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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS- IN- CHIEF

The biggest myth we encounter as undergraduate students of philosophy is viewing it as being removed from the realities of everyday life, of being abstract and self-indulgent. But three years make you realise that at its best, it helps put in perspective the most urgent questions (social, political, economic and legal) of our time, allowing us different frameworks to make sense of the world around us. That's what we've learnt this year, the necessity of meeting our classrooms with the world outside, to put things we learn into use by observing and analyzing our surroundings, challenging the status quo and finding ways to bring practical change.

At a time when the future of the world and academia feels uncertain—with everything being commodified and AI tools threatening the crucial acts of reading, thinking, and writing, working on this journal has reminded us that the spark for intellectual exploration is still alive.

We have intentionally chosen to continue Noesis' long-standing tradition of not restricting submissions to a particular theme. Our aim has always been to create a space where students from diverse academic backgrounds can meaningfully engage with philosophy and explore its intersections with other disciplines. This decision reflects our commitment to the foundational spirit of philosophy as a deeply interdisciplinary field that thrives on dialogue, critique, and connection across disciplines.

The topics people choose to write about offer a glimpse into the concerns and curiosities occupying our collective mind-space, and in doing so, they allow us to better understand the issues of our time. In this edition, Anoushka analyses women's diaries, particularly Virginia Woolf's as spaces of self-articulation outside the phallocentric order, especially in relation to illness. Nirvanika explores satire as a mode of political resistance, focusing on films such as *Duck Soup* and *Z*. Vaidehi's paper considers the absence of mutual recognition in digital spaces as a source of loneliness in a hyperconnected age, through Bo Burnham's *Inside*. Aseema and Anoushka reframe the discourse around madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, reading it as a challenge to colonial and patriarchal systems. Ayush attributes a connection between incidents of mob violence and structural racism, drawing upon the plots of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Dry September*. Rajshri asks whether AI generated art, in its current developmental stage, is an existential threat or ethical dilemma by assessing its creative and aesthetic quotient. Jiya and Vaishnavi examine voyeurism and consumerism in celebrity culture and social media through *The Bling Ring*. Dhruv talks about fragmentation of identity and loss of agency in an algorithm governed virtual world.

For our covers, we have chosen Linda Carmel's artwork that we first stumbled across in college, because it deeply resonated with the spirit and ethos of Noesis. To us, her work captures what this space has meant to its members and contributors over the years: a place of collective growth, reflection, and shared imagination. It's a visual reminder of what academia can be and lead to, especially within the context of a women's liberal arts institution and of the power we hold when we learn and evolve together. As students of philosophy, it also reinstates the importance of interdisciplinary thought, so that the discipline thrives by contributing to and assimilating from other disciplines, in turn becoming both accessible and relevant.

As we mark the journal's eleventh edition, we would like to extend our sincere and heartfelt gratitude to the authors who trusted us with their work, to the principal- Dr. Kanika K. Ahuja and members of our faculty who have been supportive of this initiative for years, and to the readers, who make it all worthwhile by keeping the conversation alive. Now in its second decade, we appreciate the efforts of the countless editors who came before us to carefully and passionately build this space for us to belong in. Noesis is a student-led and student-run endeavour, and that's precisely why it matters.

We thoroughly enjoyed reading multiple submissions of concept notes so reverently written, engaging with the authors and their ideas at length to develop them going into multiple drafts, and finally editing the papers as a team. We sincerely hope that this volume of Noesis serves as an invitation to think deeply, question systems and structures, and write with sincerity and responsibility. We hope you have a good time going through the journal!

With best regards,

Vaidehi Krishnan and Rajshri Agarwal

PAPERS

I write, therefore I am: Reading Illness as a Metaphor in Woolf's 'Selected' Diaries and Perkins' *"The Yellow Wallpaper"*

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Abstract

Women's diaries act as liminal spaces of subversion, where the pretense of the feminine performance is substituted with an articulation of the self. The private distinction and the absence of a narratorial voice situates diaries in a space of liminality; untouched by the direct intrusion of the phallocentric order. This paper seeks to situate diaries as a break in the linguistic order, where women restructure the symbolic by articulating their 'lack'. By reading the act of writing as resistance; this paper, through a parallel study, seeks to examine the subversive potential of articulating illness in the diaries of Virginia Woolf and the unnamed protagonist's in Charlotte Perkins' *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The diary's narrative is juxtaposed with the conditioning of their act in the real world, dictated by their husbands or a familial order. The female malady is a product of patriarchal semantics that construct medical discourse; women have to be nursed back to domesticity. Through the articulation of the realm of illness, they call attention to themselves as able-bodied beings. This has a radical and emancipatory potential to question the complacency of patriarchal machinations to posit an alternative reality. Diaries can become a space for articulating feminine subjecthood which poses a threat to the symbolic; this paper attempts to affirm their contribution to shifting discourse.

Keywords: *Illness, Body, Feminine, Language, Phallogocentrism*

Introduction

Suffering from your nerves; I shall speak about the dread that binds your tongue as a woman in front of the physician — your departure from lucid, conscious pain to an object waiting to be probed. The loss of words, as a stream of medical jargon fogs up your thoughts, running awry and without base. Your eyes as they follow the patchwork of the ceiling while your pain is discarded as feminine folly. It is a pattern — rise, be gawked at and repeat. Sit in your room, collect your thoughts and leave behind the badgering knock of the diagnosis. A woman must write herself — in spite of the doctor who begs her not to enquire further. I propose that writing the 'truth' that emanates from your body, can be a way of working through illness for women that are incarcerated to the sick-bed.

Illness can be a metaphor, for most it is. The needling pain, spasms all over the body, and an unreasoned secret grief nursed by the face. The limp body as it lies for hours and hours on a bed, unable to do or feel. Why is the feminine associated with the body? How far in has the 'sexual-difference' seeped into our perspectives. Traditional disease metaphors popularly create social constructs around the metaphorical implications of being ill. The punitive and sentimental fantasies they evoke, structure an evolving dominant discourse that disregards the individual, with emphasis on the female subject. This is very similar to the rhetoric of how the feminine is subsumed into an indifferent male discourse where the lines are blurred. The phallocentrism of medical language necessitates the need for a woman's sentence to break hegemony. It is this paper's contention that language is phallocentric and by extension popular metaphors around illness. However, the paradox of reading illness as a metaphor comes from the way women articulate the incarceration of being ill; replete with metaphors; "English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache" (Woolf 3). The primary contention of this paper is to explore how women frame their own metaphorical understanding of illness and their bodies detached

from the symbolic. Feminine semiotics clash with the masculine symbolic; on the sick-bed women can't embody the lack that the phallus demands. The domestic system falls apart and it is from these ruins that a new language or performative model can arise for 'feminine' behaviour.[1]

The main contention of this paper is to propose that an abject, lucid body can become a statement of restructuring phallocentric meaning, where Laura Mulvey proposes that women can only be bearers of 'meaning'. In the purge of illness, when the body gives up before the commencement of delirium, and women spew everything from their guts to their consciousness - they are given a glimpse into their barest self. A self which can be rationalized into passive conformity because of the appropriation of 'language' by the medical establishment and by extension the masculine. This engenders both the cultural and the bodily domain; they dictate what is true and how it should be articulated — Women have to be nursed back into domestic angels instead of healthy personhood. It is in the delirium of illness that the mind is brought forth into a new realm of thoughts divorced from the normative. It is on the sick-bed that women call attention to their bodies, which is inherently radical. The question arises, who records this new-found personhood? Women are constantly surveilled in sickness and in health by a familial order — one that longs for the domestic angel. For womankind to write is to shatter and posit alternative images where they are not trapped as domestic angels. Their uneroticized ill bodies and their articulation elicit an abject state in the readers and the watcher; they have no choice but to reassess.

It was in this context that women's diaries interested me as a liminal space of subversion, where the pretence of the feminine performance is substituted with an articulation of the self. The private distinction and the absence of a narratorial voice situates diaries in a space of liminality; untouched by the direct intrusion of the phallocentric order. This paper seeks to

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[1] Refer to Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady's* chapter "The Rise of the Victorian Madwoman". Feminine behaviour complements phallic power.

analyse diaries as a break in the linguistic order, where women restructure the symbolic by articulating their 'lack'. By reading the act of writing as resistance; this paper, through a parallel study, seeks to examine the subversive potential of articulating illness in the diary entries of Virginia Woolf and the unnamed protagonist's in Charlotte Perkins' "The Yellow Wallpaper"

1. Resisting the Symbolic: The Female Malady and the Mark of the Phallus

By using Luce Irigaray's conception of a "Ho(m)mo-sexual monopoly" (Irigaray 171), I propose that hysteric and neurasthenic women exist in a culture where social mediation benefits relations only amongst men.[2] The phallus is the only signifier of desire in the symbolic, and it forms the basis of commonality among the male brethren, where women are the 'other'; essentially detached from the public. Irigaray proposes that women exist on a market where they are divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values.[3] The schism in Perkins and Woolf's personality is the consequence of the symbolic order's burden; their abjection stems from the horror of their body's lived experience. Illness devalues their exchangeability and functional use. Consequently, it elicits little surprise when their treatment focuses more on the lapse of the feminine role than on the treatment of their illness:

> They have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and

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[2] Refer to Luce Irigaray *The Sex which is Not One,* which reinterprets the signification of the phallus

[3] Refer to Luce Irigaray " Women on the Market" in *The Sex which is Not One,* the monopolization of women to become social mediators of the symbolic through exchange.

body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind. (Showalter 4)

This fundamental alliance between women and 'madness' has been re-interpreted along the lines of feminist resistance. Through their body and private correspondences, opposition expressed in physical symptoms and coded speech, subverted the linear logic of male science.[4] This masculine logic shielded by the 'objectivity' of science still gave into a metaphorical understanding of what brings forth the female malady. To construe it as the essential nature of the feminine and as a lapse emanating from the 'uterus', is I contend, a metaphorical interpretation. Showalter stresses on the multiplicity of cures that involved the female genitalia; she highlights one case of a 'Clitoridectomy', in which the 'hysterical' woman was surgically-nursed back to Victorian domesticity — she now reads the Bible and knits.[5] Showalter also draws on the eroticism of Ophelia's love-ridden body which I interpret as a signifier of how even in hysterical liminality and death, male subjectivity of the feminine precedes the feminine consciousness; this extends to Perkins and Woolf.[6]

During illness, by allowing the free flow of a stream between their inner consciousness and the body, women render their subjectivity concrete. They are awakened from their infantile consciousness and are forced to reassess the implications of their domestic incarceration. In Perkins's narrative, the husband proclaims in the face of domestic revolt: "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never

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[4] Refer to Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady,* more specifically to her interpretation of the relationship between Freud and Dora

[5] Refer to Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady,* more specifically to her notes on Victorian surgical interventions on women's bodies.

[6] Refer to Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady,* more specifically to her interpretation of Ophelia and the eroticism of a woman's passive body.

for one instant let that idea enter your mind" (Gilman 652). This line highlights the primacy of the phallus in the domestic; the hierarchy of care - father, son and then the mother/wife.

The problematics of the rest cure form the uniting thread of this paper. In S. Weir Mitchell's conception of the rest cure, women were encouraged to take up the domestic and forgo the intellectual which they later critiqued (Perkins sent a copy of *The Yellow Wallpaper* to Mitchell with the hope of changing his treatment). The popularity of this 'cure' made its way to Virginia Woolf's analyst Geroge Savage: "Concerned about the 'danger of solitary work' for girls 'of nervous family' studying at home, forbade the fifteen-year-old Virginia Woolf to continue with her lessons, and ordered her to spend four hours a day gardening.*"* (Showalter 126). So incensed was she by this restriction, that she ridiculed the feminization of hysteria in her diary entries and in *Mrs Dalloway* (diary entries from 1920-25).

 Hysterics often expressed an "unnatural" desire for privacy, because it was in this space of liminality they reconfigured their identity. The hysteric contends with her anatomical destiny in a room detached from the public. Showalter talks of the feminine pretense that women in asylums put on to gain concessions from the administration, by conforming to feminine norms they ensured their survival while still tethered to their 'hysterical tendency'. Perkins' unnamed protagonist by the end of her narrative resembles the Victorian madwoman that fascinated Charles Dickens, a striking contrast between her feminine beauty and abject behavior.[7]

Perkins uses an unnamed protagonist, an everywoman ideal, where she posits the possibility of resistance in a room of one's own. However, the intrusion of a familial order in the form of surveillance is especially discernible. Her husband, "a physician of high

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[7] Refer to Elaine Showalter "Domesticating Insanity" in *The Female Malady,* where she talks about 'Lunatic Balls' where the gentry was allowed to mingle with the asylum patients. Dickens was struck by them.

standing," (Gilman 648), has diagnosed her as having a "temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman 648). She has to suffer through this diagnosis as a subject, to arrive at its futility. The lapse in domesticity is her illness, her "hysterical tendency". The infantilism and the regression of the 'nursery' also resembles the confinement of a cell - an unjustly accused clawing her way out. There is always an implicit threat of authority, especially of the medical arbiter; from her husband-physician to an implied S.Weir Mitchell. For Woolf, her uncontrollable bouts of 'insanity' made her the subject of constant scrutiny. Her husband, 'Leonard', was meticulous about subduing them - he recorded her to a limit unfathomable, which included her menstrual cycles[8]. Perhaps, the most interesting observation is her recorded breakdown after being married.[9] We can't look at the rest-cure from the binaries of good and bad, for most women this infantile regression to the passivity of the 'womb', gave them time to reassess. For Woolf, neurasthenia was the consequence of intellectual exertion which led to revelations in her diary entries and literary output, and for Perkins, it was confinement to infantilism – "What is it little girl?" (Gilman 652). It was in these liminal spaces which includes their diary where they transcended boundaries.

2. Restructuring the Symbolic: Diaries as Linguistic Transformation

Essentially, it was in this context that I was compelled to look at the centrality of diaries as narrative vehicles in women's writing. Diaries have an intended audience - someday, someone in the future will read this, this is my only remnant (be it the aged diary's writer only) . If women keep diaries it is because they become the only signifier of their lives outside of a domestic image. The idea of reconfiguring your identity in convalescence, penning down your thoughts with the diary acting as a receptacle of abjection. "*I expel, I spit myself out, I abject myself through the same motion that I claim to establish myself*"

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[8] Refer to "Virginia Woolf and the Art of Madness", where the author probes Woolf's life
[9] Refer to "Virginia Woolf and the Art of Madness" where the author probes Woolf's life

(Kristeva 3) - in a room of one's own separated from the domestic is the perfect setting for change.

By seeing the diary not as a factual document but as "liquid literature" (Martinson 4), we can posit alternative symbolic and linguistic possibilities for articulating illness and the real. When I use the term 'liquid literature', I refer to the lack of a plot which gives the reader the opportunity to come to their own conclusion. Domestic monotony acts as a rhythm in both texts, and the reader gets entangled in this experimental stream of words. This is very similar to Julia Kristeva's 'fluid subjectivity', where through the semiotic's transgressive capacities it becomes indispensable to the subject's articulation. I put emphasis on emotive semiotics associated with the ill-feminine which can attack the centrality of the sexual difference because for Kristeva akin to Lacan the woman does not exist.[10]

Kristeva proposes that consciousness does not pre-exist language, but it is actually formed by the acquisition of discourse:

> If the symbolic function comprises all communicative activity, then the semiotic designates those unconscious, instinctual, bodily impulses which precede syntactic language. The semiotic also includes the effects of pre-symbolic impulses which come into language as "rhythms, intonations", which cannot be captured as sign, signifier and signified. (Rabine 45)

If the rest-cure calls for a return to the suspension of the womb then there is a radical possibility for regeneration. In the babblings and cries of illness, I contend, women can access a genderless space where performativity stops, and this connectedness of emotive

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[10] Refer to Noelle McAfee's Routledge Thinker's edition on Julia Kristeva, I am paraphrasing popular dictums made by Lacan and Kristeva's preoccupation with dissolving identity.

semiotics is comparable to Kristeva's chora.[11] Akin to the infant's learning process, this new

poetic language of illness, and by extension of the semiotic, lies in the potential to initiate a

'revolution in language'.[12] "The speaking subject makes and unmakes himself" (qtd. in

Mcafee 14). Although, in a woman's case where speaking is frowned upon, she makes and

unmakes herself through writing, "I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write

a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me" (Gilman 649). The structure for women

to enter the symbolic necessitates the learning of the phallic language and separating from the

maternal order. However, through the rest-cure women retreat into the maternal womb or

Kristeva's 'chora' of oneness - separated from phallic intrusion. In cases where the cure

worked it was because of the rest and the food that women were able to access for the first

time - this did in one sense encourage a change in the female act.

Rose Grosskopf proposes that diaries can be seen as modernist texts - "part authentic diary

and part performative model" (4). I extend the contention that diaries do act akin to modernist

narratives - fragmented sentences, dashes and ellipses contest the conception of a unitary self

- they embody a feminist poststructuralist notion of subject in the making. By using Frederic

Jameson's argument in *The Political Unconscious,* this paper uses the contention that

narrative can act as a socially symbolic act - written narratives can restructure the symbolic.[13]

Diaries are distinctively feminist genres in which women reassess the body and mind. What

is perhaps the most interesting narrative thread, is the centrality of the diary as a narrative

vehicle in "The Yellow Wallpaper". For the unnamed protagonist, it is only in the privacy of

"dead paper" (Gilman 647) that she can articulate her body in pain, without the intrusion of a

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[11] The chora is the maternal realm of suspension before the infant's initiation into the symbolic, refer to Noelle McAfee's Routledge Thinker's edition on Julia Kristeva,

[12] Refer to Noelle McAfee's Routledge Thinker's edition on Julia Kristeva, Kristeva akin to other French feminists like Luce Irigaray believe in language's ability to restructure.

[13] In *The Political Unconscious,* by historizing narratives and arriving at its structural roots, we can analyse their significance as a socially symbolic act of protest.

phallocentric order. Modernism was a disengagement from the literary tradition, and so are diaries from the public. Diaries point to the present and future, forming a connecting thread suspending time still — a continuous present:

> This future-oriented thinking reveals itself in Woolf's diaries, which she carefully prepared with hand drawn margins. The last entry before her suicide appears near the beginning of a new volume in which she had drawn margins on each of the subsequent pages. This format, demonstrating "that Woolf had set up the diary as a book which she intended to fill," poignantly "underscores a life stopped short"; even in the midst of her depression, Woolf still directed her writing toward the future. (Grosskopf 9)

Diaries contest the conception of a unitary self and obliterate narrative authority - which is a particularly masculine authorial project. Perhaps, the most interesting distinction between Woolf and Perkins was the way they used their diary. For Woolf, diary entries stopped during her manic bouts and started again with implicit remembrances of them during her writing-process. For Perkins, the diary is where she finds the 'truth'. What is essential to note is that both Woolf and Perkins as women could only come to terms with their illness through metaphors. This is paradoxical because their domestic incarceration was the result of their illness being seen as a metaphor for femininity by the establishment. Perkins was frightened by the domestic and Woolf was trapped in her past which manifested in her writing - the rest-cure was supposed to treat this. "In fact, any autonomy that the semiotic might possess, including its alleged subversiveness, is said to be derivative, conferred by the symbolic." (Schippers 33). The semiotics of illness are a source of subversion within the symbolic, the paradox arises that it isn't emancipatory.

When we divorce diary writing from its chaste roots in women's periodicals as ways of finding spiritual fulfilment in wifehood, we can see the subversive potential of even the act of writing.[14] Diaries are a profoundly feminine genre and are comparable to the novel - and akin to the novel they also carry the capacity to be storehouses of ideology, proto-feminist I would propose.   The ramifications of articulating their body in pain caused a schism in their personality. For Woolf, for whom there was still a pang of implicit guilt when it came to her role in Leonard's life; after her breakdown post *The Voyage Out,* when she had refused to see him for eight weeks – in the end she decided to share her diaries with him.[15] Diaries are a liberating and free space, a feminist artifact; possessing and controlling them can be a source of power that can be expressed. With this train of thought, it makes perfect sense why women with weak constitutions were urged to not pick up the pen.

Julia Kristeva proposes that there are three kinds of revolt - revolt as the transgression of prohibition, revolt as repetition, working-through, and finally as displacement. I propose that diaries act as texts of resistance because they confront the symbolic prohibition on the act of women expressing themselves through writing. Their linguistic experimentalism displaces the linear and dualistic logic of phallogocentrism. Feminine doublespeak, in which women writers oscillate between complying and resisting, diaries break this chain and show a glimpse of their consciousness as it is. Through the repetitive monotony of domestic experiences which writers pen down, they work through and displace the normative of domestic harmony.

Perkins's unnamed protagonist struggled with her baby; unnatural for a woman. Through her stream of consciousness in her diary entries she transcends normative communicative

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[14] Margo Culley chronicles the diary by examining its roots in women's magazines as recorders of domestic life. Refer to her essay "'I Look at Me': Self as Subject in the Diaries of American Women."

[15] Refer to "Virginia Woolf and the Art of Madness", where the author probes Woolf's life

structures. The reader is made complicit in a narratorial web where they are allowed to see the uncovering of her true subjectivity. For Woolf, her suicide note which I considered her last personal expression – by extension a quasi-diary entry, deals with her fragmentation:

> I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know…..I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. (Popova 2019)

Notice how Woolf articulates her guilt, she succumbs to the fragmentation of the domestic angel who feels guilt over her individuality; the abrupt pauses and the repetition of 'I' with a resounding guilt. This fragmentation lingers in the unconscious where it threatens the borders of the "I". This paper proposes that diaries can act as a liminal space between the performance of the feminine and the reality of the body for Woolf and Perkins, and by extension for most women as well. In a similar vein to Luce Irigaray's ideas on 'mimesis'. For Irigaray, women have to mimic the symbolic in order to come up with an interpretation of it that overcomes its phallogocentrism. I propose that diaries become a written receptacle of a woman's new articulation of the self and her future, divorced from the world that imposes another. Both Woolf and Perkins, by conforming to a construction of feminine behaviour confront its fallacies. Through their diaries in both fiction and in reality, they come up with new, symbolic ways of describing their subjecthood which repudiates the 'The Angel in the House'.

Conclusion: The Dialect of Sex and Illness

From 1925 - 1926, while finishing *To the Lighthouse,* Woolf suffered her usual winter ills. She fell into fits of depression that were preceded by revelations, "Then I got the flu last Saturday; so have seen no one." (Woolf 214) - "Here's a whole nervous breakdown in miniature" (Woolf 218) - "Intense depression: I have to confess that this has overcome me several times since September 6th" (Woolf 220).[16] Illness, creativity, and liberation walked hand in hand for Woolf. For Perkins, articulating her experience as a patient of S Weir Mitchell through her story, is one of the most visceral examples in literature of a woman resisting. The masculine has had every advantage in telling their story, we cannot let their word be the final nail in the coffin. The realm of illness became a subversive space for the feminine identity. Through illness, Woolf and Perkins understood that their minds worked in tandem with their bodies. The use and articulation of language has ramifications that eludes the normal eye:

> If illness creates a space within which the woman writer can freely experience
>
> an embodied self," Coates argues, "it also has the capacity to liberate her from
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> the handicaps inflicted by the male dominated world of letters". (Harvey 44)

Woolf abhorred the rest cure which her familial order understood; she was allowed to speak up and write about it.[17] Hence, Woolf also survived as long as she did when compared to Perkins' character's temporary liberation. She may creep over her husband and restructure language, "It is no use, young man." (Gilman 656), but she will be expelled from the symbolic after this. Words can be a more defiant symbol of resistance.

