PARA-ANTISOCIALITY: HATRED, CELEBRITY, PROJECTION, ATTRACTION, IMPOTENCE, AND CATHARSIS IN LIMINAL SOCIETIES

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Abstract:

The last three decades of media expansion and technological innovation, encompassing the 24-hour media news cycle, the original desktop- and later site-based internet, gaming, social media, and the smartphone, have radically altered the means by which citizens of the developed and developing world access information and how they construct and maintain relationships. As the reach, robustness, ubiquity, and engagement potential of the two-dimensional world have expanded, those of the three-dimensional world have diminished (an effect accelerated during the COVID and post-COVID eras). As one world atrophies, a new one rushes in to fill the void. Celebrity culture; neoliberal economic policies; the decline of family, community, and organised religion; and the post-World War II suburbanisation and aesthetic sterilisation of shared spaces have all contributed to the decay and fragilization of the antecedent *meat space* (in-person) bonds. In their place, has risen the *parasocial* relationship—that between audience and performer or, in more modern terminology, *content creator* and *content consumer*. Why celebrities/content creators are *loved* is not the question to be posed herein. Notoriety, adulation, *status*, physical attractiveness, and charm—these all do much to explain why the famous and *would-be famous* alike are regarded with affection. Why they are *hated*—as they often are, if only by a portion of their audience—is less clear. This paper will examine the origins and utility of antagonistic parasocial relationships as well as the extent to which para-antisociality is harmful to content creators and consumers and what (if anything) can and should be done to manage hostility in parasocial relationships.

Keywords: media studies, happiness, mental health, parasocial, antisocial

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1. Introduction: Lost in the Void—Homo Post-Modernus and Disconnect

What is civilisation? Evaluating a civilisation of the past (assuming it left a sufficient historic or archaeological record) is challenging, but not impossible. A shared language, a shared collection of technologies, a shared religion or outline of belief, and a social hierarchy all broadly define civilisations in the anthropological sense. More specifically, Childe (1950) argued that a civilisation must have certain specific traits, including:

1) Urban centres of considerable size
2) Those engaged in specialist occupations outside the field of agriculture (meaning workers who are removed from farm life)
3) A taxpaying peasantry that produces food and subsidises the higher classes
4) Monumental architecture/public buildings
5) A ruling class exempt from manual tasks and labour
6) A durable system of recording information (some type of writing)
7) A system of documented natural and practical sciences
8) Technically sophisticated art
9) A mechanism for the systematic importation of raw materials
10) Interdependent trades and classes

By these measures, the civilisations of the Western and developed worlds are robust and ever-expanding. Yet there is a critical descriptor missing from Childe's list—that of interpersonal relationships of a primarily non-economic nature (familial, social, et cetera) and their function. This oversight is likely due to two separate factors. The first is that Childe did not see interpersonal relationships as *unique* to civilisations, with them being present in the two lower levels of human social organisation recognised in Childe's era—those of *savagery* and *barbarism*. The second is that Childe and the theorists referenced in his text were writing either before the era of electronic media or just as it was taking shape and beginning to reveal its ability to change expressions of human impulse and desire.

Such a major omission cannot be tolerated when assessing the current social reality. The ongoing presence of durable relationships not of a primarily economic nature must not be taken for granted. And the complexity of the modern economy and the abstruse connection between work in the symbolic-information processing industry (i.e., *desk jobs*) and the means of production present fundamental questions for many of the comfortably employed. *What, if any, effect does what I do have on the world? Would anyone notice if I stopped doing it?*

It is with these types of disconnection in mind—those related to the existence (or non-existence) of a certain category of interpersonal relationships in the modern world and the existential questions posed to the symbolic information/knowledge worker (desk jockey)—that this paper considers the landscape in which parasocial relationships develop.

1.1 The Levitating House: Civilisation without Interpersonal Relationships

The ability of the human animal to form complex societies is remarkable in two ways. First, humans demonstrate an extraordinary capacity for *chosen specialisation*. Ant colonies can be massive, with the largest known stretching 6,000 kilometres across Europe, from northern Italy to Spain. Yet ants have only four social categories—workers, queens, soldiers, and drones—and they cannot expand their social structure beyond the bonds of extended family (Foster, 2023, Walker, 2009). In contrast, the specialisation of human endeavours and labour—already considerable—continues with no sign of interruption. Second is the fact that present-day human specialisation and social organisation appear to be profoundly *unnatural* within the limitations of the species' capacity for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Psychologist Robin Dunbar proposed that the largest number of interpersonal relationships a person can maintain is around 150, with the strength of relationships functioning as though bounded by a series of concentric circles. One can form close connections to a few, weaker connections to a few more, and have business relationships, casual friendships, or *acquaint-ships* with more still until his or her quota for contacts is filled (Kommers, 2019). And Dunbar's number should be recognised as a *maximum*, with the lower limit for relationships presumably being *zero*—meaning that some people have no connection to anyone aside from themselves. That societies have proven consistently capable of exceeding this upper-limit by orders of magnitude is a testament to the flexibility of the human mind, and it suggests that profoundly *unnatural* social structures may endure for generations. *But can the force of technological genius and economic progress levitate the house of civilisation above the soil of human nature indefinitely, or does the house require a foundation of the conventional sort to long stand?* From this question flow several others, with some of the most interesting being:

1) Are substantial interpersonal relationships necessary in a civilisation of sufficient sophistication, or can relationships of a different, more novel (and economically describable) type supplant them entirely?

2) Assuming that a civilisation without substantial interpersonal relationships *can* function, *how* would it function? Can entirely commoditized, scalable, and overtly transactional relationships replace their predecessors? If so, how will these commoditized relationships work in practice? If not, what will serve in their stead?

The matter at hand is not hypothetical. And for each of the aforementioned questions, Western society appears nearly ready to deliver an answer.

More than 20% of American millennials (those in their 20s and 30s) reported having no friends or acquaintances, and approximately 63% of American men under 30 are unattached romantically (Frishberg, 2019; Gelles-Watnick, 2023). These percentages have trended upward over the decades with no sign of stopping soon. They *may* plateau. They may trend downward. But if they do not, meaning the current pattern carries on for another few decades, the *civilisation without community* will become manifest. Preliminary evidence suggests that this model *can* work, albeit not without some challenges.

In Ireland and the United States, middle-aged men exhibit both elevated levels of social isolation and suicide (Baker, 2017; McHale, 2019). And Generation Z, meaning Americans born between 1997 and 2012, appears to suffer from increased rates of mental illness and isolation as well (Coe et al., 2022; Jenkins, 2022; Warren, 2022). These are problems.

But the mere identification of problems should not be taken to establish *failure*. Every generation and cultural model will prove unsatisfactory to *some*. No people or culture is immune to suffering. In Finland—reportedly the world's happiest country—the suicide rate is above the European average, despite both a generally good quality of life and an extensive suicide prevention program that has been in place for decades (Graham; 2020; Savage, 2019). Unless one is to argue that these fallen Finns were *so happy they could die*, their choice to prematurely end their lives supports the argument that even the rich, who are in need of nothing, maybe *wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked* (New American Standard Bible, 2020, Rev 3:17). Conversely, Afghanistan—one of the *least developed countries*—has a suicide rate less than half that of Finland (Chen, 2021; Dattani et al., 2023).

