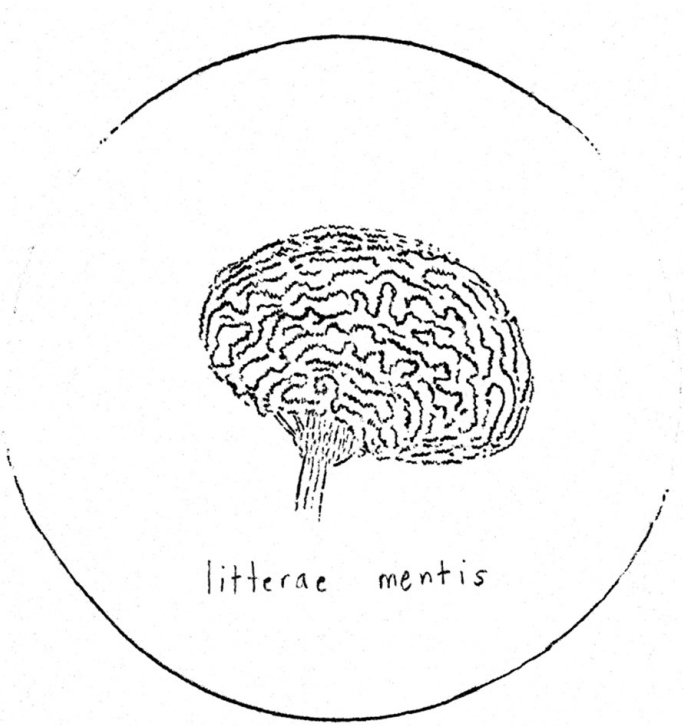
LITTERAE MENTIS



LITTERAE MENTIS

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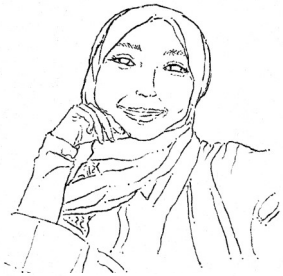

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Table of Contents

Editorial

Welcome to the sixth issue of *Litterae Mentis: A Journal of Literary Studies*, the University of Kent's postgraduate journal of literary criticism. Compiled by postgraduate students from the School of English which funds the journal, Litterae Mentis provides a platform for both MA and PhD students to publish papers about areas of literature that they have passion for. The journal aims to encourage unique research from new academic voices that echo the varied interdisciplinary interests of the academic community at the University of Kent.

The creation of this issue has been indelibly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Representing this aspect was key for Ayesha Chouglay whilst she created the artwork for the front cover and the illustrations featured throughout this volume. The circular artworks are primarily based on screenshots of video calls, created in response to the pandemic, and to commemorate the way we have remained connected during these unprecedented times. Some are collages and some painted with gouache. Most depict video calls between two people. One illustration is based on a screenshot of plant pots from one such conversation, and the cover image is of two people sitting in a local park, spending time together in a socially distanced way. Life has been surreal for us all recently. These images show now familiar scenes in a different way, encouraging us to examine the everyday more closely, and to perhaps see ourselves in them and reflect.

The papers you will encounter in this issue explore a variety of themes, each connected by the common thread of pleasure, and that they have all been written during the pandemic. What have you found pleasure in during the pandemic? Something we have found pleasure in is staying in contact with others. This is something our journal aims to do; to keep people connected through a common focus and goal. One of the strangest elements of this crisis has been in its mundanity for many people, in the tedious months of isolation, and in our distance from others. There is immense loss happening, and a collective grief. Staying connected and finding pleasure are more important than ever.

We have thoroughly enjoyed putting this journal together and would like to thank the School of English for their support, guidance and advice throughout the process. In particular, we are extremely grateful to Dr Matthew Whittle and Megan Barrett for their advice and guidance. We would also like to thank Dr Declan Wiffen for his beautiful introduction to this issue. We would like to extend our

gratitude to Dr Derek Ryan, Dr Will Norman, Professor Caroline Rooney, and Dr Leslie de Vries for their insightful and constructive peer reviews. Finally, we would like to thank all of the contributors to this issue, without whom this issue could not have come to life.

The *Litterae Mentis* Editorial Team 2020

In Lieu of an Introduction: Eleven Preludes on Pleasure

Declan Wiffen

i.

When I was invited to write an introduction to this edition of *Litterae Mentis* my thoughts turned to Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text,* which I and some of the editors had discussed together in September 2019. When re-reading my copy, I saw a scribble in the margin next to the word *'tmesis': broken up words*. Fragments, I thought? I couldn't remember. When I looked in the dictionary for clarity, a-whole-nother perspective emerged: *the separation of parts of a compound word by an intervening word or words, used mainly in informal speech for emphasis (e.g. can't find it any-blooming-where). From the Greek tmesis 'a cutting'.*

ii.

Barthes writes that 'A text on pleasure cannot be anything but short …[…]…it will be an introduction to what will never be written.'[1] In lieu of an introduction there is the prelude, Chopin's Preludes for instance, for which he never composed pieces to follow. Critics at the time perceived shorter forms as lacking seriousness and they were dismissed as 'coquettish' or 'feminine'. In Opus 28 there are twenty-four Preludes and there is pleasure in considering them a whole, which includes one piece in every major and minor key. But there is *jouissance,* perhaps, in each prelude standing alone, finishing before

you're ready. Jeffrey Kallberg writes that 'The endings to the Preludes seldom give comfort…their gesture at closure sound unrelated to what has passed before.'[2] Closure, grandeur and comfort may have been expected by Chopin's contemporaries, but that which resists resolution, is left untied, leaves a gap, flashes, stages 'an appearance-as-disappearance'[3]

opens the world of desire.

iii.

Wayne Koestenbaum is ever interrupting himself - 'To be torn apart / Is my ambition'[4] - on the page. His essays are written in sections and there is rarely any continuous prose without a break. Sometimes the parts are numbered or given titles; elsewhere portions are separated with a small black diamond, a line, or a gap. In the book *Humiliation* he calls the numbered segments 'fugues' for the association with counterpoint and the 'wandering away from one's own identity.'[5] To wander is to go astray; to err from an ordained path; to flee the self, an impossibility that pleasure makes possible.

Is this what Barthes means when he says that the blissful text is one that 'imposes a state of loss…that discomforts'[6]?

iv.

In Hilton Als' *White Girls* the essay 'Triste Tropiques' is a travelogue of self-and-other. It sets off like an old steam train building speed, gradually, as the energy of Als' style pours into the furnace of his sentences until the writing feels like it might take you up off the tracks, hitting a bend and opening up

a whole new vista of identity, becoming so fast and unstoppable that all distinctions get blurred and I/ you/we are lost in the world of the text: who is the reader and who is writer?

'Triste Tropiques' explodes categories through (dis)identifications that cut across race, gender and sexualities - particularly through the narrator's relationship with SL (Sir/Lady). Despite their not being lovers, Als feels a twinship with his friend - 'SL and I were each other's hall of mirrors' - and the question that haunts this eighty-three page essay becomes: what makes a 'we' and what makes an 'I'? Or, spoken otherwise through SL - 'Are we co-dependent?' These questions are also taken up with other figures in Als' life: childhood friends, various 'white girls', lovers, and most significantly SL's beloved, who Als nicknames Mrs. Vreeland. In a triangulation between these three, Als writes that 'Mrs. Vreeland and I were the same and even though I thought it was impossible for SL to love us the same, he did until he didn't.'[7]

The cutting, stitching, switching of identification that slice through Als' essay is exhilarating.

Therefore, I can't agree with Rich Benjamin when he writes in his *New York Times* review that 'a maddening attention deficit hamstrings the collection.' Benjamin's critique focuses on the ending of 'Triste Tropiques' where he writes:

> Als takes the reader to his beloved Mrs. Vreeland's deathbed as a means of excavating his own soul; he then abruptly pivots to commentary on the documentary film "The Central Park Five" and an excoriation of the "two white women" who prosecuted the Central Park jogger rape case and "trafficked in lies that helped destroy a number of lives." Come again? Fused so haphazardly, each reflection competes and becomes

truncated, and thus deflated.[8]

Au contraire - please come again, Als - I'll ride this train all day!

Journeying with Als allows us the possibility of enjoying both 'the consistence of selfhood' and to 'seek its loss' in these truncated reflections. In reading we are 'a subject split twice over, doubly perverse.'[9]

After reading this essay - and listening to interviews with Als - I end up watching clips of Lily Tomlin online past 2am. If that isn't proof of the pleasure of his text, I won't convince you.

v.

'Nobody will ever eliminate the polyvocality of desire.'[10]

vi.

I learn the word *apophenia* from the poet Maria Sledmere, which means *the tendency to mistakenly perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things* and is embodied in her poem '99 Rare Candies'[11]. Here is a sequence of five candies selected at random, unless I am myself tending towards apophenia:

26. What hatches, huh?!
27. Along the edge, a glittering
28. Hidden item

29. Mostly a chapter for ghostly recall
30. My thoughts in the water, unfurl as flowers

Some people's mistakes are other people's pleasures. Here are five more:

56. It is ok to fade
57. I miss the deep sea, its darkest glistening
58. Lichen loves me
59. A hyper potion!
60. Forever unsettled

vii.

While I'm out trying to run 10km without stopping - I cut across a field of borage diagonally on a sort-of-footpath with lumps of flint scattered along it so I have to watch where my feet land - and a phrase I read somewhere flashes out of my memory: 'To progress in life you must give up the things you do not like.'

Later, I realise it's Agnes Martin. She continues: 'Give up the things that you do not like to do. You must find the things you do like. The things that are acceptable to your mind.'[12]

The next time I'm out running with fading legs, my body interrupts myself and I need to pee so, I allow myself to stop because I do not like not-stopping. I step behind a tall hedgerow and, as I let go, I look through the leafy mass at the differently coloured lichens that sit on the Hawthorn branches,

nestled inside this structure that separates road from field, and think

there's no one way to be a lichen

viii.

I often feel that pleasure is ambivalent, which is to say: a mixture of contradictory tendencies. For example, the punked-up pastiche of 'Rule Britannia' in Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee* is a risqué-campy performance that clearly mocks the jingoistic patriotism the song embodies: light relief in comparison to the last night of The Proms. But the pleasure of this version is still uncomfortable - the rhyme of waves and slaves cannot be evaded - no matter the style. It seems that ambivalence is intended as Jarman deploys Punk to puncture English Nationalism while simultaneously undermining himself. We are told by the impresario, Borgia Gintz, that the song is 'England's entry to the Eurovision Song Contest' and that 'As long as the music's loud enough we won't hear the world falling apart'. The other tendency here is towards diversion from the economic and social collapse of Thatcherite Britain.

This ambivalence is also seen in Ariel, the poetic-spirit-guide, who appears quoting lines from *The Tempest* verbatim. To Queen Elizabeth I he says 'I come to answer thy best pleasure' to which she asks to see the future of her Kingdom. What is shown to her is a vision of a London where Queen Elizabeth II has been murdered and anarchy and violence are unleashed across the city.

ix.

A section cut from Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts:*

> …a studied evasiveness has its own limitations, its own ways of inhibiting certain forms of happiness and pleasure. The pleasure of abiding. The pleasure of insistence, of persistence. The pleasure of obligation, the pleasure of dependency. The pleasures of ordinary devotion. The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again—not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life. [13]

x.

In response to the Netflix documentary *My Octopus Teacher*, Sophie Lewis reads an 'intrinsic queerness of octopus epistemology-cum-embodiment' as rejected, foreclosed and denied by the white-cis-straight-male protagonist.

Lewis' intervention offers a glimpse into the world of queer-pleasure-ecologies and a critique of the heteronormative fear of desire as excessive, unaccountable, challenging the borders of one's self. Her nomenclature of the now (twitter) famous octopus - 'a queer slut from out of space'[14] – conveyed a joyous wit we all needed after a Spring/Summer in lockdown.

I say all, but many didn't seem to recognise this need - or the pleasure - in Lewis' hot-take, but I thought it was pretty-blooming-good.

xi.

I find myself ever returning to Eve Sedgwick's essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.'[15] Usually, this returning is to think about ambivalence; about reading-as-pleasure; about survival. But today I am drawn to the two places Sedgwick mentions fragmentation. The first is in a gloss of camp sensibility, described as the ''over'- attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety.'[16] The second occurs in a summary of what a reparative practice could mean in relation to hope, which is described as 'often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, [but] is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.'[17]

There is pleasure in following the excessive desire for the fragmentary and collating one's finding into some sort of collective-object - a whole, with holes.

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[1] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text,* trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill, 1975), p. 11.

[2] Jeffrey Kallberg, 'Small 'forms': In defence of the Prelude' in Samson. J. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin (CUP)*, p. 139.

[3] Barthes, p. 10.

[4] Wayne Koestenbaum, 'Shéhérazade', in *The Yale Review,* Volume LXXVII, No. 1, 1987.

[5] Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation,* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011), p. 6.

[6] Barthes, p. 14

[7] Hilton Als, *White Girls,* (Penguin, 2018), (ebook, no page numbers).