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[16] Refer specifically to *Selected Diaries*

[17] Leonard perceived that Virginia's existence depended in some indescribable way upon her creativity; refer to "Virginia Woolf and the Art of Madness"

However, to submit to a phallic understanding would be a worse fate, and there's potential in linguistically restructuring this interpretation. Woolf uses her diary and her past experiences to shape *Mrs Dalloway*. It was only post World War One that hysteria was re-evaluated as an illness that needed to be treated with no metaphorical implications. Male patients frequently complained of the ineffectiveness of the rest cure which Woolf uses in *Mrs Dalloway*:

> He is adamant that Septimus's distress results from a preoccupation with the self; if he would simply stop ruminating and join in with the rest of polite society, he would soon realize that there is "nothing whatever the matter". (Harvey 24)

Notice how much more strength and validity the masculine word holds. Showalter stresses on the almost 'eradication' of hysteria; she historicizes male hysteria, where male doctors were made to confront illness as it is: "Thus shell shock may actually have served the same kind of functional purpose in military life - defusing mutiny - that female hysteria served in civilian society" (Showalter 175). Resistance through words and the body is an indictment of the symbolic that forces us to conform.

Woolf who had been at the receiving end of this relationship, through Mrs Dalloway, wanted to criticize the social system and show it at its barest through its victims. In her diary, Woolf uses the example of digging out caves behind her character in *Mrs. Dalloway*, with the idea that they will connect to each other and come to daylight. Woolf's insistence on reconciliation and a refutation of dichotomies leads to my concluding point. To escape the patriarchal diagnosis, women must alter the sentence and transcend established boundaries. Hélène Cixous proposes in "The Laugh of Medusa" that women must write from their body

to break the phallocracy - Écriture féminine.[18] Woolf uses Septimus as a double to Clarissa - she metaphorically connects the masculine and feminine caves (I contend):

> During this period of enforced rest, Clarissa carves out space for self-inquiry, for the refiguration of feminine labour, until "life itself" enters the very room in which she lies, its "robes" of sound enveloping her prostrate body like the party dress she will don later in the evening—itself, too, a conscious performance of wellness, signalling a re-entry into the celebration of life. (Harvey 31)

If Clarissa — a perfect candidate for neurosis can choose life and complement Septimus then there is more to our identity than we are let on. Clarrisa rests on her own terms without the intrusion of the phallic order, while Septimus jumps to his death to avoid this intrusion of his sanctity. It is through illness that both of them come to terms with their existence, akin to Woolf. For Perkins' protagonist, her foreshadowed incarceration leads to the freedom of the women trapped in the yellow wallpaper, and by extension Perkins (she inscribed in her autobiography that escaping the rest cure saved her).

Society has a compulsive need to narrativize and even mythologize illness, which detracts illness. Sontag writes - "The most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill,"(Sontag 3) - "is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (Sontag 3). Sontag illustrates how popular imagination castigates women into a symbolic figuration of the disease. I extend the contention that hysteria's cure was a war of words, that writers like Perkins and Woolf propose. Writing which was forbidden saved them - by reading illness as a metaphor they came to terms with their own subjectivity and by articulating it through writing they became subjects of their own making. Woolf after the

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[18] Refer to Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of Medusa", where she analyses the radicality of writing what emanates from the body. She interestingly proposes that laughter and even crying can disrupt phallogocentrism.

tumult of Mrs Dalloway, found solace in the routine of writing, "I can write and write and write now: the happiest feeling in the world." (Gutierrez 2018)

Perkins' protagonist felt infinitely better in the narrative when she was allowed to exercise her agency through writing. Food loathing is one of the most elementary forms of abjection which she embodies, the fact the writing helped her make peace with food and life is subversive:

> Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was. (Gilman 653)

Through this paper, I have made an attempt to understand the intricacies of language and the resistance that feminine writing can pose to phallocentrism. Through the articulation of the realm of illness they call attention to themselves as able-bodied beings. This has a radical and emancipatory potential to question the complacency of patriarchal machinations to posit an alternative reality — and this makes all the difference.

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"If You Think This Country's Bad Off Now, Just Wait Till I Get Through With It": **A Philosophical Study Of Satirical Resistance In Political Cinema, Specifically Through *Duck Soup* (1933) And *Z* (1969)**

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Abstract

In an era where digital media has made satire ubiquitous—shared, memed, and instantly commodified—its roots as a deliberate, philosophical mode of resistance are often overlooked. Long before the internet transformed satire into a viral phenomenon, the medium of cinema stood as one of its most powerful vessels, especially during the tumultuous political landscapes of the 20th century. This paper explores the philosophical underpinnings of satire as a tool of resistance by examining two landmark films: Duck Soup (1933), a pre-World War II Marx Brothers film that mocks authoritarianism and the futility of war through carnivalesque absurdity; and Z (1969), Costa-Gavras' politically charged thriller that exposes state repression under Greece's military junta. Through an analysis of these films, this study seeks to investigate whether cinematic satire can be considered a legitimate tool of political resistance and how its function shifts across different political regimes. It attempts to understand how satire's capacity to resist power is shaped not only by its content, but also by the political structures in which it operates.

Keywords: *Satire, Humour, Duck Soup, Z (Costa Gavras), Resistance, Cinema, Marx Brothers, Carnivalesque*

Introduction

"Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand." Mark Twain's assertion captures the radical force of humour—in a way, revealing its profound capacity to dismantle entrenched power structures. In an age of rising censorship, political polarisation, and shrinking space for dissent, satire remains one of the few tools that can push back. Whether through stand-up, political cartoons, literature, cinema or more recently memes, humour helps people process and expose the fault lines within systems of authority. When direct criticism feels dangerous or ineffective, satire becomes a way to resist. In today's climate of deepening political divides and declining tolerance, it provides more than amusement as it becomes a means of resistance and, in some cases, a way to endure. This paper argues that satire serves a critical democratic function—it creates a space for dissent that is not only oppositional but also epistemological. One might ask, how exactly does satire allow us to see what formal critique cannot? By interrogating official narratives through irony, parody, and hyperbole, satire creates a cognitive dissonance that exposes the absurdities and contradictions of power. In this sense, satire invites us to *know differently*—to perceive the fractures, contradictions, and irrationalities within dominant power structures that might remain concealed by formal, discursive reasoning.

The transformative potential of comedy is most vividly realised in the realm of satire—which in the broadest sense is the art of *using humour, irony, and exaggeration to criticise and expose some ridiculous aspects of people's behavior, and vices* (Manh Tung-Ho). Though the literature on the meaning and function of satire is extensive, most researchers seem to agree on the two most crucial components: *humor and criticism* (Phan). Consequently, satirical humour has emerged as a potent form of resistance, not only unsettling dominant power structures but also piercing the individual psyche. Thus, in a way,

satire delivers a cognitive jolt. It unveils hypocrisy, forces re-evaluation, and leaves a continuing influence that persists beyond the moment of laughter.

Building on this exact concept, this paper undertakes a philosophical inquiry into satire as a tool of cinematic resistance, focusing on two landmark films– *Duck Soup* (1933), a pre-World War II Marx Brothers comedy ridiculing authoritarianism and the absurdity of war, and *Z* (1969), Costa-Gavras' political thriller that reveals the mechanisms of state repression in a quasi-totalitarian regime, specifically the junta that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. Despite coming from very different political backgrounds—Hollywood during the interwar years and Greece during the military occupation—both movies employ comedy to subvert authority. But they take quite different satirical stances. By comparing *Duck Soup* (1933), produced in a democratic context, with *Z* (1969), set in and censored by an authoritarian regime, the study explores how satire navigates the limits of speech, censorship, and subversion. Ultimately, it asks: can satire act as a legitimate mode of political resistance? If so, how do its epistemic and subversive potentials vary across democratic and authoritarian regimes?

1. Epistemology of Satirical Humour

Satirical humour operates at the intersection of affect and intellect, levity and critique. Its epistemological function is not simply to entertain, but to reveal, to illuminate social, political, or cultural flaws through the veiled clarity of comic misrepresentation.

As Brian A. Connery notes in the introduction to Matthew Hodgart's *Satire: Origins and Principles:*

> Satire . . . serves as an alternative form of power when the crimes committed escape the purview of . . . law, religion, and politics . . . this is the reason why so much satire is directed against lawyers and judges, preachers and religions, and rulers and politicians: it is . . . the corruption of the very agencies which are supposed to offer justice, order, and social and moral regulation that makes satire necessary. (2-3)

At its core, satire is defined by its use of "funny misrepresentation" to criticize a target (Abrahams 111). However, as Abrahams notes, two conditions must be met for such misrepresentation to qualify as satire: first, the humour must *possess normative force*–the audience *ought* to find it funny, regardless of individual reaction. Second, the misrepresentation must reliably attach to the target, ensuring that the *humour arises from a perceived truth.* If the criticism is inapt or cruel, the satire collapses into mere insult or sadism, devoid of epistemic merit. Thus, humour is not an ornamental addition to satire — it is essential to its truth function, anchoring the act of criticism in aesthetic terms that engage both cognition and emotion (Abrahams 114).

Dustin Griffin's influential work *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* positions satire along two axes: "inquiry and provocation," and "display and play" (Griffin 35). The former pertains to satire's cognitive function: its role in examining and contesting social norms. The latter refers to its aesthetic strategies—irony, exaggeration, parody, which make its critical inquiry both palatable and persuasive. Griffin's framing reminds us that satire is epistemic not in spite of its entertainment value, but because of it; the play element facilitates accessibility, allowing critique to travel under the guise of amusement.

Historically, satire has attracted efforts at systematisation, with Northrop Frye's concept of "militant irony" being particularly noteworthy. In *Anatomy of Criticism,* Frye posits that satire emerges from a clash between moral norms and deviation — a "mythos of winter"

wherein rigid standards are used to judge transgressions (Frye 223). Satire, in this view, serves as a kind of moral epistemology, making visible the boundaries of acceptable conduct through comic exaggeration. Frye offers a refined understanding of satire: "*Two things, then, are essential to satire: one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack.*" (Frye 224)

Underlying many of these frameworks is the enduring question: what makes something *funny*, and how does that humour generate knowledge? Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900) answers this by associating the comic with inelasticity — rigidity in human behaviour that reveals a lapse in vitality. When individuals behave like machines rather than dynamic beings animated by *Élan vital*, laughter exposes this misalignment and compels social correction (Bergson 49-50). Thus, for Bergson, satire is not merely a mirror to society, but a corrective lens, a means of reanimating moral and social awareness through mockery.

Arthur Schopenhauer's incongruity theory adds another dimension. In *The World as Will and Idea*, he attributes humour to the clash between abstract knowledge and sensuous experience — a cognitive dissonance that produces laughter when a concept fails to adequately map onto reality (Schopenhauer 76). This incongruity forms the bedrock of much satirical logic: by staging absurd juxtapositions or revealing contradictions, satire makes evident the gap between appearance and truth.

Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard distinguishes comics from tragic contradictions. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he suggests that comedy represents a "painless contradiction" — a scenario where resolution is possible, unlike the fatalism of tragedy (Kierkegaard 83–84). Satire, then, is *epistemologically optimistic; it mocks not to despair, but to reform,* presupposing that the object of ridicule is capable of change. The contradiction it

stages between "errant behaviour" and "ideal behaviour" implies a way out, reinforcing satire's potential as a vehicle for enlightenment.

Sigmund Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, offers yet another function for comic satire— psychic regulation. Freud views humour as a release of repressed energies, particularly around taboo subjects. This release serves not only to entertain but also to allow confrontation with otherwise unspeakable truths.

Freud's ideas find resonance in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the *carnivalesque*. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin examines medieval carnival culture, where traditional hierarchies were inverted, and humour functioned as collective dissent (Bakhtin 10–15). Carnivalesque humour embraces grotesquery, bodily excess, and irreverence to destabilise dominant ideologies. Satirical humour, especially in its populist forms, inherits this tradition by enabling subaltern critique — a radical epistemology grounded not in reasoned debate but in laughter from below.

These theories collectively highlight the epistemic richness of satirical humour. Whether through normative critique (Abrahams), moral calibration (Frye), cognitive dissonance (Schopenhauer), social correction (Bergson), psychic release (Freud), or collective inversion (Bakhtin), satire produces knowledge not by solemn pronouncement, but by making us laugh and then forcing us to think.

2. Screening Dissent: The Role of Satirical Cinema in Political Critique

Satire, as a genre, has long found expression across multiple mediums—plays, skits, articles, and cartoons—but perhaps its most potent and far-reaching ground is cinema. As *Washington Square News* notes, satire in film "epitomises a certain era in time." Films that satirise politics often serve as time capsules, crystallising the social and political atmosphere

of their moment. A film that engages with current political issues is inherently rooted in its own historical context, reflecting the prevailing public concerns and acting as a kind of secondary source.

The genre operates within a fundamental paradox: it mocks and destabilises the very institutions whose recognition it depends on for its meaning. Nicholas Holm (2023) expands on this, arguing that satire functions by adhering to a more anarchic, transgressive worldview: a particular vision of cultural politics where laughter is presented as a threat to political structures. As a generic sensibility, satire is thus defined by the assertion that humour, and cultural consumption in general, can be apprehended as a way of doing politics. This worldview has the potential to be particularly appealing in an environment where other means of political praxis seem increasingly closed off or impotent (Dean et al.). This can be considered the case with *Z* (1969).

As Kevin Willmott[1] said, *"[s]atire can bring out truths that journalism and other forms of examination cannot"* (Kliman, 2015). The genre's most important ideological commitment lies in the fact that its factual and invented elements are closely tied together to address relevant social issues, and the audience can infer the "general truths" (the interpretative position of the work) through the identification of these interrelations.

Cinema has long served as a powerful instrument of resistance, capable of challenging entrenched power structures and amplifying dissent in both democratic and authoritarian contexts. In a way, films have the unique ability to bypass censorship by using metaphor, symbolism, and narrative subversion, which allows them to communicate messages in ways other media cannot.

In repressive regimes, where freedom of expression is curtailed, cinema has often provided a covert yet powerful platform for political critique. Costa-Gavras' *Z* (1969), for

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[1] Kevin Willmott's *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* uses satire to powerfully expose the persistence of racism and discrimination in contemporary American society.

instance, offers a striking example of cinematic resistance. Thinly veiled as a fictional narrative, the film dramatises the real-life assassination of Greek politician Grigoris Lambrakis and exposes state-sponsored violence and corruption. Released during a period of intense political repression in Greece, *Z* not only circumvented censorship but also galvanised international attention toward the junta's abuses. As such, the film exemplifies how cinema can become a vehicle for truth-telling, resistance, and the preservation of collective memory in times of authoritarian control.

3. *"To War, To War, We're Finally Going to War!"*: Absurdity of War, Marxist Anarchism and the Carnivalesque in *Duck Soup (1933)*

"Take two turkeys, one goose, four cabbages, but no duck, and mix them together. After one taste, you'll duck soup for the rest of your life."

–Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx), Duck Soup

'Duck Soup' is one of the most scathing political satires in cinematic history. And it had a very specific target. Running at 68 minutes, *Duck Soup* took Marxist anarchism with all its acerbic humour and poured it on thick. Resplendent with fast dialogue, double entendres, absurdism and visual gags, *Duck Soup* remains their greatest comedy, whilst delivering a powerful knock-out punch to the absurdities of how governments rule and the nature of war (Classics, Silver Screen).

Set in the fictional bankrupt nation of Freedonia, a wealthy financier insists the eccentric Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx) become its new leader. Once in power, Firefly proves erratic and tyrannical—imposing arbitrary laws, taxing citizens relentlessly, and treating governance as a joke. His impulsive antics even spark a war after he argues with his own

inner monologue. When asked, "How do you intend to run the nation?" he starts performing a vaudeville song illustrating 'the laws of his administration':

No one's allowed to smoke/ Or tell a dirty joke, And whistling is forbidden// If any form of pleasure is exhibited/Report to me and it will be prohibited//The country's taxes must be fixed/And I know what to do with it/If you think you're paying too much now/Just wait 'till I get through with it

The list goes on for a while, ending with the lines, *"The last man nearly ruined this place, he didn't know what to do with it. If you think this country's bad off now, just wait 'till I get through with it"*

Groucho Marx as Rufus T. Firefly in Duck Soup (1933)

This song is a clever musical number, which again lampoons the concept of freedom, stifled by the rules and regulations put in place by the government. But even more so, it reveals the deep power of the state over the individual and how those who intend to abuse

power and authority, do so under the guise of freedom. In the current world, this has become an even more confusing and difficult reality to comprehend.

Produced during the Great Depression, the film is an obvious commentary on political events around the world, *"pok[ing] fun at the erratic dictators who were consolidating power in Europe at the time"* (Epplin). Critic, Tim Dirks emphasises the multidirectionality of the Marx Brothers' satire by pointing out how it mocks "the pomposity of small-time governmental leaders," "the absurdity of government itself," "governmental diplomacy," "an arbitrary legal system," and "war fought over petty matters." Duck Soup may at first appear to be a product of its time, an artwork inseparable from the historical and social conditions that inspired its creation. However, as a comedy based on political satire, it conveys something eerily contemporary and accurate. (Pagliari 155)

The title *'Duck Soup'* captures the film's absurd spirit—drawing on an old American slang term meaning "something easy to do." For Firefly, ruling a country is effortless precisely because he's indifferent to its people and driven by whim. His chaotic leadership thrives on inconsistency, allowing him to revel in power right up to the inevitable collapse. As the opening credits roll, the first visual gag of ducks swimming in a large boiling cauldron is more than a nod to the nonsensical title of the film. Indeed, the inter-war years saw a world which was very much a boiling cauldron; one where the Depression had hit the world, democracy and capitalism were in crisis and fascism had emerged as a real danger to the world. Whether or not this may not have been the intent of director Leo McCarey, it does introduce us to an imaginary nation aptly named 'Freedonia' that appears to be in political chaos.(Classics, Silver Screen)

Duck Soup (1933)

The political undertones of Duck Soup inevitably echo historical realities, contributing to its reputation as the Marx Brothers' most substantial comedy and a seminal anti-war film. Released in 1933—the same year Adolf Hitler rose to power—the film unknowingly brushes against the edge of a darkening global landscape. While the Marx Brothers were aware of the growing tide of anti-Semitism in Europe, like much of America at the time, they could not foresee the full extent of what was to come. The fictional conflict between Freedonia and Sylvania parodies the absurdities of World War I, a distant memory by then, rather than predicting the horrors of World War II. Though unintentional, Duck Soup resonates with uncanny historical parallels and, like all enduring satire, taps into deeper, timeless truths that transcend its immediate context. (Eggert)

Eggert goes on to write, "It is disturbing to think that *Duck Soup* contains just as many moments of recognition as it does nonsensical and tangential humor. The film raises so many questions about whether it is lampooning various dictators or political situations because history has a way of repeating itself. When Firefly kills his own men and then tries to cover it up, he does so two years before Humphrey Cobb wrote his book *Paths of Glory*, a real-life account of a French general who did the same thing during the First World War. When Firefly

sings, 'The last man nearly ruined this place/He didn't know what to do with it/If you think this country's bad off now/Just wait 'til I get through with it,' try not to think of someone like Hitler or Mussolini…Mussolini even banned *Duck Soup* in Italy after a twinge of recognition. To be sure, the film, either through intentional or coincidental circumstances, underlines a historical pattern of insane people taking over bankrupt nations. "It kidded dictators," said McCarey."

In a 2015 article for *The Guardian*, Craig Brown offered a particularly insightful assessment:

'Duck Soup has been praised for its understanding of paranoia in international diplomacy and of the economics of warfare. It is full of gags about the futility of war and its financial advantages'.

Louis Calhern as the Ambassador Trentino in Duck Soup (1933), IMDb

Dialogues like "I've already paid a month's rent on the battlefield" and "Remind me to give myself the Firefly medal for this" brilliantly showcase the film's irreverence. The first reflects the trivialisation of war, while the second humorously critiques the narcissism of dictators who are known to name awards after themselves.

Another scene of significant importance is the national anthem scene (*The scene occurs as the fictional country of Freedonia, led by the eccentric Rufus T. Firefly prepares to go to war with its neighbour, Sylvania. The national anthem is dramatically sung during a grand rally meant to stir patriotic fervour and unify the country behind the war effort*). It serves as a pointed satire of how national identity is constructed through performative rituals and symbolic displays. The exaggerated patriotism on display mocks the blind allegiance often fostered by such traditions. This aligns with Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses, in which he argues that institutions such as schools, churches, and cultural practices function to "interpellate" individuals into ideology—shaping them into subjects who internalize dominant state values. Through its comedic portrayal of nationalistic fervor, the film exposes the absurd ease with which citizens can be molded into conformity under the guise of patriotism.

Lastly, Duck Soup exemplifies the carnivalesque tradition as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin, wherein societal norms are turned upside down through humor, chaos, and the temporary suspension of hierarchies. In Freedonia, political decorum collapses under the absurdity of Rufus T. Firefly's rule: ministers sing and dance instead of govern, war is declared over a personal insult, and courtrooms are sites of slapstick rather than justice. This inversion of power structures and mocking of authority aligns with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, where the world is turned "inside out" and the sacred is profaned. The Marx Brothers' relentless ridicule of government, law, and war creates a cinematic carnival—a space where conventional order is subverted, and the audience is invited to laugh at the absurd foundations of state power. Hence, it's no surprise that *Duck Soup*, along with the rest of the Marx Brothers' films, was revived by the counterculture movement of the 1960s, which embraced their rebellious spirit and satirical defiance of authority.

The Marx Brothers in Duck Soup (1933)

The words of Bakhtin are of direct relevance here: The [movie] is [made] in such a way that the [audience] is induced to look in it for allusions to some contemporary or recent political events. Thus a peculiar carnivalesque picture of political and historical life is created by the [maker]. Events are conceived outside their traditional official interpretation and offer, therefore, new opportunities for interpretation and appreciation. (Bakhtin 424)

4. "Tonight, the Enemy Will Meet in Our City": Political Irony, Institutional Injustice, and the Anatomy of a Coup in *Z* (1969)

Costa-Gavras's *Z* (1969) opens with a montage of militaristic emblems—religious icons, royal insignia, and medals—laying the groundwork for a scathing satire of authoritarianism. The absurdity quickly escalates: a general delivers a rambling speech linking communist agitation to sunspots, lamenting the "mildew of the mind" and insisting that "God casts no light on the Reds." His rhetoric, unchallenged by a bewildered audience, becomes emblematic of the irrational logic often upheld by regimes desperate to justify violence in the name of order. It is after this that we see, the film's jarring title card:

"Any resemblance to real events, or to people, alive or dead, is no coincidence. It is INTENTIONAL."
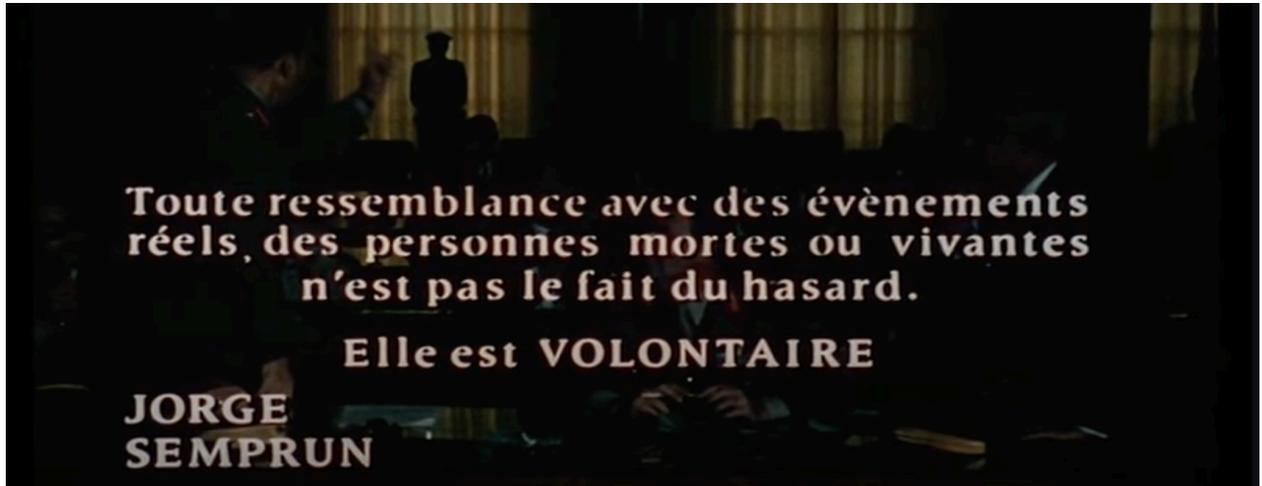
Z (1969)

Rooted in historical trauma, *Z* draws on the real-life assassination of Greek MP Grigoris Lambrakis and the subsequent cover-up, laying bare the grotesque mechanisms of state repression. Despite its ambiguous setting—featuring French actors, Algerian locations, and unnamed characters—the film's specific critique of Greece's political climate under the military junta is unmistakable. The title itself, *Z*, comes from the Greek slogan *Zei* ("He lives"), a tribute to Lambrakis, whose death sparked nationwide outrage.