And this demonstrates the difficulty of determining the importance of relationships, traditions, and civilisational structures to happiness and survival. Finland is a technologically advanced nation. Afghanistan is not. Finland is socially progressive relative to Afghanistan. And Afghanistan almost certainly has more in the way of archaic patriarchal and family structures than does Finland, with Afghan tribal affiliations and dynamics being relevant to daily life and personal associations in a way rarely seen in the West (Mili & Townsend, 2009). Do these traditional associations make for more resilient people? Do they change the decision-making process or balance of considerations for those contemplating suicide? Or are the peoples of the less-developed nations simply too preoccupied with survival to give their mental discomfort much thought? Answering any of these would be difficult without a detailed investigation beyond the scope of this paper. One of the few patterns that can be noted from reviewing national suicide data is that suicide rates appear to inversely correlate with national exposure to sunshine, with Bahamians, Greeks, and Syrians being some of the least suicidal, if not necessarily happiest, peoples of all (Dattani et al., 2023).

Rather than ask if *anyone* is suffering (the answer to which will always be *yes*) one would do better to consider if the rates of woe are uniquely high in a given civilisation or nation and if the more prevalent forms of misery and discontent therein are especially *corrosive* to the individual spirit or *erosive* to the foundations of order, prosperity, and sustainability.

But making such an assessment without further context, particularly given the novelty of the ongoing experiment of capitalist modernity—that of constructing a civilisation with a radically different model of human interaction—is challenging. With that in mind, this paper turns to a consideration of several of the most obviously relevant factors that set the brave new world of the West apart from the rest.

1.2 To Want for Nothing: The Burden of Ease, Longevity, and Safety

Our planet is a monstrous place, grotesque and unforgiving, and the universe wants us dead. Consider our natural condition. For almost the entire lifespan of the species, starvation has been an ever-present risk. The ancestors of modern man lived at the outermost edge of subsistence, and the *state of nature* is one of destitution (Ó Gráda, 2009; von Mises, 2019). And for much of the world's population, the natural state of poverty remains unchanged. It is only recently—with the advent of industrialisation—that economic growth has led to higher average levels of individual prosperity, rather than increases in population without attendant improvements to living standards (Roser, 2013).

By almost every measure, life is better. Yet the decline in immediate and pressing struggle poses problems of its own. For the first time in recorded human history, a goodly percentage of humanity does not face a constant fight for survival. And for the fortunate many, there are ample free time and resources for discretionary use. To the creative, to the self-directed, and to the ambitious, such is a wondrous opportunity. For those less skilled in making productive use of their time without a hungry wolf at the door or a disgruntled boss or angry god breathing down their neck, unstructured hours and days are an opportunity for misery and troublemaking.

Theodore (Ted) John Kaczynski described and predicted technologically afforded means to address this discontent—drugs, mass surveillance, and finally, a constant stream of ever-more mind-numbing entertainment. In his manifesto, Kaczynski (1995) recognised the benefits of technology, while arguing that the resultant destruction of community, interpersonal relationships, and individual identity caused by the widespread adoption of and *adaption to* such innovations outweighed them.

Time has not proven Kaczynski entirely wrong. The internet has become as much an instrument for imposing conformity, both through social pressures and the heavy hand of authoritarian information control and online-activity surveillance, as it has for spreading freedom and knowledge (Shahbaz, 2018). And smartphones and digital fitness trackers allow governments and private actors alike to know both where millions of surveillance targets are and what they are doing to an extent that would flabbergast and then delight even the most stern-faced Stasi agent into extolling the virtues of capitalist intelligence gathering (Munk, 2022; Valentino-DeVries, 2020).

Not entirely wrong is not to say *entirely right or irrefutable.* Kaczynski did not (and could not have) foresee(n) every technological change that occurred since his manifesto's publication more than 25 years ago. The permanent challenge of the modernising, innovating society is to outrun the problems it creates. And the *burden of the unburdened* is that they must find a purpose to live other than to die another day. Essential to resolving the problems of the present is an understanding of *libidinal energy*. In *Libidinal Economy* (*Économie Libidinale*), philosopher Jean-François Lyotard described the energy of the libido as a force below the level of the consciousness that can be channelled by social forces. Lyotard's concept of the libido is distinct from that of Freud in that Lyotard uses the concept both literally to describe sexual desire and metaphorically to describe energies at the societal level (Lyotard, 1993; Woodward, 2023). *If not directed by the pressures of immediate physiological/survival concerns, where are the libidinal energies of the unburdened man to go? And how are these energies to be directed within a capitalist economy and without a matrix of conventional (non-economic) relationships?* To answer these, one must first identify these energies at the micro- and macro-levels and then consider how they interact.

The most obvious of the micro-scale libidinal energies derive from the libido itself, which is to say the desire for sexual congress. Secondary to that is the drive for intimacy and companionship. At the macro-scale, libidinal energies mirror their micro-scale peers. The capitalistic impulse for the union, the creation, and the reproduction of industry across temporal, spatial, and cultural boundaries is sexual and occasionally coercive. And the synergy point of these energies, micro and macro alike, is where the *parasocial economy*, with its sexual, communal, and relational offerings, emerges.

1.3 Instability, Bureaucracy, Liability, and Social Atomisation in the Liminal Society

Further confounding the channelling of libidinal energies to more traditional and interpersonal ends is the growth of *liability*, *liability awareness*, and *liability culture*. For the purposes of this paper, the last is defined as *a culture in which the risk of civil or criminal sanction is an overriding concern that distorts or greatly influences decision-making processes*, and its consequences will be considered more than once in this paper.

From 1985 to 2004, the number of Americans who had close friends in the workplace dropped from nearly 50% to about 30%, and from the 1970s to 2012, the amount of time Americans spent with colleagues outside of work decreased (Joint Economic Committee, 2017; Kacperczyk, 2011). While the reasons for the decline in colleague socialisation are likely varied—encompassing everything from lower rates of alcohol consumption throughout the United States to more adults playing video games in their free time—liability concerns cannot be dismissed (Michael, 2021; Pandey, 2022). An example of this can be found in relation to the #MeToo movement. Since the advent of the movement and more aggressive enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, research collaboration between men and women at the university level has become less frequent, as have other forms of non-essential intersexual interaction outside academia, with increasing fears of career-damaging (or destroying) accusations being a reason (AAUP,

2016; Elks, 2019; Frodeman, 2020; Gertsberg, 2022; Gurchiek, 2019). *Liability* hangs as a sword of Damocles over interactions between peers, subordinates, and superiors alike. This both formalises and depersonalises relationships, rendering the sterile, utilitarian, and fragile.

Fears of job loss/career destruction are compounded by diminishing employment stability. At the professional academic level, tenure is slowly becoming a thing of the past, and those who do get tenure discover that the rights and security of tenure are being abridged by legislation and changes in school policy (Basken, 2022; Warner, 2018). And at the working-class level, incomes and working hours have seen a rise in volatility as employees have been moved from full-time to part-time status, and inflation has diminished buying power for essential goods and services (Guyot & Reeves, 2020; Timmins & Thomas, 2022; Whiting, 2022).

All of these—greater liability awareness amongst the credentialed and professional, the collapse of academic sinecure, and more economic precarity for the working class—make for higher levels of perceived (and real) income and lifestyle inconstancy. The growth of labyrinthine, dehumanising bureaucracy has further contributed to the atrophy of physical-space relationships. One such reviled bureaucratic institution is the corporate department of human resources. Since its rise in the 1970s, departments of human resources (HR) have come to play a great role in corporate America, with the upsurge in antidiscrimination and antiharassment legislation fuelling the ongoing expansion of the sector (IceHrm, 2020; Maurer, 2019; Stettler, 2022). Yet these departments are widely distrusted by workers and seen as obstacles to problem resolution and fairness as much as promoters of anything positive (York, 2021). Employees' perception of HR departments as being essentially liability-control agents for their companies is largely correct—such is their ultimate purpose, with employee wellbeing a secondary concern at best (Yate, 2023).

