Above Ground

A zine by the Scapegoats

Foreword

We've spent most of our lives trying to get *inside* – inside schools, social groups, universities, journals, parties, anything powerful and prestigious. Then we were locked up. As Peter Thiel said of law school: 'from the outside everyone wants to get in. On the inside, everyone is trying to get out.' Something changed during the plague years circa 2020-21. The ghost left the machine. The gates of all the old esteemed edifices appeared stripped of their mystique. If we accept Stendhal's definition of beauty as the promise of happiness, then all the formerly glorious places – Cambridge, Oxford etc. – are utterly and irredeemably ugly. We began, like tech libertarians and accelerationists, to look for an exit. We dropped out, we logged on, we made new friends. We realised nothing is really settled, that the certainties of the day are momentary equilibria, frozen seizures, more drift than dialectics – everything is up for grabs.

The authors of *Above Ground* met online during the pandemic but have since come to hang out in an East London loft, in pubs and theatres and partied in a Canary Wharf penthouse. It was on a chesterfield sofa in *Hatchard's,* London's oldest bookshop, that a name for our group chat emerged following a scolding by a a young bookseller upset at our frank discussion of Michel Houellebecq (our shared interest in René Girard may have had something to do with this too).

The title for the zine – 'Above Ground' – concurs and contrasts with the themes and topics of its content. We begin with a top-down look – from above – at the form of online journalism and the digital personality economy in *It's a Business thing*. Jess Anne Rose's piece *The Brothers Disconsolate* considers the two complementary approaches to post-68 transcendence of Emmanuel Carrère and Michel Houellebecq – how to rise above nihilism. In her review of the film *How to Have*

Sex, Claire Jean explores what was ‘in the air’ for mainstream drunk teens in the late noughties at the beginnings of social media. In *DeLillo has Logged On*, Joe Oswald argues for the American novelist’s insight into the nature of experience post-information scarcity through a review of *The Silence*, a novel partially set on an aeroplane. In the final piece, *Plague Phenomena*, an anonymous ‘underground man’ sets out the dialectical reversals of ‘above’ and ‘below’, of de- and re-territorialisations.

In sum, *Above Ground* documents our perspectives on the informational and cultural economy of 2023, its possibilities and constraints, its successes and failures. It’s a chronicle of a particular time, online and offline, of events and ideas that are rapidly becoming history, both marginal and mainstream. Dear reader, I hope you’ll enjoy it.

– Alexander Raubo

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It's a Business Thing

Alexander Raubo

It wasn't exactly a public event, though it had been publicised on social media. You had to know someone on the inside for your RSVP to be acknowledged and the details of the happening shared. An online course on Ivan Illich had given us access to the semi-clandestine Common Sense Society. The people outside spoke with a sense of relief, delighting that conversations could venture into otherwise verboten territory. 'There are two genders' we heard later that evening. One or two people cheered. Everyone was polite. The counterculture of today holds the same opinions as the Guardian circa 2012. It's not exactly punk rock. But then again there's a before and an after of a cultural revolution, which happens slowly at first, then all at once. Like a bend in the road, one loses sight of what had come before.

We had entered a safe-space for moderates. The journalist Mary Harrington made a compelling argument for the return of a 'feminism of care' to counterbalance the prevailing 'feminism of freedom', a dialogue which characterised feminism until 1961, the year hormonal contraception was launched. Since then a feminism shorn of sexual difference has sought to maximise a neutered 'human' freedom at the expense of women's reproductive role and everyone's integrity. Like many successful reformers, Harrington presented her case as a return to a more ancient teaching. She wasn't eking out a new middle ground like a Blairite but guiding us back to an eternal Golden Mean. Yet Harrington wouldn't be a successful journalist if she didn't spice her theory up with a sense of urgency. We heard the phrase 'the coming age of scarcity'. We were shown a promotional video for an imagined artificial womb, which was meant to come across as

dystopian. Middle class women ought to get off the Pill, marry and have children in order to weather a turbulent and impoverished near-term future, she urged. The model reactionary feminist, we learned, is a mediaeval peasant wife who works from home on her loom while the children run around at her feet. Covid lockdowns, devastating though they were in many ways, have brought back a pre-modern blurring of home and work, smudging out the sharp separation of the industrial age. Husbands and wives can now collaborate as carpenters in rural Canada or as remote teachers of sustainable living in Uruguay while managing a home and raising children without the need for professional childcare or a strict division of labour where the 'stay-at-home' party becomes economically dependent on the professionally active one. It's a Foucauldian opportunity that needs to be taken advantage of in order to stave off further erosion of freedom. It's a great Call to Action, to put it in advertising speak.

'Thinking,' Witold Gombrowicz wrote in his diary, 'which in separation from human reality is something majestic and wonderful, dispersed in a mass of passionate and inadequate creatures becomes nothing more than a screech'. The public intellectual of yesterday, the Henri Bergsons drawing crowds on their international lecture circuit, the Susan Sontags posing for the cover of Rolling Stone, the Slavoj Žižeks playing themselves in films, have been superseded by algorithmic cognoscenti who have to screech preemptively to be heard at all. I'm not saying Harrington is guilty of this – her argument is compelling and well-researched – but what she was presenting came in a suspiciously slick package, addressed to a precisely determined and commercially optimal audience like a military psy-op. Not a screech by any means, but the machinations of an ambitious professional. Books, and 'non-fiction' books for a popular audience especially, have a form imposed on them by the

dictates of publicity. Departing from this model is possible, it seems, only for those publishing with small presses, often sans editor, sans proofreader. And while the overall form may be fixed, a well-oiled editorial machine may still allow for occasional stylistic aberrations. Harrington's editor, mostly stellar, allowed a remarkable mixed metaphor to slip through the cracks: 'our effort to scrape the barrel of freedom long after its best fruits have been exhausted'. One reads this in a book where the author discloses she read English at Oxford.