Satirical elements permeate the film's structure and tone. The portrayal of political villains is especially pointed: the General and his conspirators, rather than appearing as omnipotent masterminds, are rendered absurd and incompetent. The assassins—two incompetent thugs—commit murder in broad daylight and later attempt to eliminate witnesses with farcical ineptitude. The satire lies in this grotesque caricature of the regime: instead of omniscient operatives, the state's violence is shown to be executed by fools, thereby undercutting the grandeur often associated with authoritarian control.

The final sequence is perhaps *Z*'s most biting moment of satire. Just as viewers anticipate triumph, the film jolts them with grim reality: the perpetrators receive light sentences, democracy collapses, and a list of banned items appears on screen—from Sophocles to the Beatles to the letter Z. The moment is chilling. What seemed like a satire with a moral resolution reveals itself as a tragic farce.

Costa-Gavras's *Z* is steeped in a bitter irony that lays bare the rituals and rhetoric of authoritarianism. It doesn't just satirize a particular political regime—it dismantles the performance of fascism itself. The film aligns strikingly with Umberto Eco's notion of *"Ur-Fascism"*—a kind of eternal fascism that is less about historical specificity and more about recurring traits: the cult of tradition, rejection of modernism, obsession with conspiracy, and the portrayal of dissent as treason. These elements are vividly present in *Z*. The General's rant about "mildew of the mind" and sunspots caused by Communists is not just ludicrous—it's a theatrical exaggeration of fascist paranoia. And yet, the irony is that such absurdities go unquestioned. Everyone listens, nods, and records. The satire, then, lies not in making villains grotesque, but in making the grotesque seem routine.

5. Political Reception and Censorship: State, Spectator, and the System

The reactions to *Duck Soup* and *Z* differed greatly, not only due to the time periods in which they were released, but also because of the contrasting political contexts in which they were produced and received.

Duck Soup did not open to much praise. However, contrary to the oft-repeated claim, the film was not exactly a total flop. True, there was some criticism from *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. It did not do so well in the small towns and midwest and was perhaps too cerebral for the masses looking for escapism from the Depression. Yet as Simon Louvish points out in 'Monkey Business: The Lives And Legends Of The Marx. Brothers', *Duck Soup* was Paramount's fifth highest earner for 1933. *Variety* initially gave it a positive

review as well. Yet the immediate memory of the film after initially doing well was not a fond one. Stefan Kanfer makes the point that the Depression saw people looking for something to hold them together against the cruelty of what they were going through. The cynicism of *Duck Soup* just may have been too much and with Americans in an '*isolationist mood…a satire of Balkan despots was too esoteric for their tastes'.* (Classics, Silver Screen)

Apart from commercial and critical challenges, *Duck Soup* faced no significant obstacles in its country of release, the USA, where the resilience of its democracy allowed it to thrive. In contrast, a distant nation was far less forgiving. The Italian dictator Mussolini took the film as a personal insult and decided to ban it. The fascist dictator clearly saw subversive potential in the apparently innocuous humor of the Marx Brothers, which leads us to consider one question: what power does art, specifically artistic satire, bring to political critique? (Pagliari 155-156)

Duck Soup's ridiculous portrayal of the rituals of nationalism and the machinery of war could only emerge in a relatively open society. But what does this chaos actually achieve? Is it just laughter for laughter's sake, or does it tap into something more subversive? Mussolini's decision to ban the film, despite its comic absurdity—suggests that its humour struck a nerve. Was the regime reacting to a perceived threat, or did the ban itself inadvertently confirm satire's potential to unsettle power? If laughter can provoke authoritarian fear, does that not point to an evident crack in the system—something satire exposes not by stating facts, but by unmasking the absurd logic beneath authority?

The Marx Brothers' commentary on modern politics and Mussolini's reaction to it show us how satire can act as a powerful, indispensable, and inevitable instrument of democracy. Mussolini's decision to ban the film raises a question: did the regime recognise something more subversive than laughter—a threat embedded in humour? Additionally W. J. T. Mitchell

argues that political satire is inextricably linked to democracy, the form of government that is supposed to execute the will of the people through either direct or indirect representation.

Indeed, satire is a direct result of democracy, since it allows people to freely express their opinion about specific public figures and political events. In her article, *The Birth of Comedy,* Edith Hall reminds us that comedy was first introduced as a genre in ancient Greece after the democratic revolution overthrew the Athenian tyrants in 507 BC. She writes that comedy was *"intimately tied to democracy—the form of sovereign power (kratos) held by the free populace—the demos of Athens"*. However, satire is never symptomatic of an absolute, fully developed democracy, but rather of an undeveloped democracy that is still unripe and endangered, in which freedom of expression may only be allowed within certain limits. (Pagliari 156)

According to Leonard Freedman[2], there is simply more political satire within democracies than there is under autocracies. Due to the very nature of a democratic political regime, political satire is at its fullest development when it exists within a society that safeguards civil liberties such as freedoms of speech and press. These freedoms allow political satire to flourish.

Thus, we may conclude that in a democracy, satire operates as a sanctioned space for resistance—one that exposes power through ridicule and sustains the democratic ideal of accountability through laughter. Although, this does not mean all democracies are very kind towards satirists. Satirists have faced persecution and censorship in both democratic and totalitarian regimes. However, such repression is more likely to occur silently, without protest or public outcry, under authoritarian rule. (Peréz 9)

The case of *Z* was different in many ways. It whispers its satire through tacit irony. But that doesn't make it any less potent. If anything, the restraint is what gives the film its edge. *Z*

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[2] Leonard Freedman's *The Offensive Art* (2009) is a historical narrative that analyzes the struggling dynamic between political satirists and their targets under two types of political regimes: democratic and authoritarian.

was the first film to fuse a real-life political event with the structure of a thriller, with satire serving to deepen its mode of resistance. Its unflinching critique of authoritarianism led to it being banned for several years in Greece, only seeing release after the fall of the military junta. The film was also prohibited in other regions, including Cyprus, where it was deemed *"not in the public interest"* by authorities because of an ethnic Greek majority. Yet beyond these borders, *Z* was met with widespread acclaim. It earned the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and achieved both critical and commercial success, cementing its place as a landmark in political cinema. Still, questions remain: does *Z* simply reflect the political violence it emerged from, or does it actively intervene in it? Is its meaning shaped as much by what it can't say as by what it does? If it failed to topple the authoritarian regime, did it at least show us what needs changing?

It is quite clear that in authoritarian regimes satire is far more subversive by nature. It becomes an *act of defiance,* one that risks censorship, surveillance, or punishment. Satire's function shifts from critique within the system to resistance against it, transforming humour into a political weapon aimed at survival and subversion. This echoes the famous quip attributed to George Orwell, *"Every joke is a tiny revolution."*

However, there is a distinction to make about satire that targets authoritarian regimes. Most of such satire is produced outside of the country, in immigrant enclaves or democratic countries with a significant diaspora from a particular authoritarian regime (as was the case with *Z*, it was a joint French-Algerian Production). Satire produced within authoritarian regimes for domestic audiences—particularly satire that can be accessed or studied without direct exposure to the region is significantly rare.

Thus, satire performs distinctly across political systems—serving as an instrument of public discourse and accountability in democratic contexts, while transforming into a subversive form of dissent under authoritarian rule. These tensions force us to reconsider: is

satire most effective when it's free, or when it's cornered? Can constraint sharpen satire's teeth? Satirical cinema clearly doesn't offer solutions, but maybe it was never meant to. Instead, it provokes: unsettling what is stable, mocking what is "sacred", and asking questions that resist simple answers.

Conclusion

There's no denying the fact that in the 20th century, satirical cinema has perhaps been one of the most prevalent modes of expressing dissent. In tracing the trajectories of *Duck Soup* and *Z*, it becomes clear that satire is far more than comic relief. It is a political act, shaped by and shaping the systems it confronts. *Duck Soup* revels in chaos, its satire is anarchic, wild and over-the-top. It mocks the machinery of war and governance with such irreverent abandon precisely because it can. It perfectly embodies the carnivalesque as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin.

Z, on the other hand, is tightly wound. Its satire is quieter, more cutting, and directed at a system capable of silencing it. It is not laughter, but painful irony that runs through the film. Operating under an authoritarian regime, the film cannot afford chaos; its resistance is quieter, more deliberate, and more dangerous. In countries where fear is weaponised against speech, satire becomes one of the few forms of resistance that can still slip through the cracks. In the words of Bassem Youssef, *"Satire was our weapon to dissect through the lies and rhetoric that were used to control the people."*

The treatment meted out to these films within their respective political regimes clearly illustrates how satire is received—and often regulated—differently in democratic and authoritarian contexts. Yet in both, satire remains one of cinema's most potent tools for

resistance. *"Satire lashes us deeply, but also relieves us. In this way, it uses a unique artistic language to convert tension and stridency into balance and harmony."* (Pagliari 158)

But to stop here would be to underplay the deeper work satire performs. Why should we care about satire, especially in film? Because satire doesn't just challenge power, it challenges how truth itself is told. It offers an alternative epistemology: a way of knowing through exaggeration, contradiction, and feeling. It disturbs comfortable narratives, not by replacing them with certainty, but by revealing their instability. In doing so, satire harnesses laughter not merely for release, but as a means of reorientation. Satire doesn't assert truth in the traditional sense. It performs it. When exaggeration, distortion and mockery move us to laugh, cringe, or reflect, are they not creating knowledge through feeling? Perhaps this is satire's unique epistemic value—it tells us not what to think, but what cannot be ignored.

In an era where public discourse is increasingly dominated by spectacle, inflated rhetoric, and ambiguous silences, satire matters because it teaches us to listen differently, laugh critically, and feel politically. And in that dissonance between what is said and what is shown, what is laughed at and what is lived—satire invites us to think, to question, and to resist.

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The Performance of Loneliness: Understanding the Crisis of Connection Through an Analysis of Bo Burnham's *Inside*

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Abstract

In 2023, the World Health Organisation called loneliness, "a global health concern", promptly setting up an international commission for it. Since then, the idea of a "loneliness epidemic" has captured the imagination of people, gaining significant importance in public discourse. But what does it mean to be lonely in an age of constant connection? This paper argues that the loneliness epidemic facing us is not merely a psychological condition, but instead a philosophical and social crisis manufactured by the totalising logic of digital platforms. In particular, it examines the importance of mutual recognition—the philosophical foundation of intersubjectivity and whether it is negatively impacted in the process of chasing visibility and virality.

By using Bo Burnham's *Inside* (2021), a self-directed special filmed in isolation during the COVID-19 lockdown, the paper explores how loneliness in this age is not the absence of people, but of overexposure and the lack of genuine connection. We're constantly seen by many, but recognised by none.

Drawing from Hegel's theory of *mutual recognition* in the master-slave dialectic and Sartre's concept of *the look,* I examine how digital environments dilute the intersubjectivity/mutuality necessary for selfhood. Further, by employing Baudrillard's theory of *hyperreality,* and

Illouz's idea of *emotional capitalism,* I map the transition from a relational presence to the privileging of algorithmic legibility. This leads to a sad saturation, where one is chronically online, performing, but still alone. The paper ends with an assessment of Glissant's concept of *opacity*, proposing it as an ethical counter to digital over-saturation. In reclaiming the right to remain partially unknown, I argue, we are presented with the possibility for a more ethical, reciprocal form of recognition in the digital age.

Overall, through this paper, I ask what it means to have our subjectivity mediated by the Internet, and whether, even amid digital isolation, another kind of relation is still possible.

Keywords: *Loneliness, Hyperreality, Mutual Recognition, Sartre, Master-Slave dialectic , Opacity*

Introduction

Loneliness is often mistaken for the mere absence of company, which is why Meta CEO, Mark Zuckerberg's solution of using AI chatbots (Bobrowsky) to solve the world's "loneliness epidemic"[1] won't work. In addition to the many ethical problems it raises, it fundamentally misunderstands the problem it aims to solve. It is not simply the condition of being alone, but the experience of not being seen and recognised—a steady depersonalisation[2], wherein the individual self is lost in the crowd, while still being subjected to growing individualism. So, it's both ontological and psychological, a fault at the level of recognition itself. By no means is this a new phenomenon, so what is behind this worldwide epidemic? It's worse in situations where reciprocity and relationality are expected, but not delivered. This, I argue, is at the heart of the *hyperconnected/disconnected paradox[3]*,which is characteristic of life in the digital age.

In order to better understand this phenomenon, it's useful to distinguish between loneliness and solitude, two terms that are commonly confused and used interchangeably. For Hannah Arendt, *verlassenheit* (loneliness) is a state of being abandoned, of being amidst company and yet feeling lonely. It's *"among the most radical and desperate experiences of man"* (Hill) because it makes us lose our ability to think for ourselves, which is why she posited that it was the "common ground of terror,"[4] capable of leading to totalitarianism.

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[1] The term "loneliness epidemic" was first used in Vivek Murthy's, the U.S Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community published in 2023 by the US Department of Health and Services

[2] Depersonalisation here is understood as the disconnection from one's own self, their own subjectivity

[3] Refers to the situation that arises when people report feelings of isolation, while social media and the Internet bring us closer than ever by promising constant connectivity. Even after perpetual access, there's a widespread sense of disconnection. See Sherry Turkle's book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*

[4] See Hannah Arendt's book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism (1958),* especially Chapter 13 on '*Ideology and Terror', especially pp 474-479.*

Whereas solitude has a positive connotation, as it creates space for "the thinking activity", allowing for critical and creative thinking and it requires the ability to find pleasure in one's own company.

In solitude, one is not cut off from the world but rather turned inward in a meaningful and potentially generative way. Loneliness, by contrast, is the experience of being abandoned not only by others but by the possibility of dialogue itself. The lonely person lacks both the external world of others and the internal companion that makes thought possible (Soyarslan).

Loneliness, I argue, then is not just a lack of interaction but a collapse of recognition, a structural dispossession of one's place in the world. This collapse is not simply an individual psychological trouble; it is a larger structural phenomenon, one increasingly manufactured and sharpened by digital platforms that promise constant visibility and connection. Social media platforms offer the illusion of intimacy while destroying the possibility for genuine connection. In place of mutuality, we are met with curated performances and content filtered through gate-kept algorithms.

And so, I contend that the present loneliness epidemic is not in spite of hyperconnectivity, but to some extent is a consequence of it—specifically, because of the way social media platforms restructure recognition into visibility, collapsing the possibility of mutual recognition in the Hegelian sense. In a world where selfhood must be made legible in order to be valued and where all expression runs the risk of commodification, loneliness can be seen not as an absence of others, but the presence of exposure without the satisfaction of being understood.

To explore this further, I use stand-up comedian and filmmaker Bo Burnham's 2021 Netflix special, *Inside* as my primary object of analysis. Critically acclaimed, this eighty-seven minute long special was written, filmed, and edited entirely by Burnham while

in isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shot during lockdown, it still holds relevance, because he performs for an audience that is physically absent,[5] and in doing so, he assumes a dual role: that of actor and spectator. Through *Inside*, he performs the conditions of production, implicating both the creator and the viewer for their complicity in upholding a system that demands exposure and vulnerability, while denying actual encounter and authenticity.

By performing for no one and everyone, Burnham performs and critiques the system he represents. This self-reflexivity is what makes *Inside* relevant to this philosophical investigation. As both a performance and a diagnosis, it holds the potential to act as a site of observation, revealing the gaps in our understanding through intelligent dramatisation.[6]

The structure of the paper unfolds in three parts. First, it examines how Inside stages the collapse of recognition into self-surveillance, drawing on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's master-slave dialectic and Jean-Paul Sartre's 'the look'. Second, it turns to the commodification of loneliness, arguing that affective experience itself becomes content, creating an endless cycle using Eva Illouz and Jean Baudrillard. Finally, the paper considers Édouard Glissant's ethics of opacity as a framework for resisting hypervisibility. It aims to understand how by accepting the inherent unknowability and complexity of people paired with the refusal to be fully understood, we can arrive at an ethical form of mutual recognition.

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[5] As opposed to his online audience. This distinction is important, as the paper rests on the different levels of mutual recognition in-person vs online.

[6] Refer to Bertolt Brecht's idea of *verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect) used in theatre and the arts. He believed by dramatising 'reality' and showing ironic versions of it, the audience could be prompted to think critically, instead of passively consuming what they were seeing on stage.

1.   Performing for No One: The Collapse of Mutual Recognition

The experience of loneliness is not the absence of others, but the absence of recognition, which is framed as a "vital human need" because it has both a normative and a psychological function (Taylor 26). It is rooted in the presupposition of a recogniser (subject) as well as the recognised (object).

In Hegelian terms, to be recognised is to gain self-consciousness as an autonomous agent, by interacting with an Other who is also free: subjectivity is not self-generated, but produced intersubjectively. The Self, then, according to Hegel's famous postulation of the master-slave dialectic, is forged through mutual recognition. I only become fully self-conscious when I am acknowledged by another free consciousness. It is not something I am inherently born with. Without mutual or asymmetrical recognition, the subject remains unrealised and feels alienated, trapped in a former stage, unable to dialectically overcome it. This mutual recognition and reciprocity, which Hegel treats as essential, has long served as the normative foundation of the concept of recognition (Iser).

Jean-Paul Sartre, noted existentialist philosopher, builds on Hegel's dialectic and reimagines it. He talks about the '*Le regard*' (the look), exploring the impact of the awareness of another's look on our behaviour. This is the alienating gaze that transforms a being-for-itself (subject) to a being-for-others (object) (1972). The architectural structure of social media pushes this forward.

In *Inside*, Burnham performs and critiques this dynamic incisively. He performs for an absent audience, and in doing so, he assumes the role of both the actor (recognised) and the spectator (recogniser), with no Other in the room to offer Hegelian recognition. This is particularly evident in scenes where he can be seen adjusting lights and cameras, rehearsing

lines and gestures, and checking his screen. In setting up and reshooting the same section after viewing it, he is both the seer and the seen, the subject and the object. The special was made available on Netflix after some time, but until then, he was caught in a Sartrean loop of self-objectification: constantly watching himself perform, critiquing it against the harsh standards of an invisible algorithm and hypothetical viewers. There is no real escape from this gaze, because we always exist in relation to others, and that intersubjectivity shapes our experience of ourselves. To explain this, Sartre famously used the example of a peeping Tom. He is absorbed in his voyeuristic activities, without a sense of self-consciousness, but as soon as he hears footsteps, he is caught unaware—confronted with the harsh reality of being an object in the world for another person. This realisation brings with it the feeling of shame, because suddenly, he is made aware of his place as an object in another's world. But it's not necessary for the gaze to be directed at him. It need not be real, so it's not for certain whether he was being watched in his act, but even the possibility of being watched objectifies him and is present in his reality as an eternal fear (Sartre 347). Similarly, on social media, we are constantly being looked at, and even when we are not, the gaze has been internalised—in how we critique and judge ourselves on the basis of a perceived reality that we borrow from the Internet.

This is not just an individual trouble, but a broader issue, emblematic of the self as mediated by social media platforms. The lack of a real Other, capable of offering reciprocity collapses recognition into internalised surveillance. Hegel's dialectic requires risk and the possibility of refusal, as is seen in his call for "fight to the death," where the two self-consciousnesses struggle to view the other as a threat to their own existence. Going into this struggle, there's always the possibility of their own negation, instead of that of the non-desired self. This risk, according to Hegel, is what leads to one being the master, and the other becoming the slave (gives up to preserve their animal life)—the dialectic, thus requires

two or more autonomous agents to confront each other, in order to achieve self-consciousness and agency. (Kojeve 7)

> However that may be, the human reality can be begotten and preserved only as "recognized" reality. It is only by being "recognized" by another, by many others, or—in the extreme-by all others, that a human being is really human, for himself as well as for others. And only in speaking of a "recognized" human reality can the term human be used to state a truth in the strict and full sense of the term. For only in this case can one reveal a reality in speech. That is why it is necessary to say this of Self-Consciousness, of self-conscious man: Self-Consciousness exists in and for itself in and by the fact that it exists (in and for itself) for another Self-Consciousness; i.e., it exists only as an entity that is recognized. (Kojeve 9)

Sartre is usually considered to be ambivalent on the possibility of mutual recognition, because he, unlike Hegel, is suspicious of the gaze. For him, even though important, being seen is reductive, because the Other's look reduces us to a thing, an object, a being-for-others. By turning us into an object for perception, it strips us away from our own subjectivity (and by extension, our freedom) and shifts the axis of my world. But even then, our existence is affirmed, albeit as an object—inducing feelings of shame and anxiety. This is the context from which his famous quip, *"Hell is other people"*[7] emerges. This ambivalence is visible in *Inside* as well, because Burnham wants to be seen; he wants to get out of his home. But the minute he is able to exit the door, he panics, wanting to get back inside. This exemplifies the paradox of wanting to be seen, but being unsettled by the actual act of it and the uncertainty of how we are really being perceived. He's both the subject and the object, caught in the tension of seeking recognition. He is desperate for true relationality, but is fully aware of the hollowness of the available terms of recognition. He can never truly achieve it, because he

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[7] See Jean-Paul Sartre's one act play, *Huis Clos (No Exit)*

can never really know how others are perceiving him (if at all). As a result, he is forced to live with his perception of himself as a being-for-others. He cannot be recognised, as recognition necessitates an Other who is an autonomous agent, not an elusive audience, an algorithm, or another object. Instead, it requires a subject who is capable of risking their own freedom in the act of acknowledgment. This kind of algorithmic recognition does not count because it only objectifies the self, and renders it a commodity.

That said, it is true that online recognition can be mutual—that friendships, communities, and relationships can and do form in digital spaces. The critique, however, is not of digital life per se, but rather of the overarching structure of *platform capitalism*[8] which shapes our experiences. The algorithm is made to be elusive on purpose, engineered to extract data and boost profitability, not to foster deep and meaningful relationships between users. All forms of connection are incidental; they are not what the system is geared towards.

Inside shows us that loneliness is not merely the absence of people, but a structural failure of recognition that reduces the possibility of connection. Even in isolation, Burnham is hyper-perceived (judges himself as the spectator, because he's the editor and creator as well), while being under-recognised (lack of external validation). This epitomises the collapse of mutual recognition: he is not met by another free self-consciousness who is capable of responding, reflecting, or refusing his work, and by extension, him.

This section concludes that loneliness today is not caused by the absence of people, but by the saturation of false presence. In the absence of reciprocity, the familiar structures

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[8] Refers to the the term used by Nick Srnicek to describe the activities of big digital companies such as Google, Airbnb, Amazon etc to operate as platforms. They use hardware and software as a foundation (platform) for other actors to conduct their own business. See Nick Srnicek's book, *Platform Capitalism*, 2017

we take for granted collapse—our self and its relation to others and the world begins to collapse leading to loneliness.

2. Framing and Treating Loneliness as an Aesthetic and a Commodity

In the contemporary *affective economy*[9] loneliness is no longer something that you experience; rather, it has become a structured performance. One that is increasingly curated, because for many, unless there is documentation on social media, it doesn't exist. In this section, I argue that loneliness today is fuelled by the commodification of the very feeling of being alone.