The bureaucratisation of the workplace, including the workplace of companies in which the language of bureaucracy was nearly absent until recently, and the fall of steady employment make for a people more suspicious of everything and everyone around them. Additional research suggests that Americans have also lost faith in government and each other (Pew Research Center, 2022; Vallier, 2020). To summarise: Instability, systematic bureaucratisation, and social/institutional distrust are a synergetic trio.

Bureaucracies obfuscate, often by design, parsing the decision-making process into such small pieces that *responsibility* for an outcome is shouldered by all and none alike, somehow at the same time. To borrow from a widely known physics thought experiment, bureaucracies might well be said to promote and function under *Schrödinger's management paradox*. Within *the paradox*, any department or leader is simultaneously completely responsible for any decision and completely *without* responsibility for the said decision, with the state of uncertainty only resolving itself when the most advantageous conditions for the department or leader are revealed. As bureaucracies grow and their asphyxiating chokehold over nearly every aspect of human existence becomes tighter, the miraculous (and *convenient*) uncertainty of the paradox

expands apace. In addition to confusion resulting from the paradox, interacting with bureaucracies and bureaucratic procedures elicits decidedly toxic emotional responses, including frustration and anger (Hattke et al., 2020). The effects of bureaucracy on those interacting with it from the outside—citizens seeking services or redress of their grievances from their government, employees in need of interpersonal/management-worker dispute resolution by a human resources department, et cetera—are known to be deleterious. And as much as one may be inclined to loathe the functionaries—the *human machines* of the bureaucracy—they are not unharmed by the apparatus of control, even if they profit from its continuation.

Graeber (2013) defined *bullshit jobs* as being "pointless jobs [created] just for the sake of keeping us all working." He argued that the ultimate purpose of bullshit jobs is to keep people too busy to rebel, observing that "The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger." He also asserted that a great many people in these jobs (the undeluded if no other) are aware of the Sisyphean nature of their employment. To know that one contributes nothing of value to society is bad. It is demoralising. To know that everything one does is of *negative value*—degrading human life and comfort, spreading misery, and bit by bit destroying the natural world as one motors from one pointless endeavour to the next—is worse. A lifetime spent engaging in as much is bound to make one resentful, fearful, and contemptuous—of those subject to the petty tyranny of the well-pushed pencil, of those who hand the rules down from on high, and of oneself. And one is likely to grow vindictive towards those who have the good fortune to do *anything* other than haul a cart of compliance certificates and TPS forms up a mountain of administrative rulings, eventually succumbing to the burden of fury, tumbling backwards into a vale of shadow and forgottenness. One may be both abuser and abused, destroyer and destroyed. Such is the lot of the bullshit jobber, whom one may simultaneously pity and despise, as the bullshit jobber pities and despises himself.

The misery of bureaucrat and *bureaucratised* alike is only amplified by the liminal nature of American/Western society, in which great parts of community and family have either been dismantled or allowed to decay and in which bureaucratic and regulatory structures remain ill-equipped to fill a heart-space of nothingness. Beyond the workplace and the isolation therein, social capital, meaning "social networks . . . and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other," has been on the decline for decades (Putnam, 2023b). The anti-socialising nature of road-centric suburban communities throughout the United States and nations that developed along the same lines has contributed to this (Kunstler, 1994).

At the family level, estrangement is common throughout the Western world, with an estimated 27% of Americans being estranged from one or more family members and rates in other Western countries likely being not much lower (Dean, 2020; Savage, 2021). Increased geographical mobility, lower levels of survival interdependence with relatives, the gradual erosion of ties to extended kin, high rates of marital failure, and an emphasis

on autonomy and personal growth have all worked to reduce reliance on family and the perceived importance of the bonds thereof (Coleman, 2021).

Change is not inherently bad, and a certain number of the relationships of old, be they familial or neighbourly, were harmful, either due to the presence of abuse or their tendency to restrict individual freedom and encourage closemindedness. Yet for all their problems, they *worked* insofar that they facilitated the functioning of an orderly society. Additionally, they had the benefit of allowing for *personal hatred*. One might well be wronged by a family member, but at least the wronged person knew *whom to blame.* The bureaucracy provides no such clear target for one's wrath.

Non-specific/undirected anger can metastasise into a more general resentment. Americans are generally angrier about *everything* than they were in years prior (Barford, 2016; Wolpe, 2016). Within the United States, misanthropy is higher in urban than rural areas, although members of rural communities are slowly catching up with their urban peers in their disdain for their fellow men and women (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2022). Given the anonymity and bureaucracy of urban life, the increasing bureaucratisation of rural life, and the decline of the rural family, these are to be expected.

But with no one to blame but *the bureaucracy* or *society*, where are the furious to direct their bile? Generalised misanthropy has an impotence to it—cursing everyone and everything may not be much more satisfying than cursing (and doing) nothing. The proffered antidote to this poison is *designated targets*—scapegoats, provided for a fee—by the same economic and cultural institutions that are the ultimate source of much consternation and irritation. This is the realm of the celebrity and microcelebrity, of media new and old, and the para-antisocial relationship.

2. Fetish Statues and Straw Dogs: Something to Love, Something to Blame

Before considering the dynamics and utility of parasocial relationships, one would be wise to summarise the themes above and articulate the *Quartet of Domination*—the factors that render the man engulfed and absorbed by the technocratic megastructure in need of parasocial bonds. The *Quartet* consists of:

1) Bureaucracy/abstracted decision-making/abstracted labour-output relationships
2) Isolation (of the physical and psychological varieties)
3) Passivity (of instinctive and cultivated forms)
4) Sublimation in the hyperreal

The first three of these require little in the way of explication. The first is the matter of bureaucracy, bullshit jobs, and the complexity of the means of production—all of which demotivate the *instinctive man*, driven as he is by the tribal and concrete, and induce with him a crisis of utility and meaning (the aforementioned *burden of the unburdened*). The second, that of social and geographical isolation—both addressed in a previous section—is no more difficult to understand in theory, although it will be subject to reconsideration in light of the surveillance and sousveillance advancements of the last decade. The third is a matter of both the reactive nature of human instincts and the

cultivated passivity of lives of unchallenging leisure and the benumbing effects of technologies neither seen nor imagined by Kaczynski.

The fourth is both related to and distinct from the third factor. As advanced as entertainment and media technology in the era before Kaczynski's arrest were, they were far removed from the realm of the present *hyperreality*—that which represents itself alone, with symbol and thing symbolised condensed to a singularity. The hyperreal does not *hide* reality. It hides the fact that it is *its own reality*. It exists self-referentially. Baudrillard (1994) coined *hyperreality* as a term when he observed the *implosion of meaning*, in which information ceases to have much connection to the un-reformulated world.

Baudrillard gives a relatively primitive example of the implosion of meaning in the form of the talk show/call-in show, where the information/text/speech generated by the content creators becomes incrementally detached from an independent reality. The *talk show* becomes a show about *talking about what others have talked about*, rather than about an experience neither scripted nor synthesised by the media apparatus.