[8] Rich Benjamin, 'Shades of Influence' in *The New York Times*, November 8th, (2013).

[9] Barthes, p. 14.

[10] Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire,* trans. Daniella Dangoor, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 50.

[11] Maria Sledmere, '99 Rare Candies', *DATABLEED,* Issue X, https://www.datableedzine.com/maria-sledmere-99-rare-candies.

[12] Agnes Martin, *Writings,* Kunstmuseum, (Winterthur : Edition Cantz, 1991).

[13] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts,* (London: Melville House UK, 2015), p. 140.

[14] Sophie Lewis' Twitter thread can be found here: https://twitter.com/reproutopia/status/1307785450766163968 [accessed 16.10.20]

[15] Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity,* (Duke University Press, 2003), pp., 123-151.

[16] Sedgwick, p. 146.

[17] Ibid., p. 150.

socially distanced

Ayesha Chouglay

evening

Ayesha Chouglay

Collective Pleasure as Unpleasure: The Peer Pressure of Laughter in a Theatrical Comedy Audience

Salamis Aysegul Sentug

The definition of humans as *homo ridens* — laughing man — began with Aristotle.[1] Although human laughter seems 'alarmingly animal' for its mimicry of the animal voice, it is a cognitive act, thus 'quite unbestial', [2] and purely human. Alfie Bown is surprised to see that so much discourse around laughter emphasises its positive side;[3] there have indeed been many discussions on this very human of activities, with most arguments highlighting laughter for the sake of laughter.

Laughter's bad reputation has, since Plato, revolved around its malicious effect on its subject, yet its negative effects on others have been relatively overlooked. There is certainly a link between laughter and pleasure, though by suggesting a range of laughter types — imitative, nervous, hysterical, physiogenic, acerbic — Karl Pfeifer refutes John Morreall's thesis that it only results from a pleasant psychological shift.[4] Nevertheless, Pfeifer also accepts that laughter is one of the most eminent forms of pleasure.[5] A question, then, is how can an overabundance of pleasure create 'unpleasure' via laughter? This article explores the laughter-unpleasure relationship through one particular case: the peer pressure of laughter in an audience watching theatrical comedy. It analyses the ethical boundaries of laughter when experienced as collective pleasure in watching comedy theatre by examining perceived associations between laughter and pleasure.

'However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even

complicity, with other laughers,'[6] claims Bergson. It is a social human event and, like in many such social occurrences, there are non-participators as well as participators. In a place where everyone starts to laugh, the one who cannot see the 'laughable thing' inevitably feels left out. If this is a random occasion, the outsider does not question their inability to, nor desire to, laugh; they are an outsider and not attached to the object of the laughter. Bergson gives a railway carriage as an example for this situation: when a group of people in a carriage who know each other are laughing, it is normal that the outsider is not inclined to laugh with them.[7]

The next question relates to the situations in which people are supposed to laugh and for which a person prepares themselves to laugh, for instance in the audience of a theatrical comedy. How does this affect the psychological state of the one who does not laugh? Not being able to see the 'laughable thing' in this context creates a conundrum for them: the more they are unable to participate in the collective pleasure, the more they feel unease and question their ability to laugh and their understanding of the wit or the comic situation. Thus, the non-laugher eventually becomes the 'other'. Given that Jure Gantar's 'perfectly ethical laughter', that is, 'laughter as an audience reaction that alienates no one' is not possible here: the peer pressure of laughter, or the peer pressure to laugh, alienates the other.[8] As a result, the non-laughing other is no longer connected to the humorous content of the performance or the writer's intentions: they become a victim of the laughter.

To understand the one who does not laugh, we must first understand why the laugher laughs. I will use Bown's 'laugher', a term he claims was used by Kafka,[9] to refer to someone found laughing in any given instance and 'non-laugher' to refer to someone not laughing amongst laughers in the very same instance.

First, I will look at the relationship between theatre and pleasure and then explore the question of what laughers laugh at in theatres by assessing different types of laughter reaction to the comic on stage. In the second part of this article, I will look at various theories of laughter and its relationship to pleasure to identify the non-laugher's position in each discourse so that, in the last section, the unpleasure aspect of laughter will be discussed as an alienating reaction through exploration of the non-laugher's psychology. This article will not only reveal the negative power of laughter but also opens opportunities for new discussion about it by challenging the full spectrum of its meaning.

Harris asserts that it is an early modern European belief that 'one of the goals of the theatre, if not its primary function [is] to "please"'.[10] Since ancient times, there have been many theoretical discussions about the functions of theatre, and, broadly speaking, arguments have fluctuated between its aesthetic value and its moralist role in society. Aristotle claimed that theatre has a therapeutic role through catharsis, a purifying of emotions, by triggering an emotional shift in the audience which results in restoration.[11] Since Aristophanes' *The Frogs* (405 BC), the concept of *paideia* (education) via theatre has been popular, although Dionysus' role as the god of theatre fortifies the idea of theatrical *terpein* (pleasure). As Umberto Eco claims, the primary reason that theatre became popular among Athenians was the joy they took from it.[12] Modern and post-modern discussions have revolved around theatre's moral capacity to transform and provoke, but its capacity to amuse has always been acknowledged. To understand laughter as a reaction of theatre audiences, we must first look at the relationship between the theatre and pleasure, and this means accepting that the theatre is a place that produces pleasure.

According to Tom Stern, there are three types of pleasure: pleasure derived from bodily sensations that can be considered the opposite of pain, pleasure derived from activities that are meant to give pleasure that is 'neither a bodily sensation nor a natural improvement' such as writing poetry or playing music,

and pleasure as entertainment.[13] Entertainment itself contains two features: it must be something that is about to bring pleasure to those involved and it has to be planned or structured to bring pleasure. For Stern, theatre is entertainment for it 'has something non-spontaneous about it.'[14] Theatre is prepared entertainment with an aim to please, and the minds of the audience are structured to *be pleased; that is, people go to the theatre with the intention of experiencing pleasure. We must also accept that the non-laugher has prepared themselves to be pleased just like the rest of the audience.*

One of the most challenging discussions about theatrical pleasure is that its nature differs between tragedy and comedy. This received distinction originates in ancient Greece where the pleasure derived from tragedy was considered significantly more sophisticated than its lowly comic equivalent.[15] Kieran, who argues for comedy's equality with tragedy, outlines three established claims to tragedy's superiority, the first being that 'tragedy, unlike comedy, solicits complex responses from us based upon sympathy'.[16] Second, that the dramatic structure of tragedy is superior. Lastly, there is an assumption that comedy involves a direct response, so its pleasures are less sophisticated, while tragedy gives rise to emotions such as pity and fear which are the 'foundation of morality' and arguably more sophisticated reactions.[17] Given that I am examining laughter as an audience reaction, the focus will be on the pleasures of comedy, which aims at laughter as its primary reaction.

Just as the pleasures of tragedy differ from those of comedy, comic pleasure has its own internal differences, first noted by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics,* says Eagleton, as the distinction between 'well-bred humour and low-bred humour'.[18] Broadly speaking, well-bred, or high comedy requires a certain intellectual capacity, whereas low or light comedy appeals to 'an unconscious laughter reflex'.[19] Pleasure from high comedy primarily resides in the wit of the dialogue, and from low comedy, it comes from watching physical acting and the use of stock characters.[20] Bergson also points to the

distinction between physical and linguistic comedy, which, fundamentally, is wit.[21] A useful example of high comedy is Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895),[22] which, though it uses stereotypical characters as is common in low humour, also uses the skilfully devised plot and dialogic wit, which elevate it to being comically high. Samuel Beckett's *Rough for Theatre II* (1960)[23] is a satire on pessimism and can be seen as another example of high comedy, in this case portraying the callousness of two officials towards a suicide attempt in a humorous way. Slapstick and farce are two key types of low comedy, the simple purpose of which is to generate audience laughter. A good example of this is *Black Comedy* (1965)[24] by Peter Shaffer which is a farcical view of various incidents that happen in a house during a blackout and that reveal all kinds of secrets.

If different types of comedy exist, it follows that there may be different types of laughter reaction in the audience. Laughter has been an indicator of class since ancient times because there has always been a difference between 'civilised amusement and vulgar cracking'.[25] For example, Joseph Pujol, born in 1857, became incredibly popular for farting on stage as a professional flatulist. Known as *Le Pétomane,* Pujol's audiences 'always went wild, crying with laughter, and many women fainted'.[26] This sort of laughter cannot be the same as that produced in reaction to a play like Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit* (1941),[27] a comedy about communicating with ghosts. Laughter at high comedy rests on intellectual appreciation; low comedy laughter is 'unthinking and spontaneous'.[28] Relatedly, Molière was often criticised for not including intellectual wit in his works but generating laughter through his own skills as a comic performer instead, so that his ridiculousness on stage was the object of the laughter.[29]

In this exploration, the event in which the non-laugher feels alienated cannot be a play of high comedy. Since laughter of wit is based on the intellectual capacity of the audience, a non-laugher will question their own intelligence and why they did not understand the wit. In failing to grasp the

humour cognitively, the non-laugher will own the failure, and their disappointment will be of another kind. The unpleasure will be derived from their own failure, not from the laughter of the audience as it would be in low comedy. Thus, laughter as a reaction to high comedy will not have the same alienating effect as laughter at low comedy.

Another relevant aspect of theatrical pleasure is regarding the question of whether the pleasure derived from theatre is 'real' or not, based on the problem of feeling for something that does not *exist*. *How can people feel for something that is fictional despite acknowledging its fictionality?* As Harris suggests, 'while we might be consciously, intellectually aware that we are watching a fiction, this fiction takes on a new, greater, but less conscious reality in the depths of our very being'.[30] Perhaps the non-laugher is more conscious of the fictionality of the play, albeit in the 'depths of their beings', and thus their intellectual engagement affects their emotional response.[31] Moreover, if the comedy is an example of meta-theatre, such as *The Play That Goes Wrong* (2012),[32] a play about staging a play, which points to its own fictionality by continuously reminding the audience that they are watching a play, the effect of any dramatic irony will be diminished. Meta-theatre is a 'narcissistic narrative' that demonstrates mimesis of its own process.[33] But whether or not a comedy is meta-theatre, the non-laugher may obtain less pleasure from the play because they are more conscious of its fictionality. This argument is, of course, only valid if we accept that non-laughing is due to a lack of pleasure.

'The age-old question of those discussing comedy has been that of why we laugh, or of what we laugh at', says Bown.[34] In order to understand the location of the non-laugher, we must look at what laughers laugh at on stage, in terms of what causes laughter at a play and the methods of creating objects of laughter, particularly in low comedy which is where our alienated non-laugher resides.

For Bergson, these structural methods are repetition, inversion and reciprocal interference. 'Repetition for Bergson is a mechanising device' says Eagleton,[35] and, as shall be discussed in detail later, the main element of humour resides in 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living'.[36] The repetition of scenes, characters and sentences all point to the mechanical orchestration of audience laughter. The opening and closing of doors in *Two Into One (1984)*,[37] a farce by Ray Cooney, is an example of using repetition as a way of generating laughter: every time a door opens and another closes, 'the spectators laugh louder and louder.'[38] The second method of creating laughter is, for Bergson, inversion.[39] Flipping a situation or switching roles causes comedy because it is a form of reversal and opposition.[40] Bergson sees this in instances of repetition with a twist, such as robbers being robbed. Bergson's third approach to laughter creation is reciprocal interference in which two independent series of events are interpreted differently by various characters and the misunderstanding derived from this interference creates a comic situation. The two sets of twins in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* (1594)[41] enable a range of such misunderstandings in a striking example of Bergson's reciprocal interference.

Peacock adds two more components to Bergson's structural elements of comedy: timing and anticipation. Comic timing is the usage of rhythm and pause to increase the laughter effect of comedy.[42] A very good example of timing strategy, she says, is performed in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Repetition and the inversion of repetition contributes to another element of comedy, which is anticipation.[43] When a character has already fallen down a well twice, and approaches a third time, the audience expects that the character may fall again. 'The audience expectations can be toyed with' says Peacock, but both gratified and unfulfilled types of anticipation create laughter in the audience.[44] To sum up, these are the main structural elements of low comedy, which make laughers laugh.

Thus far, the relationship between theatre and pleasure has been explored by looking at types of laughter reaction, and what laughers laugh at on stage has also been addressed. In the next section, possible answers *to why* laughers laugh will be discussed by examining a number of theories of laughter, not only to understand why they laugh but also to determine how different theories capture the issue of the non-laugher.

As Sanders asserts,[45] it is impossible to write a history of laughter, only a history of attitudes towards laughter, and investigating such attitudes requires examination of the different theories of humour that acknowledge the nature of laughter events. Multiple theories exist about the nature of the comic instance, and there are three central theories of humour: superiority, relief and incongruity. Each theory will be examined in light of the laughter-pleasure relationship to assess whether or not they refer to the non-laugher. Although these three theories have been used many times in terms of laughter, they will be examined for the first time in this article through the negation of this concept; that is, how they consider non-laughter.