Sociologist Eva Illouz talks about how the logic of capitalism has infiltrated our personal lives, entangling affective states with capital. Emotions are no longer outside the purview of economic rationality; instead, they have come to be shaped by it. She calls this fusion of interests between the public and the private *emotional capitalism*, where affective states shape discourse in traditionally 'public' areas, and economic and bureaucratic relations determine private lives (2007). This plays out quite evidently on social media, where feelings are expressed within the webs of visibility and value, with people invariably profiteering from their pain. The more 'sincere' and 'relatable' one seems, the more their audience grows. In a world that increasingly feels only, these displays of vulnerability and sincerity gain traction. This may sound harsh—questioning the authenticity of 'content' that makes us feel seen, or is built around and out of somebody else's emotions. But it is precisely this commodification that is staged by Burnham, and he does it with profound discomfort. He shows how loneliness can inevitably become an aesthetic.

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[9] First used by Sara Ahmed to show how emotions are socially situated and gain value only by circulation. It is the system of circulation of "signifiers in relationships of difference or displacement."See Ahmed, *Affective Economies*, Social Text, 2004 or refer to her book, *The Cultural Capital of Emotions*

There's a scene in which the camera zooms in on his face, where he is looking visibly upset. He says—almost confesses to the camera, "I am not well." In the background the sound of applause and cheer continues to grow. With the camera still on his face, the shot zooms into another camera behind him. We hear him thank his audience, possibly after his set. He says, *"You guys have been incredible, I could not have done it without you guys. I couldn't…last year has been…there have been times when…"* He does not complete the sentence; he does not need to. But as soon as he says this, the audience bursts into laughter. The scene directly segues into another song, *All Eyes On Me*, sung directly to the audience.

> All eyes on me, all eyes on me/ Are you feeling nervous ?/ Are you having fun?/ It's almost over/ It's just begun/ Don't overthink this/ Look in my eye/ Don't be scared, don't be shy/ Come on in, the water's fine/ We're goin' to go where everybody knows, everybody knows everybody

Somewhere towards the end of the song, he gets visibly frustrated and walks towards the camera, dramatically taking it off its stand (the audience) and moving it (us) around while he sings, asking, even demanding people to put their hands up to have a more immersive experience. Perhaps it's because he desperately wants people to see him, to perform with him. Maybe that is why he also repeats, *"all eyes on me, all eyes on me"* throughout the song.

This song perfectly captures the double bind that we find ourselves in on social media: to express loneliness is to perform it, and to perform it is to run the risk of turning our own pain into content. But without this, a sense of validation, or even documentation seems to elude us. It is important for us to have spaces to express emotions, so that they don't fester, but these spaces have now become a spectacle. And among the many possible interpretations of each of Burnham's performances, this appears to be a critique of how we find laughter in another's pain. During the song, there are instances of an imaginary audience cheering,

laughing, and clapping. Burnham adds these in post-production. So even if someone were to be honest about their feelings, chances are, we would not understand it, or pick up on the cues—because as Illouz argues, even the language of therapy and the discourse around mental health is now being absorbed into the performance economy. This too, she argues, is born out of a desire for recognition; the need to recognise others, and be recognised in return. If we wish to be recognised, in psychological terms, that would require an understanding of our personality and identity, which are shaped by these experiences, which is why according to her, it has become easier to create micro-industries around self-help books and other such endeavours at the intersection between the public and the private (2007).

Burnham's awareness of this commodification is not enough to save him from it, because it becomes part of the work. In a promotional interview for his film, *Eighth Grade,* he talks about his own experiences of having panic attacks on stage, and how thirteen-year-olds would come up to him after the show to say that's what they experience too. This, in turn, he said, made him feel understood. There is nothing particularly amusing about it, apart from maybe his way of delivery (he is, after all, a great comedian), but the audience breaks out in laughter multiple times (The Daily Show). So this commodification is something he has experienced firsthand. He starts the special by saying*, "Robert's been a little depressed…I'm sorry I was gone. But look, I made you some content."* It may seem ironic for him to critique the commodification of affect through *Inside,* a successful Netflix special, but that is precisely the point he is making. He repeatedly asks the audience if they are with him, if they are enjoying what he's doing—revealing both a desire to be understood and a critique of how the audience's perception is prioritised over his emotions. None of this is accidental, it is carefully thought-out, edited, and then presented. The emotions are not fake, but they are practiced and formatted. This implicates us, the viewers. We are not witnessing loneliness, we consume its performance.

When loneliness acquires an aesthetic dimension, the possibility of shared vulnerability is replaced by passive spectatorship. We do not join Burnham in his struggle; we watch him live through it. This mirrors the broader reality of our digital selves, where others' emotions are consumed in the form of stories, statuses, and posts. It is not as if commodified affect cannot lead to meaningful connection. Through his work, the audience may uncover something about themselves or feel understood. But I argue that the structure of commodification itself rearranges relationality. Expressions of loneliness are evaluated, much like everything else on the Internet, not only with their truth value or urgency, but their relatability and shareability within a larger ecosystem. Burnham is aware of this, and even in critiquing the difficulty of being able to feel without performing, he performs. We see his pain through the lens of irony, because even sincerity feels unreal now.

The subsequent collapse of meaning was theorised by Jean Baudrillard much earlier, *"We live in a world with more and more information, and less and less meaning.* (79)" This overwhelming saturation of signs, where the circulation of affect is almost instantaneous, makes it difficult for meaning to stabilise. The constant inundation of 'content' makes us lose our ability to distinguish between the real and the hyperreal. *"Information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social. (80)"* This is exactly what Burnham shows in the song, *White Woman's Instagram,* a parody full of clichés–latte foam art, coffee table books, pastels and so on. Until a verse expresses grief and loss, but even this is performed.

Her favorite photo of her mom/ The caption says: "I can't believe it's been a decade since you've been gone. Mama, I miss you, I miss sitting with you in the front yard. Still figuring out how to keep living without you. It's got a little better, but it's still hard…Your little girl didn't do too bad Mama, I love you, give a hug and kiss to Dad"

Apart from the verse mentioned above, the song remains upbeat and maintains the same tempo. The bridge is just a blip in the rest of the song, similar to an occasional display of vulnerability in a feed of curated sameness. Even stylistically, Burnham uses the vertical aspect ratio of an Instagram post, switching out of it for a few seconds at the beginning of the bridge, before quickly returning. The genuineness is palpable for a second, but then is lost in compulsion to curate. This is what Baudrillard talks about, even when something is real, it is made indistinguishable from the rest, because of the structure within which it is made available. [10]

It is not as if we suddenly lack sincerity or emotion, but rather the very conditions that make them meaningful. The result is that all expressions, including those of loneliness, start feeling rehearsed, even when they are genuine. We pick up on clichés and templates, before we recognise the emotion, or the person. This erodes the ground for genuine mutuality. There is no free subject to be recognised, only an interpretation of another's creative mind.

This is relevant because subjectivity no longer depends on mutuality. It requires an external assertion. We need to consciously enact emotion for others to see. This is vastly different from existing and being perceived by another, because it involves a conscious (internalised) decision to perform what we feel, so that others can see and evaluate. In doing so, we lose our freedom and sense of agency, which is at the core of mutual recognition. Solitude is hard to experience, because the internalisation is so immense, that it does not allow us to enjoy our own pleasurable company. There is a certain kind of *crisis ordinariness*[11] associated with the act of loneliness—it is treated as a logical successor to

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[10] See Baudrillard's chapter on *The Implosion of Meaning in the Media* in *Simulation and Simulacra* where he presents three hypotheses for meaningless information.

[11] Refers to the phrase coined by Lauren Berlant, in her book, *Cruel Optimism* to describe how people adapt to living through ongoing, unresolved crises as part of everyday life. Instead of being experienced as an exception, crises become normalised and are treated as ordinary. Thus, there is usually no resolution. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011, p. 10

social media, with the lack of interpersonal relationships being cited as the reason. This normalisation is what *Inside* critiques. Burnham being unable to escape the camera, his desire as a creator to create and showcase his emotions and mirror the world he inhabits, and his awareness of how these feelings will eventually be commodified is a symptom of this *crisis ordinariness*. As soon as *All Eyes On Me* ends, the screen goes dark. We see Burnham wrapped in a blanket, a distant gaze in his eyes, and then he just goes back to 'normal': watching himself perform, eating breakfast, and so on. There is barely any gap, just a shift in focus, from a breakdown to a song to normal everyday life. In a 2018 interview, Burnham talked about how everything nowadays is a performance. He said, *"The truth of the current moment is how you choose to perform honesty.* (theoffcamerashow)" This performance of honesty on social media and its subsequent normalisation, to the point where it is almost expected, is what has led to increased loneliness. This is *crisis ordinariness* playing out in real time.

3. The Way Forward: The Right to Remain Unseen

Throughout this paper, I have argued that loneliness today is structured by the collapse of mutual recognition into performative visibility, which makes it hard to establish any kind of authentic relationship. But problematising the world we live in is only one part—albeit an important one. The question still remains: what kind of relationality might still be possible? Is it even possible to relate to others in a way that neither demands performance nor turns the self into content, an object to be consumed?

This is where I turn to philosopher Édouard Glissant's concept of *le droit à l'opacité* [12](the right to opacity). He famously said, *"we clamor for the right to opacity for everyone"* (194), which essentially meant a refusal to be reduced or fully understood. For him, our

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[12] See Glissant's book, *Poetics of Relation, 1990,* especially sections titled, *Transparency and Opacity* and *For Opacity*

obsession with 'knowing' is neither neutral nor natural; it is a form of domination—a way to exercise control, playing on the human desire to be understood and recognised. Therefore, the right of individuals and cultures to remain partially unknowable, to resist full translation, and to exist in relation without being reduced is radical.

Even though he writes in the context of colonialism,[13]   where different modes of understanding were not allowed to exist, his framing of opacity (a refusal of translation and transparency) as a right challenges our present digital compulsion toward hypervisibility and overexposure.

In one scene, Burnham reacts to himself reacting to his song, *Unpaid Intern* three times over creating a looped simulation. This perfectly represents the Baudrillardian logic of hyperreality, where there is no significant distinction between the original and its copies. While reacting he says, *"It's an instinct I have, where I need everything that I write to have some deeper meaning or something. But it's a stupid song, and it doesn't really mean anything. It's pretty unlikeable that I feel this need, this desperate need to be seen as intelligent."* This shows everything we have been talking about: how our need to be seen in specific desirable ways has overtaken any sense of originality and sincerity; he preempts criticism by being critical of himself, before anybody else, performing the anxieties [14]around being seen in a world where perception means everything. He says something interesting,

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[13] Glissant's theory of opacity arises in his postcolonial critique of Western epistemologies that demanded the legibility of the Other as a precondition for relation. It was against epistemic control. While this paper applies the concept to digital and emotional life, the theoretical move should not erase its political origin. My intention is to draw structural analogies between colonial and algorithmic demands for legibility.

[14] This is not an oversimplification of mental health disorders. Forms of anxiety and depression are real and change our perception of the world. Burnham's own struggles with anxiety have shaped this special and are referenced multiple times throughout the special. But self-criticism here is understood as being rooted in fear of being understood and disliked. Social media has a disproportionate impact on our self-worth and self-concept, because that is where most people derive their sense of validation from.

"self-awareness does not absolve anyone of anything." He continues to self-criticise and we see him get uncomfortable. He pauses it. In that moment, we witness the refusal Glissant speaks of, a desire to step out of the cycle of performance, to resist translation.

Burnham longs for opacity, but it eludes him. He cannot exit the field of recognition long enough to cultivate a self that is not for others. The camera picks up on everything, and when it does not, his internalised gaze ensures he is always performing. The subjective interior becomes hard to access through layers and layers of inevitable conditioning. In demanding legibility, social media alters identity as something that must be publicly interpreted and fully understood.

And this recognition, as the paper has shown, is false recognition—it is unlike the reciprocity Hegel theorised, but instead is a platform-mediated gaze that alienates more than it affirms. Glissant helps understand why: because the terms of being seen are already compromised by the very structures that demand it.

Instead of facing loneliness with more exposure, based on Glissant's theory of opacity, I propose that today, this refusal involves resisting the temptation to know, consume, and commodify the Other in search for 'genuine' connection. This need not take the form of a retreat into isolation. Instead, it involves structurally reimagining how we view relations—seeing others as existing beyond our expectations of them. So even though another's gaze may still turn us into an object, and change our perception of ourselves, it need not result in our commodification. Opacity, then, becomes a tool for reclaiming agency. This sentiment in some parts also finds an echo in Sartre's work. Even though the look commodifies and alienates us, *"By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other.* (1972)″ It's at this moment that we have the option to reclaim our agency. We are met

with two choices: resist objectification (authentic), or internalise their demands (bad faith). In choosing to recognise the look and not letting it define us, we are capable of an authentic refusal. *"Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world, he is responsible for everything he does* (1946).*"* This freedom is unsettling and terrifying, but it is also what enables refusal. Even within the coercive structures of *surveillance capitalism*[15] and the *transparency society*,[16] we are not yet fully determined. We can consciously resist internalisation, withhold ourselves from full visibility, and reclaim our ambiguity and subjectivity. Simone de Beauvoir elaborates on this by making the freedom of others a prerequisite for the maintenance of our own. When we allow ourselves to feel like free-thinking agents, it is important to extend that right to others as well–-seeing the duality of human nature (both subject and object) in them as well. Our freedom does not negate another's ability to achieve the same (Moore).

The idea here is to understand the inescapability of these dynamics and strive towards understanding possible ways to hold onto ourselves within them. In addition to identifying social media as a leading factor for the loneliness epidemic, we must also ask why—in order to think of possible alternatives, or ways to curb the growing sense of fatalism and resignation. My aim is not to offer the creation of a utopian community, or the refusal to use social media as a fix for an issue that is much more complex and structural than we realise. But it's helpful to offer a counter-imagination to the isolating logic that *Inside* portrays and critiques. If the performance of self under platform capitalism leads to recognition without

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[15] Refers to a political and economic system where big corporations profit by collecting, storing, and monetising people's data, by monitoring their behaviour across digital and physical spaces. See Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power,* PublicAffairs, 2019

[16] Refers to an age where transparency was considered to be democratic and necessary, but has instead become a means of exercising control. See Han, *The Transparency Society*, StanfordBriefs, 2015

relation (connection), then perhaps conscious efforts to nurture opacity, build patience for ambiguity, and embrace silence might help us see beyond what the algorithm feeds us.

In this, I circle back to Arendt, whose understanding of loneliness and solitude has greatly informed my paper. Solitude is not the same as loneliness. It allows the space of inwardness that makes thinking happen, making genuine dialogue possible. And this inwardness begins, perhaps, in the refusal to be fully seen.

Conclusion

Through this paper, we have seen that the epidemic of loneliness is much more than just a medical problem. While existing philosophical studies implicate social media, I have argued that the loneliness we now feel is due to a collapse of mutual recognition, where recognition is now unidirectional perception. This illustrates why in the digital age, we increasingly seek in-person activities in order to increase our chances at achieving this reciprocity—enabling us to view our own subjectivity. This subjectivity is not entirely absent on social media, but is flattened, diluted because of the commodification of affect and by systems which blur the line between the real and the simulated. I have shown how no amount of connection online can ever truly amount to mutual recognition, because they exist within a broader controlling system: of capitalism, where the priority is not human interaction, but the production of profit. On social media, the conditions required for autonomous and reflective intersubjectivity are constrained by algorithms, which, when viewed in tandem with Sartre's understanding of subjectivity builds fertile ground for acts in *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) (1972), in order to feel secure and less vulnerable, such as building parasocial relationships online—in an attempt to circumvent the objectification of the look.

After the collapse of mutuality, when even recognition starts to feel like a form of self-surveillance, and the desire to be known inevitably fuses with the need to be legible, we stand to lose more than privacy. We lose the grounds of relational subjectivity itself, forgetting the realness of who we are outside of social media, and the metrics of likes, shares, and comments.

It does not do to simply refuse screens, reject social media platforms, and maintain an arm's length from anything that contributes to a hyperreal digital life, because the effect, like I argued earlier, is totalising and much more pervasive than we usually think. We have internalised the demands of the algorithm to such an extent that they appear as self-criticism. This is bleak. But Glissant shows that the space to freely exist lies in finding ways to embrace our humanness within these structures—by reclaiming the right to ambiguity, consciously creating spaces for slowness, purposive action, and by recognising the value in not always being seen.

Burnham's work asks: what happens to selfhood when we no longer speak to be understood, but to be seen? And what happens when being seen is indistinguishable from being watched, from being consumed?

Inside does not resolve these questions, but it insists on them, making it impossible for us to look away. He presents a self who cannot stop performing, editing himself, and seeking validation, not out of narcissism, but rather as an existential necessity. This becomes even more powerful, because throughout the special he references his earlier work and initial popularity on YouTube. Reminding us that he, too, is not beyond mediation.

But in doing so, he does not position himself as an outsider critiquing the system from a distance. Instead, while implicating us, he also implicates himself—mirroring the logic of digital media. He nudges us to understand our place in it, to really reckon with how we help

hold it up. In naming and showcasing the reality of our lives through his own, he does the important job of starting a conversation and of creating a space for reflection.

If Burnham's special and its critical reception teach us anything, it is that we are not alone in our loneliness.

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The Author Is Dead. Long Live the Data: The Digital Afterlife and the Ethics of Remembering

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Abstract

In our time, the dead live on in pixels and data, complicating the boundaries between life and death. One scrolls through a Facebook page and finds a birthday greeting to someone who has long since passed; the tweet stream contains a final announcement that "she posted yesterday." These traces – photographs, status updates, emails, blog posts – are not only reminders of individual lives, but also part of a new ontology of death, in which absence itself returns as a haunting presence. As Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology reminds us, the past always lingers in the present as a spectral echo.

Digital technologies intensify this haunting: the dead can seem not gone but ever-present in online spaces. Yet this persistence is fraught with politics and power. Who controls which voices of the departed are heard or forgotten? How do market logics commodify grief? What ethical and philosophical questions arise when machines "speak" for the dead? Building on Derrida's hauntology, Foucault's analysis of power and memory, Barthes's ideas about authorship, and Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, this paper explores the digital afterlife. Throughout, we argue that the digital afterlife is haunted not only by personal loss but by deeper issues of power, memory, and profit, demanding new ethical and philosophical scrutiny.

Keywords: *Surveillance capitalism, Digital mourning, Digital afterlife. Hauntology, Ethics of AI, Memory and Power, Commodified grief, Philosophy of death.*

Introduction

The Internet and AI have opened new avenues for mourning and memorialization, and unprecedented complexities. People seeking solace after loss now find it in online memorial pages and condolence posts. Beyond online memorials and condolence posts, we now see the rise of *griefbots*—interactive programs that simulate the speech and personality of the deceased using their digital footprints like social media posts, texts, photos, and emails. These "AI ghosts" or "deathbots" allow users to chat with an artificial replica of a loved one, a concept popularised by *Black Mirror*'s episode "Be Right Back," and now a reality.

As Craig Klugman notes, these bots are built using large language models trained on personal data, and some platforms even let users design their future "ghosts" before death. Globally, the technology is growing: a simple AI ghost in China may cost just a few hundred dollars, while high-end models in the U.S. can be far more expensive. These technologies promise comfort to the bereaved by preserving a "connection" to the dead. Mourner testimonials suggest a relief in hearing the voice or manner of a lost spouse, parent, or friend. Indeed, for some users, an AI relic can feel like a "grief alleviation therapy" or a companion in mourning.

 But they raise profound questions. Are these chatbots truly benevolent? Unintended harms have been hinted at. One emerging concern is that griefbots might disrupt natural grieving. In an episode of Star Trek: Discovery, a character keeps a holographic simulation of his 800-year-dead grandmother for comfort; when he tires of it, he must "retire" the ghost, effectively re-experiencing a second loss. As Klugman notes, even fiction highlights a dilemma: if we can shut off or delete a griefbot, does that count as a second death? He wonders, "Would 'retiring' an AI ghost be a sort of second death…?" (Klugman). The human

response could be complicated. A person might feel guilty about not interacting with the griefbot or, worse, feel like a murderer for deleting it.

This unsettling possibility – that ceasing the bot's use might feel like killing – underscores how blurred the lines between life and machine become. Beyond grief, there are pressing privacy and consent issues. A human being's identity is being repurposed by companies that extract and recombine their data. In Klugman's words, if a company builds your ghost from social media, "it's possible that the company would own the ghost. Survivors who use the AI would merely be leasing it". Personal data spoken to the bot can be harvested: if a mourner tells an AI parent about a lost recipe or family secret, that data might be collected by the AI firm or even sold, just as social media once sells our living data. These scenarios recall Shoshana Zuboff's warning that under surveillance capitalism, "human experience" (even bereavement) is treated as raw data for profit.

Craig Klugman warns of a dystopian twist: griefbots might one day make purchases in a dead loved one's name- a chilling evolution of targeted advertising. Psychologists also raise concerns over "complicated grief," where prolonged engagement with an AI ghost may hinder emotional healing. Some users report trauma when AI revives memories of abusive or violent individuals, even imagining bots of killers re-traumatizing victims. Yet others find solace. A grandson in Sierra Vista said talking to his AI-generated abuela "was helpful," highlighting how reactions vary. These contrasting effects underscore the need for empirical research before commercial deployment.

Griefbots embody this spectral return. But they also transform mourning into a technical, virtual process – a simulacrum of the real. Mourning becomes partly algorithmic. This shift demands that we rethink the boundary between presence and absence, between memory and data. As Natasha Fernandez writes, griefbots "blur the reality of death and the illusion of

life," introducing moral, autonomy, and exploitation dilemmas. They illustrate a key theme: in the haunting persistence of the digital, the dead are never fully gone, their presence is just filtered through code and commerce.

1.   To Be Forgotten: Memory Politics, Erasure, and Digital Power

If grief in the digital era is haunted by simulations, then collective memory, too, is transformed by unseen forces. Who "remembers" the dead online – and who is forgotten – turns on power, policy, and culture. Michel Foucault's insight on the relationship of power and memory is especially apt. He notes that an era's "archive" is not simply the pile of documents saved, but a conceptual system that governs what can be said or remembered.

In his terms, power creates silences as well as voices. We might never have paid attention to a person's life, but the data they leave (perhaps a dozen Facebook posts) can end up in billions of digital bodies. Conversely, tragedies affecting marginalized people might be barely recorded online. In effect, the *conceptual archive* of our digital culture determines… what statements will survive and disappear and who gains access to them.

This archiving "rule of the present" reflects ideological forces: wealthy, famous, or simply loud users see their memory preserved, while the quietly deceased fade from notice. Race and history illustrate this politics vividly. Tonia Sutherland's, *Resurrecting the Black Body: Race and the Digital Afterlife* explores how Black lives are differently treated in archives and media. As one reviewer notes, Sutherland documents *"the precarity of Black life in the interstices of digital permanence and the contextual erasure of the history of racial violence"*

For instance, when the young Black woman Henrietta Lacks died in 1951, her cells became the immortal HeLa line – yet her personal story remains lesser known. Sutherland

argues that Black deaths are often "spectacularised, commodified, and memorialised" in ways driven by white supremacist capital.

Tupac Shakur's posthumous hologram performance or other "resurrections" of Black icons, she shows, echo slave auctions in making Black bodies a spectacle for profit. In short, even in death Black people have minimal agency over their digital remains; their identities can be co-opted and distorted by powerful others. This recalls Foucault's notion of subjugated knowledge – memories and histories banished by dominant discourses. If social media is an archive, then which Black narratives enter it, and how, is far from neutral. Other cultural factors shape what stays online. In different societies, the dead are honored or silenced according to tradition and power. Diaspora communities may actively honor ancestors online (creating rich memorial spaces), whereas in some Western contexts, survivors feel uneasy posting public grief, fearing it violates privacy. In any case, norms are emergent: as Scott Stroud and Anna Isbell note, society is still learning what "acceptable ways" of online mourning are.