At the wine reception after the talk my companion and I spotted Oli London mingling with the panellists. London, the previously trans-racial and trans-gender identifying media personality for whom a gender-critical book is the latest addition to his career portfolio, bears the scars of provocation and reaction required to stay in the limelight. It's a kind of battlefield: London, just thirty-three, appeared with the aura of a crippled veteran, though he's still fighting – he's now a self-styled 'Barbie Ken doll', to coincide with the première of the highly publicised movie.

It's difficult to make sense of this crowd. Harrington would, I'm guessing, label them 'detransitioners' – whether it's from being Korean, as in the case of London, or from being a progressive feminist in the case of Harrington herself. It was a gathering of opponents of a dominant ideology, though its dominance being nowhere near absolute: Michael Gove, prominent Conservative MP and current Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, wrote one of the blurbs for the book. And there are signs its relative dominance is on the wane. Several books critical of the sexual revolution and the more extreme aspects of gender ideology have been published just in the last year or so, such as Lousie Perry's *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A Guide to Sex in the*

Twenty-First Century, Kathleen Stock's *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* and Hannah Barnes' *Time to Think: The Inside Story of the Collapse of the Tavistock's Gender Service for Children*. The feeling of being in an already outdated cultural moment that will soon give way to another was palpable. The people in the audience were, after all, middle aged, most of them already established, such as Harrington herself, and positioned to only get wealthier in the coming age of scarcity they've predicted.

'a literary event hosted by two thin middle aged women journalists attended by a crowd of young online conservatives and a transracial british korean man with lip filler.' cc Microsoft Bing

People get excited about these ‘based’ thinkers, who appear like the shadow self of the culture, saying the quiet part out loud. But they’re not underground men, like the 4chan and Reddit ‘poasters’ of yesterday. Harrington isn’t alienated from society, isn’t really at war with it. Her work demands no new literary form, like Dostoevsky’s existential novels or the online imageboard with its memes. It appears instead after a brief poasting career as something familiar: a ‘non-fiction paperback’, part manifesto, part personal essay, collecting shorter pieces published elsewhere. The work’s thesis and arguments appear like a mere differentiating surface motivated by market logic. Harrington’s audience is highly targeted, possibly focus-grouped. The rhetorical appeal, cunningly veiled by the personal narrative which opens the book, is to the reader’s instinct towards self-preservation. A friend of mine likened her compulsive reading of Harrington’s essays on UnHerd to crack – William S. Burroughs would have compared it to junk, the ‘ultimate merchandise’. From the perspective of genre-analysis, from a consideration of literary form, Harrington’s work seems, indeed, indistinguishable from that of a Guardian journalist circa 2012.[1] And what sets her apart from figures like Oli London may be less a question of any inherent persuasion and more an issue of target audience. It’s a business thing, baby.

[1] This points to the importance of a criticism of *form* as a tool to distinguish the entertaining, ‘thought-provoking’ grifter from the upending, revolutionary artist. But consideration of form has either been ghettoised in the idle, neutered sphere of ‘literary experimentation’ or atrophied as a result of its corporatisation in consumer products.

The Brothers Disconsolate

Jessica Anne Rose

In 2015, the contemporary French novelist, journalist, and screenwriter Emmanuel Carrère set out to produce an ‘upbeat, subtle little book on yoga.’ Despite the insouciance of this stated intention,*Yoga* (2020; translated to English in 2023) became like most of his work, deeply personal and a curious hybrid of genres. Even so, the book follows a conventional narrative arc of struggle and redemption, wherein Carrère features as the eminently flawed protagonist, a man in possession of a life ‘replete with all it takes to be happy,’ in a primordial quest to find a reason to stay alive. Said quest will take place internally, as he explores all manner of personal transformation to achieve transcendence.

‘A 60 year old depressed french man, with shaved, dark hair, in black tee shirt, looking for meaning in life in God and meditation who looks as if he's been smoking his entire life.’ cc Microsoft Bing

Around the time Carrère began collecting notes for *Yoga*, his peer and contemporary Michel Houellebecq – preeminent poet-critic of the post-Sexual Revolution West – published the prematurely infamous, satirical novel *Submission* (*Soumission, 2015*). *Submission*'s protagonist, François, is an ageing bachelor and scholar barely enduring the antagonisms of late 20th/ early 21st century Western civilization in an imminently near-future Paris. Having just completed his PhD on the corpus of early 20th c. French novelist

Joris-Karl Huysmans, and securing a tenure-track teaching position at Paris-Sorbonne, François' material needs are more or less met: he can live a modest but comfortable existence punctuated by access to the nubile body of one female student or another. Yet, François withers before the felt burden to justify his own life when all possibility for meaning-making has been precluded by atheist humanism, market supremacy, social permissiveness and cultural pluralism.

In their mutual concern for meaning and suffering, *Submission* and *Yoga* might have made interesting additions to the crisis of faith genre (think *The Book of Job*) were it not for the fact that neither François nor Carrère had faith to begin with. François does not and can not believe, while Carrère details his frenzied picking up and putting down of Christianity in the 2014 'novel' (in the loosest sense of the word) *Le Royaume* (*The Kingdom*). On the contrary, Houellebecq has characterised his work as Romantic, with all the concomitant fantasy and longing, while Carrère's idiosyncratic oeuvre touches on memoir, history, biography, true-crime and fiction. But it is their relatively opposing yet complementary postures toward the state of things that render them the Yin & Yang of contemporary French letters: one who looks inward, critiquing himself, and one who looks outward, critiquing life as such.