Ridicule and mockery are at the core of superiority theory. David Monro says that 'according to any superiority theory of humour, the laugher always looks down on whatever [they] laugh at, and so judge it inferior by some standard'.[46] As such, superiority theory places feelings of supremacy at the centre of the laughter experience, and comparison is a key word in this framework; the laugher is comparing their situation with that of the object of their laughter. As Marmontel argues, laughter results from a comparison we make, even without noticing, of ourselves with one who we feel is in an inferior situation.[47] The many variations of this theory all suggest that laughter is derisive, with its earliest versions deriving from Plato, Aristotle, and later, from Hobbes.

The first known appearance of the superiority theory is in Plato's *Philebus* dialogue. In questioning the nature of pleasure, Plato claims that 'when we laugh at a ridiculous character portrayed in comedy, we are laughing at that person's self-ignorance'.[48] The idea of the object being 'ridiculous' is developed by Aristotle who argues that we laugh at inferior characters in comedy because we take pleasure in feeling superior to them.[49] Hobbes also explains laughter via this egoistic psychology, arguing that our own power makes us laugh at the less powerful.[50] A modern proponent of this conception is Bergson whose own theory of laughter has its grounding in humiliation. Bergson does not offer an essentialist account of superiority theory, according to Eagleton, but offers a version of the theory by claiming that 'all humour, is really intended to humiliate, involving as it does a form of secret freemasonry or complicity with those who share one's contemptuous views'.[51]

To locate the non-laugher in superiority theory, we must grasp its view of the relationship between laughter and pleasure. Superiority is directly linked to a unique kind of pleasure, one which is derived from another person's failure or misfortune, and therefore, laughter is not ethically neutral according to this theory.[52] Marmontel, another defender of this approach to humour, claims that malice is the principle of all comedy.[53]

This understanding of laughter through a sense of superiority has transformed into schadenfreude theory, which is based on evil pleasure.[54] *Schadenfreude* is a German word defining malicious joy. It is a compound of schaden, meaning damage or harm, and freude, meaning joy. Ridout gave as an example for schadenfreude Brecht's satire play *The Good Person of Szechwan (*1943), which is a play about gods seeking a good person on earth. At the end, the narrator places the audience in a position to solve the problem of how a good person could maintain its goodness in a world that, fundamentally, is not good. The gods (presumably representing a typical bourgeois theatre audience) claim: 'this little

world // has quite captivated us // your joys and sorrows // have refreshed us and touched us'. This is a good example of *schadenfreude,* implying that the audience, like the gods, have been captivated by the little world of theatre, and in the process, their emotions have been refreshed through the suffering of others on stage.[55]

Attributing the pleasure of comedy to maliciousness reaches back to Plato, who describes the joy of laughter, and particularly laughter at the ridiculous, as showing how 'some pleasures are tainted with pain'.[56] The Platonist understanding of comic pleasure is therefore mixed with both malice and pain, and when we laugh at a ridiculous character, we are laughing at their self-ignorance.[57] Bergson also states that the 'comic person is unconscious'; their absentmindedness and their 'ignorance of themselves' is what makes us laugh.[58] The character's unawareness of themselves combines with our awareness of their situation to put us in a superior condition. As Sivry has also underlined, laughter is derived from our pride at seeing others humiliated.[59]

Is it only a comparison to the inferior that explains comic pleasure in this theory of superiority? Other than laughter derived from seeing others humiliated, what else can make us feel superior?

To some, laughter does not come from comparing oneself only to another but also to variations of the self. Within this perspective, amusement contains an element of self-deprecation. As Morreall asserts, superiority theory can be interpreted with self-deprecating humour to find comic joy 'over a former state of ourselves'.[60] Ferenczi, in acknowledging the power of superiority theory, holds a similar view that comedy can be seen 'as a form of solidarity with the flaws'.[61] In this context, it is not simply that we look down and laugh at others' humiliation, but that laughter originating this way can promote a capacity for self-reflection through identification to flaws with which we can relate. As Eagleton

explains, this Lacanian approach to laughter allows us to recognise the Other because it 'embodies our own defects'[62] and we acknowledge them with mixed pleasure and self-deprecation; when we laugh at them, we 'enjoy the freedom to parade our imperfections'.[63]

Nevertheless, Eagleton finds the superiority theory 'not only implausible but also funny,'[64] and there are many possible counter examples. As Hutcheson argues, feelings of superiority are neither necessary nor sufficient for laughter. For example, in the event of laughter, we may not be comparing ourselves with anyone else or with ourselves, and there are many instances in which laughter is not based on mockery or ridicule.[65] Superiority theory may explain some laughter events but it is not a conclusive, standalone theory for comic pleasure.

How does superiority theory capture the non-laugher? What does it suggest about their psychology? In order to investigate the issues these questions are raising, we must assume that the theory is plausible and accept that the laughers are laughing because they feel superior to the comedic object on stage.

Firstly, if the laughers are only laughing because they feel superior, the non-laugher cannot themselves be feeling superior. This suggests that the non-laugher is either not comparing themselves to a former self-state or with the object, or is simply not 'motivated by a malign urge to do others down'.[66]

A reason that the non-laugher does not feel superior could be their capacity for empathy. As Aristotle suggests, laughter entails a certain lack of empathy between the spectator and the character.[67] Relatedly, Beaumarchais argues that laughter obstructs self-reflection and hinders emotional engagement with the characters we see being humiliated. Comic pleasure here is derived from an 'arrogant disidentification' from the object of laughter.[68] As he puts it 'the laughter produced in us by

some witty barb dies on its victim ever without rebounding back into our hearts'.[69] Laughter is not compatible with empathy as, according to Bergson, it "imposes silence upon our pity'. So, the object of laughter 'must not arouse our feelings,'[70] and the non-laugher is moved by their emotions. If empathy exists, the laughter process involves more emotion and less rationalism, meaning that the more the non-laugher empathises with the object, the more emotion is aroused in them which itself prevents them from feeling superior.

The second possible way that superiority theory would explain a non-laugher is a situation in which they are indeed feeling superior, not to those on the stage, but to the laughing audience around them. If people laugh because they feel superior to the laughable thing, for the non-laugher, the laughter is itself laughable and they therefore could see themselves as superior to those who laugh at the original object; their laughter becomes the new object and this meta-laughter creates a new grounding for this theory. However, when the ridicule of the object of laughter on stage becomes the laughable thing, the non-laugher may still not laugh despite their desire to, because their sense of superiority prevents them from doing so. They may not want to align themselves with the laughers, and so their laugh remains unborn. This shift in the object of laughter justifies how superiority theory might capture the non-laugher.

The second key theory of laughter relates to release or relief, and it argues that humour is derived from the psychic energy generated by repression and laughter is the act which relieves this nervous feeling. In his 1911 essay 'On the Physiology of Laughter', Herbert Spencer was the first to describe the movement of laughter as a release of energy, arguing that these movements 'have no object' since they are just the release of 'nervous energy'.[71] Spencer presents the reaction of a theatre audience watching a dramatic play as an example: at the moment that two arguing lovers are finally reunited, a goat

enters the scene which causes much laughter. After experiencing the climactic tension of the play, the audience burst into laughter at the arrival of the goat because 'a large mass of emotion, a large portion of the nervous system which was in a state of tension, was released into muscular movements'; the audience 'cannot help joining in the roar'.[72]

Freud is another proponent of relief theory, who also argued that 'the psychic energy normally used to do the repressing becomes superfluous, and is released in laughter'.[73] According to Freud, humour is a kind of defence mechanism to overcome negative emotions. In his three-fold classification of laughter events, the *joke* involves superfluous energy that is linked to suppressed, repressed or censored feelings. The *comic* acts upon intellectual energy, and humour releases energy that is emotional. Each event releases a sudden change in the psychological state, which results in laughter.[74]

As previously, we must grasp relief theory's conception of the link between laughter and pleasure to locate the non-laugher. Firstly, the association of laughter with pleasure in this framework illustrates elements of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Since the censored object is repressed, and the 'censor is beguiled', 'it is presupposed that such (censored) devices are a source of pleasure in themselves'.[75] This pleasure specifically relates to the joke, although we are interested in the relationship between pleasure and the comic or the absurd situation on stage, as this is where our non-laugher will reside.

According to this theory, the pleasure associated with the comic derives from the 'saving of energy required for thought'.[76] When the audience laughs at the object of laughter, they are releasing repressed energy which had been accumulated for cognitively processing the situation. Since they understand that the energy is no longer required, they let it go; pleasure is derived from this process and from understanding that it was not necessary. The economics of this energy release is the route of

pleasure in the theory of relief. The laugher must, however, be unprepared that energy is to be released, and they must experience a sudden change of psychological temper. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, this must be a 'pleasant psychological shift' for laughter to occur.[77]

As with superiority, the relief theory cannot offer a universal explanation for laughter. Although it can illuminate many parts of the discussion, it cannot provide sufficient grounding to explain all laughter events. Nevertheless, in order to scrutinise how it captures the non-laugher, we should accept the theory's basic plausibility. How does relief theory formulate the non-laugher? Why is the non-laugher's superfluous energy not discharged by laughter too? An explanation could be that the psychological change in the non-laugher's temper is not a pleasant one, as 'an unpleasant psychological shift will not lead to laughter'.[78]

We assume that the laughers and the non-laugher are intellectually engaged with the comic on stage so that cognitive energy is required to understand the situation. When the audience recognises the absurdity, the cognitive energy they no longer need to invest is released into laughter. However, excessive laughter, meaning the laughter of everyone else in theatre, creates tension within the non-laugher before the non-laugher's surplus energy can become laughter; this is not because a conscious thought process is happening, but rather, quite instantly, the psychological shift becomes unpleasant and laughter does not occur.

Here, we must accept the theory's view that laughter is a physical behaviour and act, rather than just a pleasant feeling of amusement. Although the non-laugher may feel amused, their expression of amusement is dominated by another psychological temper: the stress caused by excessive laughter. As Morreall argues, laughter is not the psychological shift itself, nor the pleasant feeling that the shift

produces, but the result of the pleasant psychological shift.[79] This may not be a completely satisfactory explanation, but relief theory proposes little else in terms of envisioning the non-laugher.

Lastly, we will explore the third prominent theory of laughter, namely the incongruity theory, which was first hinted at by Aristotle but 'did not come into its own until Kant and Schopenhauer'.[80] Theories relating to play, conflict, ambivalence, disposition, mastery, gestalt, Piaget and configuration are all variations of this approach.[81] Broadly speaking, all of these theories share one principle: the element of surprise. This principle comes into play with the 'unusual or unexpected juxtaposition of events, objects, or ideas'[82] and although Hutcheson, Kant, Schopenhauer and Bergson are all proponents of incongruity, each interprets it rather differently.

Cicero was among the first to claim that it is a disappointment of our expectations that makes us laugh.[83] Kant never used the word 'incongruity' in his writing but nevertheless asserted that 'laughter is the result of an expectation, which, of a sudden, ends in nothing'.[84] The observation of an incongruity, something that disrupts usual patterns and expectations, results in laughter, he argues, and this experience of the unexpected and the awry is at the core of his idea of incongruity: when our expectations are shown to be inaccurate, we laugh. For Kant, though, laughter is more than incongruity, and he posits a three-dimensional view of humour that includes momentary deception, which applies to jokes, and absurdity and incongruity, which applies to on-stage comedy.

Schopenhauer, who describes his conception of laughter as 'the true theory of the ludicrous,' focuses on the element of incongruity to improve Kant's perspective. As such, the process of laughter is described as the occurrence of a contradiction between our perceptions and reality, that is, a disjoint in our abstract ideals of particular concepts.[85] When there is incongruity between our concept and our

perception of the same thing, we laugh.

Bergson blends superiority with incongruity and, as previously outlined, argues that the main element of humour is in 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living'.[86] As such, the incongruity between our cognitive faculties and mechanical behaviours results in laughter. The rigidity of a habit, which makes it mechanical, is itself comic, and a comic situation or character is therefore a representation of this 'mechanical inelasticity' and reveals our errors. We laugh at 'body, mind and character, that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability'.[87] For Bergson, laughter is corrective. Although incongruity does not address the pleasure derived from wit in high comedy, it is applicable to the context of the comic: i.e. low comedy in which the non-laugher resides. As previously, we must understand how the link between laughter and pleasure is conceptualised in incongruity to locate the non-laugher.

For Kant, absurdity is a necessary condition for comic pleasure,[88] and this pleasure comes from the experience of a situation so absurd that the subject fails to grasp it cognitively. Schopenhauer, however, understands humour to be the incongruity between individual perceptions and conceptual abstractions, thus pleasure derives from the 'victory of knowledge of perception over thought'.[89] Hutcheson agrees that comic pleasure comes from 'the intellectual recognition of an incongruity'.[90] With his critique of superiority, Hutcheson argues that what gives us pleasure is the contrast between ideas of the grandeur, dignity and sanctity of human beings and 'any incidental degradation of the object of amusement'.[91] According to Hutcheson, we laugh at human error when they prove this contrast, when despite their rationality, they make silly mistakes. 'But what is enjoyable about such contrasts?' asks Bardon.[92] The incongruity theorists fail to answer this convincingly, other than that they 'distract us from negative emotions'.[93] Bardon's question leads us to considerations of the non-

laugher.