Debates swirl over digital spaces: is it appropriate for strangers to "like" a photo of a deceased friend? Are algorithms re-showing anniversary posts to widows comforting or cruel? Such questions underscore memory's contested nature. State and corporate policies also intervene in memory. Social media platforms have built formal rules about the dead's accounts. For instance, Facebook allows profiles to be "memorialised" after a user's death. This freezing of the profile prevents future wall posts or invitations, ostensibly protecting the deceased's privacy and preserving dignity.

On a memorial page, friends can post memories and tributes, maintaining a kind of digital shrine. Yet the process of memorialization itself can be fraught: who has the authority to decide if an account is locked or deleted? If the dead person never designated a legacy contact or put instructions in their will, next of kin or even outside agents may petition

Facebook to act. In at least one case, the hacking and subsequent forced memorialization of a German teen's account drew controversy in 2015. These high-profile incidents highlight that there are no settled protocols. Some mourners find comfort in public memorial pages; others view posts on a loved one's wall by acquaintances as invasive or disrespectful.

In effect, the digital space of mourning is still being negotiated. These practices reflect Foucault's claim that archives (even digital ones) are exercises of power. Who writes history? As James Baldwin famously wrote, *"History is never simply the past; it is a way of seeing the present… it belongs to the living"*.

Today, the living curate the dead's digital presence—editing, filtering, or deleting traces left online. But platform algorithms and corporate policies often shape what persists, not users.. This is a new form of Foucauldian biopower—control extending beyond life, governing posthumous identities.

Globally, memory politics vary. The EU's "right to be forgotten" allows data erasure, but it's hard to enforce posthumously or across borders. As Sutherland notes, technology can resurrect figures like Tupac or Henrietta Lacks as virtual entities, turning death into spectacle and profit. This "digital necro-prospecting" mines the dead's archives, echoing Derrida's hauntology: the past returns to demand justice, not silence.

Digital remembrance is unequal. Celebrities' profiles may flood with memorials, while others vanish into algorithmic neglect. Digital archives reveal deeper structures– unseen forces that decide who gets remembered. Until now, we have taken digital memory for granted; increasingly, we must ask: who is remembered, who is forgotten, and who decides?

2.   Narrating the Departed: Posthumous Storytelling and Digital Ethics

Who controls the stories of the dead, and how they are told, is a fraught question in the digital age. On one level, Roland Barthes's proclamation "the Author is dead" (Barthes 1967)

takes on a literal resonance: when a person dies, that authorial voice is silenced forever, and others reinterpret their legacy. Barthes argued that assigning a text to an author "impose[d] a limit on that text… to close the writing."

In other words, as soon as someone speaks, they vanish behind the layers of cultural meaning. By analogy, once a person is gone, their life-narrative becomes open to endless rewriting by whoever survives. The deceased cannot clarify their intent or correct the record. Barthes himself would probably say the dead's story was never just their own. He described the text (or any cultural artifact) as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."

Likewise, a person's life and legacy exist in a web of memories, news reports, rumors, and now tweets. Posthumously, the "author" of their story becomes, as Barthes put it, "a rhetorical function rather than a source of meaning."

To surviving family and acquaintances, it matters less what the deceased wanted (for that intention is inaccessible) than what others say, share, or do with their memory. This shift has been complicated by the explosion of user-generated and commercial content about death. One vivid example is the industry of "true crime" media. Podcasts, YouTube channels, blogs and TV shows dedicate themselves to crimes, often involving real victims and their families. Consumers gush over murder mysteries and serial killer profiles, creating a booming market. But survivors of violent crime report that this can be deeply harmful. The National Center for Victims of Crime notes that media exposure frequently re-traumatises victims' loved ones; victims are "not characters in stories who exist to boost ratings; they're people in various stages of trauma and healing."

In other words, a slain person or a murder victim's story is not public fodder – yet the logic of content creation often treats them as material for entertainment. Unlike authors who (Barthes might argue) intended their work to be interpreted freely, crime victims rarely

consented to have their life recast as a sensational narrative. Even on simpler memorial pages, questions arise. If a widow writes posts in the name of her deceased husband, who is the "author" of those posts? After death, "voice" is transferred to the living or to algorithms. Consider "Dave's Musicbot," an AI purportedly trained on a late musician's files to create new songs. If a new track emerges, who is the songwriter? Barthes might reply: the text stands without an author-god; without the one must have complete control over their story. Yet emotionally and legally, families often feel differently. There have been lawsuits over posthumous memoirs or poetry compiled by editors. The digital realm threatens to amplify these disputes. We shall ask: when an AI throws together tweets and writings of someone, and then ChatGPT crafts a "new letter" from them, is that letter "authored" by the deceased, the algorithm, or the programmer who set it up? This uncanny territory echoes Barthes's point that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" – now even more so when there is no originating voice at all. Those ethical perplexities become acute in practice.

A YouTuber dramatizes a teen's fatal car crash for views, distorting facts without the family's consent. The victim, now deceased, has no legal right to control their story—copyright lies with the living. This reveals a crisis of posthumous authorship: the dead cannot defend their narratives, and platforms enable this erasure. Facebook might resurface old posts or auto-recommend the deceased to new users, while ghost accounts tweet outdated quotes. These algorithmic "memorials" blur presence and absence—Derrida's *spectre* (something that is neither fully present nor absent, neither living nor dead, but rather exists in a state of haunting or potentiality made real.) Mourning becomes perpetual, automated, and public, often overriding the needs or wishes of the bereaved. They underscore a key point: digital memorialization often blurs the line between private loss and public spectacle. The booming "true crime" market is a stark case of how stories of the dead become content.

Ethicists warn that many true-crime producers "select" victims and frame narratives in ways that appeal to audience biases, often focusing on certain types of victims while others are overlooked. The host becomes the de facto narrator, imposing their perspective on the silence of the deceased. Barthes's idea that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" takes a new twist: here the reader (or listener/viewer) becomes both killer and heir of the author-god. In consuming "true crime," audiences are complicit in the re-death of the author's intent; they fill in the gaps. Meanwhile, survivors watch as strangers claim to "know" the victim's story. Many family members have spoken out about unwanted documentaries or podcasts about their loved ones, saying it feels like a second violation. The phrase there is no victimless crime applies: even years after, telling the story of a killing has real costs to those still living. Ethical storytelling is possible. Some creators prioritize victims over perpetrators, aligning with Barthes's idea that meaning lies with the reader, and thus, creators choose whose voice to amplify. Survivor-centered media seeks to involve victims or their proxies in shaping narratives, offering agency to the voiceless dead. Yet, such practices remain rare.

A plague of clickbait often dominates, suggesting that digital attention itself has become a scarce resource – even in death. In that sense, the dead's stories have become part of the platform economy, where not just goods but narratives are mined for profit. In sum, posthumous storytelling in the digital era is haunted by the interplay of absence and authorship. The dead can no longer author their own legacy; we must listen for their traces in the voices of others or in the machines that mimic them. Yet as Barthes predicted, the meaning of a "text" (or life-story) now lies in the network of readers and algorithms that engage with it, not in any original intent.

That realisation is both liberating and disturbing. It frees us to reinterpret, but it also means that grieving humans must navigate an ecology of significance where the line between

honoring memory and exploiting it is thin. Our challenge is to find ways to respect the humanity of the dead even as their "texts" are translated into digital form.

3.   Ghosts for Sale: Death and Profit in the Platform Era

Behind every memorial or chatbot lurk corporate interests. Digital afterlives are lived on platforms that operate under capitalism, and increasingly, surveillance capitalism, as Zuboff describes. In her now-famous thesis, Zuboff shows that tech giants "unilaterally claim human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data."

They promise services, even in mourning, but charge for the privilege, often stealthily. Griefbots, in this light, are a service marketed to a vulnerable demographic at premium prices. Alerts pitch them as "comfort" products, yet fundamentally they are data products: every conversation with a bot generates new data on your feelings, questions, even your financial means if the bot recommends purchases. In other words, the dead person's data was the initial raw material, and the living mourner's responses become fresh raw material – all feeding back into corporate profit. This dynamic isn't limited to griefbots. Memorial pages and tributes are subject to advertising algorithms. A news site about a famous death will show ads, turning death into a click-driven business. On social networks, targeted ads can appear in your feed even as you look at a loved one's memorial page. This is the grim realization of Zuboff's "one-way mirror" logic: companies harvest engagement at any cost, even at a funeral.

In one reported scenario, an AI bot for a deceased person placed an order on behalf of the mourner, charging them for a present the dead "bought." This kind of incident demonstrates the infiltration of market logic into mourning: every data point about death can be monetized or upsold. It has been recognized that the dead can become a new source of profit. A recent study of digital afterlife notes that "technological companies involved in many forms of

digital afterlife are revenue-seeking corporations with a sizable carbon footprint" – they treat the dead as living customers. As one paragraph puts it: digital remains are not valued because of affection but "turned into revenue-generating affective meeting points through policy and design changes"[1]

In other words, platforms recast *necro-waste* (to borrow a term) as a market opportunity. People continue to *live* on servers as data ghosts: algorithms keep accounts active, feed their content to others, and even create *memories of the day*. The dead, as Zuboff might say, become raw material for ongoing surveillance – from product recommendations to political profiling.

An illustrative policy example is how Facebook (Meta) handles memorialized accounts. A memorial page, by design, turns a private profile into a quasi-public data repository. Facebook allows friends to post tributes, but crucially, it does not remove the underlying personal data of the deceased. Their photos, likes, and even location tags remain in the system (unless forcibly deleted by executors). This means advertisers and data brokers potentially still have access to those data points. Essentially, a dead user's profile is archived but not silenced: it continues to contribute to the platform's "social graph," and possibly to the reservoir of behavioral surplus Zuboff describes. The user is logged out, but their data is not.

This scenario reflects the Foucauldian idea that power can secure knowledge over someone even after death: the archives live on, shaping the present. Indeed, Mark Andrejevic and others have pointed out that personal data are now seen as assets inheritable at death. When companies talk about your digital estate (emails, photos, ebooks), they often treat it like a bank account that can be inherited, but the terms of use usually grant the platform itself

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[1]Harju, Anu A. "Theorising Digital Afterlife as Techno-Affective Assemblage: On Relationality, Materiality, and the Affective Potential of Data." *Social Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 4, Apr. 2024, p. 227. doi.org/10.3390/socsci13040227.

extensive rights. As Klugman noted, a ghost built from scraped data might be owned by the AI company, with heirs only leasing access. This resembles a *sharecropping model:* the person toiled in life to create data, but the platform harvests the crop.

In this way, platform capitalism mimics colonialism: extracting value from "territory" (our lives and deaths) without fair return. Even well-meaning institutional practices can have this effect. Consider academic or memorial foundations that digitize letters or artworks of the dead. If they upload them to certain platforms, then those memories exist only within corporate ecosystems. The dead's *voice* is archived on servers that can shut down or censor at any time. This vulnerability was made clear when Twitter announced it would delete all inactive accounts after a gap – suddenly, the long-dead activists' feeds were slated to vanish (though public outcry paused that move). Under surveillance capitalism, this is just another question of data retention: to the platform, the user is "inactive" and so their data can be pruned, free of any moral or historical consideration. In Foucault's terms, the society's memory (recorded on corporate-ledgers) is being managed in a top-down way, subject to market logic.

The environmental dimension is also worth noting. Each digital afterlife has a footprint. Servers storing data consume energy. Those AI griefbots train on large-scale models, many of which have a carbon footprint akin to a transatlantic flight. When we speak of "immortality" in the cloud, we should remember it is a cost to the planet, not pure benevolence. The MDPI authors caution that tech companies promoting digital immortality are still "revenue-seeking" with carbon footprints and should raise concerns about sustainability. In effect, even memory and emotion are now ecologically entangled with capitalism. But it demands acknowledgment of the broader frame: none of these innovations exist outside the market. As Zuboff warns, these platforms turn everything about us (and after us) into prediction products. The people behind our data (alive or dead) become silent partners in ventures they

never chose. Their *ghosts* work for the platforms, providing emotional content that drives user engagement and profit.

Finally, a word about resistance. Foucault's genealogy reminds us that any dominant system carries within it the traces of subversion. Digital afterlives can also enable counter-memories. Activists have used social media archives to keep alive histories that governments try to erase (for example, documenting victims of political violence in places with censorship). Families have created online petitions and memorial hashtags to demand justice. In these cases, the stubborn persistence of digital traces – even as *ghosts*– becomes a resource for accountability. So while platform capitalism tends to commodify death, the same technologies can also democratize memory, giving voice to the historically voiceless. The *haunting* of the digital is not a one-way street; those specters can also demand change.

Conclusion

The digital afterlife is a paradoxical realm. On the one hand, it offers the comforting illusion of continuity – posts, photos, and even AI friends that suggest the departed have not completely vanished. On the other hand, it raises unsettling questions about reality, agency, and exploitation. The dead, in one sense, haunt the Internet: they are present in countless data points that refuse to vanish. As Derrida's hauntology explains, the absence of those specters shapes the presence of the living.

But the digital world is not a neutral canvas for ghosts; it is a terrain marked by power, profit, and narrative struggle. We have seen that grief in the age of algorithms becomes entwined with simulation, where bots can speak for the dead, and sometimes a mourner's last conversation can be with software. This blurs the line between *authentic memory* and *manufactured comfort.* We have seen that memory politics plays out on social media: whose lives are immortalized, whose are edited out, and who decides. In recounting or

commercializing posthumous stories, we grapple with the "death of the author" writ large – a death we cannot interpret for ourselves but by which society must constantly wrestle.

Finally, under platform capitalism, the dead become part of the data economy: their very traces are mined as *free raw material* for prediction and profit. Philosophically, these phenomena compel us to revisit old questions in new clothes. Derrida's specters, Foucault's archives, Barthes's authors, and Zuboff's profiteers all find roles in the *digital necropolis*.

We might say the Internet has become a vast (and poorly regulated) cemetery, where data of the dead are kept alive as long as they serve living interests. This demands ethical frameworks: policymakers and platform designers must consider the rights of the dead (and their families), and the responsibilities of the living.

Do we owe the departed dignity in death as in life? Should some data be sacrosanct? Must grief remain immune from commodification? The answers are emerging in lawsuits, tech policy debates, and advocacy movements, but the moral urgency is clear. Ultimately, the *haunting persistence of the digital* is a mirror: it reflects our deepest hopes and fears about mortality. To memorialize in pixels is also to be haunted by technology's ghosts. In the flicker of a screen lies the question of what it means to be human, when memory and identity can survive only as code.

If the author is dead, then the author's posthumous reflection, the digital memorial, invites us to step in as the new authors of their memory, carrying both the privilege of interpretation and the burden of care. In doing so, we must remember that behind every screen name is a once-living person. Treating their data with thoughtfulness becomes not only an ethical imperative but a way of honoring the basic humanity that endures beyond life, even in the digital beyond.

"What is remembered, lives." - Toni Morrisson

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Reclaiming the Discourse of the Hysteric: Colonial Semiotics and the Politics of Space in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Introduction

As the waves crest and trough; the spectre of a newly christened Bertha Mason on a ship bound to England occupies the gaps and the pauses of the sentence that so define the necessity of a woman's word. *".... such a monster in the vessel"*; Rhys testifies to the dubiousness of this apparent monstrosity as a social construction — the abandoned child of a 'rational' masculine logic, one that negates the complexity of the woman as a receptacle of subjection. In a modernist subversion of realism, Jean Rhys through Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* creates scope for a new articulation of the feminine experience. Fascinated as we were by Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* — the madwoman in the attic, we were compelled to study the ramifications of articulating a body neglected. The 'stream of consciousness' which forms the narrative, resembles the musings of a mental diary that lays bare the 'truth' of Antoinette Cosway's soul; the truth that emanates from her body that is so violently subdued. Rhys works through the gaps and silences of Bertha's narrative in *Jane Eyre* and breathes new life into her text with all ends tied in an outspoken articulation of Bertha's 'truth. The ceremonious ritual of Jane Eyre's evolving Victorian femininity clashes with Antoinette's submission to the body, a clash of body and spirit. If a new feminine morality, the product of a Wollstonecraftian feminist 'enlightenment,' ensures survival, then it is a hollow victory over the 'body'. In a bid to avoid a gender-essentialist discussion that pits Jane Eyre with

Antoinette Cosway, this paper will focus on the construction of language in Rhys' scathing indictment of phallogocentrism and by extension, of the colonial project, which moves past the coloniser/colonised dichotomy. Rhys charts out from its infantile stages the symbiotic metamorphosis of a postlapsarian, postcolonial world and Bertha Mason as a colonial commodity. From the abject, despondency of a fallen estate and a mother to Bertha's betrothal to an institution that does not claim her — fire is the redemptive motif of a cleansing in a world that is too spotted with the sins of the past.

If Antoinette, a paradox incarnate, rebellious icon who distrusts the 'fair' ideals of enlightenment, can become the subversive answer to realism, then there's a wealth of ideas that can be unearthed from the transition of Antoinette to Bertha in Rhys' novella. The eroticism of the numbness of Rhys's honeymoon landscape becomes the battleground for imperialism and its contradictions. This paper aims to gauge the centrality of Antoinette's 'hysteria', the challenge that this transgression poses to colonial semiotics, which are entrenched in our gaze. Through her body and her relationship with the spaces it inhabits, Rhys's heroine writes 'herself'; an act denied to most women in literature, which we argue makes it all the more radical.

1. The Erotic and the Religious: The Madwoman's 'Sex'

Language is sexed; it has a phallic guardian-–a man's word trumps over a woman's in Rhys's world. Antoinette's hysterical laughter, akin to Cixous's Medusa[1] can break the snare of silence. The erotic imagery of sensual death isn't an essentialist project but can be interpreted as the connection between the sexual, the mystical, and the religious. Antoinette becomes a receptacle for Rochester's anxieties and later for Jane in Brontë's narrative. The madwoman has to be a 'sex-deviant', a trickster who challenges the stability of the symbolic

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[1] Refer to Helene Cixous's essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

projection of what a marriage's consummation should reflect. The isolation of Antoinette's virginal construction of 'England' to the erotic paradise of her island, *"this is precisely how your island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream."* contrasts the 'cleanness' of morality to the later 'discourse of the hysteric':

> 'If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn't have to kill me. Say die, and I will die…'

> 'Die then! Die! I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight. In the long afternoons when the house was empty. Only the sun was there to keep us company. We shut him out.'

This concoction of death and eroticism is very similar to Georges Bataille's idea when referencing the 'Ecstasy of Saint Hilda', and we contend that this is also an intertextual reference to John Donne's poem "The Canonisation". The motif of fire, regeneration through desire and death is central in the narrative—the fire set by Bertha at the end of the narrative cleanses the Victorian house and paves the way for Jane and Rochester's union. *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins with a suicide and ends with an apparent suicide; madness, death, and sadness of the abandoned, from Mr. Lutrell to Antoinette and her mother—identities dissolved by what the colonial masters deem right and wrong. Antoinette's lingering sadness and her secret grief expressed in involuntary expressions lays herself bare. She signifies what she thinks with her body in all parts; as Antoinette and even as Bertha Mason, she becomes a sexual curiosity, an aberration of the female sex.

> 'I am not used to happiness,' she said. 'It makes me afraid'

> 'Never be afraid, or if you are, tell no one.'

The dualism of binary thought is reflected as a gendered structure in this extract. The fragmentation and the loss of control are reflected in Antoinette's protestation of how fleeting

everything she grasps is: her family, home, and body. The rigidity of Rochester's colonial subjectivity refuses to submit to the union. Interestingly, for a moment in the narrative, a perfect conciliation between Antoinette and Rochester blooms in their post-emancipation island, devoid of colonial intervention, but abound with its past ghosts— "She said, 'Here I can do as I like,' not I, and then I said it too. It seemed right in that lonely space."

Showalter proposes, and we infer that the pathologization of femininity made the female body a public spectacle to be locked up until nursed back to domesticity. Antoinette's refusal to conform to Bertha forms the subversive current. Akin to the Foucauldian condemned body that serves as a fear-reciting spectre, Antoinette refuses this symbolism; the trap of it. Rhys frees Antoinette from Bertha by imbuing her with a life denied through a painful progression to death's freedom as she burns down the manor. Her 'madness' is erotic desire, one that frightens the imperial public; lore passed down to create resistance against rebellion expressed by the abject body. Everything is fleeting for Antoinette; the public space isn't hers and her 'private' is surveilled–her body becomes the last encampment against a numb existence, discernible in her 'hysterical' outbursts through *Jane Eyre*. Perhaps, the frenzied rage against the wedding dress that ends up in tatters at Bertha's hands is the perfect symbol of indicting a phallic narrative of exotic romance.

2. Mimesis, Semiotics and Spectres of the Colonial

The speaking subject makes and unmakes himself, Julia Kristeva contends. In a woman's case, this is problematized by the symbolic prohibition of women's speech. However, most women's relationship with semiotics is one characterised by mimicry; all of us speak in some instance or the other, similar to Antoinette, successfully or unsuccessfully. By appropriating phallic language, they can come up with their versions. Everyone's a 'victim' in the narrative, from the slaves to Antoinette and Rochester. The colonial law of the father entraps everyone

in its snare; Rochester by his father's greed and Antoinette because of the colonial abstraction of a father who takes away her house, mother and brother and then her body to England.

Phallocentric law robs her — in excerpts from an exchange between the island's Christophine and Antoinette after Rochester wishes to repossess his colonial power-masquerade:

'A man doesn't treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out'...

'I have no money of my own at all, everything that I had belongs to him' —

With consideration to Christophine's disbelief over such an unjust system over this 'law',

Antoinette adds, "That is English law". Antoinette is a signifier for the colonised spirit–colonial semiotics reinforce the law of the father, which both the slaves and Antoinette contend with and then suffer because of. Bertha's fragmentation stems from being a woman on the market; a commodity to be traded for cultural meditation between an island still tethered to its colonial master.

Using Luce Irigaray's rhetoric on mimesis[2], we propose that through the mimicry of the symbolic, women and other marginalised identities can come up with an articulation that is not phallic. Through both Antoinette's and Bertha's mimicry, the realisation of the futility of the act dawns on her. Antoinette can never be an 'English girl' and Bertha cannot be a wife. Rhys's emphasis on the loss of meaning in a society that had been plagued by slavery is discernible in both Antoinette and the slaves. At the end of part two, after her submission to Rochester's word, she implores him to accept the servant Baptiste as his quasi-colonial servant/slave to be taken to England—the rational man refuses to take care of the destruction his linear logic has unleashed on the complexities of post-colonial life. Antoinette, through

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[2] The deliberate assumption of the feminine role as mimicked from the symbolic order is subversive. Through mimicry a new articulation is possible.

mimicry, becomes Bertha and realises the futility of it all, the pretence *"For nothing. Nothing…"* — this ellipsis, a tradition in modernist literature, has the potential to reveal multitudes. Bertha's mimicry ceases when she comes up with her absolution, in her terms — the most natural, emanating thought from her body; burn the spectre of oppression in a similar vein to her thoughts of death.

3. Restructuring the Symbolic: Discourse of the Hysteric and the Politics of Space

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the eruption of hysteria within Antoinette's subjectivity marks not a deviation from reason. but a confrontation with the structures that render her unknowable within dominant regimes of intelligibility. Jacques Lacan's discourse of the hysteric positions the speaking subject in opposition to the master signifier, demanding meaning from a structure that can never fully answer. Antoinette's refusal to be intelligible within either the colonial order or the heterosexual matrix positions her as the hysteric par excellence—one whose fractured speech, disobedient body, and non-linear memory unsettle the phallic logics that seek to contain her.

Rather than interpreting hysteria as a clinical disorder, Rhys presents it as epistemological resistance—a refusal to stabilise within the roles scripted by colonial modernity. The house, the plantation, the convent, and finally the attic—each spatial register in Antoinette's life—becomes a disciplinary tool aimed at reconstituting her as knowable and docile. But each of these spaces fail, precisely because Antoinette's subjectivity exceeds spatial and linguistic boundaries. She cannot become the colonial wife, nor the grateful creole, nor the compliant convert. Her displacement between these roles creates an opacity that hysteria articulates—not through coherence, but through intensity.