The editorialised Carrère struggles from debilitating melancholic depression in *Yoga* while writing on the stabilising merits of yoga – a dramatic irony he is undoubtedly privy to. In the end his salvation does not come from his meditation, Zen, and martial arts practices, but by the ambiguous benefits of a transient intimacy with a dumpy academic while tutoring young refugees in Greece, and ultimately, by the unambiguous benefits of a Lithium prescription attending to a late diagnosis of Bipolar II. *Yoga* concludes with

Carrère returning to Paris and completing the book you are reading, publishing it to amiable reviews.

In *Submission*, though absent much in the way of a physical description, one imagines François to look a little like the relatively young Houellebecq documented online – not handsome but not ugly, evidently ill at ease in the world and susceptible to misanthropy if it weren't for his love of art. François' ennui appears terminal ('I didn't even want to fuck her, or maybe I sort of wanted to fuck her but I also sort of wanted to die'), as he considers the parallels between his trajectory and that of his muse Huysmans, whose tenure as a resentful government bureaucrat formed the basis for an unremarkable personal life. François passively longs for the past described in books, and even attempts to follow in Huysmans' footsteps, looking for God before the Black Madonna of Rocamadour and travelling to Ligugé Abbey where Huysmans took his monastic vows. But François does not find faith on these pilgrimages, only disappointment. His acuity in diagnosing the suicidality of the West cannot save him from it. As minor burdens eclipse meagre pleasures within a spiritual vacuum, life for François looks as if it will march on interminably toward death. That is, until the surprise political ascendency of the Muslim Brotherhood in France, headed by the charismatic Ben Abbes.

Abbes' historic vision recenters the family, rather than the individual, as the basic unit of society. He desecularizes public institutions and places a cap on mandatory education (particularly for girls and women); he employs a Distributist model of economic theory, thus decentralising the means of production, empowering small and family-owned businesses. After the initial shock and fear of this foreign incumbent, François comes to see how his station in life may be improved should he embrace the new order – he can take a

wife or two (arranged, of course), occupy a prestigious, well-compensated academic post, and generally participate in an Islamized Parisian society as a respected member with a distinct role. '[An] Orthodox Jew doesn't have to worry about whether he believes in God or not. As long as he observes the law,' the philosopher Gillian Rose once observed; likewise, François need not share the Brotherhood's faith in order to submit, to, in the words of psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, 'escape from freedom.'

Suicidality and divorce are among the biographical ordeals shared by authors Houellebecq and Carrère, who are of the same age and Baby Boomer generation. The breakdown of Carrère's second marriage preceded the devastating depression at the heart of *Yoga* (the omission of this lurid detail by Carrère, typically known for Knausgaardian exhibitionism, is explained by his former wife's lawsuit barring her representation in his writing). Should François have pursued a clinical assessment of his anhedonia as does Carrère in *Yoga*, he'd have likely received a similar diagnosis and perhaps even joined the author for a period of internment at the Sainte-Anne psychiatric hospital in Paris (where the real Houellebecq has also spent time). But François isn't looking to attenuate his pain through prescription drugs, therapy or a searching moral inventory because he does not locate the onus nor the solution for said pain within himself but in the world. This accords with a sentiment expressed by Houellebecq's former wife about the author in a 2000 *New York Times* profile, that 'Michel's not depressed. It's the world that's depressing.' François blames society, and so feels little in the way of regret to see it overturned by Abbes and his Brotherhood.

Satisfaction arrives for François at the end of *Submission* not by his overcoming worldly desires but by the world meeting them. Meanwhile, Carrère, handsome and pedigreed as he is, may be included among those people who François identifies as having 'lived and

prospered under a given social system,' and so might find it impossible 'to imagine the point of view of those who feel it offers them nothing, and who can contemplate its destruction without any particular dismay.' The closest Carrère comes to encountering such hostility in *Yoga* is when contemplating the possibility that one of the traumatised young refugees may turn violent should they find only rejection and poverty once they land in northern Europe.

If *Yoga* has an antagonist it is Carrère himself, or what he refers to as his 'despotic ego.' He accordingly employs Freud's distinction between neurotic misery and common unhappiness, the former being self-inflicted and horribly repetitive, while normal unhappiness is delivered by the external world variably and unpredictable. Carrère's attempts to transcend worldly, egoic concerns are in service of the second. Yet, in his repeated allusions to his lack of deprivation, to the irrational (and thus illegitimate) nature of his misery, he denies himself even the salve of self-compassion, and in so doing continues the neurotic cycle of self-inflicted pain. Ironically, this embodies the Buddhist metaphor of the 'two darts,' in which an initial injury is tragicomically followed by a second, one's judgement of the first.

Where Carrère regrets his indiscretions, flagellating himself in the process, François does not apologise for his own, seeing no alternative or possibility of returning to a bygone era that is only a metaphysical place anyway, and one he feels ambivalence toward what with the diseases and inconveniences the past implies. The vision depicted in *Submission* of a contemporary, coherent and prosperous monotheistic society is exclusively fantasy, which makes for good entertainment but only that. Against this relentless blackpill articulated by Houellebecq but implicitly accepted by the developed world, Carrère's mastery of self – increasingly regarded

as the last domain in which one can have any effect – begins to look attractive, if only by default. Ultimately, remedies in *Yoga* are found within the clinical domain and the secular (Carrère does not describe himself as a Buddhist) arena of market-friendly self-improvement, if also in the passing warmth of his transient encounters abroad.

Yoga and *Submission* each capture a dimension of the zeitgeist: tacit embrace of individualism via secular self-optimization and biohacking on the one hand, and of rejection of technocracy in favour of faith-based social organisation on the other. Still, disorienting contradictions are the domain of both authors: Carrère's naked will-to-power does not correspond to the yogi precepts of ascetic abandonment of worldly possessions, which parallels François' (and Houellebecq's, for that matter) partaking in the casual sex and pornography that evidently exacerbate alienation.