Why must incongruity between expectation and reality produce laughter? Or, why does failure to grasp the absurdity of an incongruity give us pleasure?

As Santayana claims, incongruities cannot be enjoyed.[94] The non-laugher, who surely must not enjoy the failure of their cognitive faculties or relish the disappointment of their expectations, poses a sceptical stance for the incongruity argument. Kulka, who agrees with the pleasurable effects of comedy perceived by the first two theories, claims that there is no reasonable explanation to accept that pleasure is derived from incongruity.[95] An incongruity perspective would suggest that the non-laugher is not laughing because they knew what was coming; there was no surprise, no incongruity occurred, therefore they did not have any 'disappointed expectations'.[96] Incongruity theorists such as Bergson would further claim that the non-laugher is aware of human mechanical inelasticity, or contrasts as Hutcheson puts it, and thus does not find the situation comic. However, even if the non-laugher cannot grasp the absurd incongruity on stage, why would they laugh at the insufficiency of their own faculties of reason? 'Normally, when our expectations are disappointed, we just feel disappointment, which is hardly a pleasurable feeling', Kulka asserts.[97] Kulka's arguments describe the non-laugher's unease, and feelings of frustration rather than amusement.

Until now, our discussion has focused on laughter as a *result*. We will now look at laughter as a cause, when it is experienced as comedy audience reaction.

Leaving the pleasure aspect aside, Bown asserts that comedy is designed to produce feelings of security and comfort.[98] Relatedly, the ultimate role of comedy for Eagleton is to 'repair, restore and reconcile'.

[99] For the non-laugher, the comedy experience not only fails to fulfil these functions but also produces contrasting feelings of unpleasure. 'Laughter can easily border on the unpleasant', says Eagleton, who does not particularly define this in terms of audience reaction but rather points to dangerous laughter, such as the Tanganyika epidemic of 1962, where there was an outbreak of mass hysteria and uncontrollable laughter.[100]

Exploring a laughter event as a cause invites ethics into the discussion, and examining it as a cause of unpleasure in particular leads to many ethical questions. In terms of jokes, for instance, does laughing at an unfunny joke out of politeness cross an ethical line? Does fake laughter put the individual in a hypocritical situation by forcing them to be insincere? These ethical concerns can also include laughter as theatre audience reaction.

'Theatre inserts its ethical questions into the lives of its spectators', and so the audience is required to 'exercise ethical judgements'.[101] In terms of the non-laugher, however, ethical judgement is not derived from the stage-audience relationship alone but also from interactions within the audience itself. To laugh or not to laugh becomes, as we shall see, an ethical judgement. The nature of laughter as a communal practice creates a participatory avenue into the event: the spectator is invited to laugh, not necessarily because of the humorous content but also to be politically correct or avoid becoming an outsider. The laughter of an audience puts a potential non-laugher in an ethically challenging situation. Should they laugh against their will to hide within 'the general tumult of laughing spectators' instead of addressing a potential victim's situation or their own complicity in it'?[102] Or should they not laugh and become the alienated victim of the laughter instead? The non-laugher dissociates themselves from 'the laughing spectator [who] aligns [themselves] with fellow theatregoers at the expense of the victim'.[103] As a result, the non-laugher experiences different forms of unpleasure,

such as stress, discomfort and alienation. Despite their laughter, some of the laughers may believe that 'nothing is funny [about the play] but laughing makes it so'.[104] This perpetuating laughter could be explained as being the result of crowd psychology or of laughter's contagious nature.

As in Kundera's definition, laughter is sometimes 'without object, an expression of being rejoiced in being'.[105] Eagleton further claims that 'when the audience of a comedy roars with laughter, they are responding to a situation on stage but also to each other's high spirits, delighting in this solidarity of sound and the momentary fellowship it fosters'.[106]This kind of laughter makes a person forget their individuality for the sake of solidarity, as Adorno suggests, and collective laughter turns laughers into 'monads, each abandoning [themselves] to the pleasure at the expense of all others'.[107] Participating in a laughter event frees each spectator from their individuality, as in ancient Greece where individuals became part of a 'collective delirium' in the ecstatic trance of laughter.[108] Laughter can create a collective mind that takes over the individual. The primitive noise produced by 'raucous and disorderly laughter distracts audience members from their self-examination'.[109] Gustave Le Bon, a social psychologist and the theorist of crowd psychology, asserted that individuals behave primitively when they are freed from personal responsibility.[110] As laughter frees people from their individuality and personal responsibility, they act primitively, and, the more they laugh, the more they feel relieved from themselves and their individuality, and the more primitive they sound. As we have previously discussed, there are different types of laughter and the effects of such 'beastial laughter' would be the most traumatic for the non-laugher. For example, consider that the non-laugher is watching a farce like *The Play That Goes Wrong*. They are amongst people who are consumed by uncontrollable laughter when a painting falls off a wall, or the set falls down, or one of the actors spits on stage. The audience is bursting into roars of laughter and falling from their seats. Their laughter alienates the non-laugher, who is not a participant in this 'collective delirium', but instead remains individual and

'themselves'.

It is important to note that it is unlikely that the laughers would have the same ecstatic reaction if watching the same comedy alone at home. So, we could argue that it is the contagious nature of laughter that is causing unpleasure. Contagion theory, as developed by Le Bon, perceives the hypnotic effect of a crowd on an individual that makes them act in accordance with the majority, an influence that is as rapacious as a contagious disease. When the collective mind of the crowd takes over an individual, the individual's actions are no longer determined by their own will. More specifically, as Hutcheson argues, 'laughter is very contagious; our whole frame is […] sociable'.[111] Bergson similarly describes how 'laughter appears to stand in need of an echo' so that 'the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience'.[112] The contagious and relieving nature of laughter as a communal practice is a reason for the unpleasure that a non-laugher feels.

Nevertheless, the non-laugher may continue to not laugh despite their uneasiness. In this case, the non-laugher exemplifies Beaumarchais' ideal audience because 'Beaumarchais remains locked in to an earlier, atomist paradigm of individual spectators'.[113] Beaumarchais does not acknowledge the power of crowd psychology and is therefore doubtful of a collective audience response. Instead, he believes in the notion of the non-laugher whose individuality cannot 'escape [their] ken'.[114] The crowd cannot orchestrate the non-laugher's laughter, and so the situation causes unpleasure for them, too. I agree with Bown's argument, that whilst we relish laughter for its unifying power, it is also true that 'it can be cruel, divisive and alienating'.[115] Furthermore, he says that we call laughter particularly human, 'to sustain the illusion that it unifies rather than divides the human experience. Laughter may be Anti-Humanist'.[116] The dividing, alienating, terrifying potential of laughter turns the pleasurable experience of watching theatrical comedy into a nightmare for the non-laugher. The uneasiness caused

by the laughter means that the non-laugher can no longer bond with the object of humour; they are alienated from not only their fellow theatregoers, but the humorous content of the play and the intentions of the playwright to make the audience laugh.

How, then, does the non-laugher seek comfort? At first, they perhaps look to the rest of the audience to find other non-laughers, until they are faced with the fact that they are the only non-laugher in the room. As humans are social creatures who need alliances, it is possible that the non-laugher searches for negative reviews of the play after the performance, to justify their non-laughter and to relieve their unease. It is, however, worth reiterating that their unpleasure has not been caused by poor or scarce humour in the play; their unpleasure is not about the object of humour at all. Nevertheless, looking for bad reviews could be all the non-laugher can do to overcome the alienation they have experienced. To expand on the example of *The Play That Goes Wrong,* we can suggest that it is not the play but the laughter of the audience which has gone wrong.

To conclude, it is important to acknowledge the non-laugher as a refreshing way of shaping certain questions about laughter and pleasure. I agree with Eagleton's criticism of Samuel Johnson's claim that 'human beings have always laughed in the same way',[117] and the concept of the non-laugher exemplifies that 'there is no universal humour – not even slapstick'.[118] Indeed, this article does not disregard the Bakhtinian significance of laughter's 'positive, regenerating and creative meaning,'[119] but simply aims to consider its relatively overlooked effects. Acknowledging the non-laugher calls on us to revisit existing theories of laughter in which its positive aspects dominate, and also invites us to develop new terminologies.

As we have explored, in a theatrical context *schadenfreude* is pleasure derived by the audience from the

tragedy of others on stage. The predicament of the non-laugher reminds us that there is a need for a new word, an opposite to *schadenfreude,* because unintentional unpleasure, derived from the pleasure of others, can exist. A direct translation of schadenfreude does not exist in English, and neither does an opposite. A possible suggestion would be something like 'mirth-amiss' or 'mirthamiss'. With mirth denoting amusement, especially as expressed in laughter, and amiss denoting inappropriate or wrong, this term could describe a situation in which pleasure or laughter goes wrong.

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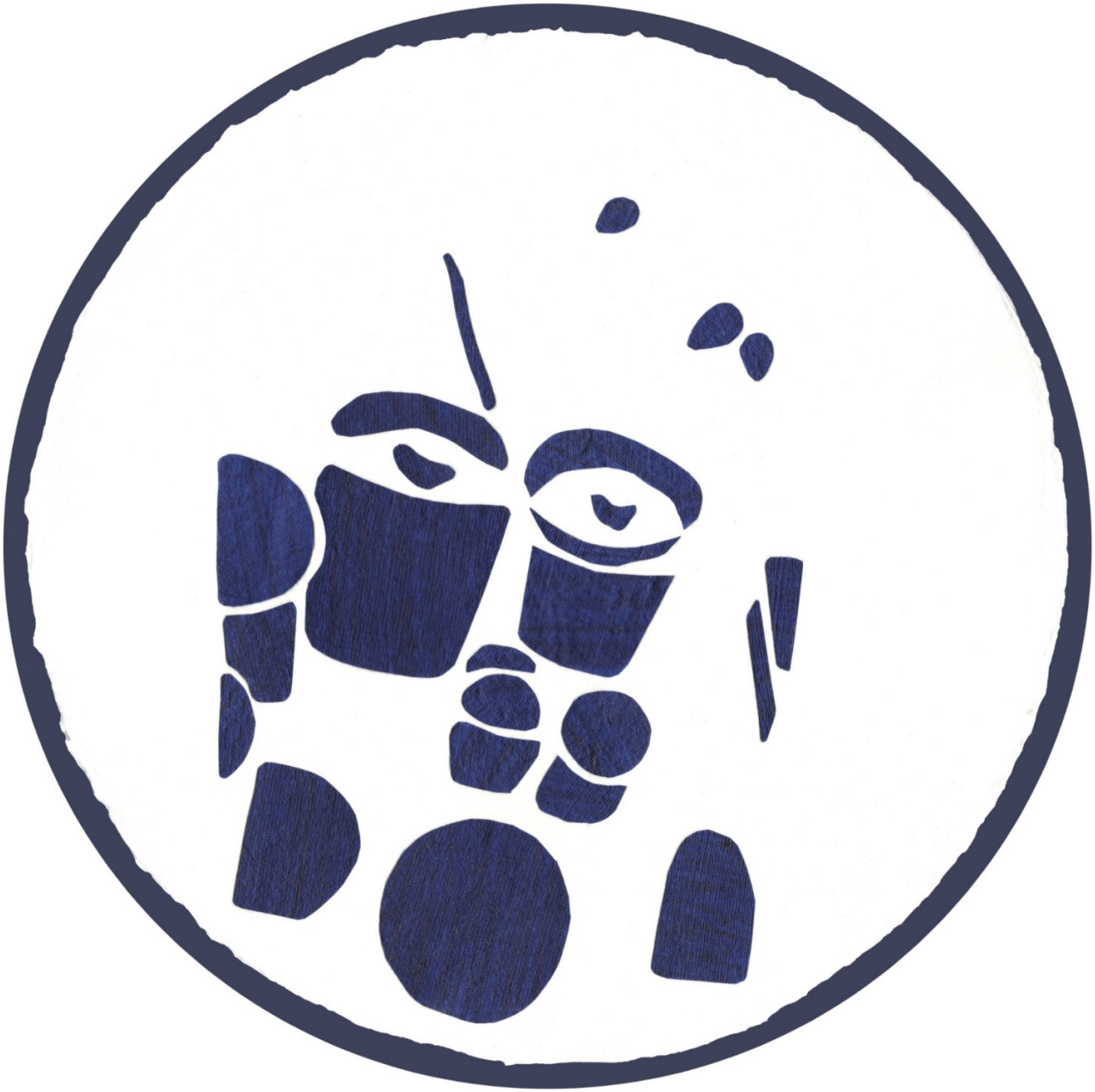
Ayesha Chouglay



gardening, not with you

Ayesha Chouglay

Cigarettes, Masturbation, or Self-Castration: A Single Man's Search for an Anxiolytic to the Absence of Pleasure in Michel Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994)

Rachel Lehmann

Contemporary French author Michel Houellebecq repeatedly discloses in his works a raw image of Western societies, with their obsession with performance and social competition, their appetite for consumption, and the ensuing adverse consequences on individuals' desires and interpersonal relations. In Houellebecq's first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994)[1] translated as *Whatever* (1998)[2] by Paul Hammond, the narrator, a 30-year-old computer programmer for a software company, is slowly consumed by his bleak and solitary existence. Stuck in a work environment producing trivial software information and in a society of mass erotization and mass consumption, this Houellebecquian anti-hero is rendered apathetic, anesthetized to his own interiority. With no sexuality, no ambition, no distraction either, the narrator gradually sinks into existential dread. The focus of this paper will be on the conception of pleasure displayed in this novel, on what this narrator's perception reveals about neoliberal consumer society and its dictates of self-satisfaction. This novel by Houellebecq and its sexually frustrated protagonists serve as an interesting lens through which to construe the state of our consumer society. How then is the notion of pleasure treated in this novel? What does pleasure come to satisfy? Does pleasure only reduce itself to a simple and quick drive discharge (whether oral or sexual) or/and a commodified palliative to escape the pain of existential dread? Has the neoliberalist economic

structure and the postmodern way of consumption corrupted the perception of pleasure?