A more modern example of this can be seen in *reaction videos*—popular on several modern video upload sites—in which the content creator records his/her *reaction* to something another person has done on camera. The information generated by the reaction then becomes the subject of further discussion, sometimes leading to a *reaction of another's reaction to a video*. With each step, the information generated becomes further removed from the original uncontrolled event (one person attacking another, a building collapsing, et cetera), until the original event is irrelevant. Only the *reactions* remain. And the purpose of information production and distribution becomes to sustain the systems and agents by which the information is produced and distributed and the systems' and agents' ability to engage an audience.

In the same vein, the commodification and *hyper-commodification* of symbols—of truth, justice, religion, tradition, power, et cetera—decontextualises and *de-signifies* them to the point they are reduced to stylistic choices. And these choices are integral to a larger system—a hypermarket—in which "cultural objects, as elsewhere the objects of consumption, have no other end than to maintain you in a state of mass integration," with *mass integration* meaning *integration into the collective mind* (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 67). It is with the emergence of a hyperreality mediated and propagated by the developing technologies of digital communications (and their tremendous bandwidth) that parasocial relationships come to the fore of the human experience. Relationships are inherently symbol-rich, be these symbols gestural, verbal, visual, or behavioural. And the parasocial paradigm allows for optimal commoditisation of such symbols and signifiers, offering the content consumer a *good enough* alternative to any organic/pre-hyperreality counterparts, with parasocial relationships particularly suited to the cultural and legal context of the present.

2.1 Parasocial Relationships, Marxist Foresight, and Managerial Class Self Owns

What do parasocial relationships replace? To give Baudrillard his due, one should acknowledge parasocial relationships as *replacements*, not substitutions or simulations. A

car is not a substitute horse. It is a thing unto itself. But the car *replaced* the horse, so what does the parasocial relationship replace?

Most obviously, family and community. First, family.

Marx and Engels (2010) argued that the "bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation," (p. 31). They further contended that the lower classes had seen their families *annihilated* by the bourgeoisie and that the process of annihilation should be extended to *all classes*, thereby eliminating an essentially feudal construct and mechanism of oppression and allowing for the elimination of intergenerational wealth and power advantages. And these observations were made in the middle of the 19ᵗʰ century—an era that, for all its flaws, might well appear as the golden of intact marriages and community when compared to the present.

Despite the fall of the Soviet Union and the failure of Communism to become the world's dominant economic model, the *social* observations of Marx and Engels have proven to be preternaturally astute in several instances. The downfall of family at every class and station is nearly complete, brought about by the persistent tidal energies of capitalism rather than those of Communism, but such makes present conditions no less real. Stated less elegantly, one could argue that the capitalist and managerial classes were unable to resist the impulse to consume and restructure their own families, resulting in them rendering themselves no less isolated than their economic inferiors, albeit not quite as quickly. The ideology of the managerial class triumphed *over the managerial class itself*.

Parasocial relationships—rationalised and transactionalised—are part of capitalism's answer to the question of what should replace family, just as a global brotherhood of the proletariat, one in control of the means of production and the allotment of resources was Communism's. (Another critical part of capitalism's answer—assumed group identity by brand choices and consumption—is beyond the scope of this discussion.)

The parasocial relationship content provider can serve as a maternal figure, a paternal figure, or a sibling or friend of sorts. No less significantly, the parasocial relationship provider can supplant the lover/husband/wife. Herein is the intersection of parasocial relationships, the libidinal economy, and the convenience afforded by technological innovation.

Libidinal impulses must find a means of expression. Depending upon the era and state of civilisation, these expressions can be anything from the terror-catharsis of tribal warfare; to energetic rebellion against the merciless brutality of nature; to sublimation into artistic, humanistic, or nationalistic endeavours. In a highly developed consumer economy, channels for the expression of libidinal energies are simultaneously varied and artificial. The disciplining and domestication of the natural world is largely illusory—something of which untempered and untested citizens of modern nations are reminded from time to time when fires, floods, and tornadoes burn, wash, or blow away the delicate constructions that spare them from the *horrors of the real*. Yet this illusion of mastery is

good enough to lull the less-observant into passive resignation. Life *seems* predictable and mechanical, and this can narcotize the spirit.

And as the real becomes ever more artificial, the artificial becomes ever more real. Thus, parasocial relationships and their technologically mediated interactions rise to the state of simulacra superior to that which they supplanted. And the convenience of parasocial relationships only adds to their appeal when the economic and legal perils of their predecessors grow greater by the day (partially as a result of the aforementioned rise of *liability culture*). The simulacrum is *cheaper* than that which it is constructed to simulate (and ultimately replace), and although the simulacrum may not rival the quality of the *best of the best* of that which came before it, it is rarely as bad as the worst of the worst.

2.2 Risk/Conflict Aversion and Interaction Costs in the Digital Panopticon

As much as liability culture promotes extreme risk aversion, the *digital panopticon* does no less so. The *original panopticon* was theorised by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who envisioned a prison constructed as a cylinder, with prisoners easily watched by guards, but having no way to know if they were being observed at any particular moment (Lynch, 2021). The mechanism by which prohibited behaviour is controlled within the panopticon is not total and perfect surveillance, but the *possibility* of the offender being seen.

The *digital panopticon* extends from virtual to physical space. Social media postings can easily be tracked, monitored, and recorded as screen captures—this much is obvious. To counter this hazard, one can avoid sending sensitive messages through electronic means. One can minimize his online presence. But these actions do little to remove one from the digital panopticon's field of view. Smartphones and internet-connected security cameras can immortalise for all the world to see any misstep or misstatement, any fumble or awkwardness of the panopticon's denizens. In countries with strong security apparatuses—China being a prime example—much surveillance is done by the government, but in nominally free nations, the surveillance is not much less intrusive. In London, England, the level of remote observation is astounding, with the average Londoner being photographed around 300 times a day (Bunyan, 2021; X6, 2021). Granted, the majority of security cameras in the *free world* are owned and operated by private organisations and individuals. But this makes little difference. Video recorded by private systems can be easily submitted to law enforcement. And *the law* proscribes but a few of the actions for which one may be punished if seen by the invisible eye.

Figure 1: Architect Willey Reveley's Rendering of the Panopticon
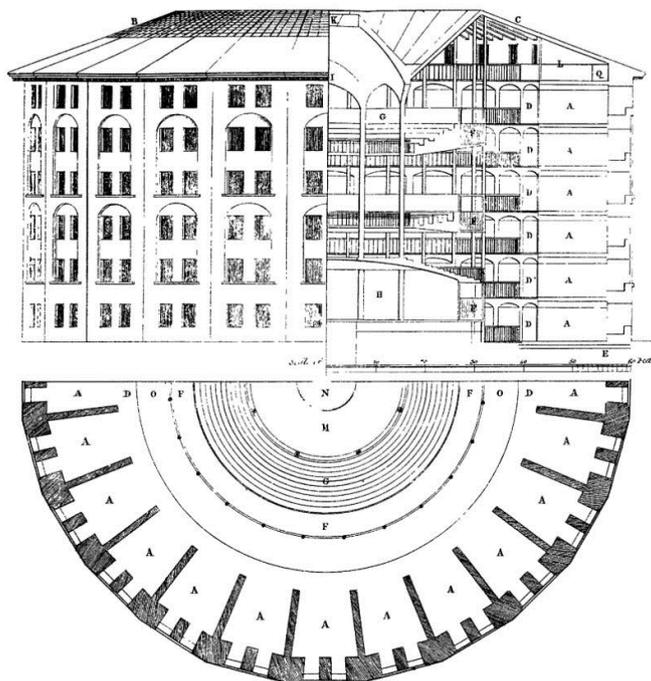
Ostracism, ridicule, the loss of employment, and barrages of threats and occasional violence from the self-proclaimed righteous—these are no less severe forms of sanction than the sentences for some lesser criminal offences. Sousveillance, made ever more intense by both technological innovation and the ever-increasing population of those in need of moral purpose—the desire to *correct a wrong* and to *be better* than another—enables a tyranny of the people, by the people, and for the people. Kaczynski failed to fully predict or explore all these social means of imposing conformity through technology, but that makes them and his observations no less significant. And the administration of punishment can be particularly worrisome in that it is done with extreme inconsistency by the virtual mob, become terrible by the power of the internet and incensed by easily shared short video and audio clips, which make decontextualising or *mis-contextualizing* behaviour a trivial matter.