One leaves *Yoga* with the disquieting sense that Carrère's prescription drugs, his professional accolades and solo practice of non-religious spiritual exercises will prove inadequate to permanently buoy him from another bout of ruinous despair so long as he exists within a society where relations are unreliable and social roles are fluid; eventually, a new prescription will be called for, another trip abroad, more accolades, and so on. Meanwhile, François' success at the end of *Submission*, crude and fantastical as it is, resonates as inherently more sustainable in its embeddedness within a social structure capable of reproducing itself. Memoirs and novels are inherently (blissfully) not didactic, but ones that are truthful admit to there being no solution for *mal moderne*, but there are better and worse ways of dealing with it. Collective solutions are more tenable for a social species, lest the onus for meaning-making

be left to any one of us alone, least of all to the girl reading this.

How to Remember Sex

Claire Jean

Nothing is certain but her desire to grow up, and the absence of the following memory:

- Annie Ernaux, *The Years*

In February 2023 I tagged along to a test screening of Molly Manning Walker's film *How to Have Sex*, along with a bunch of other millennials and zoomers. The film follows three British teen girls who travel to a nonspecific Greek locale where Tara, the sympathetic runt, is pressured to lose her virginity. Those who spoke up in our London focus group (girls only) seemed to experience *HTHS* as did one BFI reviewer, as 'devastatingly nuanced,' compared to a friend's mother's description of 'a sad girl walking around while everyone behaves disgustingly.'

I too got blackout on the beach during spring break, so I am permitted to analyse the devastation and the nuance. In truth, I was so overwhelmed by a sense of deja vu whilst watching *HTHS* that I related the discussion afterward to exposure therapy, i.e. re-living and re-telling. The premise of most therapy is that confronting shame and fear decreases avoidance: when a bad time is recalled and voiced – or a director coaxes sensation of 'been there, done that' and facilitates confession – the memory is re-coded with the stimuli of the 'safe space,' be it therapist's office or screening room. Even more than in a clinical setting, soft data collection on consumer triggers relies on an atmosphere of condescension.

‘Average young women in group therapy.’ cc Microsoft Bing

Our discussion facilitator was a smooth East London professional – a 30-something black man tasked with eliciting feedback from our group of mostly white women. After inviting us to wash our faces and to take all the space we needed, he broke the ice by asking each of us to imagine our preferred superpower (not to be confused with fragility, vulnerability is power). I later filled out a glowing feedback form and received an email from the facilitator thanking me for ‘taking part in informing and shaping this project.’

Post factum I have a cold sense of humour about the Stockholm syndrome of such a situation, but at the time Manning Walker's film had triggered something in me. I was utterly amazed that I was still capable of feeling 'seen' in a target market, and considered the experience a remarkable achievement of Manning Walker – the concomitant, narcissistic inspiration to write about her work.

Several months later, when the film was picked up for a limited run at the Curzon after a lauded showing at BFI, I paid to re-watch the project I had once helped to shape with the intention of writing something for a new project that might have to do with internet culture. My take, I thought, would be that *HTHS* is extremely realistic, cinematic exposure therapy for millennials who were traumatised by binge drinking and its mediation on early Facebook. But upon re-watch I was inclined to the view that the film follows 'a sad girl walking around while everyone behaves disgustingly.'

The first watch, abetted by the focus group, must have triggered impersonal feelings I mistook for personal ones, or more disconcertingly, blurred with actual memories. If early Facebook fuelled performative self-commodification, then 'core' memories of sexual initiation are equally vulnerable to dislocation, beyond their being soaked in alcohol. To be clear, *HTHS* fills in all the blanks of a series of encounters, and never calls its maltreated protagonist's experience or recollection into question (which might have been interesting albeit less kosher). Instead, it serves up a suggestive narrative for those of us with similar yet hazy experiences to adopt as a 'generational memoir' – to misquote a girl from the focus group.

When is the film actually set? The present time period was vaguely signified by neon cut-out dresses befitting Love Island and a

hyperspeed TikTok montage at the beginning, but no one was convinced by this digital prelude to a mise-en-scene devoid of scrolling or performing choreography to phones. Gen Z participants of the focus group consolidated negative feedback on the TikTok montage, while I googled Manning Walker to identify her in the room, and confirmed my suspicion that she was born in 1993, just like me. Regardless of the iphone version it features, the film spiritually takes place in the late aughts.

HTHS is a particularly potent trip when it delivers Tara's unmonumental first time near the ocean, likening her to washed up litter on the beach. This pivotal scene is embedded in bleary clubbing montages which cut in and out of her p.o.v., but otherwise, the film is not aesthetically choppy. Its constant chatting shit or taking the piss carry the anxious rise and fall of three nights out, three continuous waves, echoing a more ancient rhythm than IG reels, like waiting days to confront Facebook albums. Between the test screening and its theatrical release, the TikTok montage was deleted from the final cut of *HTHS*, helping to unofficially correct the film's time period from 2022 to around 2008. It remains fitting that Facebook is out of frame, unspoken yet 'in the air' or in the water.

For millennials who experienced a pathological drive to get the hymen out of the way, it was not simply a hangover from the 'toxic' 90s/early 2000s, but also charged by the atmosphere of early Facebook. The pressure to perform or self-commodify on the crude social network accelerated the ordinary mimesis of sexual initiation – of keeping up with the looksmaxxing and nudity of the popular kids. Facebook was a new and mysterious second life, and its deferred, post-party engagement – as opposed to the instantaneous, constant social media of zoomers – meant that it was obscene and ill

considered, even as it charged assumptions about sexual availability before the matter of consent was discussed to death.

The slippery perpetrator of HTHS, called Paddy, who forces a second, even worse encounter on Tara, represents the sort of boy who has consumed too much hardcore porn, and whose clumsy body imitates its movements and positions. Anecdotally, girls who are disconnected from their 'meat suits', who struggle to come, seem most vulnerable to Paddies as well as the pseudo feminist delusion that lots of practice with diverse partners makes perfect. Such exhausting generalisations about millennial coming of age, and its lack of coming and remembering, lead me to discuss autofiction, and specifically a work of 'experimental' writing from 2008, which I tried to consume around the same time I attended the test screening: Annie Ernaux's *The Years*, which forged a genre of 'collective autobiography' (according to the back of the Fitzcarraldo edition).

