral expansion of empire. But higher dimensions, like the abyss of deep time, are difficult, if not impossible, to imagine. Kaku writes that "even experienced mathematicians and theoretical physicists who have worked with higher-dimensional spaces for years admit that they cannot visualize them." However, there are techniques designed to make it easier. Mathematician Charles Hinton, while working at Oxford in the late 1800s, devised a series of tricks intended to help people "see" four-dimensional objects.

The most well-known of these thought experiments involves a "hypercube," a four-dimensional cube. You can unfold the sides of a regular cube into a two-dimensional object, six squares lying flat in the shape of a cross. A two-dimensional being could perceive the cross of squares, but could only imagine what

the higher-dimensional, folded-up cube might look like. Analogously, Hinton proposed, a hypercube can be "unfolded" into a three-dimensional object—he called this a "tesseract"—which looks like a cross made of eight cubes. You can see an example in Salvador Dali's painting *Christus Hypercubus*, in which Jesus is crucified on a tesseract. The exercise is to try to imagine what the tesseract would look like "folded" back up into its real shape.

There's something misleading about these exercises, though, as well as the idea of higher dimensions creating "more room"—they make it seem like the fourth, fifth, etc., dimensions are larger, somehow, more outside. But where? As high up or far down as you can imagine is still in the third dimension. But counterintuitively, some theoretical physicists think higher dimensions are smaller, not bigger, than the ones we perceive. Peter Freund says we can't see them because they are "'curled up' into a tiny ball so small that they can no longer be detected." These curled-up dimensions are on the scale of the "Planck length," a unit 100 billion billion times smaller than a proton. Of course, to a normal brain this makes as little sense as trying to imagine the extra dimensions "outside" our three dimensions. How

do you escape the third dimension by going further inside? What order of dimension you're in is somewhat academic when the scale itself is inconceivable.

Kaku, writing in 1996, reports that physicists speculate that hyperspace—entailing, as it does, wormholes, or portals into other parts of space-time or even other universes—could save us somehow from the eventual heat death of the universe (the Big Crunch), when "all lifeforms will be crushed beyond recognition." "Scientists and philosophers, like Charles Darwin and Bertrand Russell," Kaku writes, "have written mournfully about the futility of our pitiful existence, knowing that our civilization will inexorably die when our world ends"—unless hyperspace provides an escape hatch.

Now this idea sounds almost quaint. First of all, recent evidence suggests there will be no Big Crunch, because the expansion of the universe appears to be accelerating. If it keeps doing that "forever," the death of the universe will actually be cold. But either way, the end is the end, most likely many trillions of years from now—in what sense would the "us" that makes it there be "us"? More importantly, I can't imagine a scientist

or philosopher in the 21st century worrying about the eventual fate of the greater universe. A different kind of heat death—global warming—is a far more imminent existential threat.

A progress trap is a development that looks at first like a clear advancement but in time proves to actually deoptimize the system. The classic example is the development of weapons, which helped early man become much more efficient at hunting but then led to the extinction of megafauna. According to Ronald Wright, who wrote a book about these traps called *A Short History of Progress*, the problem is often one of scale: Trying to scale up technologies that work on the local level leads to depletion of resources and other unforeseen consequences that can ultimately collapse the system.

It may be that civilization itself is a progress trap. A theory known as "the Great Filter" proposes that the reason we haven't found compelling evidence of advanced civilizations elsewhere in the universe is that there aren't any, at least not any advanced enough that they could reach us. There may be a "filter" somewhere in the evolution of life that puts a ceiling on advancement—for example, maybe any civilization sufficiently advanced to develop deep space travel will quick-

ly exhaust the energy needed to sustain it. Or maybe they'll inadvertently destroy themselves through nuclear warfare or a runaway artificial intelligence.

"Since World War II, the sum total of scientific knowledge has doubled every 10 to 20 or so years," Kaku writes, "so the progress of science and technology into the 21st century may surpass our wildest expectations." When I was in college, I read Ray Kurzweil's *The Age of Spiritual Machines* and completely accepted its techno-optimism; Kurzweil believed that "the singularity," a tipping point after which technology would advance so rapidly we couldn't possibly predict or imagine what developments would be possible, was upon us. For years I told people we might be the last generation to die, or might not die at all but be "uploaded" out of our bodies so we could theoretically live on eternally, as data. To be clear, I have lost all faith in this theory. I no longer assume that technology will save us.

The economist Leopold Kohr believed most social dysfunction was the result of "the cult of bigness," the unexamined assumption that growth is always good. In *The Overdeveloped Nations: The Diseconomies of Scale*, Kohr recounts an incident in New York where a man threatened suicide from a high window. The

first bystanders were "terror-struck," but as the crowd grew, "the pangs of individual conscience were insensibly drowned in the throb of socialized excitement." They turned mean and taunting; someone called to the man to "make it snappy." When the crowd dispersed, the few who stayed went back to praying for the suicidal man. "This had nothing to do with their better selves," according to Kohr, but the return of the group to a "sub-critical mass"—"the tenuous translucency of which makes it impossible for an individual to hide his action from his own conscience." A crowded world, then, has a dangerous opacity, providing cover for cruelty and corruption.

In *Hyperobjects*, Morton claims that "the end of the world has already occurred"—more than once, in fact, since "for something to happen it often needs to happen twice." It ended first in 1784, with the invention of the steam engine, and again in 1945, when we tested the first atomic bomb—two events commonly named as the starting point of the Anthropocene. He includes a photograph of the Trinity test at 0.016 seconds, a horrifying membrane-bubble like an alien jellyfish the size of a town. The photo was originally banned, "since it was considered far more provocative

than the habitual mushroom cloud." Unlike a cloud, the bubble did not look natural.