One should not suppose the above arguments are against surveillance *per se*. Video recordings have been instrumental in identifying and prosecuting criminals and clearing the names and reputations of the wrongfully accused. And as Bentham desired, the digital successor to his panopticon likely has dissuaded the surveilled from nefarious, criminal, and simply discourteous conduct.

That acknowledged, the theoretical benefits of the digital panopticon do not eliminate the problem of the system's haphazard implementation and operation. And the prospect of interactions being misconstrued (either innocently or otherwise) greatly elevates their perceived costs. Even if an interaction *is not* misinterpreted or misrepresented, the risk attendant has imposed a certain price in anxiety and defensive measures. Thus, the digital panopticon favours a *minimax strategy* of social interaction—

one which *minimises* the *maximum* possible loss. The rationale for such caution is further buttressed by liability culture, which favours the same strategy.

2.3 Simulacra and Simulation in the Desert: Ratcheting of Standards and Hyperreality

As social, economic, and cultural pressures reduce reality in technologically advanced societies to *the desert of the real*, they further incentivise the development of the parasocial. *The virtualisation of the world is self-reinforcing*. Media production technologies for video, audio, and still photography—once the domain for large organisations and dedicated single-subject experts—are accessible and usable by dedicated amateurs with modest budgets. And automated image manipulation, such as that found in the photograph filters used on popular social media sites, has improved to the point that untrained consumers can manipulate video in ways only major film studios could do two decades ago (Palumbo, 2023).

Then there are market forces. With every innovation that lowers the barrier of entry to content production, the number of content creators has grown. This leads to both specialisation and customisation becoming the order of the day. An examination of the many channels of YouTube, a popular video-sharing platform, demonstrates how tremendously arcane content can be. From presentations focusing on Old Norse language and mythology (the Jackson Crawford channel) to taste-testing of military rations (the Steve1989MREInfo channel), no interest or passion appears so obscure that it does not warrant the production of videos and the creation of a page through which viewers can make donations.

But this is not the stuff of strong parasocial relationships. Rather, there must be an *illusion* of interpersonal connection. A good stage performer can synthesise this illusion *for a time*. But this requires a magnetism and charm that few possess. Fortunately for the growing army of content creators, technology provides the means for even the most *antimagnetic* of personalities to serve as the foundation for a simulacrum that can live and breathe in the parasocial sphere and the *semi-parasocial* sphere—the domain of relationships that are predominately parasocial but may have some limited non-parasocial elements.

Aside from major advancements in production technology, the smartphone era of modern communications and computing affords content creators ready means of customising content and interacting with individual consumers. One finds parasocial relationships in abundance on platforms designed to allow consumers to subscribe to content creators and directly request customised photographs and videos. Such sites exploit and channel libidinal energies of the higher and lower sort, with OnlyFans being an excellent example of the latter. Since the platform's establishment in 2006, it has registered more than 1,500,000 content creators and 150,000,000 users (content consumers). And the platform has grossed 6.25 billion dollars of subscriptions each year, paying out 5 billion dollars to content creators, with the difference in subscriptions collected and payout being the result of the platform taking a 20% cut of each consumer subscription (Cooban, 2021; OnlyFans, 2023).

Not all OnlyFans creators produce adult entertainment, but a considerable majority of them do (Cooban, 2021). To anyone with an even passing familiarity with the internet, the success of a subscription platform for adult content may be perplexing. Although estimates vary widely, the best available numbers suggest that somewhere between 4% and 15% of internet traffic consists of adult content, with a considerable amount of this being available at little to no cost (Castleman, 2016b). Such confusion arises from the presumption that all OnlyFans content is libidinal in the *purest* animalistic sense, ignoring its parasocial element. OnlyFans and similar subscription sites function largely as social media platforms, with interaction between creators and consumers being integral to the business model. One content creator stressed the critical nature of the social element, describing her audience as "just a lot of people who are lonely or unhappy in their marriages or who haven't got a lot of friends," (Kale, 2020).

Parasocial relationships of this sort have the potential to serve as both replacements and supplements for conventional relationships. It would be a mistake to assume that all of those who enter into parasocial bonds are *without* more traditional connections. Rather, as the aforementioned content creator noted, married content consumers are not uncommon, and some other consumers are (presumably) in non-marital relationships—dating, cohabitating, et cetera—that they find to be less than completely fulfilling.

The advantage that the parasocial relationship and content creator has over his (or more likely *her*) non-parasocial counterparts is *image management*. Consumers may look to content creators for more than erotic gratification. Rather, they seek a controlled, curated relationship that provides a sense of connectedness without the attendant problems. This structured, performative intimacy is an integral part of *the girlfriend experience*—a simulated dating relationship that is frequently requested by clients of sexual service providers (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018; Milrod & Monto, 2012). In physical-space client/provider interactions, this simulation can be placed in the second tier of Baudrillard's order of simulacra, making it an *unfaithful copy* of the authentic thing—in this case, a less overtly transactional relationship. But technology as an intermediary and enhancer propels the internet parasocial construct to the third or fourth levels, in which simulacra are unbound from reality and exist in their own right.

Moving away from the second to the third or fourth tier of Baudrillard's order of simulacra and from the more concrete libidinal energies to those more abstract, one arrives at the realm of the *entirely synthetic* parasocial relationship. It is here that the sock puppet of the online persona—hyperreal, non-human, but forever enlivened by human hands and decision-making—gives way to the virtual being that lives entirely *in silico*. This is the space of artificial intelligence.

Before one argues that an artificial intelligence *cannot* serve as half of a parasocial coupling, it is worth pre-empting as much by reviewing the definition of a parasocial relationship, which is "a one-sided, emotional attachment with a fictional character or media personality," (Gillette, 2022). By this definition, artificial intelligence offers the only possibility of an interactive *and purely* parasocial relationship. The physical-space sexual

service provider may well be entirely detached from her (or his) clientele, but it is unlikely that the provider will have *no* awareness of the traits and personality of clients. The online intimacy and sexual service provider is further removed, possibly never seeing or communicating with a significant portion of content consumers, and those with whom the provider interacts communicating purely through text. Still, there is *some* possibility, however small, that the provider will develop an emotional attachment or concern for a client. Simulated personalities, no matter how much they interact with clients, risk no such entanglements, at least with current technology.