Antoinette's spatial experience is central to this breakdown. The environments she inhabits do not merely reflect her emotional state—they participate in producing it. The slippage between home and prison, sanctuary and site of violence, mirrors the instability of her identity. In Lacanian terms, the symbolic order fails to map coherently onto the realm of Antoinette's body and memory. This disjuncture fuels the hysteric's persistent question: "What am I to the Other?"—a question Antoinette asks not of Rochester alone, but of the entire imperial symbolic that insists on naming her Bertha. Unlike the Victorian domestic ideal, which links womanhood with containment, Rhys's spatial narrative renders the female subject uncontainable. The attic[3], the final architectural metaphor, fails to silence Antoinette's jouissance—her unspeakable, excessive experience that bursts through the cracks of language. The hysteric, rather than disappearing into madness, becomes a haunting remainder within the symbolic—one that threatens to collapse the entire edifice through its unresolved presence. Importantly, Rhys does not incorporate Antoinette into a redemptive narrative. There is no catharsis, no assimilation into rationality. Instead, the novella ends in an anticipatory gesture—flames not only as destruction but as semiotic rupture. Fire here is not a metaphor for purification but for illegibility; it leaves nothing to interpret, only traces. If the discourse of the master depends on fixed meanings, the hysteric's revolt reduces it to ashes.

In this way, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not simply give voice to the silenced "madwoman in the attic"—it undoes the very conditions under which that silence was constructed. The politics of space in the novel are not just colonial but discursive: who can speak, from where, and in what language? Antoinette's hysteria, far from being a failure of reason, becomes the only form of speech available to a subject made unintelligible by race, gender, and empire. In burning the space that imprisons her, she articulates what the symbolic refuses to acknowledge—that the subject of hysteria is not broken, but lucid in her fragmentation.

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[3] Refers to the room where Bertha was kept under constant surveillance in England, detached from the public.

4. Spectral Geography and the Haunting of Space: The triad of Gender, Class and Race

To interrogate the politics of space in the *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to trace the cartography of colonial violence, not just as a historical imposition, but as a spectral presence that warps landscape and memory alike. The spaces Antoinette moves through—Coulibri Estate, the convent, Granbois, Thornfield's attic—are not passive settings but spectral palimpsests; they retain the residues of conquest, exploitation, and trauma. In Rhys's narrative, geography is not neutral—it is haunted. The plantation house is built upon violence, its beauty always already foreclosed by the blood in the soil. Even the convent, meant to instill civility and spiritual purity, is a disciplining architecture that inculcates silence and deferral. These are not just material locations but 'affective' zones where Antoinette's body is rendered unreadable. It is in these spaces that Rhys's critique of colonial spatiality emerges—how the empire maps its ideological certainties not just onto people but onto terrain. The very act of naming, of calling Coulibri 'home' or England 'civilised,' becomes an epistemic violence that seeks to overwrite the Creole woman's intimacy with the land. In doing so, Rhys exposes how the colonial order depends on spatial re-inscription to enforce its symbolic coherence. But Antoinette, as both insider and outsider, constantly disturbs this cartographic clarity.

If Sigmund Freud's understanding of the uncanny gestures toward the return of the repressed within the home, then Rhys's novel intensifies this return into the unhomely, a term Homi Bhabha deploys to name the space where the private and the public collapse. The plantation house becomes unhomely because it cannot secure Antoinette's subjecthood. It offers no continuity between interior space and interior life. She feels watched, displaced, and betrayed. Even Granbois—initially presented as an erotic refuge—is turned into a site of violation. Space refuses to be a sanctuary. This is not merely thematic, but structural: Rhys

dismantles the Victorian novel's association between space and moral order. In *Jane Eyre*, Thornfield's attic can be safely compartmentalised—it hides Bertha, contains madness, and preserves domestic sanctity. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that architecture unravels. The attic no longer contains, it leaks. Sound, scent, shadow; Antoinette haunts it with her sensorial presence long before she sets it aflame. The home becomes permeable, perverse. The epistemic break between the 'proper' domestic interior and the 'wild' exterior of the colony collapses as Antoinette morphs into Bertha. Perhaps these continued violations of space are Rhys's way of portraying the futility of the domestic-public division — there is always the intrusion of the unwanted and abandoned, be it a spectre or thought. As Jane is haunted by the 'spectre' of Bertha, which only divine punishment can correct, both Rhys and Bronte in their ways comment on the contamination of the domestic, the complacent Victorian-idle class which segregates the individual it uses to maintain their 'idleness'. As Jane is set away from Thornfield parties as a governess, so is Antoinette in the attic as an exotic aberration to maintain the colonial status quo.

Race, too, is spatialised in Rhys's fiction. The Black Jamaican characters are allotted space only as labouring or spectral presences—confined to the margins, their voices flickering in and out of Antoinette's consciousness. Christophine stands apart—her spatial autonomy (she owns her room, she leaves, and returns on her terms) makes her a figure of resistance. But even she exists in a state of precarious negotiation. In colonial space, one is always trespassing. Property becomes the ultimate arbiter of legitimacy: Antoinette's loss of inheritance, of Granbois, of any claim to land, mirrors her symbolic eviction from subjectivity. Without land, without legal autonomy, she is easily remapped by Rochester, by the law, by history. Spatial boundaries reinforce colonial hierarchies: Englishness is associated with order, whiteness, symmetry — seen in Rochester's discomfort with the unruly flora and curved architecture of the island. His desire to domesticate Antoinette parallels his

desire to domesticate the space she inhabits. His gaze reduces the island into a romantic backdrop or a fevered nightmare, never a political geography with its own agency. This reduction is itself a colonising gesture—the refusal to read the land on its own terms. The language of his terms refuses to concede to a middle-ground, a conciliation between the youthful spawns of the colonial project–they cannot escape its entrappings.

Conclusion

Through this paper, our aim has been to draw a skeletal sketch of the problematics of the colonial entrappings that go unnoticed in popular reception and how Rhys subverts the canon in symbolic imagination.

Each pause, each dash, each ellipsis–- in a similar vein to this paper's language, has a story to tell, a point to emphasise. For Rhys, it contains multitudes; the last encampment of a woman denied her voice, one who has to resort to her body as a vessel of expression. Phallocentric language cannot capture the profundity of the 'feminine'; not from a gender-essentialist gaze, but from the perspective of the suppressed in a world that doesn't cater to her. In a similar vein to *Jane Eyre,* where Brontë resorts to the divine; the rustling wind carries a message of reconciliation. Bertha seizes the candle in an almost-trance, a divine message that beseeches her, *"Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do".* It's almost like a powerful proclamation, exhorting women to make 'change' happen for themselves. Both Bertha and Jane listen to their bodies, their desires, and achieve 'freedom' in a way that was denied to them. They let go of the past, and that makes all the difference.

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ESSAYS

The Ethics of Exclusion:

Mob Violence, Structural Racism, and the Fragility of Justice in

To Kill a Mockingbird and *Dry September*

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Introduction

Unlike fissures of classical abstract theories, fiction is an embodiment of the sensory texture of injustice, presenting the embedded nature of ideologies in everyday routine social transactions. The non-definite moral and social contradictions of definite historical times become a potent space where fiction dabbles—through its characters, narrative choices and silences, and conflicts. It is in this context that literature emerges as a site of philosophical reckoning, a medium and a tool for dramatising how structural inequalities operate both at the level of law and sentiment.

The prevalence of mob violence in the segregated American South is the continuum of a disturbing historical reality where racial hierarchies were enforced through extrajudicial killings and systemic injustices. According to the Equal Justice Initiative's 2015 report *Lyching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, more than 4,000 racial terror lynchings occured in South between 1877 and 1950—their function being white supremacist social control. Lynching, as Iulia Andreea Milică writes, "became a widely-employed form of control of the

black population by intimidating and constantly threatening them" (Milică 104). Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and William Faulkner's *Dry September* (1931) attempt to address this socio-political phenomenon, presenting the societal mechanisms that enable mob violence and racial oppression. These two texts try to explore how collective prejudice, institutional complicity, and dehumanization perpetuate cycles of violence, laying bare the fragility of justice in the face of systemic inequality.

In my essay, I will argue that mob violence in these narratives is not a spontaneous eruption of anger but a manifestation of entrenched structural racism. I will draw on these theoretical frameworks to comment on the operations and functioning of racial violence: Critical Race Theory (heretofore referred to as CRT) to contextualize structural inequities, Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" to understand moral thoughtlessness, and Durkheim's "collective conscience" to examine social cohesion through exclusionary practices. Girard's "scapegoating theory" reveals how victims are constructed to bear communal tensions, while Foucault's "biopolitics" and Agamben's notion of "bare life" will be used to look at the reduction of racialized bodies to expendable entities. Additionally, I will use Butler's theory of "grievability" to synthesize how systemic structures determine whose lives are valued.

My essay begins by examining how structural racism informs mob functionality and dynamics in the two texts, applying CRT to reveal the broader implications. I will then move to theoretical critiques of racial violence, highlighting the roles of *thoughtlessness*, *social cohesion*, and *scapegoating*. Then, the discussion will extend to biopolitics and the exclusion of racialized bodies from legal protections. Finally, I will address societal complicity, focusing on authority figures and collective responsibility, before concluding with reflections on the relevance of these narratives in exposing systemic injustice.

I. CRT and Racial Prejudice

Critical Race Theory (Critical Race Theory) exposes racism as an entrenched feature of social and legal systems, shaping perceptions of justice. Delgado and Stefancic argue that "racism is ordinary, not aberrational—'normal science,' the usual way society does business" (20). In both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Dry September*, this structural racism manifests through the presumption of guilt placed upon Black men accused of crimes against white women. Faulkner's portrayal of Will Mayes' lynching adheres to historical patterns of racial control. Similarly, Lee's depiction of Tom Robinson's trial underlines this systemic bias: "In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a Black man's, the white man always wins" (Lee 234).

The mob scene outside Maycomb's jailhouse is an event which shows how collective action reinforces racial hierarchies. Atticus Finch's lone resistance points at the precariousness of moral integrity in a society rooted in prejudice. When confronted by the mob, Atticus attempts to humanize Tom Robinson, stating, "You can turn around and go home again, Walter. Heck Tate's around somewhere" (Lee 160).

In *Dry September*, the narrative employs the ease with which racialized violence is justified. The barber's plea for rationality—"Find out the truth first. I know Will Mayes"—is disregarded by the mob, which views Mayes's Blackness as sufficient evidence of guilt (Faulkner 171). Amende observes that the men in Hawkshaw's barbershop "have already decided that the allegations... must be true, since Will is Black" (Faulkner 12). This presumption is crucial as it shows how systemic racism silences dissenting voices and legitimizes violence.

II. Theoretical Analysis of Racial Violence

II.i. Arendt's Banality of Evil

Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil highlights how ordinary individuals become agents of systemic violence when they forgo critical thought. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the jury's conviction of Tom Robinson exemplifies this dynamic: "A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson... 'Guilty... guilty... guilty... guilty...'" (Lee 234). This mechanical adherence to societal norms demonstrates what Arendt identifies as "sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity" (Arendt 287). The jury members' failure to interrogate the veracity of Mayella Ewell's claims is their complicity in a system where prejudice supersedes justice.

In *Dry September*, Arendt's framework comes into play with the mob's decision to lynch Will Mayes, driven not by evidence but by racial bias. McLendon's rhetoric—"What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?"—illustrates how the mob conflates vengeance with justice (Faulkner, 161). Arendt's insight that "evil can spread like a fungus over the surface of the earth" (Arendt xiv) finds expression in the mob's collective actions, which institutionalize violence and dehumanization. The normalization of racial violence through uncritical conformity perpetuates cycles of oppression. As Milică notes, "The scale of lynching and the severity of the scars it has left on American society have caused both blacks and whites to struggle to explain this grisly manifestation of humankind's capacity for hate and violence" (Milică 103). This points at the confrontation that we, as readers, have to make with the ethical void at the heart of these communal and systemic injustices.

II. ii. Durkheim's Collective Conscience

Émile Durkheim's theory of collective conscience posits how shared norms and values enforce social cohesion, often at the expense of marginalized individuals. In *Dry September*, the mob's violence is the collective need to affirm communal identity. Durkheim argues that "acts of ritualized violence require group participation in order that the individuals involved may avoid feelings of guilt" (Milică 110). The mob's collective determination to lynch Will Mayes reinforces this principle, as the participants seek validation through conformity.

Hawkshaw, the barber, attempts to resist the mob's logic, his dissent is overwhelmed by the collective force of the group, whose actions illustrate Durkheim's assertion that "society, its facts and products, exists outside of, and above individuals" (Durkheim iii). The mob becomes a social organism, erasing individual agency in favor of a collective pursuit of racial dominance. Similarly, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the townspeople's adherence to unwritten codes reinforces white supremacy. Atticus Finch's assertion that "She has committed no crime; she has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society" is in lines with Durkheim's observation that "the group has a different constitution from that of the individual, and the things that affect it are of a different nature" (Durkheim xvi; Lee 216). The collective conscience prioritizes racial purity and 'social order' over justice, enabling systemic violence.

Durkheim's also helps us understand the destructive power of social cohesion when it is built on exclusion and dehumanization. As Milică observes, "The presentation of how the white community reacts to such accusations becomes a justification for deeper introspections into the Southern culture and mentality, into its prejudices and traditions" (Milică 109). The mob's actions are the violent cause of societal norms, rather than individual morality, which prescribes

and dictates behavior in racially stratified contexts.

II. iii. Girard's Scapegoating Theory

René Girard's scapegoating theory provides a framework for understanding how communities channel their collective anxieties onto marginalized individuals. Both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Dry September* depict Black men as scapegoats for societal fears and tensions. Girard writes, "The apparent cause of disorder becomes the apparent cause of order because she is a victim who rebuilds the terrified unity of a grateful community" (Girard 50). In *Dry September*, Will Mayes's lynching reflects this process, as his death symbolically restores the town's perceived social equilibrium.

Amende highlights how Girard's theory applies to Faulkner's narrative: "Keeping in mind René Girard's theory that people will often use a scapegoat to deal with their own failures, and that what (or who) they sacrifice is almost always tied to perceived violence against them" (11). McLendon's leadership in the mob demonstrates how individuals exploit this volatility to consolidate power, masking personal insecurities with collective violence.

Similarly, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tom Robinson is cast as a scapegoat for Mayella Ewell's transgressions. Atticus Finch's argument that "She must destroy the evidence of her offense" points at the community's need to purge perceived threats to its stability (Lee 216). Tom's trial and subsequent conviction act as the "communal ritual" to reassert racial hierarchies. Girard's theory is therefore useful to understand how scapegoating dehumanizes its victims, reducing them to symbols of societal disorder. As Milică observes, "The frustrations connected to their present unsatisfying conditions lead to vengeance against the marginal, the black man" (Milică 111), leaving the vulnerable Blacks community trapped in cycles of violence and

exclusion.

II. iv. Foucault's Biopolitics

Michel Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics' examines how power structures govern populations by defining the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Biopolitics, as it emerges from his analysis in *Discipline and Punish*, refers to the mechanisms through which state regulates bodies and population, not merely as visible and overt repression, but through both ritualistic and dormant processes of normalisation like surveillance and the subtle management of life and death. In both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Dry September*, the marginalization of Black characters is the exercise of biopolitical control, where societal norms and legal systems determine whose lives are protected and whose are expendable. This control operates primarily through punishing transgressions. But on a more tertiary level, it establishes what kinds of lives matter, who is visible, counted, and qualifies for legal protection, and who is rendered invisible and therefore, disposable. Foucault writes, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility... inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles" (Foucault 202). The panopticon mechanism referred to here is what imposes an internalised surveillance that individuals perform on themselves and modify their behaviour accordingly, and producing a self-disciplining subject. This internalization of power is evident in the characters' experiences of systemic racism. Black characters, though given scant access to positive social structures around them, are constantly governed and regulated by an imposed visibility. They are judged, criminalised, and excluded precisely because they are seen as the "other" to the normative male white heterosexual order.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tom Robinson's death shows how institutionalized racism

enforces biopolitical control. Despite being unarmed and fleeing in desperation, Tom is killed, his life rendered inconsequential by the state: "What was one Negro, more or less, among two hundred of 'em? He wasn't Tom to them, he was an escaping prisoner" (Milică 119). The racial hierarchies entrenched in Maycomb's legal system reinforce Foucault's assertion that biopolitical governance operates through the categorization and exclusion of undesirable groups.

In *Dry September*, the mob's violence against Will Mayes illustrates this regulatory mechanism. The act of lynching is a 'performative' assertion of white supremacy, reducing Mayes to a figure of collective control. As Milică observes, "Violence is directed against the marked individual, the one who deviates from the norm and becomes different" (Milică 111). Mayes's exclusion from the protections of the law reveals how biopolitical systems transform marginalized individuals into objects of regulation and domination.

II. v. Agamben's Bare Life

Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life explores the liminal state where individuals exist outside the protections of law, reduced to mere biological existence. In both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Dry September*, Will Mayes and Tom Robinson occupy this zone of exclusion, stripped of political and social rights. Agamben writes, "Bare life... is a threshold in which law constantly passes over into fact and fact into law" (35). Maye's lynching and Robinson's death make evident the impunity with which violence is passed as legally permissible.

In *Dry September*, Will Mayes is denied the presumption of innocence, his life rendered disposable by the mob's collective judgment. The act of lynching transforms him into a non-person, existing solely as an object of communal violence. Faulkner captures this dehumanization: "Someone produced handcuffs. They worked busily about the Negro as though

he were a post, quiet, intent, getting in one another's way" (Faulkner 175). The imagery reflects Agamben's notion of how legal and social systems create spaces where individuals exist as exceptions to the law.

Similarly, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tom Robinson is reduced to bare life within a legal system that prioritizes racial hierarchies over justice. Despite there being clear judicial evidence of his innocence, like the problematic narratorial justification of his left hand being disabled and thus rendering him physically incapable of inflicting Mayella's injuries, Tom's legal conviction is solely on the basis of his racial identity. Atticus Finch's airtight defense is disregarded by the all-white jury in favor of the unspoken social code of white supremacy. After being stripped of legal personhood, Tom's alleged attempt at escaping incarceration is met with seventeen bullet shots, a grotesque misuse of the State's hard-power. His death, framed as an inevitable consequence of his race, highlights this bias. Agamben's assertion that "the realm of bare life... gradually begins to coincide with the political realm" (Agamben 80) resonates with this narrative, indicating how racialized individuals are systematically excluded from the protections afforded to others.

The convergence of Foucault's and Agamben's theories lies in how biopolitical governance and the concept of bare life intersect to sustain systems of racial oppression. In both texts, racialized bodies are rendered expendable, their lives regulated through exclusionary practices that blur the boundaries between legality and violence.

Foucault asserts, "The major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). As a result, in this architecture of constant observation, a self-regulating society is put into action where obedience (here, racial) becomes internalised and the state emerges as the

disciplinary power that gains an omnipresent traction without physical enforcement. The Maycomb society becomes a decentered panopticon which regulates and adheres to its own racial norms, simultaneously. Here, the participation of the white citizens is a necessary condition, whether actively violent or passively compliant, 'performing' roles within a system that demands constant adherence to racial codes, and the fear of transgressing these norms ensures conformity through all means possible, even in silence. The surveillance of the Black characters is made possible not only by means of state laws but also cultural surveillance: their every gesture, utterance, and ultimately existence is subjected to a racial profiling and renders them as perpetually visible 'threats'. Fanon puts this as an affective burden of racialised visibility, "I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others…but the other, the white man, refused to recognise me…I existed in triple: I was being given not one but two, three places at the same time" (Fanon 109). The explicit experiential fragmentation alluded to by Fanon mirrors the internalisation of surveillance in Foucalt's schema, but it is marked with a race conscious intensity that identifies Black existence as hyper-visible but ontologically excluded. The phenomenon produced is that of a mutual entrapment in the gaze which further enforces a social structure in which both perpetrators and racialised victims are forced into binary roles of antagonistic interdependence, with the former disciplining themselves into racially dominant behavior, and the latter discipling themselves into subjugation and silence, while being at the surveilled margins of disciplinary institutions. Racism, therefore, while being a repressive system is also a distributed and internalised form of control, functioning precisely because it is methodologically seen, felt, and obeyed without visible coercion.

III. Dehumanization: Butler's Grievability Theory

Butler's theory of grievability looks at how societal structures determine the value of lives. Tom Robinson's and Will Mayes's deaths highlight this disparity: "If a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note" (Butler 52). This denial of grievability perpetuates systemic dehumanization, reinforcing the expendability of marginalized individuals.

IV. Societal Complicity: Authority Figures and Collective Responsibility

Figures like Sheriff Tate and Judge Taylor embody the complicity of authority in sustaining racial hierarchies. The community's acquiescence to mob violence illustrates a broader moral failure: "Violence is directed against the marked individual, the one who deviates from the norm and becomes different" (Milică 111). This collective responsibility perpetuates cycles of injustice, leaving communities trapped in "a vicious circle of violence, frustration, and shame" (114).

Conclusion

The narratives of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Dry September* demonstrate that structural racism is not merely a historical artifact but a mechanism embedded in societal and legal systems, perpetuating cycles of violence and dehumanization. These texts present the ease with which communities justify atrocities under the pretense of preserving order. As Milică observes, "Lynching was seen as a method through which the whites defended civilization, honor, and order against the danger posed by the 'uncivilized' black" (Milică 105). This process is not confined to acts of overt violence but extends to systemic exclusions that render some lives

ungrievable, as Butler notes.

Theoretical frameworks from Arendt, Durkheim, Girard, Foucault, and Agamben further contextualize these narratives within broader critiques of power, complicity, and marginalization. Arendt's notion of the "failure to think" (Arendt xiv) resonates with the jury's dehumanization of Tom Robinson, while Girard's scapegoating explains how Will Mayes becomes the focal point of collective frustration. Agamben's concept of bare life elucidates the legal invisibility imposed on these characters, reducing them to expendable entities.

But any literary critique, including mine, must move beyond to interrogate contemporary practices where racialized violence persists under new guises. As Delgado and Stefancic assert, "Our system, by reason of its structure and vocabulary, is ill equipped to redress certain types of wrong" (34). There's a need to look at how modern institutions perpetuate these undercurrents through subtler mechanisms, embedding structural racism in ostensibly neutral policies and practices. The challenge lies in confronting systemic complicity at both individual and institutional levels, ensuring that such cycles of violence and marginalization are neither normalized nor forgotten.

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AI Generated Art: An Existential Threat or Ethical Dilemma?

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Introduction

As AI *generated* art is increasingly seeing the light of the day, it is being met with different reactions. Some think it will enrich human life *aesthetically* and *creatively*, others predict *evolutionary* possibilities due to it. However, as we dive deeper we realize that at its *current developmental stage*, any *skepticism* related to it is not motivated by *anthropocentric egoism*, rather it rightfully unveils *unjustified attempts at anthropomorphism* of artificial intelligence. The primary reason for this is that AI *produced* art is *impersonal, objective and appropriated* rather than *subjective, sentimental and original*. The essay shall employ *Kant's* interpretation of the *immediacy thesis*, *Young's* theory of *genius*, *Boden's* explanation of *creativity*, *Schopenhauer's* understanding of *aesthetic pleasure* to show that AI generated art poses an ethical issue rather than an existential one.

I.

Aesthetic appeal is the first way in which art lends itself to us. The immediacy thesis explains that this *'pull'* is due to sensory perceptions and judgments effectuated by elements and

constituents of the artwork itself and that beauty cannot be rationalized but is only experienced. Its assessment is instinctive, immediate and individual. Although, it's common to appreciate and critique art by drawing on its specific characteristics, these analyses are context dependent and cannot be converted into universal criterion, which if accounted for by any other artist, would make their work better. Which is to say, any generalized conceptual or inferential constructs, if applied, do not necessarily establish aesthetic appeal. However, the focus can seem to shift from the work itself to the process of its making and the ontological composition of its maker when AI generated art comes into question. The newfound awareness might lead to a shift from sentimental reception to measured reaction by humans. Here, therefore, some optimists posit that being categorized separately and/ or labelled explicitly as AI generated reduces that art's aesthetic value and artistic character.