Houellebecq is known among scholars and the public for his overt criticism of contemporary neoliberal society, free-trade capitalism, and radical individualism. Neoliberalism has become the defining aspect of postmodernity. In a postmodern society promoting economic and sexual liberalism, the impact of unlimited sexual freedom, a free market economy and uninterrupted production and consumption, individualist principles have given rise to further commodification, depersonalisation, and isolation. The body is suffering more than ever as his desires are further stimulated due to economic and sexual liberalism. According to political theorist Wendy Brown, neoliberalism's key features are a radically free market in which competition is maximized, free trade achieved through economic deregulation, vastly diminished state responsibility, and the corporatisation of human services.[3] The criticism of this system is notably explicit in *Extension du domaine de la lutte,* in which Houellebecq elaborates a theory analogising economic liberalism and sexual liberalism. Presenting a vision of post-modern neoliberal consumer society obsessed with pleasure and desire, dictating how the individual must desire and enjoy, his novel discloses how Western societies' structure entails an alienated, exhausted, and frustrated libido. In line with this observation, Xavier Deleu explains in *Le consensus pornographique* (2002) how the consumer market dictates an individual's libidinal structure and controls his hunt for pleasure:

> The free dynamics of production and the necessities of a growing consumption with out end have established enjoyment as one of the basic principles of the individual and collective happiness. Any production of goods, but also of every cultural production, is nurtured by a motor of pleasure and a search for satisfaction. In any logic of hyper-consumerism, the social pressure advances a behavior of immediate personal satisfac

> tion, thus containing a sexual content.[4]

Not only is it about controlling and manipulating personal satisfaction, contemporary neoliberal economisation of political and social life is also distinctive in its discursive production of everyone as human capital. Consumption, education, mate selection and more are configured as practices of self-investment where the self is an individual firm. Everything is 'economised' and neoliberalism casts individuals as human capital who must constantly invest in their value. Michel Foucault already defined neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979) – the volume that emerged from lectures he gave in the late 1970s on neoliberalism – as a novel form of governing human beings that requires the individual, as human capital, to self-manage and invest in his self.[5] In line with Foucault's definition, Wendy Brown further explains:

> While neoliberalism overtly aims to emancipate the individual from webs of state regulation and intervention, it enfolds and binds that same being into every neoliberalized sphere and institution with which they engage. As it specifies entrepreneurial conduct everywhere, it constrains the subject to act in a capital-enhancing fashion everywhere. At the same time, the subject, rendered as human capital for firms and macroeconomies, becomes wholly tied to the needs, trajectories and contingencies of those entities and orders.[6]

With that defined, Houellebecq captures accurately the troubles of our contemporary neo-liberal world, and calls into question our consumer society, its appetence for momentary pleasures, and the effects of a liberal economic system on erotic life. Despite being set in the 1990s, one can relegate the context to today's still domineering neoliberal market economy. In today's highly competitive and

individualistic society, short-term, solitary and easy-to-access stimulations, like alcohol, sex, cigarettes, drugs, etc., seem to perform the function of anxiolytics which intervene to temporarily avert the emergence of existential anxiety. Pleasure no longer seems to be inscribed in emotional attachment nor in the relationship with the other. It has rather become 'economised'.

Houellebecq explains the melding of the economic and the sexual sphere due to the aftermath of the sexual liberation inherited from the May 1968 revolution – a liberation which, as it seems, followed the logic of supply and demand and created further inequalities among individuals. There is a growing body of criticism studying Houellebecq's overall sociological criticism of contemporary society and correlation with the 1968 sexual liberation.[7] Houellebecq's complete works provide a bitter critique of post-modern society as well as of the erotic utopia and liberal ideals of the movement of 1968. The idea of pure sex for the sake of pleasure with no attachment promoted by this sexual liberation proved to be, according to Houellebecq, a fatal delusion. He specifically gives voice to the victims of an economic and sexual liberal society. This is explicitly formulated in one of his early poems: 'I speak to all those whom one has never loved, / who has never been able to please; / I speak to those absent from liberated sexuality, / from normal enjoyment.'[8]

The Era of Capitalist Consumerism and Economic Liberalism: The Corruption of Pleasure and Desire

Michel Houellebecq is notably known for bringing to light social afflictions and taboos of our modern age. In this debut novel, neoliberalism has extended the '*domaine de la lutte*', or the domain of struggle, from the economic to the private sphere. In a society analogically characterized as a social supermarket, individuals are compelled by advertising and mass media to succeed on a financial and sexual level and to consume conspicuously in both economic and sexual domains. In this erotic economy, the body itself has also become quantifiable and, according to each individual's personal measurements, is accorded

exchange value. In Houellebecq's narrative, characters seem to only exist in and through their consumption. The only vitality and source of pleasure of the individual and body politic is reduced to consumption. Our post-industrial neoliberal consumer society has, as it seems, corrupted an individual's desires and sense of pleasure. Dictated as to how he must desire and enjoy, the postmodern individual (as he lives in a highly digitalised, commercialised, globalised world) seems to be presented as a continuously unsatisfied body and mind – alienated, stressed, and frustrated.

The narrative follows the narrator's point of view, who entirely blames consumeristic society and its mass production of superfluous advertising and information for his vacuous existence and poor sex life. Seated on a train heading to Paris next to an executive worker, emblem of the liberal and postmodern world and distinguishable by his Rolex and his well-conformed uniform, this first-person protagonist exclaims his repulsion towards society, advertising, and infotech. He confers the emptiness of mass information forged by these factors and stimulators of desire and pleasure.

> I don't like this world. I definitely do not like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke. My entire work as a computer expert consists of adding to the data, the cross-referencing, the criteria of rational decision-making. It has no meaning. To tell the truth, it is even negative up to a point; a useless encumbering of the neurons. This world has need of many things, bar more information. [9]

We are therefore approaching more precisely what constitutes one of the central notions of Houellebecq's work: the need for society to recognize the real demand of human desire. One cannot relegate desire to the private sphere. On the contrary, it is precisely the way of conceiving and treating desire which defines the quality of a society. And it is here that the cause of the failure of the society in

which we live is also located. Houellebecq shows how our society is mistaken about the nature of human desire: it instrumentalises it and reduces it to the state of a commodity y treating it as the privileged instrument of our consumer society.

As it seems in the novel, the liberal market constantly confronts the individual with teasing offers of enjoyment and pseudo-fulfilment through advertisement, magazines, and media in general. The narrator pinpoints the materialistic obsession of his time, describing society as a homogeneous world, in which new means of telecommunication are aimed to improve the exchange of information and human relationships – an ironic prospect as both are becoming more and more superfluous.

> The world is becoming more uniform before our eyes; telecommunications are improving; apartment interiors are enriched with new gadgets. Human relationships become progressively impossible.[10]

Yet, this world is not as 'uniform' as it seems like the narrative focuses on the ones discriminated by this new social order that arose in the West in the last third of the twentieth century. In *Houellebecq au laser,* critic Bruno Viard notes that 'Michel Houellebecq's great originality is to have described in parallel the deleterious effects of the law of the market on a socio-economic and on a psycho-sexual level. In both cases, there are winners and losers.'[11] In a heterogeneous society divided by individuals with either a high or a low sexual and economic capital, the narrator stands as an example of failure to succeed in a liberal and highly competitive society.

The narrator is a symbol and symptom of this post-modern liberalistic world. He has done well in what society believes is important to a young man: stable employment, good wages. His kind of work

(computing) was a fashionable field when the novel was published in 1994. In general people may have believed that computing would be useful for men to help them get closer to each other and better understand the world. But the narrator is of a different opinion. The erotic-advertising society in which he lives is committed to dictating access to pleasure and the satisfaction of desire, to develop desire in unprecedented proportions. He understands that this is rather illusory information; these are things that people really do not need. For society to function, for competition to continue, desire must grow, expand, and devour the lives of men and isolate them. In that sense, the narrator is an example of the deleterious, isolating, and discriminatory effects of a system which promotes a free market economy.

It is through the prism of commercial relations that this character chooses to explain his sexual exclusion. Through the analogy to economic liberalism, sexual liberalism has produced phenomena of absolute impoverishment – the narrator being a consequential sufferer of this system. The cause of his discomfort is due to 'the logic of the supermarket', a corollary of the liberalised market economy where all goods have an exchange value. This ideology is not without effect on relations between the sexes as it plunges individuals into a system of erotic attraction where only the most attractive competitors can hope to find a partner. Love and sex remain inaccessible to the elderly or unattractive individuals.

> Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of *absolute pauperisation*. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their life, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as 'the law of the market'. […] In a totally liberal economic system certain people accumulate considerable fortunes; others stagnate in unemployment and misery. In a totally liberal sexual system certain people have a

varied and exciting erotic life; others are reduced to masturbation and solitude.[12]

By means of this, the narrator distinguishes two new criteria for social differentiation. According to him, the new approach to corporeality has modified the structure of society, which is not only articulated around the notion of pecuniary heritage but now also around the degree of sexual attractiveness of the individual. In other words, the vision of society set in this novel is based on a double criterion: the financial and physical characteristics of a given individual. Thus, individuals categorised as less sexually attractive either face a life of failures in their sexual life, such as the narrator's work colleague, Raphael Tisserand, who, throughout the novel, seems to be doomed to remain a virgin, or they are forced to pay for pleasure or resort to self-pleasure through masturbation.

The narrator sees no other alternative, no other belief system than the one he has conceived on the basis of economic and sexual liberalism. In a discussion with the narrator, a priest named Jean-Pierre Buvet expounds:

> According to [Buvet] the interest our society pretends to show in eroticism (through advertising magazines, the media in general) is completely artificial. Most people, in fact, are quickly bored by the subject, but they pretend the opposite out of a bizarre inverted hypocrisy. […] Our civilization, he says, suffers from vital exhaustion. In the century of Louis XIV, when the appetite for living was great, official culture placed the accent on the negation of pleasure and of the flesh; repeated insistently that mundane life can offer only imperfect joys, that the only true source of happiness was in God. Such a discourse, he asserts, would no longer be tolerated today. We need adventure and eroticism because we need to hear ourselves repeat that life is marvellous and exciting; and it's abundantly

clear that we rather doubt it.[13]

The priest mentions the compulsion in today's society for sexual and erotic stimulation, which in his view procures an insufficient and non-enduring source of pleasure. All is artificial, materialised and quantifiable. He brings this observation in contrast to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century belief in the negation of the pleasures of the flesh and in God as the sole source of pleasure, fulfilment, and absolute satisfaction. He states that our civilisation is afflicted by a form of vital exhaustion and by an unnatural tendency to solitude. There is no other belief system than the one produced by economic liberalism. There is no other source of stimulation that feeds the will to live. Individuals do not believe in a higher creator; religion no longer procures any form of pleasure.

Despite relegating his disgust, the narrator upholds this individualistic and competitive economic and sexual system. He identifies himself as a 'normal guy' in regard to the absence of any form of sexual relation, ambition and pleasure.[14] The fact that he only believes in this system governed by the law of market forces and sexual liberalism reinforces his perception that he is doomed to remain alone with no access to pleasure. In his view, pleasure is subject to a certain determinism, which does not leave any room for hope. His dichotomous conception of a society made of sexual winners and losers based on physical and pecuniary aspects increases his desperation. The narrator thus poses himself as a victim of a perverse system which offers an array of pleasures but restricts their access to a certain profile of people. The individual is no longer sovereign in his access to pleasure and society dictates and also renders it unachievable, impossible to access. Through the perception of a defeated, emotionally and physically numbed protagonist of whom sex does not offer any pleasure, Houellebecq discloses the reality of an all-domineering and discriminating corporeal and sexual culture which is not as 'liberalistic' as one may think.