From an economic and convenience perspective, the simulated personality is the ideal manifestation of hyperreality. The simulacrum is forever present, forever engaged, forever willing to tolerate abuse and mistreatment, and incapable of receiving emotional injury. And interaction with simulacrum is without the dangers of other modes of relationship building. From the liability and risk aversion perspective, artificial intelligences fair no less well. An artificial intelligence cannot pursue criminal charges or litigation against a client, nor can the artificial be stalked, harassed, or killed by an obsessed person.

It is a mistake when assessing parasocial relationships in which an artificial intelligence *is the content creator* to protest that the content consumer will never find these relationships sufficiently convincing. Otherwise, normal and rational people can be convinced by such systems—*Replika* being one of the more popular—of machine sentience, with a Google engineer (someone presumably well-informed about computing technology) stating repeatedly that he believed that a certain artificial intelligence had achieved such a state (Raskin, 2022; Reuters, 2022).

No fetish statue or straw dog can be anything but an imperfect substitute for a human being. The converse—that no human can be anything but an imperfect substitute for a fetish statue or straw dog—is no less true. Community decay, interpersonal isolation, and advancements in technology drive the growth of hyperreality, but a consideration of the origins of this growth does not fully elucidate hyperreality's indisputable utility in a post-community, post-family liminal society.

3. Let the Hate Flow Through You: Catharsis, Pathology, and Social Stability

Thus far, the stage has been set for the central question of this paper—*why the hate?* The modern man has both much and little to resent. Materially wealthy, he is socially poor. Protected, however imperfectly, from the gales and gusts of the heavens, he is one false keystroke away from a cyclone of social media vitriol. This same modern man commands the great power of horrible and wondrous things—cars, weapons, communications technologies, earth-moving machinery, and technologies to reprogram and repurpose the most fundamental elements of life itself—but is rendered helpless by the smallest disruptions to infrastructure.

Well-equipped to wreak havoc, isolated, and insecure—this is a nearly certain formula for a dangerous person. Modernity is unlikely to retreat, family is unlikely to be

revitalized, and the meaninglessness of cubicle work is unlikely to evaporate in a cloud of purpose. *So what is to be done?* Anger and libidinal energies must flow somewhere. To dam them up forever is to condemn their holder to a life of agony.

3.1 Fifteen Years (or More) of Infamy—JonBenét Ramsey and Disgust/Lust in Media

On the early morning of 26 December 1996, Patsy Ramsey, a wealthy homemaker in Boulder, Colorado, called to report that her daughter, JonBenét, had gone missing. Shortly thereafter, law enforcement responded to the call and began a search for the missing six-year-old girl. Patsy presented the responding officers with a ransom note she claimed to have found, which demanded 118,000 USD for the safe return of JonBenét. Around 1:00 PM, JonBenét's strangled and beaten body was discovered by her father, John (Flynn, 2023; Suglia, 2016). As traumatic as the death of JonBenét Ramsey must have been for her family, it was but one of 19,645 murders that occurred in the United States that year, with an estimated 10% of these victims being juveniles (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001; Ringel, 1997).

Were media attention to have been distributed rationally and fairly, the Ramsey case would have been given local news coverage and little more, and other crimes and other victims, many with compelling stories and heartbroken families of their own, would have received commensurate amounts of attention. Yet they did not, and the Ramsey case became the centre of a decades-long feeding frenzy, encompassing thousands of news articles, approximately 15 books, and more than one film and television mini-series (Aiello, 2016).

The JonBenét Ramsey case and its attendant media circus were neither the first nor the last of their kind. They did, however, take place at a significant moment in American media history. Cable and tabloid news reigned supreme, and the 24-hour news cycle, ushered into existence by Cable News Network (CNN), was less than a decade old (Hansen & Folkenflik, 2005). To the internet-connected media consumer of the 2020s, the rate at which information flowed might well have seemed glacial. Televisions were hardly portable to the extent smartphones are (although AM news and talk provided some of the same information streams), and the choices one had for content consumption were decidedly limited compared to those of the present.

Content creation was relatively centralized. News websites, while in existence, were neither particularly sophisticated nor accessible, with only 22% of the American public being online the year of JonBenét's death (Pew Research, 1996). This was the relatively brief era in which the broadcast network stations of the 1950s through 1980s had diminished in importance while the internet was still little more than a toy for the upper and middle class. Thus, researchers are provided with extraordinarily ample evidence of the media fixations of the era—evidence neither likely to be completely lost in newspaper morgues of previous generations nor to be deleted from the servers of today. The 1990s were an optimal era for over-coverage of a small number of stories, with just enough technology to allow for the bombardment of the public with a case's salacious details, but not so much that one story could be quickly replaced by another.

Despite the particularities of this era, the Ramsey case had much in common with its earlier and later counterparts. Earlier, there was the case of Elizabeth Short, a woman in her early 20s whose badly mangled body was found in Los Angeles in 1947. Known for her penchant for dark clothing, Short was nicknamed *the Black Dahlia* by her friends—a reference to *The Blue Dahlia*, a movie that had been released not long before. Short's case was widely publicized by the newspapers, drawing considerable attention to the death of a young woman without any particular social connections or importance to the larger community. There were some intriguing aspects to the case, namely that someone purporting to be the killer mailed taunts and some of Short's personal effects to the police (Ott, 2021). But such were insufficient to entirely explain the case's appeal.

Well in the internet era—2021—was the case of Gabby Petito, a 20-something woman who was allegedly killed by her boyfriend while they were touring the United States in their van and vlogging (Weitzman & Narvaez, 2022). The media attention around the Petito case was intense yet relatively short-lived. It received neither the tabloid coverage nor the film and television coverage of the Ramsey case, and it is unlikely that it will be clearly remembered and commemorated some 25 years after the fact. Such can be explained by the news cycle of the internet era being considerably faster than that of 1996. By 2018, big news stories were covered for an average of seven days (Owen, 2019). By the time of Petito's death, the news cycle had likely accelerated further.

In all of these cases, there is a common theme—sexuality. JonBenét Ramsey was a child beauty queen; Petito, a young, thin, blonde woman; and Short was described as "the attractive victim of a brutal sex-fiend murder" in a contemporaneous account (Flynn, 2023; Los Angeles Times, 1947, p. 2; Weitzman & Narvaez, 2022). The death of a homeless Danny DeVito lookalike (or even an older or less attractive woman) might draw considerably less attention.

The point of these retellings is not to trivialise *anyone's* death but to suggest that the intense media and public fascination with the deaths of young women and girls has a sexual undertone to it that taps into the most lurid, base, and uncomfortable-to-acknowledge of libidinal impulses.

Outside the realm of crime and tabloid news, this erotic-violent fixation can be found in certain genres of horror, slasher, and exploitation films that were popular in the 1970s and 1980s. The exact relationship between sexuality and death across these films and genres varies. In some—*The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Straw Dogs* (1971) for instance—sexual interactions are themselves violent. In others—*Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) being two prime examples—sexual tension is intimately bound to violence. In a few, with *Vampire's Kiss* (1988) being one of the clearer cases, sexual interactions *lead* to violence. With the exception of *Vampire's Kiss*, in which a young Nicolas Cage plays a New York professional driven insane by his sexual and romantic delusions, the focus of these films is female sexuality. And even in *Kiss*, the destructiveness of allowing oneself to become enraptured by feminine appeal centres the narrative.