Ernaux's translator exploits the idiom 'in the air' (p.36) to refer to culture in *The Years*, which refracts French history through her memories, as well as fragments of social habits, photos, books, songs, advertising etc., unknown to her lived experience, but 'in the air.' Po-mo feminine writing tends to fixate on subjective sexual revolution, or deals with history in bits of atmosphere. The former trend includes works like Ernaux's memoir *Simple Passion* (1991), which is a flowing meditation on how an illicit affair distorted her relation to time. The latter, a style of autofiction, is the perfect genre for girls who can't really remember what happened to them. *HTHS* translates both trends on screen: the experiential flow of sex obsession is punctuated by clubbing montages with historically potent Avicii-esque tracks.

Beyond my apparent fixation on the year 2008, *The Years* may be related to *HTHS* through its reliance on the reader's self-projection to make meaning (admittedly I couldn't and stopped trying at page 38). Autofiction compels my projection onto the amnesiac author, just as *HTHS* tempts me to generalise what was 'in the water' around 2008 for anglosphere teens. Cliches contain truth and it may be true that gen Z prefers ketamine to King's Cup, is phone addicted, and undersexed compared to Manning Walker's characters. However convenient or instinctive, it is nevertheless ludicrous to claim that my own teen era was the last gasp of carnal virgin sacrifice before the digital apocalypse. If Western teen culture is stuck on a beach in the noughties, just as seaside towns play its Top 40 hits on loop, it is a stuckness in visceral, unprovable anecdote.

‘insecure average+looking girl washed up on the beach at night in a neon bikini.’ cc Microsoft Bing

I wish Manning Walker had officially decided she was making a film set in 2008 and incorporated more contextual fragments. Weirdly, the Wikipedia list of 2008’s events in the UK includes high profile murders and kidnappings of women and girls, and no other types of crime. If such a film as *HTHS* were directed by a Toronto-born peer (my home city, not Manning Walker’s) and simulated more specifics than crowd-sourced fear of rape and murder, my catharsis might be psychedelic. One or two fragments feel silly whereas two hundred fragments might trigger memories I can ‘work' with. I crave

individualised or cohort-targeted cinematic or perhaps even VR exposure therapy, while fearing it at the same time. Exposure therapy relates to a dubious understanding of memory as a 'palimpsest': one may try to retrace an old shape but will draw something new which distracts from the faded layers below.[2] This is not to say 'disbelieve women' but it is wise to keep one's wits about cultural products that feel like group therapy.

I thought *HTHS* accurately recalled a former time, but perhaps I am writing about it to neutralise my own 2008 with pollutants in the air now. The more I retell on myself, the less I remember acutely, and so dart my eyes between 'eras' and their signs, hoping to 'recover' memories in the phantasmagoria. My contemporaries who do EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing, an American-born method of exposure therapy to 'process' memory, which involves darting one's eyes back and forth while recounting something in a suggestible state, are at risk of co-writing a new story with the therapist, just as writers of autofiction suggest a collective autobiography through fragments or intensities which trigger impersonal feelings easily mistaken for personal ones.

An early version of this essay contained eight pages of empathic close reading of *HTHS*'s devastating nuance, but thankfully my collaborators reminded me this is for an e-zine, not *Cahiers du Cinema*. I had written as if I were still beholden to the focus group and wanted Molly to know that I *got* all of her choices. The facilitated discussion post-screening and the pretence of collective contribution were unconvincing, and none of the participants' comments struck chords. Yet, I was moved by seeing the director IRL, in the vulnerable position of asking for feedback. It was easy to

[2] While the cognitive science of memory and its relation to exposure therapy remain hotly debated, the 'palimpsest' metaphor is now used by scientists, as well as cult studies hacks, to describe dynamic consolidation of multiple memories on 'different time scales.'

imagine her life as similar to mine in solidarity rather than competition. I thought the film was made for my ‘shadow self’ so that I might observe her (insecure + average) with fresh care.

Projecting my ‘shadow’ in a nonspecific locale provided a similar rush as I once felt when notified that I was tagged on Facebook, excited that I might be seen in a new light. Seeing a former self in Tara was not flattering, because her activities in Greece were depressing, but she was lovably played by Mia McKenna Bruce and her childlike manner flirted with the attractive moral high ground of victimhood. In all honesty, the loss of my virginity on a beach was nowhere near as tragic; I was drunk but somewhat in charge of the scenario, or somewhat aware of my self-annihilation, and there was laughter throughout, but that’s another autofic.

DeLillo Has Logged On

Joe Oswald

“A commercial aeroplane in the sky” cc Microsoft Bing

It would piss me off if I didn’t like him so much, but the great boomer novelist Don DeLillo beat our whole generation to write the first true novel of the internet age. Novels have taken the internet as a subject before, of course, but they’ve never got right inside, sentence by sentence, the way the world feels since the end of

information scarcity. I was starting to think it's impossible: that the difference between the speed of a novel and the speed of the internet is too great, you can understand one but never both. Moving an internet-speed brain down to novel-speed would be a heroin-withdrawal-like process of sweating and crying and shaking, and would not be conducive to novel writing. You can still have well-written novels as long as they restrict themselves to the fewer and fewer parts of life not yet ruled by the information superhighway, otherwise your piece of writing will not much exceed the length of a tweet before collapsing, any attempt at coherent structure eaten away by exposure to the noise. And yet in Don DeLillo's 17th novel, *The Silence*, he does both. As Jim Kripps and Tessa Berens are flying home across the Atlantic on Super Bowl Sunday, every electronic screen suddenly goes dark and just like that DeLillo has figured out the metaphor to let him write the internet without losing the clarity you expect from a real professional 20th century novelist.