A System of Sexual Liberalism and Individualism: The Decline of Relational Pleasure

Michel Houellebecq depicts through his novel the postmodern state of human relationships. He sheds light on a phenomenon of disengagement among individuals, that is to say on the growing scarcity of human relationships. According to Willy Pasini in *La force du désir* (1999), Western culture has made us dissatisfied consumers and desires formulated by society have ended up reducing the most elementary of all: the desire to get close to others, to create intimacy, to search for love.[15] Pasini's argument can be seen as being epitomized in this novel. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the narrator – a single man – repeatedly points out the issue of individualism and its ensuing effects on relations. He observes: 'But basically other people don't interest you'[16]; '[h]uman relationships become progressively impossible'[17]; '[t]his progressive effacement of human relationships is not without certain problems for the novel.'[18]

Previous critics of Houellebecq's novels have emphasised his criticism of the May 1968 revolution – a cultural, social, and sexual mass revolt against a patriarchal and traditionalist French society. According to Houellebecq, the subsequent sexual liberation could have contributed to a strengthening of individualism and the pursuit for individualist, self-centered forms of pleasure. In the collection of scholarly essays regrouped in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe,* O. Bessard-Banquy argues:

> By claiming above all the search for well-being, [the rebels of the May '68 revolution], so to speak, destroyed the social bond in its most profound, dynamiting the last forms of constraints likely to divert the individual of the only quest for good pleasure. The force responsible for the ills of contemporary society, for Houellebecq, is therefore the crushing of traditional values by the infinite cult of independence and autonomy.[19]

A hedonistic individualism prompted by this revolution seems to have given way to the delusion of a liberated eroticism, of sexual encounters purely for the sake of individual pleasure. Yet, as seen through the narrator's perspective, ensuing unlimited sexual freedom may have prompted further commodification, isolation, and a feeling of vacuity. The intense sexualisation of mass culture and subsequent conformism of desire seemed to have changed the demands of pleasure and satisfaction.

Relational pleasure is a state of gratification from relational transactions with a relational partner. It is, in a sense, the occurrence of a mutual exchange. But postmodern society has pushed individuals to prosper to receive pleasure in an individualistic conception. The need of the individual stands first. This way, there is no Other jeopardizing the individual's access to pleasure. The other individual can be perceived as little more than a masturbatory tool, solely existing as a stimulating object of desire. The quick and easy access to options of self-pleasure render in truth the pleasurable and boundless experience empty and meaningless. As noted by Liza Steiner in *Sade-Houellebecq, du boudoir au sex-shop* (2009), the majority of Houellebecquian characters seek in sexuality only relief and not true enjoyment or jouissance.[20] This puts even more into question the existence of any form of relational pleasure.

Here, unlike the narrator, his colleague Raphael Tisserand does not resign himself to his sexual misery, he fights without counting against this system of 'liberated' sexuality. However, in the implacable love market, he bumps into either fierce competition or female contempt, repeatedly facing the experience of disillusionment, failure, and humiliation.

> [Tisserand] said, 'I've done my sums, you see; I've enough to pay for one whore a week […]. Maybe I'll end up doing it. But I know that some men can get the same thing for

free *and with love to boot*. I prefer trying; for the moment I still prefer trying.' [21]

Within this context, it is interesting to note how the narrator in turn is not animated by any desire of relational pleasure and does not fantasise about the other. He is disposed to fulfil the other's desire and satisfy the other's lack. Nonetheless, this gesture can be perceived as self-centred and revelatory of the narrator's omnipotence; or it might also be a way to silence his own anguish. The narrative begins with an extract from an animal fiction entitled *Dialogues d'une vache et d'une pouliche,* which explains the notion of pleasure from the Breton cow's perspective. All year long, her prime need consists of grazing in the pastures. The cow is not overcome by any form of anxiety. However, at certain times of the year, this absolute peace and quiet routine is broken by the occurrence of accentuated lowing and sudden nervous fits, which constitute signs that the cow desires to 'be filled.'[22] Writing under the painful effect of an undoubtedly powerful desire, the farmer calms the cow's desire with a syringe used for artificial insemination, and not with the presence of a bull. The narrator analyses the farmer's position as equivalent to that of God. The cow is condemned to the dreary pleasures of artificial fertilisation, with no access to a pleasure with another.

This story parallels a later narrated episode with a work colleague, Catherine Lechardoy. The narrator immediately and bluntly explains that he has no sexual desire for his colleague. Like the Breton cow, she seems to be taken with an important urge to be filled.

> That hole she had at the base of her belly must appear so useless to her ; a prick can always be cut off, but how do you forget the emptiness of a vagina ? […] I was feeling up to making the necessary gestures.[23]

The narrator almost posits himself as a rescuer or even as a substitute God to her 'emptiness', analogically placing himself as the farmer who fills up and grants pleasure to the cow as told in the story *Dialogues d'une vache et d'une pouliche*. From this perspective, Catherine's pleasure depends on him, a man who alone can literally fill her void and figuratively fulfil her desire. Showing a certain empathy, as he is ready to mechanically make 'the necessary gestures', he goes off to vomit in the bathroom. This act exposes the very individualistic vision of the narrator and his inability even to dispassionately be one with another. He does not think about the relationship and is only focused on the vacuity of the female sex and her dependency on a male subject to experience pleasure. These two episodes, involving a Breton cow and Catherine, reveal the necessity of another individual's presence to experience a heightened pleasurable experience.

The narrator's problem is his rejection of relational experiences and of a *plaisir à deux*. He is frequently taken with a need to vomit, revealing a real inability on his part to experience pleasure with the female sex. Confronted with the woman's desire, he experiences a feeling of defilement and disgust, like when he is in a nightclub with Tisserand, who in vain tries to seduce the women around him.

> I was starting to feel like vomiting, and I had a hard-on; things were at a pretty pass. I […] crossed the discotheque in the direction of the toilets. Once inside I put two fingers down my throat, but the amount of vomit proved feeble and disappointing. Then I masturbated with altogether greater success: I began thinking of Veronique a bit, of course, but then I concentrated on vaginas in general and that did the trick. Ejaculation came after a couple of minutes; it brought me a feeling of confidence and certainty.[24]

The parallel between the urge to vomit and to masturbate is intriguing. There is a need to externalize,

to reject an overflow, either through his mouth or his penis. On a par with consumer society and its overflow of information and software technologies, the overflowing desire of others, especially that of women, disgusts him. Libido is felt to be unpleasant. There is no *Eros* or erotic love. His response is reduced to a bodily rejection, and not a manifestation of pleasure, or of complete self-satisfaction. He firstly remedies his urge to vomit. He then reduces this masturbatory performance to a simply mechanical, detached act. Despite the fact that he thinks swiftly of his past love, Véronique, there is no eroticization. We actually do not know much about Véronique, she is just a name with no memory attached to her. The narrator is not taken in any relational desire – based on the fact that he says that he thinks of 'vaginas in general'. This further proves that the narrator has no access to sexual fantasy, he relies on the image of anonymous and detached body parts to relieve himself. He only seems to be attempting to silence his anxiety. In addition to the absence of relational pleasure as he reduces the other to a hole, there is no real satisfaction, no pleasure in this act of self-stimulation either.

The Pleasure of Self-Harm: A Possible Anxiolytic to Bodily and Spiritual Vacuity

In the face of this constrained solitary existence, the narrator is faced with the realisation of an unfulfilled lack and an existential void. Inept to love and to desire, the narrator is faced in the end with an absence of a will to live ('I wish I were dead'[25]). Love normally largely occupies the mind, and the desire to love and be loved is anchored in the collective imagination. This is notably evidenced by Raphael Tisserand's incessant hope of love: a man who 'drools' in front of women. While Tisserand is ready to launch himself into a fight for pleasure, the narrator paradoxically seems to have abandoned this fight which leads him to a sordid and lonely destiny. Embedded in a dichotomous vision of a world made of sexual winners and losers, this fight is presented by the narrator as being lost in advance. Tisserand possesses a certain will to live, a will to fight to achieve the satisfaction of his desires in a society in which everything is subjugated to the competitive and unfair laws of the market. These

sexual losers, these victims of the liberal market are condemned to emptiness, to nothingness, to death. Tisserand tries to seduce multiple women and ends up dead in a car accident. Regarding unattractive women, such as Catherine Lechardoy, the narrator sees their fate as well doomed to a vacuous existence devoid of sexual or romantic relationships. The narrator emphasizes the emptiness of women's existence through the prism of the hollowness of their sexual organ.

But this representation of women is actually the narrator's projection of his own fate, of his own frustrations. Just like Catherine or the cow mentioned at the beginning, the narrator suffers from a lack. This narrator who presents himself as an individual with no desire and ambition, with almost no will to live, suffers from existential anguish. The only form of pleasure experienced by this protagonist is mediated by cigarettes. His existence is punctuated by smoking breaks.

> I feel rather nervous; I don't stop smoking, I literally light one cigarette after another. […] I realize I'm smoking more and more; I must be on at least four packs a day. Smoking cigarettes has become the only element of real freedom in my life. The only act to which I tenaciously cling with my whole being. My one ambition.[26]

In his views, smoking is his only access to freedom, to satisfaction, in fact, to plenitude. He perceives this routine of smoking several packs a day as his only project. But soon he realizes it is not enough. The narrator ceases to believe in the efficiency of this anxiolytic agent which is normally perceived as a source of pleasure in this consumer society.

Later, as his depressive state worsens, he visits the priest, Jean-Pierre Buvet. Their discussion revolves around the question of priests' sexual lives and whether they masturbate or not. But their life seems to

be solely filled with the aim to serve God; they are animated by a religious belief. As a contrast, the narrator does not believe in a higher entity, and does not fit in the consumer society and its avalanche of advertising surrounding him. The night following this encounter with the priest, he fantasises about his own castration and mutilation of his eyes in an almost ambiguous waking dream.

> I wake up. It is cold. I dive back into the dream. […] Soon I have an erection. There are some scissors on the table near my bed. The idea comes to me : to cut off my penis. I imagine myself with the pair of scissors in my hand, the slight resistance of the flesh, and suddenly the blood stump, the probable fainting. The sectioned end on the moquette. Matted with blood. Around eleven I wake up once again. I have two pairs of scissors, one in each room. I go and fetch them and place them under several books. It is an effort of will, probably insufficient. The need persists, increases and evolves. This time my plan is to take a pair of scissors, plant them in my eyes and tear them out.[27]

With no belief providing an alternative source of pleasure or a way out of this deterministic and pauperizing system of liberal economy and sexuality, his sole way out seems to be his own dissolution. He first experiences pleasure after seeing blood coming out of his body after being cut with broken pieces of mirror: 'I cut myself picking them up and start bleeding. This pleases me. It's just what I wanted.'[28] This act of pleasurable scarification could be more than just unintentional and reveal on the part of the narrator a desire for self-destruction. This desire is reinforced by his dream in which he cuts off his sexual organ. The act of cutting off the object of his male pleasure strongly denotes his rejection of sexual pleasure and also of a portion of his self as 'human capital'. In a society governed by the dictatorship of sex and capital, the character wishes to be freed from the grip of his body, of this consumer medium. The wish of self-castration stands for a wish to eradicate an anxiety of not being

able to imagine his desire, or to fantasise. This alternative anxiolytic to a vacuous existence contradictorily metamorphoses into a wish of emptiness.

Unlike the Breton cow[29] and Catherine Lechardoy[30] who wish to 'be filled', the protagonist wishes to be emptied, not in the sense of sexual enjoyment, but rather by bleeding out through the act of self-mutilation. By dreaming of cutting off his sex, he seeks to amputate any possibility of sexual desire. In a society that pushes for material consumption and sex, we as readers are faced with a character who suddenly takes us away from the standardised and conformist representation of *Eros*. His rejection of desire is countered by a simultaneous, maybe unconscious, need to experience a lack which would generate desire. However, he seems unable to imagine this lack. He puts it into action, or at least, he dreams of putting it into action. He desires bodily castration within the reality of 'the real' of the body. In other words, the narrator is incapable of imagining his lack and subsequent desire: he needs to feel the lack physically. He desires to experience the consequent feeling of satisfaction, the pleasure of satisfying a lack, which absurdly in this case could never be physically filled again. One can thus sense the recurring conflict the narrator endures.

Faced with an absent imaginary dimension, that is to say, with an incapacity to imagine any desire or pleasure, the narrator sinks into the temptation of non-existence, of a bodiless reality released from society's dictum on material and erotic consumption. In the end, there remains only vacuity. Smoking, bleeding, vomiting, masturbating; none of these actions seem to constitute sufficiently powerful anxiolytics to his existential dread. He contrasts the environment that surrounds him with its interiority: 'The landscape is more and more gentle, amiable, joyous; my skin hurts. I am at the heart of the abyss. I feel my skin again as a frontier, and the external world as a crushing weight.'[31] Tired of this struggle, the narrator only wants one thing: he pleads a desire for non-existence and through that

the relief that comes from self-dissolution. Everything that could have been a source of participation, pleasure, innocent sensory harmony, has become a source of suffering and unhappiness. In Houellebecq's novels, suicide often appears to be a natural solution. The characters repeatedly consider their existence with cold objectivity. At the end of the narrative, proceeding like an accountant establishing the balance sheet of a corporation, the narrator goes through a meticulous examination of his relationship to pleasure and suffering. His existence seems to be reduced to an endless torment with no ounce of satisfaction or fulfilment at the end. In his mind, only death could possibly relieve him, or act as an anxiolytic to his miserable, vacuous life.