This reminds me of the Buddhist philosophy known as "broken glass practice": Don't be upset when a teacup breaks, because its breaking was inevitable, therefore it was already broken. Is the world already broken? I wonder if humanity is not "too big to fail" but too big not to.

Originally published June 25, 2018
reallifemag.com/big-and-slow/

CONTRIBUTORS

CRYSTAL ABIDIN *is an anthropologist and ethnographer who researches internet culture and young people's relationships with social media, technology, and devices. She is Postdoctoral Fellow with the Media Management and Transformation Centre at Jönköping University and Adjunct Research Fellow with the Centre for Culture and Technology at Curtin University.*

RAHEL AIMA *is a writer based between Brooklyn and Dubai, a contributing editor at the* New Inquiry *and an editorial correspondent at* Ibraaz.

ANA CECILIA ALVAREZ *has written on art and women, among other topics, for publications including the* New Inquiry *and* Vice. *She lives in Los Angeles.*

DREW AUSTIN *writes about technology and urbanism on the blog Kneeling Bus.*

DAVID A. BANKS *is an editor at* Cyborgology *and an editor at large of* Real Life. *His work has been featured in the* New Inquiry, Tikkun *magazine, and the* Baffler.

ELISA GABBERT *is the author of several poetry collections, including* The Self Unstable, *and a collection of essays,* The Word Pretty *(Black Ocean, Fall 2018). She is currently writing a book about disasters, forthcoming from FSG Originals.*

CHRIS GILLIARD *has a Ph.D. from Purdue University and teaches at Macomb Community College. His work concentrates on privacy, institutional tech policy, digital redlining, and the reinventions of discriminatory practices through data mining and algorithmic decision-making, especially as these apply to college students.*

ROB HORNING *is an editor at* Real Life.

NATHAN JURGENSON *is the editor-in-chief of* Real Life.

SORAYA KING *is an editor at* Real Life. *She lives in Los Angeles.*

NATASHA LENNARD *is a British-born, Brooklyn-based writer focusing on how power functions and how it is challenged. She writes for publications including the* Nation, *the* Intercept, Fusion, *and the* New York Times *philosophy blog, the Stone.*

ALEXANDRA MOLOTKOW *is an editor at* Real Life *magazine. She was a founding editor of* Hazlitt *and an*

editor at the Hairpin. *She has written for the* Believer, *the* New York Times Magazine, *the* Cut, and *the* New Republic.

DREW NELLES *is a writer and podcast producer living in Brooklyn.*

VICKY OSTERWEIL *is a writer, editor, and agitator based in Philadelphia.*

TONY TULATHIMUTTE *wrote the novel* Private Citizens *and runs CRIT, a writing class in Brooklyn. He has received a Whiting Award and an O. Henry Award, and is a graduate of Stanford University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop.*

IMAGE CREDITS

"Already Late" From the series *Animal Farm* (2014) by Chou Ching-Hui. Inkjet Print. © Chou Ching-Hui, courtesy Chini Galley, Taipei.

"Apathy Machines" Systematic Ambiguity by Ernesto Canovas. Courtesy the artist.

"Big and Slow" *Civilization Could Not Do Without It* (2014) by Tula Telfair. Courtesy the artist and Forum Gallery, New York.

"Breaking News" *Mic, Mic, Mic* by Ernesto Canovas. Courtesy the artist.

"The Constant Consumer" New Necessities by David Delruelle. Courtesy the artist.

"Crush Fatigue" Tyler Spangler. Courtesy the artist.

"Daily Affirmations" Jake Reid for Real Life.

"Friction-Free Racism" From template/variant/friend/stranger by Tony Oursler. Courtesy the artist.

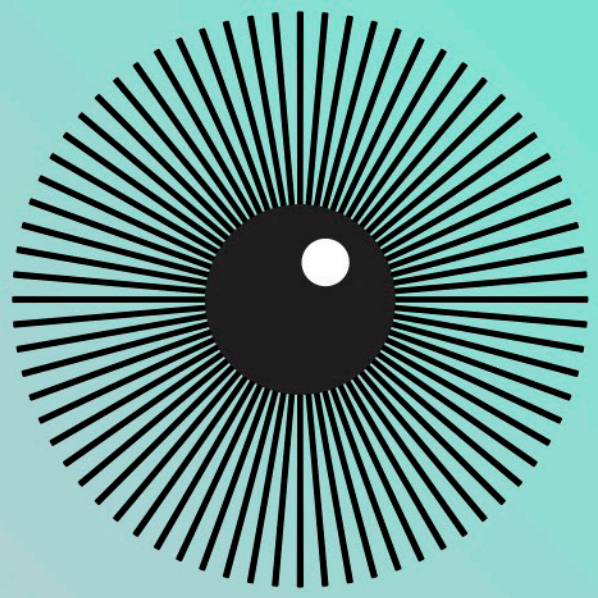
"Good Boys" *Innate Disposition 2* (2012) by Katja Novitskova. Photo by Erik Sæter Jørgensen. Courtesy the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin.

"Layers of Identity" Farah Al Qasimi. Courtesy the artist.

"Like and Subscribe" From *Room of One's Own* (1990–93) by Lynn Hershman Leeson. Installation with computer-controlled interactive apparatus, including laser disk and laser disk player, mirror, camera, projector, speakers, and doll-house furniture. Courtesy the artist.

"No Joke" Detail from *Sacks* (2007) by Sara Greenberger Rafferty. Courtesy the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

"Paradise Regained" *Celestial Spectacular* (2002) by Jennifer Bornstein. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome.

"Uber Alles" Marinos Tsagkarakis. Courtesy the artist.

"Unreal News" *June 2; 2017* by Fred Tomaselli. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York.