It's not the first time he's done the impossible. Again and again DeLillo has been forced into a kind of guerrilla war, figuring out how writing survives in a world hostile to the novel and dominated by other mediums – film in the seventies, then TV in the eighties, and now the internet. Film was no problem. It was a worthy adversary and only inspired DeLillo to greatness. TV however was a challenge, because DeLillo had to work out how to write about a shallow, ugly era without resorting to shallow, ugly writing. But he did work this out, and in working it out he got good practice for how he would one day take on the internet. The clue to how DeLillo did this is in a mixed complement he gave to William J Gaddis' J R, a novel that faced the same challenges but responded – arguably – by being shallow and ugly to reflect that kind of world. DeLillo:

> ‘Years later, when I was a writer myself, I read J R, and it seemed to me, at first, that Gaddis was working against his own gifts for narration and physical description, leaving the great world behind to enter the pigeon-coop clutter of minds intent on deal-making and soul-swindling.’

But he goes on:

> ‘J R in fact is a realistic novel - so unforgivingly real that we may fail to recognize it as such. It is the real world of its own terms, without the perceptual scrim that we tend to erect (novelists and others) in order to live and work safely within it.’

DeLillo works his way around to praising Gaddis, and yet his solution to the same dilemma was the exact opposite. DeLillo didn’t look at the world without that perceptual scrim, but neither did he look through it: he looked at it. He made ‘the scrim’ his subject. Where other writers might ultimately come back to class, or faith, or capitalism, or feminism, or whatever, for DeLillo it’s always ‘the scrim’. Call it ‘the medium’ or call it information itself. This is what he writes about.

Think of DeLillo as fiction’s Marshall McLuhan, the intellectual pioneer of media theory. It’s easy to imagine McLuhan’s most famous catchphrase ‘the medium is the message’ in a DeLillo book, undercut only a little when given voice by a mentally ill ad-exec or Hitler studies professor. It could be his genius, or it could just be luck, but it turns out ‘information’ was exactly the right lens to use for DeLillo to understand the world from the 70s through to the present day.

Looking at the TV age in terms of ‘information’ meant understanding what it meant to have just a few channels delivering narratives to everyone at the same time. The scarcity gave TV’s narratives incredible power: if you saw something on TV you could be pretty sure everyone else did too. So the situation DeLillo’s characters found themselves in was not that different from what DeLillo himself was facing. There was an all powerful lowest common denominator narrative everyone was floating in and trying to swim against it as an individual was nearly impossible. You can feel in DeLillo’s post 70s novels the constant pull of it like gravity. But you can also see the attempts of his characters to do what he’s doing and fight back. It’s his focus not on one side of this conflict but on the tug of war itself that is how DeLillo resolves the paradox of wanting to make the banality of the 80s his subject without becoming part of the banality of the 80s.

So how to extend this into the internet age? If all *The Silence* was doing was rerunning DeLillo’s old moves from TV’s moment it wouldn’t feel nearly as alive or as current as it does. Something has fundamentally changed in the digital era. Meditate on the different implications of White Noise and Silence for a preview of the answer. Even if it’s just as hostile to writers and individuals, what’s going on under the surface of the digital era in information terms is the exact opposite of what was going on under Television. This is what makes it so remarkable that DeLillo was able at age 80-something to flip his analysis on its head and ‘get’ the new world quicker even than people who grew up in it.

So what changed? In the days when TV reigned a novelist like DeLillo couldn’t change the culture because he was locked out of the few channels firehosing narratives to the whole society at once – today he can’t because every single person has access to the channels and

he gets drowned in the noise. *The Silence* is the book where DeLillo takes the tools he used to write about the scarcity conditions of the TV age, and turns them on the post-scarcity of the internet era. The punchline is that the endpoint of ever increasing abundance of information in the digital era is exactly equivalent to total scarcity, to Silence. Like a whine getting higher and higher in pitch until it disappears from our hearing completely, there is a point where the flow of information is so overwhelming it is no longer information at all. If you want to imagine the future of communication in the 21st century, DeLillo says you should imagine not an exaggeration of the 20th, but instead something more like the information world of the 19th century, or the 18th, 17th, 16th, 15th... 3... 2... 1....

The Silence opens far above the Atlantic Ocean as a couple fly home for the Super Bowl kickoff. The husband is hypnotised by his in-flight informational display. He reads out current speed, altitude, temperature, time in Paris, time in New York while his wife – a poet – tries to write down everything that happened on their trip so it will never be forgotten. This is the world of infinite information. It's a world where no meaning, no feeling, can break through the noise to pass from husband to wife. Their marriage is one of those legacy institutions from before the age of digital communication that could not be built today and now survives only on inertia. There's something perfect about DeLillo setting this moment on a plane. In flight from one place to another it feels like life's on pause, as if obligations and hard decisions can be safely ignored until you land in a few hours. This is how people live online now too, convincing themselves time is hardly moving and you can ignore life's choices until you touch down in, maybe a few years.

DeLillo knows a book that lived only on this level of unreality would get boring, so what could be a better way to 'touch grass' than a plane crash? This is when every electronic screen on the plane, and in the world, dies. Jim Kripps and Tessa Berens begin their long fall back to the real world, while at that very moment the friends waiting on their arrival look around in confusion as the Super Bowl on their TV goes dark.

It's actually the key to the book that *The Silence* revolves around a football game. Football has been many things to DeLillo. In his perfect second novel, End Zone, it was his way of understanding total nuclear armageddon. But by the time of *The Silence* he's sworn off this analogy – as one character puts it in a direct rebuke to seventies DeLillo 'we've gone beyond all comparisons between football and war [...] war is something else, happening somewhere else.'