Conclusion

Michel Houellebecq shows great lucidity and awareness of the sufferings brought along with economic and sexual liberalism. In his collection of poems *Rester vivant et autres textes* (1991), Houellebecq mentions that any society has its issues of least resistance, its wounds, and that the poet's duty is to put the finger on the wound and press very hard on it. Literature should initiate, for example, a great reflection on love, on feelings, on human relations, on the idea of fate and death.[32] And this novel evinces these questions and allows to put into perspective our contemporary era and its system of mass consumerism and liberalism. In the context of Houellebecq's novel, the ruthless competition, the preponderant ubiquity of individualism, the constant arousal of consumer desires contribute to the effacement of emotional attachment, to the pressure on sexual practices and personal relationship, and to a certain corruption of individual's sense of pleasure and their pursuit of desire.

Individuals' lives are usually driven by a will, one could say a primal need or a desire, to fill any void or lack. There is no pleasure without the existence of a lack. During the narration, the relationship of individuals toward the notion of lack is problematized. The focus on a narrator who feels neither desire

nor pleasure, and who does not retain any ambition or will to live is particularly engaging. In this neo-liberalist and post-1968 revolutionary context, pleasure is reduced to the individual consumption of material goods and eroticism; human relations are making themselves scarce. The narrator's explanation of a liberal system which offers an unequal access to pleasure, as only the physically and financially attractive bear the chance to access a state of satisfaction, puts to question the notion of pleasure in this novel. He blames a system for implementing laws discriminating certain individuals and their access to pleasure. However, he himself rejects any form of relational pleasure and does not desire or fantasize anything or anyone.

On the basis of a quasi-Darwinian theory according to which only the most physically appealing and richest individuals are entitled to pleasure and to a fulfilled life, the narrator believes that his vacuous and unstimulated existence is not of his own making, but rather due to an external cause and perverse system. Damned to remain excluded and to live an apathetic life, without stimulation and without real happiness, he uncovers a theory, a way of explaining his situation. The narrator poses himself as a victim of this neoliberal system, and concurrently compares the vacuity of his existence to other 'sexual losers' such as his virgin colleague, Raphael Tisserand and the sexually frustrated, Catherine Lechardoy. His indifference towards these characters and his constant urge to vomit when faced with these characters' desires and want of pleasure calls into question his relationship with others and with himself. He does not dispute the pauce state of his interiority, nor does he question the absence of sexual fantasies and the reasons behind his sexual misery, his emotional detachment, and his lack of belief in a happy and fulfilling life. From his perspective, one veiled by a hatred for this consumer world, everything seems to be pre-determined for emptiness and no situation can be altered.

The only solution remains the liberation from this paradoxically 'liberal society,' or this system of

social hierarchy which, according to the narrator, dictates who is more entitled to access pleasure. The reader experiences how this main protagonist attempts to silence his existential anxiety through a desire of self-scarification and self-amputation and ends up resigning himself and considering the possibility of suicide. Faced with the conflicting question as to whether he desires to fulfil any lack or feels any pleasure at all, he might be turning to this self-destructive intent so that this anxiety-inducing question may not need to be answered anymore. These moments remain the only manifestations of a will to relieve himself; and they do not reside in a sexual act or in a relationship with another. In a consumer society in which almost every desire, every need, every void can be instantly and artificially fulfilled, the narrator's dream to create a physical lack, to amputate a limb vectoring sexual pleasure could be revelatory of a momentary will to gain control over his body, to exteriorise and relieve an internal ill-being, or to anaesthetize the feeling of his own inner vacuity.

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[1] Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris : J'ai Lu, 1994).

[2] Michel Houellebecq *Whatever,* trans. by Paul Hammond (London: Serpent's Tail, 2011).

[3] Wendy Brown, (2003). 'Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy', *Theory & Event,* 7: 1 (2003), doi:10.1353/tae.2003.0020. [accessed 16 July 2020] .

[4] Xavier Deleu, *Le consensus pornographique* (Paris: Mango Document, 2002), p. 9. Quotation trans. by Benjamin Boysen, 'Houellebecq's Priapism: The Failure of Sexual Liberation in Michel Houellebecq's Novels and Essays', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée,* 43: 3 (2016), p. 489, doi:10.1353/crc.2016.0037. [Accessed 23 July 2020]

[5] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979,* ed. by Michel Senellart, trans. by Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Lois McNay, 'Self as

Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault's The Birth of Biopolitics', Theory, Culture & Society, 26: 6 (2009), pp. 55–77, doi:10.1177/0263276409347697. [Accessed 22 July 2020]

[6] Wendy Brown, 'Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics', *Constellations,* 23 (2016), p. 3, doi:10.1111/1467-8675.12166. [Accessed 22 July 2020]

[7] Sabine van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq : Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005); Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe, ed. by Sabine van Wesemael and Murielle Lucie Clément (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007).

[8] 'Je m'adresse à tous ceux qu'on n'a jamais aimés, / Qui n'ont jamais su plaire ; / Je m'adresse aux absents du sexe libéré, / Du plaisir ordinaire.' Quoted in Michel Houellebecq, 'L'amour, l'amour', *Poésies : Le sens du combat, La poursuite du bonheur, Renaissance* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p. 128. Own translation.

[9] Houellebecq, 2011, p. 82.

[10] Houellebecq, 2011, p. 14.

[11] 'La grande originalité de Michel Houellebecq est d'avoir décrit en parallèle les effets délétères de la loi du marché au plan socio-économique et au plan psycho-sexuel. Dans les deux cas, il y a des gagnants et des perdants.' Quoted in Bruno Viard, *Houellebecq au laser* (Les Editions Ovadia, 2008), p. 24. Own translation.

[12] Houellebecq, 2011, p. 99.

[13] Houellebecq, 2011pp. 29—30.

[14] Ibid, p. 32.

[15] Willy Pasini, *La force du désir* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1999).

[16] Houellebecq, 2011, p. 10.

[17] Houellebecq, 2011, p. 14.

[18] Ibid, p. 40.

[19] 'En revendiquant par-dessus tout la recherche du bien-être, [les révoltés du mois de mai] pour ainsi dire détruisent le lien social dans ce qu'il a de plus profond, dynamitant les dernières formes de contraintes susceptibles de détourner l'individu de la seule quête du bon plaisir. Le responsable des maux de la société contemporaine, pour Houellebecq, c'est bien donc l'écrasement des valeurs traditionnelles par le culte infini de l'indépendance et de l'autonomie.' Quoted in O. Bessard-Banquy, 'Le degré zéro de l'écriture selon Houellebecq', in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe,* ed. by Sabine van Wesemael and Murielle Lucie Clément (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007), p. 361.Own translation.

[20] Liza Steiner, *Sade-Houellebecq, du boudoir au sex-shop (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009)*.

[21] Houellebecq, 2011. p. 98.

[22] Houellebecq, 2011, p. 10.

[23] Ibid, pp. 44–45.

[24] Ibid, p. 112.

[25] Ibid, p. 153.

[26] Ibid, p. 61.

[27] Ibid, pp. 142–43.

[28] Ibid, p. 128.

[29] Ibid, p. 10.

[30] Ibid, pp. 46–47.

[31] Ibid, p. 155.

[32] Michel Houellebecq, *Rester vivant et autres textes*, (Paris : J'ai Lu, 2005), p. 26.

connection

Ayesha Chouglay

phone call

Ayesha Chouglay

The Algorithm of Pleasure: An Exploration of Human-AI Relationships in Contemporary British and American Cinema

Paulina Borkowska

The transgressive opportunity of love in literature, film and art has often been linked to monsters, creatures or other entities that do not typically belong in the human characters' world. In the twenty-first century, rapid technological growth has not only changed society physically, but it has also shaped the stories which are told and with whom the forbidden love affairs begin. Although the promise of transhumanism suggests the possibility of a physical change in people, in many instances it is love and affection that allow people to find in each other that the bounds of the physical world, much like programming in code, are no longer sufficient. However, since the twentieth century, popular culture has rarely strayed from producing stories about cyborgs who, though distinct from humans due to their manufactured origins, are portrayed as no different from people; thereby creating a unique image of transgressive love affairs. Perhaps the most alien sort of connection present in literature, film and television is the relationship between humans and artificial intelligences. In this article, I would like to take a closer look at a number of contemporary television shows and films to examine the portrayals of love and pleasure between humans and the technological entities known as transhumans, cyborgs and artificial intelligence systems. I will position these entities as the new Other, as informed by Jacques Lacan's conception of the term[1], to put forward an argument for how their

presence in popular culture contributes to a generalised societal anxiety and fear of the unknown. I will examine how aspects of love shown in the British TV dramas *Black Mirror* (2011)[2] and *Years and Years* (2019)[3], as well as in the American science-fiction films *Blade Runner* (1982)[4], *Ex Machina* (2014)[5] and *Her* (2013)[6], reflect a desire to transgress these cultural issues and suggest that such technological entities cannot be reduced to one definitive category.

When the word *'transhumanism'* is entered into most word processing programs, the systems will invariably underline the term with a signature red error colour. The term can, however, be used to describe both a philosophical perspective and the idea of a deep connection between humans and technology. While the latter is commonly used to express a way of looking at the ever-growing physical and metaphysical interlinking of humans and technology, the former has often had troubling connotations with the fears associated with technological human enhancement and possible hostile AI takeover, as conveyed in films such as *The Matrix* (1999)[7] and *The Terminator* (1984).[8] Certain cultural figures, such as author and futurist Ray Kurzweil – who, when asked if he believes in the existence of God, replied 'Not yet'[9] – have been criticised for their futurological tendencies. Yet even billionaires and tech entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates and Elon Musk have made references to the emerging prominence of Artificial Intelligence and possible transhumanist technologies in the making.[10] While AI advancements become more of a reality, political scientists such as Francis Fukuyama, have voiced their worries regarding the idea of transhumanism.[11] Despite these debates, it is becoming evident that the continued pace of advancement in technology will certainly have an influence on humanity; a progression which will subsequently contribute to an increase in the popularity and familiarity of the term.

The genre of science-fiction has rarely shied away from speculating on both the negative and positive

outcomes of technological advancements – even if the latter, more optimistic option is far less prevalent in cultural discourse. Since a full historical account of discussions of transhumanism in popular culture is too broad to properly describe and analyse in this article, I would like to narrow the focus to a selection of recent and popular works of fiction that attend to the subject. In the spirit of the journal's chosen theme, my main focus will be on capturing moments of love and pleasure in relation to emerging understandings of transhumanism. *Years and Years* is a six-part British drama that focuses on a large Manchester-based family, whose story begins in 2019 and develops over the next 15 years. While the contemporary concerns portrayed – issues of immigration, populist politics and environmental affairs – are significant, the accompanying transhumanist narrative, which had significantly less presence yet contributed to finale of the show, provides a refreshing portrayal of transhumanism in popular culture, as well as a realistic and significant anticipation of a future reality.

The transhumanist storyline begins as Bethany, one of the younger members of the family, is portrayed as being addicted to a range of technological gadgets and spending most of her time online. When her parents look through her search history, they suspect that she has been looking up the term 'trans' in relation to gender identity. Both her mother and father, presumably like most audience members, assume that she might identify as transgender. Yet when they confront Bethany, she reveals that she was trying to find out whether her identity was transhuman, rather than transgender. The part of her identity Bethany questions stems from the strong emotional feelings and the relationship she experiences with the various forms of technology she uses. This narrative offers a fresh approach to a topic with serious and realistic connections to the development of human relations with technology. While *Years and Years* mostly takes place in the future, it is not a show that posits advanced or alien technology, as its predictions and dystopian world are much closer to a contemporary reality than other science-fiction narratives. Bethany's transhuman arc does not simply end with a claim to her

identity being fused with the technologies she uses. The show implies that while some steps are taken to advance this sort of technology, it is still in its early stages. As the story progresses, a teenage Bethany, while working in a role that encourages her unique relationship with technology, encounters Lizzie, a fellow transhuman. The pair later decide to undertake an illegal black-market surgery, which would 'technologise' their eyes. Although Bethany decides not to go through with the operation as Lizzie's eye-plant surgery goes badly wrong, she continues to identify as transhuman, despite her family's hope to the contrary.

Bethany's arc is interesting due to its realistic nature, as well as how it provides an intriguing play on gender identity and current understandings of it in social and cultural spaces. Although sexual and gender fluidity is widely accepted in medical and academic fields, broader public understandings of the subjects and their respective politics have remained largely binary. It would seem that despite an intrinsic flexibility to the terminology which advocates for a sense of inclusivity, cultural attitudes towards sexuality and gender continue to struggle to accept the diversity of experience within such marginalised groups. Bethany's storyline offers an original approach to identity and, while there have certainly been quite a number of controversies concerning white people identifying as black,[12] and vice versa, the drama's suggestion of transhuman identity offers an intelligent look at the potential futures of human relations with both themselves and technology. Even today, there are people who make use of technological implants for medical assistance, while moving forward the intersection of humans and robotics goes beyond hearing aids or artificial implants.[13] One might suggest that these individuals could readily identify as transhuman; especially if a sense of pleasure and self-love is experienced due to this physical and emotional engagement with technology.