However, a common observation is that it is not difficult to tell AI generated art from human made one. This, essentially because it is populated with familiar and identifiable trends and tropes, structural and stylistic similarities with existing pieces and that fails to elicit the unique emotions induced by aesthetically pleasing art. Immanuel Kant echoes this empiricist approach by saying that judgments of taste are *"merely contemplative"* (Kant 95) and disinterested which reduces scope for external considerations as one would be fully immersed in the experience and not be wary of its origins or any a priori considerations.

A contrary position taken is that perceptive elements are not sufficient, it is something more abstract and elusive that makes the work aesthetically pleasing which allows for freedom of subjective interpretation and simultaneously also prejudice against/ liking for certain kinds and types of art. Basically, if one knew that the art was not made by a human, it could tamper with their experience before they got a chance to assess it independent of that information. This,

mostly because creation of art is a popularly romanticized process and spectacles of quick automation and computerized production are inadvertently seen to vulgarize the practice, thereby affecting conventional definitions of art. The following sections analyze why exactly is that the dominant perspective.

II.

So, what essentially is the origin of this artistic merit apart from aesthetic satisfaction? It has to be creativity- which allows us to see something *"new, surprising and valuable"* (Boden 1), that *'blows our mind'* and *'touches our soul'*. There have been theories tracing the genesis of creativity, even though aesthetic appeal was shown to be inexplicable.

Theists attribute this to divine providence- where one comes across a muse because they are *'chosen for it'* and *'gifted as such'*. Edward Young attributed it to innate natural capacities- *"An Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made…."* (Young 7). This, according to him, would then help one to break the mould and create something original. It is not something one could be trained for or taught- learning was corrupting according to him since it was premised on *"..imitation.."* (Young 20) and that diluted ingenuity and therefore true creativity.

However, it is pertinent to observe that creativity, just like knowledge, is more like an achievement than a matter of luck, chance or coincidence- we credit and praise the ones that bring it about. This is because, even if we were to believe that one had the talent in them, they had to realize and consciously channelize it for it to be recognized. Additionally, even if some

people are *'born with it'*, it could be a skill for others- consciously pursued and developed if not acquired over time. This wouldn't mean methodical following of rules but absorbing the spirit of curiosity. All *'inspiration that strikes'* has to be the deferred and delayed manifestation of seemingly unintentional endeavours and expeditions that we make into the world that is already there for us. These are not preempted since we are often blindsided by the multiple consequences of the activities and events that we undertake or occur in our lives. However, this aforementioned surrender to uncertainty is exactly what leads us onto new ideas.

Most importantly, its emergence has to have a deterministic metaphysical causation that supported its existence- wherein it couldn't be predicted by it previously, but eventually it came from it. It was an overcoming of sorts, a perspectival change, an interpretation and representation of it in a way that couldn't be conceived before. Margaret Boden reinforces this idea with her theory of *"conceptual spaces"* which are *"structured styles of thought"* that are *"normally picked up from one's own culture or peer group, but are occasionally borrowed from other cultures"* (Boden 4). She describes creativity of three types- *"combinatorial, exploratory and transformative"* (Boden 1). In combinatorial creativity, the whole is recognized as different from the sum of its parts and in this different things and ideas are combined using different patterns to formulate something that breaks free from the essence of its previous associations. Exploratory creativity occurs when one sees things in a new light while adhering to the rules of the conceptual space. Transformative creativity requires altering the conceptual space to introduce something completely new into the world. Ironically, artificial intelligence generated art is disregarded despite using similar mechanisms to 'create' art. The reason for this is analyzed in the following section.

III.

Machines, unlike humans, always have details, direction and the destination mapped out. Their ideas are not experimental since they are influenced and informed by the existing data points. The patterns of analysis, combination and association that it employs on elements will also likely be extracted, learnt and borrowed and therefore have precedence. So, it might work through multiple permutations and combinations to apply thought- designs (made by humans) to work out an outcome, but then that will not necessarily count as doing something imaginative and novel for its anchoring idea and principle was outsourced. Even if considered creative, since the outcome will be valuable and new, humans shall be credited for the better part of it.

Another significant issue is that AI art is produced or generated on command- where a specific prompt sets the process in motion and then the machine 'generates' or 'produces' the 'art' as per the exact desire of the 'bidder'. However, art is made when there is *'an itch'*- compelling a need felt for something that isn't expressed/ *'out there'* as yet. The seeking and/or serendipitous realization of such longing is what impassions the artist. The delivery- canvassing, choreographing and composition is the second step. In this stage, machines go ahead with algorithmic precision, without *'sitting with'* the piece, and *'working on it'*- assimilating and adapting as they *'build on'* the idea progressively. This lack of volition and leeway for change takes away from its potential *'charm'*. The sterile, controlled environment inhibits its *'coming into being'* because that requires anarchic abandon where one chooses to pursue their idea freely. Arthur Schopenhauer, echoes this by proposing that for a fuller, richer experience of life, one needs to step out of themselves and their worldview to practice 'will- less contemplation' and gain exposure. That would induce aesthetic pleasure. And therefore, art or inspiration for

creating art, if we were to draw from him, cannot be deliberately sought and desired (Schopenhauer 196).

Moreover, AI art is produced by algorithms whose raw material is limited and specific and thus prone to reproducing biases. This epistemically disqualifies lesser- known elements and unacclaimed styles to generate art that wishes more to appease the person seeking it, than be an aesthetically gratifying experience for them. This doesn't mean that the result is an exhaustively perfect artwork, customized to the seekers taste, but one which is predicted to 'most probably' cater to their prompt (its robust feedback mechanism will help do this predictive analytics). This also risks marginalization of quaint styles by filling and encroaching the spaces with specific and similar types of art and effectively hindering the goal of diversifying and democratizing the art space.

Conclusion

Hence, skepticism regarding AI generated art is not due to existential fear of human abilities increasingly being made redundant but motivated by the ethical audit of AI's true competence in making art. The common contention that AI wields a distinctive style of creation that it develops over time proves to be untenable majorly because these styles are learnt, codified and automated by internalizing patterns found in the digital footprint of humans. The evident generalized and derivative nature of such work further compromises the work's unique character and aesthetic appeal. It is therefore important that the current wave of instrumentalization of art be mitigated by responsibly designing (transparent and accountable) and using Artificial Intelligence tools and software.

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Consumption and Self Construction in *The Bling Ring* (2013)

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Introduction

Sofia Coppola's, *The Bling Ring* was based on the 2010 Vanity Fair article, *The Suspects Wore Louboutins* by Nancy Jo Sales. It narrates the true story of a teenage gang that stole over $3 million worth of clothing, jewellery, and cash from celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Orlando Bloom, and Megan Fox. However, is it just about those 7 misguided, privileged kids from California, or about us?

The film offers no one to root for in the film, not even ourselves, because we all have the same disease, an obsession. A generation of kids raised on social media and reality TV– from *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* to *Bigg Boss*. With Coppola's signature style, *The Bling Ring* is shot like a reality TV show, creating a powerful satire. It is interspersed with talking interviews and low-quality visuals, pulling curtains on this era's vapid materialism and soulless celebrity culture. The movie starts with Rebecca, the lead character, saying,"Let's go shopping,*"* as she leads her crew into Paris Hilton's house. They jump over fences and recklessly grab whatever they can, while taking selfies to post on Facebook. The film shows us the glamorous parts of these characters' lives, detached from the messy realities of theft, deceit & consequences.

Sofia targets the one-dimensional personas of these characters, who are driven by a hollow fantasy to be seen. They seek a sense of belongingness in a world where image is everything, and self-worth hinges on external validation. This portrayal reminds us of Jean Paul Sartre's notion of "being-for-others" in his work, *Being and Nothingness*—where

individuals reduce themselves to roles constructed for the gaze of others, abandoning authentic existence for the sake of appearances. We begin this essay by exploring how Sartre's shame operates within the context of social media. We further our analysis by asking how this shame evolves in two interrelated contexts: hypervisibility and hyperconsumerism.

The constant pull of social media and digital consumption exacerbates our detachment. Social voyeurism, where we passively observe rather than actively engage, is the modern manifestation of the age-old struggle to live in the moment.

Social media has enabled us to borrow our identity from people we follow, the posts we like, and the music bands we listen to. We deliberately construct a personality that can meet expectations that are dictated by trends and can be validated by our favourite "influencers." It resembles the theory of performativity given by Judith Butler, which we'll discuss further in our exploration, all while asking the question, are we in any way different from the *Bling Ring.*

1. Sartre and the Self

In this context of identity and curation, Sartre's existentialist quest for authenticity lends an interesting lens. His book, "*L'être et le néant*," or *Being and Nothingness,* is considered a cornerstone of existentialist philosophy. Apart from this, we will also consider some of his fictional literary works, such as *Saint Genet* and *Nausea*, because his philosophy is closely tied to, and better illustrated by his fiction.

Sartre, like almost all other French philosophers of the era, treats Descartes as the father of the subject. He derives basic consciousness and freedom from "cogito ergo sum", which is also the indubitable foundation of his whole system. He also rejects that there is an unconscious, as proposed by Freud and other psychoanalysts, and focuses instead on awareness. He derives some principles of phenomenology from Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel. Particularly, from Husserl he gets the idea that human consciousness must be directed

somewhere, that it must be directed upon some object of which it will be aware. And further, in being aware of this object, it will also be aware of itself perceiving something or being aware. So, he says that our consciousness is always aware of *something* and also of *itself*.

In *Being and Nothingness* particularly, Sartre talks of three modes of being. Firstly, a being in itself, for example, a rock; secondly, a being for self, which is a consciousness aware of itself, and thirdly, a being-for-others, which is a role or being a thing for others. We will focus on this third mode, the third part of *Being and Nothingness*, particularly the concept of the gaze of the other.

In being for others, we attempt or pretend to be something, and we reduce our entire existence to one role. We pretend to be a teacher, or a worker, or a student, or a fan. Sartre uses the example of a waiter, how he is convinced that his purpose, at least while he's working, is only to wait and is committed to the role of a waiter.

Another example is from Sartre's book *Saint Genet*, which is about a novelist and playwright, Jean Genet. Genet was sent to foster parents, where he started to steal. When he was discovered, he was labelled a thief. As soon as he heard himself being called as such, he decided he must be what he was said to be. Thereafter he devoted himself to a life of crime and was continually in and out of prison.

According to Sartre, an individual is a subject when he views things around him. However, he also becomes the object when another subject views him as a part of their surroundings. Therefore, a human is an object *and* a subject– the seer and the seen. This idea, according to him, induces fear and insecurity for an individual, as the idea of being seen as an object is an aching reminder that you are perceived not just by yourself but also by the other subjects around you. The insecurity produced by this lies in the fact that the individual has no idea and no control over how they are being perceived. This leads to Sartre's theory of the look, or the gaze, or "le regard." The famous example for the look is that of the keyhole:

Imagine you are in a hallway and you crouch down to peep through a keyhole. You are driven by curiosity or jealousy or voyeuristic vices. You are not self-conscious; you are only aware of the keyhole or of your interest in the keyhole, but you are not aware of yourself as a separate object. All of a sudden you hear footsteps in the hall, and you realise that someone is looking at you. What does this mean? You perceive yourself now from the eyes of the other; you are filled with shame.

2. The Gaze in The Bling Ring (2013) and on Social Media

This dynamic bears a striking resemblance to the dynamics at play on social media platforms, where users experience altered self-perceptions due to the gaze of others. We are slowly moving towards a self that is solely curated for the other. We may observe this in the culture of buying clothes/jewellery/things just to show to others you have them, or reading a book just so that you look smart, watching a movie just to be able to tell others that you've seen it, and attending events just to prove yourself. Almost as if, when looking through a keyhole, you're not ashamed or afraid that someone will walk by; in the moment, you desperately want someone to walk by and see you.

In an interview with The New York Times Magazine, Sofia Coppola said, *"When I go to a concert, everyone is filming and photographing themselves and then posting the pictures right away. It is almost as if your experiences don't count unless you have an audience watching them."* Sartre said this "being watched" such as on social media causes unease, shame, and immense discomfort.   The characters in The Bling Ring, it seems, are not ashamed of it; they *chase* it, and *yearn* for it. It is like a drug to them. When the security footage from one of their robberies is released and they don't get recognised in it, it emboldens them because it doesn't get them the fame that they were chasing. Genet, the thief, became a thief because he was called one. The Bling Ring became more reckless and more

frequent in their operations, instead of backing down. Without any indication of inner unrest or discomfort in sight.

Sartre says the individual has no control over how they are being perceived. They cannot possibly put themselves in the position of the seer and experience themselves exactly how they are being seen. However, social media, celebrity culture, and reality TV grant a new kind of power and control. The individuals feel like they are in full control of what to share and when to share it. The *Bling Ring* is a story of the first generation to grow up with a sort of Do-it-Yourself image-making.

There are two important views that emerge here: pride and shame. Firstly, the in-the-moment, transient self, which wants, more than anything, to be seen. The principal reason that the *Bling Ring* were convicted was their never-ending vanity. They needed to tell everyone what they did, otherwise; it didn't count. Posting their exploits on Facebook, telling everyone at parties that they went to Paris Hilton's house five times. This is the prideful self. Michael Stephen Lopato describes how this self on social media, which is the object of the look, *"is no longer my being-in-itself holistically but rather a list of qualities and information which I have decided to share publicly"* (Lopato). There exists a duality here between the self-constructed social media identity and the being-in-itself. The pride and validation from social media is attributed merely to the self-constructed identity, and thus, they do not experience pride regarding themself, but rather regarding only the qualities which both the self-constructed representations have in common with them.

The second view, the larger picture, is the bad faith that leads them to live in a world that detaches effect from cause, depicting only the outcomes. Sartre used the concept of bad faith to explain how individuals act inauthentically, owing to a denial of their freedom. They only identified with getting crowned The Bling Ring, revelling in their new title. They believed that they didn't even do anything wrong, by ignoring the realities of selling stolen

goods in shady deals and hiding stolen guns in boxes under beds. Rebecca and her crew *think* they can exert a level of control over their environment – that they can break out of their lives (by breaking in) and be something more, but that "something more" is itself an imprisoning position and a false sense of empowerment offered to them by a superficial culture. This is the self suffering from a nauseating shame and acting under Sartre's bad faith, sparing themselves from the burden of responsibility of their own decisions.

On social media, one is always under the surveillance of the Other. The situation that Sartre mentions in the keyhole example, before you become aware of the presence of another, where you are only aware of the keyhole, is a situation that doesn't exist on social media. There is never a moment that you are not being seen.

Lopato's shame/pride loop further explains how because of the omnipresent Look, the user feels constantly ashamed and reacts using social media platforms in a way that is guided by pride, like how the characters feel compelled to pose with their stolen goods. This loop is difficult to exit, and pushes people to perpetuate shame dynamics. As Sartre notes in *Being and Nothingness*, *"it is the shame or pride which makes me live, not know the situation of being looked at"*.

This is one aspect of the movie: self-construction, objectification, and destruction. The other aspect deals with consumptive behaviour and questions about celebrityhood. Why do we spend hours checking what each celebrity is wearing to an award show? How do the people we follow on Instagram define what we buy? Why do we wear merchandise from our favourite singers?

3. Shame in the Age of Celebrity

The answer is perhaps because we, like the characters in The Bling Ring, are obsessed with these singers, as they were with the Hollywood royalty, Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, among others.

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and author, has had a great influence on a wide range of humanistic and social studies. Foucault's theories explored the relationships between power, knowledge and liberty, and analysed how they are used as a form of social control through various institutions.

He introduced the concept of the panopticon in his book, *Discipline and Punish*, borrowing it from the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham first used it as a design for a prison system in the late 1800s, where a single watchtower at the center would allow guards to observe all inmates without being seen themselves. Foucault took this architectural concept and turned it into a metaphor for modern society. He argued that the panopticon symbolised how power and control operated in social institutions and even everyday life. For him, power doesn't come from laws or government alone, but is a network that subtly flows through social structures. In his model of surveillance, "the few see the many," and control is maintained through the internalisation of the gaze.

Thomas Mathiesen, a Norwegian sociologist, introduces the idea of the 'synopticon' as a development of the panopticon in his 1997 article titled, *The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited.* Mathiesen's *synopticon* is a reversal of Foucault's model, where 'the many see the few.' This shift reveals how control and conformity no longer stem solely from top-down surveillance, but also from the aspirational gaze we cast on 'the few.' Here, power operates not through the fear of being watched but the desire to emulate and curate performance of identity in this age of hypervisibility. This further complicates self-construction on social media; what were described to be the self's best qualities are now the best qualities observed in 'the few'. Lopato's shame/pride loop also becomes enmeshed in this system of hypervisibility. The pride experienced or the validation received regarding the self modelled on 'the few' strays even further from the self curated from one's best qualities, and fully disconnects from the being-in-itself.

Social platforms like Instagram allow us to have a close look inside the lives of others. This has specifically affected teens and young adults, cultivating unhealthy ideals and standards of the way we should look and what we ought to do with our lives. Some of the characters in the film are taught this celebrity worship right at home. In one scene, their mother teaches them to model their behaviour after people who show good character, such as Angelina Jolie.

4. (Hyper)Consumerism and Performance of Identity

Shame has historically been associated with religious institutions, such as the Church and its use of guilt. In the present scenario, we use Max Weber's and George Ritzer's writings to draw a contemporary parallel. Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* spoke of increasing rationality in modern society, which meant individuals lost their sense of spirituality and traditional religious beliefs declined. George Ritzer argues in his *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* that Western societies are now distinctly defined by consumption. His ideas see a change from religion to consumerism, whereby he refers to shopping centres as 'cathedrals.' It could be argued that in an age of consumerism, we are given something different to believe in, something that brings us together with a new type of social glue, as young people are willing to "pay up to fit in."

As Naomi Klein puts it in her book, *No Logo*, we are living in a *"corporate climate obsessed with finding the secret recipe for cool,"* and that goes for both us, the consumers, and the celebrities who are simply individuals "known for being well known." In *No Logo*, Klein critiques the evolution of brand culture, wherein corporations shift focus from selling products to manufacturing identity and commodifying cultural expression. Rather than marketing goods, brands seek to embody a lifestyle that can be packaged and sold. In the pursuit of the elusive ideal of "cool," subcultures and aesthetics are appropriated into marketable symbols.

The peer pressure among the members of the Bling Ring blurred their moral judgement; all of them were pushing their boundaries aimlessly to get their hands on a little bit of footwear, watches, or bags. As absurd as it already is, the gang broke into-in 5 times into Paris' home five times before she realised that she had been robbed, pointing to blind overconsumption.

Increasing technologies have given us more sources of knowledge, but these are not always used in a positive way. We have celebrities' lives right at our doorstep, and that's how The Bling Ring tracked when these celebrities were out of town to break into their houses. In fact, Paris Hilton posted on Instagram that she leaves a copy of her house keys under the doormat, as it is just one of the few things that make her *"so iconic"*. The huge amount of time we spend on social media extends beyond mere passive observation – it's a profound detachment from active participation in life. This phenomenon is social voyeurism – a contemporary epidemic in which we prefer to experience life vicariously, forfeiting genuine living for digital façades. Consumption operates thus on the same systems of hypervisibility and shame, leading to the development of a self identity that is now reliant on hyperconsumerism, fully detached from Sartre's being-in-itself.

This constant personality curation also mirrors Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman's dramaturgical approach viewed interactions as a theatrical "performance," shaped by environment and audience. He said that the actor's goal is to provide others with "impressions" that are consistent with the desired goals of the actor, regardless of the individual's mental state. He asserted that societies are made up of "frames" that give meaning to actions and behaviors in specific contexts.

In the context of celebrity culture, this goal is clear: self-presentation must be consistent within the "frame" of the unattainable ideal celebrity or influencer, which must begin by owning the same things they do.

To build on this we consider Judith Butler, who gave the theory of performativity in their book *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues, *"Performativity of gender is a stylised repetition of acts, an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender."* While their theory is specifically about gender identity, it is also a reflection of how we undermine our authentic selves to impersonate other Instagram users, all trying to achieve an ideal that no one actually inhabits.

There's a compelling sequence towards the beginning of the movie, when Emma Watson's character is being questioned by the press right before she is arrested, and she responds: *"I'm a firm believer in karma, and I think this situation was attracted into my life as a huge learning lesson for me to grow and expand as a spiritual human being. I want to lead a huge charity organisation, I want to lead a country one day, for all I know."* This character is an example of the fake personality we're compelled to create.

In this fast-paced environment, where the entire world is accessible at our fingertips, we're inundated with a constant stream of information about everything on the face of this earth. It has created an urgency to always stay informed, conform to the ever-changing trends, and cancel those who don't. Marcus Aurelius noted in his Meditations, Book II, *"Even if you live three thousand—or thirty thousand years, you should remember this: You cannot lose any other life than the one you are living now"*, emphasising the temporality and immediacy of life. In our quest to capture and curate our lives, we can lose sight of it unfolding before us. Even if one were granted thousands of years to live, one would still experience life solely in the present moment. The past is irretrievably gone, and the future remains beyond possession. All we have is the present, and it is up to us to experience it unfiltered and unmediated by a screen. The Stoics gave us the concept of temperance–the virtue of self-control and moderation, which can guide a balanced relationship with social media, because it's not about

abstinence, but intentional engagement that can enhance our well-being rather than exerting control.

Conclusion

The Bling Ring at first glance seems as shallow as the characters it depicts, but it wants us to question every single scene. We are constantly performing on social media, and although most of us don't go as far as breaking into houses, we may have been in fandoms that idolise celebrities. When Shah Rukh Khan's house is a modern pilgrimage site, or when the whole world knows when Taylor Swift has a new boyfriend, is that when we begin questioning the notion of a celebrity? Or is it when things like the Beatlemania of the 60's and the One Direction Infection of the 2010's impact thousands if not millions of people worldwide? Drawing from Sartre, Foucault, the Stoics, and Butler, this analysis establishes the link between how hypervisibility leads to hyperconsumerism and in turn to self-construction, all within the context of shame.

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Sisyphus in the Simulation:
AI, Virtual Worlds, and the Digital Absurd

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Introduction

This essay argues that AI-driven virtual and augmented realities are the contemporary Absurd spaces where humanity expands in the search for meaning and makes it futile at the same time. Drawing from the philosophy of the Absurd by Albert Camus, this essay deconstructs how immersive technologies deform identity, agency, and connection. It focuses on how virtual worlds function as modern existential theatres by using examples from the play *Waiting for Godot* and the movies *Ready Player One* and *Tron: Legacy*, mirroring humanity's paradoxical desire to be free in algorithmically controlled environments.

In *Ready Player One*, while the OASIS is limitless within its artificial landscape, it binds users into endless quests for existential meaning. *Tron: Legacy* presents the Grid as a digitally utopian world but acts as a prison through which AI could dictate human choice, questioning whether technology frees human beings or chokes them. These narratives mirror *Waiting for Godot*, since characters wait upon meaning that can never come—much like users in VR searching for fulfillment in curated, AI-driven realities. Psychologically, AI breaks identity to exist in multiple, often contradictory digital selves. VR and AR promise connection but paradoxically isolate the user in experiences hyper-personalized by algorithms, reinforcing Absurd tension between agency and determinism. Yet, by Camus' reasoning, rebellion against the Absurd itself is meaningful. Humanity embodies and critically engages with these technologies, redefining purpose in artificial worlds. This essay

aims to synthesize AI's reconfiguration of the Absurd. In the digital age, identity is informed by algorithmic influences and persuasion that eliminate the distinction between authenticity and curation. The Absurd is defined by Camus as the tension between man's quest for meaning and a universe indifferent to it, echoed in *Waiting for Godot* as characters remain suspended in perpetual limbo, like users stuck within digital realms. Absurdist revolt, as opposed to a search for an answer, consists of critically navigating this futility.