So why is football so prominent in *The Silence*? DeLillo's long interest in understanding the mediation of reality left him with a nagging curiosity in whatever its exact opposite is, reality at its least mediated, its most physical, or its most embodied. It's the glimpses DeLillo gives you of these exceptions that make his rule so clear.

This is what football is in *The Silence*. It's the heir to his long-running obsession, almost to the point of professional jealousy, with terrorism. Reading interviews with DeLillo from the nineties you could be forgiven for thinking he was considering a career change.

Imagine we're compiling a dossier of evidence to support a drone strike on the author as he steps out of his New York home. Here is the first damning quote:

> 'There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists [...] Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated.'

The second:

> 'True terror is a language and a vision. There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to.'

And the final trigger for our strike:

> 'In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. There's too much everything, more things and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes.'

Fortunately this was the nineties, before the invention of cancel culture or the MQ-9 Reaper, so DeLillo survived this intellectual exercise of his. It's worth stating this was no radical chic belief in terrorism as the voice of the voiceless or something like that. DeLillo was as interested in Maoists as he was in Islamists or even Lee Harvey Oswald, who were for him all part of the same phenomenon.

‘Older balding Italian-American author wearing a tweed jacket without tie playing NFL Football video game in business class on a transcontinental flight.’ cc Microsoft Bing

Terrorism for DeLillo was the key to understanding the world of the late 20th century because it was, by design, more powerful than mediation itself. To put it very simply terrorists were among the few people who could decide what the main subject of the evening news would be. This was a power DeLillo was jealous of. It was his long journey to work out why terrorists could do this and he couldn’t that ultimately gave him, if not the power to shape the eighties and nineties, at least the power to describe the era better than anyone else.

It turns out what the terrorists had that the novelists didn't was scarcity, and scarcity is value. For TV, while it ruled, its power came from the scarcity of the complex equipment needed to broadcast a message to the world. But terrorism rests on an even more fundamental scarcity: the scarcity of people willing to give their lives for a cause. It's this connection terrorism has to the physical world and the human body that makes it impossible to mass produce and therefore rare, therefore always able to command our attention. In contrast our high-flying stories, ideologies, narratives, and novels can be copied and pasted infinitely, into blur and glut with zero value. DeLillo's books give such a clarifying vision of the world because they locate everything on this spectrum between the few things still rooted to the physical world or the human body and the ever-growing mass of mediated ideas. This is why terrorism was DeLillo's fascination for at least a decade before 9/11, at which point he had to switch things up a little since the real world had now caught up to his theories a bit too completely.

Here's a question TV industry analysts struggle with that DeLillo could answer without blinking. As pro sports begin to experience the kind of difficulties holding onto their audience that the novel went through in the 20th century, why is one sport going the other way, its audience continuing to grow year after year? For the NFL, it's like the 20th century never ended. While the NBA hangs on with 1 to 2 million viewers for a regular season game the NFL is pulling in 15 to 20 million, numbers you could likely only surpass with live footage of a real unfolding terrorist attack. The reason is that while the NBA has 82 games in a season, and MLB 162, the NFL has 17 and you can't add any more because the players would simply break down, so great is the demand football makes on the human body. For

capitalism, scarcity is a personal insult and an invitation to get rich, which is why everyone now walks around with the same broadcasting power as nineties CNN in their pocket and TV is a spent force culturally. Durable power comes only when scarcity is ineradicable. This is the through-line that takes DeLillo from football in End Zone back in 1972, through an interest in all the varieties of 20th century terrorism, and then back to football for 2020's *The Silence*. As different as the TV world looks compared to the time of the internet, DeLillo's vision of both as defined by their antithesis to anything grounded makes clear that the former was always destined to collapse into what we have now.

However much DeLillo tries to swear off the symmetry between football and war that he had figured out fifty years ago, reality has no problem cribbing from his notes. On the Saturday, as I was revising this piece, a new war between Israel and Gaza began. My twitter feed was like a bootleg DeLillo novel as it split itself fifty-fifty between updates on the war and the day's games. Hamas is advancing into Israel – now Ohio State moving into Maryland territory – Israel fighting back – Hamas to the 18 yard line of UCLA – Penn State striking Hezbollah from the air—outrage at the blatant war crimes the referees keep missing! DeLillo always has to be moving on to new ideas because the real world keeps ripping off whatever he was writing ten years ago.

So Jim Kripps and Tessa Berens survive the crash and find their way to their friends' apartment where everyone stands in confusion around the dead TV. This is DeLillo's chance to tell us what comes after the flood of information reaches the point it fades into silence. And now the book makes its concession to the internet. It is incredibly short at just 128 pages, or 1567 kilobytes. So what comes next? We don't know. In the book's funniest moment one of the

characters launches into an imagined commentary of the game they can't see, as if faced with silence people will just hallucinate the noise again:

> 'Max said, "Avoids the sack, gets it away—intercepted!" [...] His use of language was confident, she thought, emerging from a broadcast level deep in his unconscious mind'

But mostly what we see is the grand narratives fade away and what is left is just the relationship between people who know each other physically. Faced with what might be an attack from a foreign power, or a natural disaster, no one knows if they should freak out because there's no media to tell them they're allowed to. The characters do feel frozen, but also like they're just starting now to use muscles they didn't know they had, imagining for themselves the stories they will need to make sense of their world. I'm reminded of being in New York after Hurricane Sandy when the electricity went out, and everywhere people who never normally would interact were thrown together and forced just to talk, unmediated. But then the power came back on.

Plague Phenomena

Anon

“The final end, gentleman: better to do nothing! Better conscious inertia! And so, long live the underground! Though I did say that I envy the normal man to the point of uttermost bile, still I do not want to be him on those conditions in which I see him (though, all the same, I shall not stop envying him. No, no, the underground is in any case more profitable!).”