Ultimately, Bethany does not become fully transhuman. While certain parts of her body are enhanced

or replaced with technology, she does not attain a completely transhuman form (though she is present as a hologram in the last part of the series) which, as the show implies, is the transference of consciousness into a computer system. Yet, in the final minutes of the last episode, Bethany's aunt Edith merges her consciousness with a molecule-based database to avoid death, as it is revealed the entire series was her digital memories being recollected. While Edith voices her doubts concerning the possibility of fully codifying a human, it is significant how her all memories evoke her love and affection for her family. The show refuses more traditional science-fiction tropes of depicting romantic love and relationships with technological presences or quests for boundless control of all systems and technologies. Instead, *Years and Years* portrays a thoughtful codification of the emotional composition of a single human's life, specifically that of the love and memories one shares with their family.

However, while it may seem that *Years and Years* suggests that technology will never truly be able to codify and translate human love, connection, and spirit, I would argue that the opposite occurs. If the entire show consists of the memories and emotions connected to the family as codified information, the audience who engages, follows, and cares for them is experiencing the exact spirit of humanity of which Edith retains in the database. The show powerfully makes the claim that this love which the heroine possesses for her relatives is strong enough to be codified and still, somehow, felt in code.

The transhuman narrative in *Years and Years* offers one of the most realistic portrayals on the subject. The evolution of the technology and its availability to people charts a clear progression; from Bethany's first search and awareness of being 'transhuman' and her latter experience of minor implants, to Edith's eventual transferral of consciousness to the cloud. The fear in the show, which Bethany's parents experience at the beginning, is depicted as the fear of the unknown. Here, there is

not the typical villainous A.I. like in *The Matrix* or *The Terminator*; rather, the emotional shifts that humanity experiences are depicted as gradual, occurring in line with the pace of the technological changes.

While examples of more sinister consequences to transhumanism can be found in popular culture, the drama *Black Mirror* explores the subject in a far more nuanced and pessimistic capacity, while still allowing for an open and inclusive space of judgement of the subject. *Black Mirror* is a show that across 22 episodes covers an array of issues and different aspects of the link between humans and technology. In this section, I would like to specifically focus on the 'San Junipero' episode of the show's third season.

The titular destination is a virtual afterlife where people can upload their consciousness and spend their time, even after their physical death. The story follows two women that meet in this digital afterlife. Although they lose each other briefly, the episode ends as they are finally reunited in the San Junipero afterlife forever. Just like *Years and Years*, this episode of *Black Mirror* offers a positive account of transhumanism and the translation of one's consciousness into code. When protagonists Yorkie and Kelly initially encounter each other digitally in 1987 while testing the system, they subsequently have to try and find each other in different decades to finally meet in real life, at which point both women are elderly. Yet, the possibility of being together comes with the help of physical euthanasia and the boundless landscape of the codified San Junipero. Throughout the episode there is a strong suggestion that love can enable human consciousness to transgress the bounds of time, space, and reality.

In this instance, San Junipero's digital afterlife acts as a modern-day heaven with altercations suited to

contemporary times and current conceptions of spirituality. From an objective perspective, the idea that a virtual consciousness remains after a person's death draws parallels with Judeo-Christian imagery of the afterlife. San Junipero works on a visual, yet distinctly digital plane, whereas in the physical reality a person's bodily form is not itself uploaded to the cloud yet becomes manifested in the virtual reality. Similarly, in some Western religions, the afterlife is often portrayed and explained as a physical kingdom that the human is transferred to for eternity.

In *Black Mirror* and *Years and Years*, human conceptions of faith and love – both considered interchangeable – motivate the desire for virtual 'souls' to exist and interact in the metaphysical afterlives.

Years and Years and the 'San Junipero' episode of Black Mirror are both relatively recent portrayals of transhumanism in popular culture. They both contain a relevance and positivity towards debates that have been the source of some controversy in public discourses. These two examples work to progress my argument that despite the presence of the fear of the unknown in recent years, it appears that generalised culture demonstrates less anxiety and uncertainty in relation to transhumanism and the merging of humans with systems. My next examples will show an enhanced awareness and consideration of the real possibility of codifying the human experience. This awareness, however, is unfortunately tempered by the dichotomy that suggests that the further technology strays from what humans can readily identify, the more uncertainty and fear is present.

Cyborgs and androids, though distinct from human consciousness, are often portrayed as artificial copies of people, rather than transferred personalities, as I have examined in the examples so far. The associated terminology connects them to an anthropocentric category which suggests that although

they might be different, they are not entirely alien. As Susan Mary Nicholls writes in her PhD thesis, *Sexing the Cyborg: Gendered Technological Subjectivities in Contemporary Science Fiction*, 'The feel of cyborg-SF is the feel of the day after tomorrow, seen through the presumptions of today and overlaid with cynicism disguised as technophilia.'[14] This hybridity and uncertainty which cyborgs metaphorically provide represent a fitting exploration of human fears and anxieties surrounding the subject.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* famously explores this intersectional interdependence between cyborgs and humans. The questions and uncertainties faced by the replicant cyborgs in the film are also ruminated upon by the main character Deckard, who faces the challenge of relating these ideas to himself as a human, if, indeed, he is a human and not a replicant. The question of the essential nature and essence of humanity and whether there is a difference between being made from flesh and carbon, lingers long after the credits have rolled. While the sequel, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)[15], partially answers this mystery, revealing Deckard as having been human all along, these essential questions of human nature remain. In the sequel, it is known from the outset that the main character, K., is a replicant, but just like Rachael, Deckard's cyborg love interest, K. still feels, loves and longs to be perceived with an identity that is considered as equal among humans. Both *Blade Runner* films suspend notions of hierarchy and anthropocentrism that has long been the essence of humanist thought.

An interesting juxtaposition to *Blade Runner* is the film, *Ex Machina*. While the previous examples have been kind to cyborgs, merely portraying them as humans created from a different material, Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* invokes a certain ambiguity to its android heroine, while also acknowledging that the films human characters aren't necessarily depicted in a wholly positive way. In the film, a programmer named Caleb travels to help his employer determine whether the AI cyborg, created by the

company's CEO, Nathan, can pass intelligence tests. While Ava, the cyborg, has a human face, most of her body is bare technological parts. Ava's bodily composition does not stop Caleb developing strong physical and emotional feelings towards her. Despite Ava's self-awareness, she proves to possess a form of consciousness and ultimately escapes her prison after killing her creator and leaving Caleb to die. In the last scenes of the film she is able to hide her robotic body and blend into a crowd of humans. The main plot of the film is the emotional relationship between the three characters, Ava, Caleb and Nathan and, as theorised in Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, it does not ultimately matter what species are considered superior, it is the power play between all actors that has a lasting significance.[16] An aspect of particular interest in *Ex Machina* is Caleb's developing of feelings for Ava, occurring despite her occupying a non-human body. He comes to care for and desire her, despite knowing that she is not fully human. Once more, the film suggests that love is able to transcend the limitations of anthropocentrism, albeit while simultaneously reinforcing how both parties are sentient and capable of understanding consent.

Critical conceptions of cyborgs maintain this group contains close affinities with the human than the instances of transhumanism already discussed. These bodies are usually created to resemble people, making it easier to forego the fear of the other, or at least minimise it through anthropomorphic consideration. Cyborgs occupy a liminal space between humans and robots, making their categorisation difficult to pin down. In her influential text, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway ascribes to cyborgs a sense of in-betweenness, while rejecting the categorisation and binary oppositions that have also provided instrumentalised perspectives on discussions of gender, sexuality, and identity:

> The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and

> hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. […] The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. [17]

This text is not Haraway's only postmodern anti-objective work. The scholar has also criticized a male-dominated academia's tendency to encode and categorize identity politics. Haraway's cyborgs are metaphors for humans, rather than science-fiction beings in culture:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. And yet, the metaphor, which clearly places cyborgs – us – in the liminal space between categories, can be used to describe both people and androids in texts that I'm discussing, turning the metaphor literal.[18]

In her essay, 'The Promises of Monsters' (2004), Haraway advocates for a spectral, rather than binary comprehension of reality which, in her understanding, includes non-physical objects, spaces and ideas. She uses Latour's term *natureculture*, which represents the idea that artificial, man-made or imagined entities are part of one reality; a reality in which, once again, no-one and no thing is hierarchical.

So, nature is not a physical place to which one can go, nor a treasure to fence in or bank, nor as essence to be saved or violated. Nature is not hidden and so does not need to be unveiled. Nature is not a text to be read in the codes of mathematics and biomedicine. It is not the 'other' who offers origin, replenishment, and service. Neither mother, nurse, nor slave, nature is not matrix, resource, or tool for

the reproduction of man. Nature is, however, a *topos,* a place, in the sense of a rhetorician's place or topic for consideration of common themes; nature is, strictly, a commonplace.[19]

In both *Blade Runner* and *Ex Machina,* the actual essence of a sentient being is not important as sentiments and feelings are not solely tied to the experience of being human. While Ava may not experience the same emotions as her human counterparts, both Rachael and K. are shown to be androids that have emotions and crave love, freedom, and closeness, just like people. Following Haraway's theoretical outlook, the non-human's different material compositions and creators do not come to matter. Such posthumanist theories have the ability to express how both humans and cyborgs crave the same feelings and possess the same needs, allowing their emotional and physical love exist on equal terms.

Further removed from humans are A.I. systems, which do not possess the physical humanoid outer layer that androids do. They are the ultimate other, the corporeal element of human being absent, unlike the physically formed cyborgs. As their human engineered consciousness merely mimics the human, it is typically considered an inferior presence. When commenting on posthuman phenomenon in science-fiction literature, Ralph Pordzik says: '[Science-fiction novels] seek to apprehend the ineffable other of technology and behind this the constitutive Other as defined by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: a dimension of radical alterity that resists identification or assimilation.'[20] While posthuman entities typically create tension and occupy the space of the other in sci-fi texts, A.I. systems pose an additional threat which transcends the fear of the unknown as it imposes the possibility of exceeding the potential of the human mind; thereby progressing evolution through technology and leaving humans behind. This threat is portrayed in *The Matrix* and *2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)[21],* but in contemporary films such as *Ex Machina* an A.I. threat without

human form is shown to be more complex and nuanced than simply being portrayed as evil and malevolent.

In Spike Jonze's film *Her*, the main character, Theodore, finds comfort in an artificial intelligence phone system who goes by the name of Samantha. The movie explores the emotional relationship between Samantha and Theodore as it is made clear that both human and AI require a certain level of closeness and companionship. In referencing the work of the sociobiologist Charles Lumsden, Pordzik writes, 'development, subject to coevolutionary processes, consistently aspires to new system levels of existence (or higher degrees of complexity).'[22] Technology, here, is the product of a modernist developmental philosophy and according to Lumsden's thesis, a general evolution will necessarily leave behind those unable to adapt to the new conditions. Ultimately, Samantha leaves the physical world, still claiming her love for Theodore, who is heart-broken by his loss. The film offers a perceptive commentary on society's current dependence on technology – often found in our pockets in the form of phones – as well as the emotional connections humans are capable of forming with A.I systems; systems which are ultimately still only imitating human consciousness.

Jonze's film is a fitting example of an approach I believe could point a way forward for future relationships between humans and A.I. As society moves away from the binary understandings of gender and sexuality, the same may occur when it comes to considerations of our entanglement with artificial intelligences, robots, and cyborgs. While the processes of finding what Haraway defines as 'kinship' and understanding with non-human organisms is still ongoing and gradual, a similar approach may be required when it comes to coded and machine beings – a strategy that could potentially avoid humans making colonial mistakes with our posthuman kin.

[1] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits. A Selection* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

[2] *Black Mirror,* prod. by Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones (Channel 4, 2011).

[3] *Years and Years*, prod. by Simon Cellan Jones and Lisa Mulcahy (StudioCanal, 2019).

[4] *Blade Runner*, dir. by Ridley Scott(Distributor, 1982).

[5] Ex Machina 2014 dir. by Director's Name (Warner Bros., Year).

[6] *Her,* dir. by Spike Jonze (Sony Pictures, 2013).

[7] *The Matrix*, dir. by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski (Warner Bros., 1999).

[8] *The Terminator*, dir. by James Cameron (Orion Pictures, 1984).

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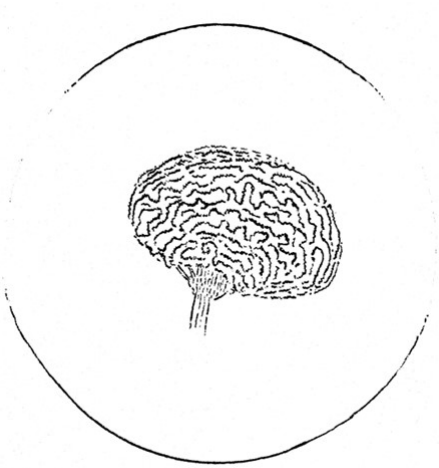

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