This paper asserts that fiction provides a less morally suspect outlet for the erotic-violent libidinal impulse than true crime and tabloid journalism. First and most obviously, fiction demands no *real* victims. Actors, actresses, writers, film composers, and crew members may well be underpaid and overworked, but they rarely die in the course of their duties. Ramsey, Short, and Petito were not so lucky. Second is the matter of *consent*—a topic that will be addressed in considerably more depth in a later section but that is worthy of brief mention here. Practically, privacy is of no concern to the dead. But for those they leave behind, barrages of questions, news trucks parked outside their homes for days on end, and months (if not years) of microscopic dissection of behaviours that might not warrant a second glance in more normal circumstances can further injure the already wounded. Characters can suffer no such violations. Performers and content creators can, but they have at least consented *to something*—to being in the public to a certain degree. And they can freely profit from as much.

Finally, there is the matter of the *boundary of the unreal*. Tabloids and television news are not in the business of presenting *reality*, rather they distribute and market *second-order simulacra* according to Baudrillard's taxonomy, and there is danger in this. *Tabloidized* reality is close enough to the real world to promote fear, irrationality, and panic. True fiction, clearly labelled as such, rarely has equal potential for harm.

The challenge of a civilisation without a community; the spiritual corrosiveness of a life of ease, longevity, and safety; the mental and psychological burdens of bureaucracy and bullshit jobs; the enervating and emasculating powers of liability culture; and the pressures of dammed-up libidinal energies—these issues need be addressed. Not all can be remedied easily, but further analysis of parasocial relationships and their utility might stand to partially mitigate their harms.

3.2 Famous for Being Famous: The *Kardashianisation* of Celebrity

For all their differences, Ramsey, Short, and Petito have something in common with the entertainers of traditional media—they are all famous *for something*. In the former case—that of those fetishized in the erotic-violent construct of tabloids and television—their fame was imposed upon them along with their status as victims. In the latter, fame was chosen and pursued, often at great expense, as part of their acting and performance careers. Regardless, one knows *why* they are famous. Crime victim, actor, or actress—any person reasonably versed in the popular culture of the era can explain in a few words *why these people are known to the public*.

The next category—that of those who rose to prominence in the reality television era—is distinct. Of no discernible talent (aside from self-promotion), and victims of nothing (aside from their egos), the reality television star is a step up Baudrillard's order of simulacra. The name itself—*reality television star*—is both deceptive and instructive. In the conventional sense, *reality television* is far removed from reality. Yet according to the thinking of Baudrillard, such programs and the characters therein can be said to be a reality of their own. And they represented something novel for their era—the merging of actor, writer, and character developer into a single being. The older model of television

and media creation was largely compartmentalized, with writers and showrunners developing characters and storylines and actors playing the roles given to them. In contrast, reality television relies on self-constructed characters—personas that are the imaginings and work-products of their creators, become synonymous with their creators, and eventually consume their creators, until the *reality persona* becomes *the real*, and the *real person* becomes irrelevant. Thus emerges the *personality/persona*—that which is both *authentically inauthentic* and but poorly (if at all) distinguishable from the organic.

Reality television is not something that could have come into being anywhere or at any time. The ability of *almost anyone* in the United States to construct a character—to play up some aspects of their personality while playing down others—demonstrates a deep form of literacy. This is not a literacy of classical works or a literacy of ancient thoughts and customs. Instead, it is a substantial, if sometimes imperfectly articulated, grasp of the tropes, mechanics, and nuances of modern media. Narrative, pacing, timing of interactions, the naturalistically artificial behaviour one must present to the camera—there is nothing intuitive about these. They must be learned, and such requires immersive study over years. *Documentaries* can be made about different cultures at different stages of technological development, but to compare a documentary to reality television is no less inaccurate than to compare the strategic planning and decision-making of a general in wartime to those of a chess player in a tournament. The skillset required for each overlap, yet they are far from the same.

Reality television rose to prominence in the United States as a result of the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike, which made the production of traditional scripted content all but impossible (Blickley, 2018). Ultimately, those on strike saw many of their demands met, but their victory was one tempered by loss. The rise of reality television demonstrated that their works had been received and *absorbed* by the public consciousness to such an extent that writers themselves had become nonessential.

In 2007, the first year of the Guild strike, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* debuted. If *Seinfeld*—a much-beloved 1990s American sitcom—was said to be a show about nothing, it at least had a script (Cantor, 2023). *Kardashians*, and reality television in general, demonstrated that such was unnecessary—that many (more than 10 million for the most viewed episodes) Americans were willing to watch a television program about people *who wanted to be on television* and who wanted to be famous *for being famous* (Lerner, 2023). *The process of celebrity-making is itself the point of attention and fixation*. Reality television is thus *hyperreal* in that has achieved a near-perfect unification of fiction and reality.

One would be in error to think that the *Kardashianisation* of celebrity stopped with network and cable stars. Rather, this was but one step towards the Kardashianisation of all online media, through which the mechanisms and goals of fame-building are recursive. This leads to the next critical concept of this paper—the microcelebrity/content creator who is the natural evolutionary outcome of the self-constructed media producer, oftentimes serving as his (or her) own director, videographer, and editor, in addition to playing the roles of writer, actor, and character creator in the Kardashian mode.

3.3 Geeks, Gurus, Trolls, Influencers, E-Girls, and Libidinal Channelling

Between the very deliberate celebrity in the vein of the Kardashians and the wholly accidental/unintentional celebrity of the crime and tabloid media is the microcelebrity—someone who may well strive to be famous *but only in a limited way or for a limited audience*. For the purposes of this paper, a taxonomy of five distinct types of microcelebrities has been developed, organized from presumed weakest to strongest potential for parasocial relationship formation:

1) Geeks (technical/subject experts)
2) Gurus (Lifestyle/behavioural experts)
3) Trolls (those who gain fame by attacking others)
4) Influencers (those who build a reputation to sell products)
5) E-Girls (women whose primary appeal is sexual or romantic)

Of all categories of microcelebrities, *the geek* is the one least suited to the construction of strong parasocial relationships. *Geek* is used in this paper without malice or intent to belittle, meaning simply *one who has a strong interest in technical subjects*—the most common modern usage of the term (Roeder, 2014). Communities may well form around the geek, and the geek may even achieve limited *influencer* status insofar that he (or she) makes product recommendations. But these recommendations, be they for electronics, timepieces, survival equipment, firearms, or automobiles, are at least nominally made due to the specific performance of the product, rather than the lifestyle and cultural associations of it.

Figure 2: A stereotypical geek—distinct from the usage herein

Then there is the *guru*. As likely to appeal to men as women, the guru serves as an elder figure or font of sagacity, generally offering life or fitness advice, with some extending into business and relationship fields. The geek has technical expertise, whereas the guru has wisdom. Gurus may be associated with a religion or traditional set of beliefs. But such does not make them ministers and religious workers, and one could argue without much difficulty that they exist in a different social space in American culture,

where *self-improvement* is held in high regard. Apropos of such, the guru offers *gains* in the here and now, not in the hereafter.

If the geek exists to analyse, engage with, and manipulate technology, the *troll* does so with other people. Arguably higher on Baudelaire's order of simulacra than the geek or the guru, the *troll* personality/persona is a fundamentally reactive agent in the media-sphere. Often without firmly held beliefs or articulable purpose aside from frustrating others, the troll may diminish some voices and messages, amplify others (often of the more extreme sort), or distort messages and meanings. At its heart, this is a demonstration of power and technical competence. *I do this to prove I can.* Both the guru and troll act with the intent of modifying human behaviour, but unlike the guru, the troll offers little wisdom or insight to improve one's life, although some of the troll's psychological techniques are worthy of study and can be put to less wicked ends. A noteworthy predecessor of the troll—the AM talk show host—shared the troll's aptitude for recontextualizing and repurposing existing media for novel psychological and entertainment ends. *Unlike* the talk show host, the troll has a large and expanding toolkit for both gathering audience feedback and applying such knowledge to rapidly evolve his tactics for manipulating the perceptions and mindsets of the content consumer and content creator.