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

Last year we were all nobodies. An evening could change one’s life. There was spirit in the network. People had been let out from isolation and they were posting about it. I met a Milady in real life. NFTs had an aura about them. There was money. Warholian group chats seemed like the future of art, virtual artistic factories, everybody could be a star. Everybody was starting a Substack. There was love. People lowered their guard. Did you think that forging the future would involve sitting around the campfire singing kumbaya? Reality has fangs. Whatever’s outside the simulation has sharp teeth and will bite. The plague has passed, that particular simulation glitched out of existence, bugged into oblivion. All that is left of that pregnant moment is a jpeg on the blockchain. I’ve been sent so many tokens. I was told holding them represented my belief in the value of its community. They’re all worthless now. RIP Warholian group chats RIP IndieThinkers RIP Urbit RIP Angelicism01 RIP Bronze Age Pervert RIP PariahTheDoll RIP Wet Brain RIP Based Retard Gang RIP Twitter RIP Red Scare RIP Dimes Square. Everything that deterritorialised has been reterritorialised on a familiar pattern.

Young men just want to look like Timothée Chalamet. Zoomers just want to look like Zillenial mixed-race celebrities. Depressed academics are now running multi-level marketing schemes. Previously suicidal artists now talk of shareholder value. But it's a bear market, people are slitting their wrists again. It's autumn again. The summer didn't feel real. I want to kms. Who could've thought that one would have to fight to stay alive growing up in the twilight of social democracy? Perhaps when the state asks whether you'd like some help to kill yourself. I suppose I did think of life, not out loud but suggested through my actions, as a long retirement, a life of leisure. I was insane. I was a vulgar Marxist. Comes as a beautiful shock to realise Capital is the Concept, is an intelligent being, a vast, decentralised optimisation process. To ignore it is to assume the status of a gnat. It's really the same as ignoring God. Landian accelerationism is a Protestant denomination. Leisure is a privilege bestowed upon Capital's most loyal knights, those with the highest transaction volumes, those who reach escape velocity. 'Between lululemon whores with office-job delusions of grandeur and a lumpy barely sentient woman most incels will choose the latter. Their children will be slaves and they will be happy, happy like ants, doing someone else's work.' Worms, rats — these I believe are the rhizomatic animals that burrow and scale and energetically pursue their own self-interest, like a cuckoo chick, like squirming maggots. Our instinct is to wince at such monstrous callousness, at such adendritic growth which cannot be stopped with a cut to some stem, cannot be felled. How did Hercules kill Hydra? I'll ask Chat GPT, which didn't exist a year ago, didn't exist in the public consciousness, wasn't used by homosexuals on trains. 'Killing the Hydra was a challenging task because for every head Hercules cut off, two more would grow in its place.' A linear growth, a polynomial of the first degree. A labour alright but not an explosive one. The trick was to have Iolaus cauterise the necks

after decapitation. Apparently that stopped the growth. And the clearest evidence showing Hydra wasn't rhizomatic is the central head with its special status. Just another dendritic structure with a stem and branches. We're dealing with something else, something creepy crawly, something exponential, spore-like, not branching and hierarchical. *Cough* *cough* *cough*.

'An anonymous internet writer in the dark, spiral art' cc Microsoft Bing

Reterritorialised on the New York Times bestseller list, in a book published by Penguin Random House, on the balance sheet of an

investment fund. What was I thinking? What was my standard? To recognise myself, a loser, in art. I thought that this pandemic art, these plague phenomena, were a disinterested parallel hahahaha, that they were hyperstitional, bringing something new into being. Instead they're absorbed like Mark Fisher would say into the ordinary process of commodity production, negative feedback loops kicking in, regulating behaviour according to the profit and prestige motive. I can't believe I'm such a crusty Marxist in spirit not in word. I must find God again, must break out of the retirement castle. I've never been in a fist fight. I've never made a ruthless business move. When I was little, four or five, I used to escape the house and run up the hill to sit like a Rodin figure on a rock pondering the burly grey landscape all the way to the sea. I haven't stopped ruminating like a cow. Deprived of middle-class comforts I aspired to nothing more than a house, to some friends, a publication. Now I'm comfortably lower middle class and my desires have changed. Poasting as art, anime pfps have evolved into a vague promise of shares in a Fortune 500 metaverse business. Plague phenomenon group chat has shifted from an alternative timeline to an accelerated future, a prediction, oracular scribblings, acausal trades with a daemon from the year 2100. I'm so nostalgic for five minutes ago when my favorite poasters hadn't yet escaped into reality. I'm so nostalgic for virtuality. I should've taken the blue pill. Reality has teeth and my skin is thin. Mastery is illusory. Mastery is a psyop, exit liquidity. Capitalist realism baby. We've always been at war from the moment we logged on. I thought I was a lord but I was just infantry in some daemonic battle. Modernity is idolatry, the minuscule humuncular lord of the self. My friend said he doesn't have a stable sense of self. I said stop bragging. Nostalgia for facemasks, nostalgia for podcasts, nostalgia for underground poasting. Everyone is facefagging, the mystique is gone, the spirit has left the network. The characters of plague phenomena have made

their bag and cashed out. God is speaking to us through something else (perhaps it’s as Nick Land says, that the sublime intelligence of the future has curated our canonical works and is speaking to us there, through Adam Smith and Kant. I became a retrochronologist yesterday listening to a podcast on a train. I’ve stopped worrying and practice numerology, syncretic mysticism. I’ve lost myself, given up familiar clichés for other readymades, objets trouvés. I’m shopping around for a philosophy, a reason not to kms, to not kms like Gilles Deleuze).

‘two young men and two young women sitting on a chesterfield couch in a central london bookshop being shown the door by a fifth younger genderqueer woman with a septum ring.’ cc Microsoft Bing

London, UK

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