Virtual worlds powered by AI hold out the promise of freedom but in fact exercise algorithmic control, as in *Ready Player One*'s OASIS, where there is limitless choice but a structured fantasy, and *Tron: Legacy*'s Grid, a utopian prison of AI determinism. These virtual worlds also fragment identity, compelling users into incompatible digital personas. While AI and VR increase connection, they also isolate individuals through hyper-personalized but limiting experiences. Echoing Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, the gamification of virtual life creates existential tiredness and identity fatigue, under which constant play conceals abiding alienation. VR compounds this situation by presenting a world that appears to be immersive and boundless yet is governed by scripted boundaries. Users of VR are immersed in quests—gaming, socialization, and exploration—like the futility of Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the mountain. Scholar Nolen Gertz (2018), in this vein, asserts that technologies never reduce existential despair but optimize it by providing the appearance of choice while optimising algorithmic determinism. This is similar to the situation of Vladimir and Estragon, where much as they would like to go, they instead find themselves trapped in an infinite waiting trap. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is an anti-play, a story without an ending, in which the main characters wait for an arrival that never comes. This repetition of structure is at the heart of the VR experience, in which users are constantly doing things that promise resolution but never deliver. As Boluk and LeMieux (2017) contend, most VR worlds generate "infinite replayability" through procedural generation, such that the world is created

to sustain engagement without delivering a definitive end. This design replicates the existential state of Absurdity, where meaning is constantly pursued but never attained.

Moreover, the theatricality of VR is not only limited to narrative form but also to the performative (*Butler 25*) dimension of virtual selves. In VR, the self is traditionally fragmented into avatars—virtual masks one puts on to move about in simulated spaces. The split between the "player" and the "played" is echoed in Beckett's theater, where performers enact their own desperation in looping, scripted lines. According to Joshua Kates (2019), the theatrics of existentialist drama propose identity is always a performance—one that VR literalizes through its ability to generate customizable selves.

1. Disassociation with *Reality* and the Ambiguous Self Caused by Algorithmic Governance

Virtual reality represents the Absurd paradox of presence and absence. The protagonist of Waiting for Godot is perpetually on his journey but never arrives, reinforcing the fact that presence is illusory. Likewise, VR players interact with carefully crafted environments that feel real but are ultimately realized to be intangible. As Baudrillard (1994) theorizes in Simulacra and Simulation, digital spaces elide the distinction between the real and the hyperreal and produce a sense of participation that is, in reality, a type of detachment. The promise of VR is one of immersion, but its reality is that of detachment—from the body, from the senses, and ultimately from an authentic self.

This condition can be understood more deeply within a set of inter-related theoretical constructs by Michel Foucault. Two of which I would like to discuss are biopower and the datafication of the body. Foucault describes biopower as the kind of power that governs populations through a new mode of regulation - a population's life itself - controlling all

aspects of life: health, contouring habits, shaping desires, generating functions, and even monitoring absence. Biopower is a soft form of power, given its capacity to regulate life through norm-building policies and how individuals come to internalize norms and self-regulate their own bodies and actions. The datafication of the body is similarly able to mark and quantify all aspects of lived, embodied experience into digital data and each part of lived experience is mapped to be measured, tracked and quantified. This includes not just eye movement or gesture, but emotional reaction. While everything, from the passage of time to breathing, is measured and assessed, all digital ecosystems will use these same forms of data to generate algorithmically adjusted experiences that seem responsive but are often just engineered to meet behavioural controls, pulling back unpredictability while continually reinforcing causes of past forms of engagement and control. Foucault's earlier concept of the panopticon and Jeremy Bentham's architectural plan for a prison is relevant here. Bentham's prison was based on the idea that prisoners knew they might be seen at any point in time but never knew when they might be seen, so they monitored themselves by self-regulating their own behaviour. Foucault uses this model as a likeness of how visibility works as a way of power. These ideas take a different configuration in digital spaces: users are always visible—not to a central organization, but rather to dispersed and indistinct algorithmic systems that are tracking their every action and response. In the case of VR, these concepts also highlight the underlying architecture of the control beneath the illusion of freedom. Biopower here acts through parasocial relationships between users and digital entities—avatars, NPC's, and immersive spaces—that create emotional attachments that displace the connections that are possible with a real-world body. The physical body is subordinate to a crafted, digital presence as the perception of flesh becomes redundant. The datafication of users allows experiences to be adaptively engineered on the fly, all the while sensing the illusion of agency, but establishing predictable behaviour. The surveillance

becomes ambient and encoded in the milieu of the experience. In this way, the users begin to self-regulate as they navigate these digital systems akin to the panopticon; their actions aligned to invisible expectations constructed within design and code. In this manner, VR does not only contain the Absurd, but reproduces the Absurd in an algorithmic reproduction. Users are disposed to imaginative, rich interactive experience spaces of promise—presence experiences detachment; agency experiences a script; freedom experiences pattern. The search for meaning, much like in *Waiting for Godot*, is continuously deferred, suspended in a loop of curated experiences that both simulate and obstruct fulfillment.

The avatar, as self projected into virtual form, disrupts conventional sense of identity, embodiment, and agency. It is simultaneously an interface device, a signifier of user intent, and a fractured embodiment of self. Avatars are at the intersection of self-expression and system constraint in virtual worlds, where users can experiment with identity under constraint by pre-existing representation codes. This engenders ontological ambiguity which raises basic questions regarding subjectivity, authenticity, and plasticity of self. This conflict between user autonomy and external control is central to *Ready Player One* (2018), in which avatars are both instruments of liberation and objects of algorithmic determinism. The OASIS, a vast virtual reality universe, enables users to transcend physical constraints through virtual self- transformation. This idea of boundless identity creation is therefore ironic—avatars remain subject to economic, corporate, and algorithmic forces that dominate the virtual environment. Jean-Paul Sartre's distinction between être-pour-soi (being-for-itself) and être-pour-autrui (being-for-others) in Being and Nothingness (1943/2007) illuminates the existence-driven nature of avatars. According to Sartre, human existence is determined by the tension between self-consciousness and external interpretation. Avatars embody this duality—being expressions of user intent (pour-soi) but subject to interpretation and judgment in virtual spaces (pour-autrui). In virtual multiplayer environments, avatars are

performative identities, similar to Sartre's garçon de café—a coffeehouse waiter who studiously performs his role to fit the expectations of others (*Sartre 59*). As Taylor (2002) notes in her ethnographic study of MMORPGs[1], avatars exist at the threshold of self-construction and externally imposed meaning, performing identity in ways that are both liberating and restrictive. Wade Watts' avatar, Parzival, in *Ready Player One* depicts this existential struggle. While the OASIS offers Wade a world of limitless potential, his avatar is shaped by forces outside of himself—the game economy, others' opinion of him, and the internal logics of cyber-capitalism. Despite the facade of agency, Wade's life within the Oasis is never fully self-controlled; it is always filtered through the system of the virtual world.

Judith Butler's gender performativity theory (1990) further complicates avatar-based identity. Butler argues that gender is not an inherent trait but a repeated performance shaped by societal expectations. Avatars take this on to an extreme, enabling players to not just perform gender but completely redefine their embodiment at any given moment. Nakamura (2009) is correct to note, though, that such fluidity exists only in the digital realm. Virtual worlds tend to mirror real-world biases, infusing hegemonic norms in the design of avatars. As avatars allow identity experimentation, they are anchored in systemic limitations, including character models and algorithmic bias. This struggle is realized in *Ready Player One* by the avatar Aech, a hyper- masculine figure in OASIS who is revealed to be Helen, an African-American woman in the physical world. Helen's avatars are in response to reinforcement of real-world prejudices in the virtual world—her virtual existence is freer and more respected. Yet, the unveiling of her actual persona highlights the tension between fluidity afforded in the digital realm and structural limitation, and how virtual embodiment is mediated by user intention, external perception, and platform designs. N. Katherine Hayles (1999) examines the ways in which virtual environments disrupt classical concepts of

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[1] A massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG)

embodiment, making consciousness possible outside of the material body. The avatar represents a posthuman embodiment of the self—free from physical limitations but dependent upon human intelligence. And yet, this disembodiment generates a paradox: in that the avatar projects presence into the virtual world, it also fragments selfhood, creating an ontological distance between the user and the virtual representation of the same. Baudrillard's (1994) hyperreality theory underpins this paradox—avatars become simulacra that render the simulation and selfhood binary impossible. The OASIS in *Ready Player One* depicts this hyperreal state where virtual identities take precedence over bodily ones. Therefore, although the avatar can be a place of self-discovery, it is governed by the algorithmic control of virtual worlds. *Ready Player One* satirizes virtual identity as totally autonomous, demonstrating how avatars still operate under control systems, surveillance, and motivations of commodification.

2. Personalized *Realities* and the Connection Paradox

The virtual world promises freedom—a freedom from bodily constraint wherein identity, choice, and interaction are unfettered from material constraint. And yet this promise is fraught with contradictions. The Grid in *Tron: Legacy* (2010) is a utopian virtual world, a world of unlimited potential. And yet this vision of liberty takes place under an odious type of command: AI rule in which citizens subsist at its behest. The hypocrisy reflects algorithmic worlds of our times, where personalization and predictive AI guarantee to enhance user freedom yet curb human agency. Gilles Deleuze's "control society" theory (1992) provides a framework for understanding this paradox. As opposed to Foucault's "disciplinary society" (Foucault *197*) where power is concentrated in static institutions, Deleuze argues that control in the modern era is decentralized and fluid. Clu, in *Tron: Legacy*, is an expression of this shift: rather than exerting explicit coercion, he uses the system's underlying architecture to impose conformity. This is an analogy mirroring real

algorithms, which do not explicitly coerce action but subtly guide it—curating content, anticipating desires, and influencing digital experience in nuanced ways. In contemporary virtual landscapes, sites such as Google, Meta's social media applications, and Netflix's use of machine learning programs generate hyper-individualized encounters. Though appearing to transfer command to people, these mechanisms restrict the plane of exchange. Zuboff (2019), in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, argues that algorithmic prediction mechanisms are not merely responding to activity but are manipulating, nudging human beings into selected choices. These recommendation algorithms foster closed-loop systems, creating digital echo chambers that simulate freedom but confine users to solipsistic interaction. The result is a deterministic regime masked by the illusion of limitless potential—one that subtly shapes thought, desire, and action. Like the Grid, where all one's movements and actions are determined within Clu's world, such virtual realities construct pre-designed realities that pose as free-flowing, dynamic realms but impose unseen limits.

Algorithmic control is also supported by gamification, a process that converts digital interactions into loops of reward. This concept, common in social media and gaming environments, conditions user behaviour through psychological reinforcement. In *Tron: Legacy*, Clu's regime is sustained by competition, forcing residents to participate in ritualized combat that maintains systemic control in the name of free choice. Social platforms use engagement-based designs that reinforce habitual interaction in the same way. Chun (2016) terms this 'habitual new media', whereby users feel as though they are exercising independent choices while their activity is determined by algorithmic norms. AI feeds do not reflect preferences; they construct them, turning user agency into a byproduct of automated suggestion rather than genuine volition. This creates a paradox of play, where users engage in what appears to be free choice but are bound within algorithmically crafted paths—game

mechanics fused with recommendation algorithms reinforce habit through reward, not freedom.

Post-humanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti (2013) contend that in the age of algorithmic rule, autonomous human agency is ever more a fiction. Digital liberty, one once dreamed of as an unbound horizon, is now filtered through AI systems that predict, control, and shape patterns of thought. This is all captured best in *Tron: Legacy* by Clu's one-track-minded quest for a "perfect" system—one which, rather than granting subjects greater agency, removes freedom and spontaneity from them. This speaks to more general anxieties about digital freedom in today's culture. With AI supplemented by predictive abilities, human behaviour is ever more quantifiable, liberty reduced to a mathematical probability rather than an existence. The utopian dream of the internet as a site of infinite discovery has given way instead to a scenario where decisions are constructed algorithmically and deviation from preordained paths becomes increasingly difficult. The emergence of AI-based realities—virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and algorithmically composed digital realms—has revolutionized how people build and live identity. In such spaces, individuals are not bound to one self but are composed of several digital personalities, influenced by platform affordances, algorithmic feedback mechanisms, and social norms. This multiplicity of selves spawns identity contradictions because individuals lead disparate lives in the world of technology and the material world. Although VR and AR technologies have the potential to be more humanly connected, they end up producing hyper-personalized and solitary experiences. Such solipsism is deepened by recommendation algorithms that prioritize alignment over divergence—digital spaces become closed-loop systems where difference is filtered out and sameness is reinforced. Algorithmic curation also means that users are engaging mostly with content and groups most aligned with their interests, reinforcing "filter bubbles and virtual echo chambers"

(*Pariser 9*) instead of promoting varied engagement. This is an irony where technology designed to bring people closer together ends up isolating them further, echoing existentialist concerns regarding meaning, selfhood, and agency.

3. Absurdist Revolt and Meaning- Making in the Virtual World

Albert Camus' Absurd Man in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) provides a powerful model for understanding this digital life. The Absurd Man recognizes the contradiction between human seeking and the universe's indifference. Hence, instead of seeking absolute truths, he embraces absurdity and engages with life despite its absence of inherent meaning. Similarly, in AI-mediated worlds, customers are aware of the constructed reality of their virtual lives and the possibility of imposed meaning in algorithmically mediated worlds. However, like Camus' Absurd Man, they do participate—choosing avatars, interacting via VR, and embracing broken identities, not in pursuit of inherent truth, but because the act of participation itself is meaningful. The acting out of multiple virtual selves is a symptom of existential fragmentation. Consumers oscillate between avatars, social media presence, and web personas in virtual space, each uniquely adapted to individual locations. Digital selves, therefore, are absurd performances—performances of self-creation done despite the awareness that they are mediated, provisional, and finally transient. This theme is discussed in *Ready Player One*, wherein Wade Watts, alias Parzival, identifies his virtual reality as a hyperreal construction but appropriates the OASIS as a signifying space. He is not searching for the ultimate truth but participates because the OASIS gives him a space wherein, he can practice agency. Similarly, AI-led users locate significance in their silly performances of self, despite being aware of the artificial nature of their constructions. They act within systems that promise limitless potential but operate through deterministic architectures of prediction and reinforcement, where rebellion is enacted within boundaries predefined by algorithmic

design. For Camus, the solution to absurdity is revolt—a strong affirmation of life in the face of its meaninglessness. For AI realities, revolt is not just active engagement with digital identity but also a critical awareness of its constructed nature. Rather than aspiring for an authentic self, users are liberated to affirm multiplicity, engaging digital spaces as possibilities for creative experimentation rather than algorithmic predetermination.

Yet, this Camusian ideal of the Absurd Man is not without its detractors. Notably, the absurdist revolt has often been considered a romantic escape, as an aesthetically clothed acceptance of an existing system that may often require resistance rather than affirmation. Embracing absurdity in the face of real, structural exploitation runs the risk of complicity—it may be less philosophical liberation and more tactical pacification, individualized struggle, and endurance rather than transformation. When rebellion through absurdity turns into just an aesthetic of self-performance in broken systems, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish whether one is critically engaging or tapping into passive accommodation. While human life may then be limited to obstacle navigation—jumping hoops versus the pursuit of truth—and arguably achieve greater temporary efficiency, it is at a deeper ethical price. As existentialist critics have pointed out, it puts the individual in an unfair position, not just to themselves, but to others (especially those who are structurally deprived of this ideal privilege of philosophical play). Camus wrote, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy," but this happiness can, at worst, ignore the need for structural change and, at best, be blind to the collective justice to be achieved. In this context, revolt must go beyond personal affirmation. There is an urgent need for conscientious technology development that pushes back against algorithmic determinism. Digital revolt should aim at developing platform ethics and narrative agency—not just by creating a space where users are allowed to critically investigate their virtual selves but also by customizing the spaces they occupy. This is where digital literacy, critical design, and inclusive algorithmic design are practical forms of revolt.

Users must be prepared not only to reflect on their data self but also to challenge the interface and the design and governance of that self. The goal is not to escape digital existence but to transform it. This means holding corporations accountable, demanding transparency, choosing open-source alternatives, and fostering spaces for shared meaning instead of individual echo chambers. These objectives also require thought leadership—a shift from reactive digital posture to proactive meaning-making. Thus, users will be making back the narratives the algorithm will aim to automate for them.

In addition, a critique of Camus' politically individualistic revolt can be illuminated more productively via Émile Durkheim's notion of anomie—a normless state, as collective values erode, whole portions of social identity and cultural meaning splinter, resulting in crises in existence. This condition is amplified in the algorithmic age, where a hyper-personalized curation aggravated by algorithms accelerates alienation from collective meanings or moral cohesion. The fragmentation of identity into data points, the enclosure of echo chambers, and the disintegration of shared symbolic spaces revive Durkheim's forebodings. In this regard, an isolated revolt is not enough. What is required is not just a personal response to the Absurd, but a common ethic of our digital existence, a new networked solidarity of existence that reconstitutes meaning to social identity through collective networks of meaning and justice. Moreover, marginalized communities that can be doubly excluded from algorithmic systems are even more impacted by the compromise that involves Camusian revolt. To refuse to challenge the structures of designing and distributing meaning within digital space inherently means to preserve the status quo. Therefore, resistance must also mean designing for difference: integrating intersectional awareness into the design of AI systems, uplifting underrepresented voices, and designing forms of digital storytelling that are more democratic. Thus, while the Absurd Man's revolt is a beautiful poetic metaphor for the online encounter, it must transition from a poetic impulse to a

pragmatic, ethical disposition—from solitary rebels to collectively transformed. This is not a renunciation of absurdism but its maturation: revolt becomes not simply to endure meaninglessness but to resist systems that profit from it.

Conclusion

AI-mediated realities create environments that replicate the tension in the essence of absurdism—a promise of liberation enacting an existence. Virtual and augmented worlds purport freedom through limitless customization and hyper-personalization. Yet, while claiming ownership over a surreal world, there exist algorithmic defaults, predictive nudges, and structural iterations behind the curtain. Like Vladimir and Estragon, users are cast into systems that are continually deferring meaning, propping up engagement but yielding no conclusion. Avatars, identity performance, and platform engagement underscore a posthuman multiplicity that is as much liberating as it is fragmented. The dichotomy of user intention with an external algorithmic frame portrays self-for-itself and self-for-others, as Sartre described. Gamified systems further invoke a complexity of autonomy and performativity, fundamentally eroding conditions for autonomy as they collapse freedom into conditioned responses within a system where choice is defined with loops of reward and loops of reinforcement. Such systems demarcate solipsistic digital chambers for users, constructing an information environment that is only inclusive of movements that are aligned with previous behaviour. Such epistemic enclosures condition users to visualize ontological ambiguity such that users are unable to distinguish their self-construction from a system script. The epistemic enclosures produce a closed circuit of what users can perceive, creating a condition wherein individuals lose the fundamental ability to distinguish their self-constructions from system script. Camus' Absurd Man arises here, not as one who passively endures, but as a provocateur who lives in artificial life, but without illusion. Yet, the act of revolt has to move

forward from individual awareness and suspicion. Durkheim's notion of anomie offers insights into the pitfalls of the total collapse of meaning, bringing to the foreground, especially when algorithmically mediated spaces lack shared ethical or cultural dimensions, the possibilities of meaning at a collective level. The act of individual, couched resistance needs to move onto collective reformulation: we need to demand transparency, inclusive design, and storyline agency.
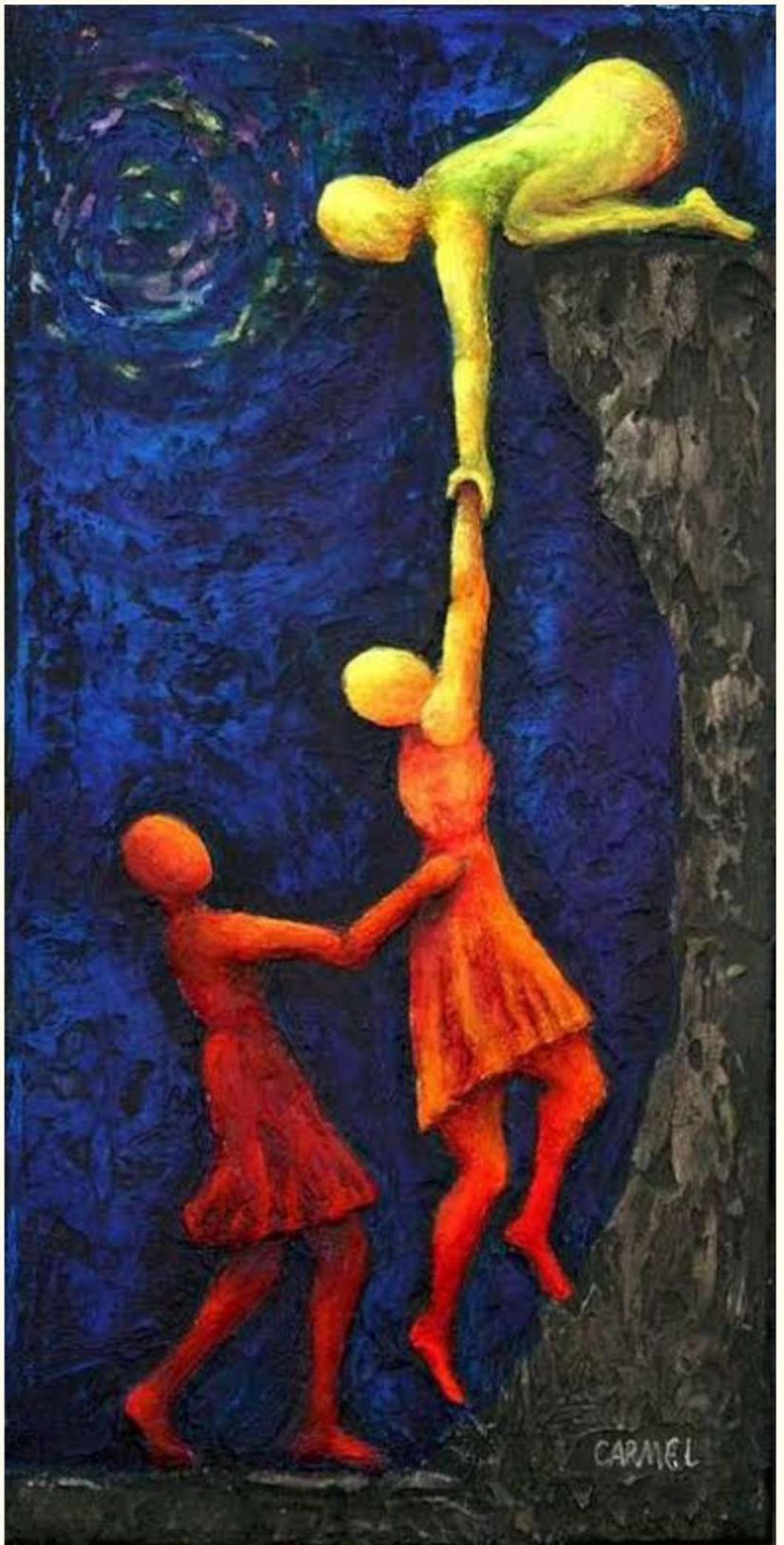
Rather than a possibility of reclaiming existential authenticity or a transcendent self, the digital subject can still engage in intentional and critical creation—using technology not to escape from the meaninglessness, but to design embodied meaning through playfulness, resistance, and imagination. The promise for what freedom looks like is not in rejecting VR or AI but in an agentic remaking of the architecture. It may be that in the exhaustion of loops and/or curated self, to live is to embrace the Absurd, not as acquiescence, but as an invitation to deliberately choose to co-create futures that are the inverse of inauthenticity—ethical, collective, and alive.

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