Next, there is the *influencer*. Essentially an independent marketer, the influencer relies on building a parasocial connection with members of a target market. Geeks share interests, gurus and their devotees share ideals, and trolls and their acolytes share a sense of mischief. Influencers and followers both *aspire to live a certain lifestyle*. The carefully edited Instagram travel and clothing photographs, the sunsets at one idyllic location after the next—what the influencer sells is a consumeristic friendship. *Come away with me. We will go to beautiful places, see beautiful things, and live our best lives.*

Finally, there is the *e-girl* (and less commonly *e-boy*). Both *e-girl* and *e-boy* can describe those who wear a style of clothing defined by a game- and anime-influenced aesthetic developed more than a decade ago (Jennings, 2019). As used in this paper, the meaning of the terms is slightly different, with a similar emphasis on internet presentation and engagement, but with the primary function being to present themselves as virtual and generally idealised romantic partners or nominally platonic friends with some romantic/flirty undertones. While e-girl content creators may produce highly sexualized material, a distinction should be made between e-girls and more traditional adult content/video performers. The distinction is in the *parasocial*. An adult video performer might well gladhand and pose for photographs with fans, but the mode of content production is fundamentally similar (in most cases) to that of the film and television industry, with greater emphasis on performance than person. For the e-girl, the parasocial relationship *is the first product*. And the e-girl's main target is the heart, not the genitals. This physical performance/act versus relationship distinction is neither novel nor confusing when considered in the larger framework of real-world sexual relationships, where a nearly identical one is used to contrast short-term and overtly transactional interaction with dating and romantic relationships.

Taxonomy aside, parasocial relationships can be centred around any microcelebrity. This is as much the product of the human capacity for psychological projection—to perceive the existence of a sentience, a relationship, motives, or feelings where none exist. Projective anthropomorphism—one of the more elaborate forms of this mechanism—allows people to see robots (and the aforementioned artificial intelligences) as having certain human-like traits, even where none exist (Jones, 2022). In comparison to this, the construction of an unreciprocated relationship with a celebrity or microcelebrity is trivial.

Figure 3: Representations of Gurus, Trolls, Influencers, and E-girls

Yet not all parasocial relationships have the same capacity to channel and sate the libidinal impulses to the same degree and in the same way. The more *apparently* personal the parasocial relationship becomes, the more effectively it allows for the construction of a strong (if unidirectional) bond. And the stronger this bond becomes, the greater the channelling utility of the relationship will be.

With all of the concepts above taken into account, this paper now turns to an examination of para-antisocial behaviour and its personal and societal impact.

4. Harm and Harmlessness: Virtual Hatred, Virtual Love, and a Safer World

The arguments within this section are based on several assumptions. While most of the have already been addressed earlier in this paper, they should be summarized for the sake of clarity. They are:

1) A civilization is unlikely to long survive without *apparently* non-economic (or *non-strictly-economic*) human connections of *some form*.
2) In the West, conventional interpersonal relationships have diminished in number, strength, and relevance. This trend will continue for decades to come, and if not addressed, will have the potential impair society's ability to function in an orderly manner.

3) A lack of immediate physical threats and stress—comfort—will not make people happy, and it can contribute to their unhappiness. The bureaucratisation and depersonalization of life and authority can do much the same, largely through engendering a sense of powerlessness and purposelessness.

4) Just as much as the human psyche demands somewhere to direct its affections, it also demands somewhere to direct its ire. *Hatred and anger are integral to the human spirit. They cannot be eliminated, only focused.*

5) As the digital panopticon grows more sophisticated and ubiquitous, the legal, social, and economic perils of graceless, inappropriate, or misinterpretable in-person social interaction grow, with no commensurate enlargement of benefits. This has made (and will continue to make) for a people more averse to social risks and missteps.

6) Concurrent with in-person social interaction growing more stilted and perilous, the technology facilitating parasocial relationships will become more sophisticated and less expensive.

7) Parasocial relationships and new media technologies can address, at least partially, the human need for connection and can do so in a manner compatible with evolving Western values and social and legal norms.

The relevance of these assumptions should become clear throughout the following subsections.

4.1 Viceless City: Crime, Violent Games, and Sexual Assault

Homicide rates in the United States have varied considerably over the last six decades. In 1960, the homicide rate was 5 per 100,000. In 1980—the peak year—they reached 10.2, dropping inconsistently throughout the 1990s and early 2000s and 2020s, reaching a low point of 4.4 in 2013 and settling at 6.5 in 2022 (Hauck, 2023). At least since the end of World War II, the natural annual homicide rate in the United States appears to be somewhere between 4.5 and 6.5.

So why were the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s so unusually violent? Guns laws appear to have had little effect. Before 1968, most Americans could purchase firearms with little government interference or investigation (Miller, 2019). Even mail-order sales were permitted, with the 1960 Sears catalogue offering a selection of shotguns, rifles, semiautomatic pistols, and revolvers. Orders for semiautomatic pistols and revolvers *did* require a signed certificate from a law enforcement officer, but rifle and shotgun sales did not (Sears, 1960). Changes in rates of poverty and homelessness appear to have no obvious correlation to violent crime rates, with inflation-adjusted median household incomes being higher in 1970 than in 1950 but more or less the same in 1990 and 2010 (Richter, 2019).

Something—some essential social or community element that cannot be described in purely economic terms—appears to have broken in the 1960s, with it not being repaired or completely replaced until the 2000s. *What was broken and what replaced it?*

The introduction of no-fault divorce in 1969 radically changed the landscape of interpersonal relationships, just as did the sexual revolution (Willett, 2019; Wilcox, 2009). The decline of social networks and community bonds occurred more or less simultaneously (Putnam, 2023a). One cannot establish a causal relationship between the decline of family and community and a rise in crime rates. This is a mere correlation, but a correlation worth noting. Until a superior hypothesis is introduced—one that argues that the decline of family and community and the increase in crime were coincidences or were dependent variables for some heretofore unidentified independent variable—the idea that the collapse of interpersonal bonds resulted in an uptick in crime should stand.

Assuming that the collapse of family and community *did* lead to more crime, the question of what caused the later decline. Incarceration rates in the United States grew considerably from the 1980s through the 1990s, suggesting that *tough-on-crime* policies work, yet other countries that did not implement such policies also saw significant drops in their violent crime rates (Levitt, 2004; Santos & Testa, 2019). One of the few constants across essentially every nation studied has been innovation in entertainment technology, and this is hypothesised to be responsible for the downward trend in violence. Simply stated, the more time people spend being entertained, the less time they spend killing, raping, and robbing each other (Copus & Lacqueur, 2019). And there is some evidence that this socially stabilising effect is stronger for *violent* video games than many other forms of entertainment (Wilson, 2019). Engagement with electronic entertainment likely serves as a *substitute/replacement* for bad behaviour, redirecting libidinal energies. Adult entertainment appears to have the same effect, with greater access to internet pornography correlating to significant declines in rates of sexual assault around the world (Castleman, 2016a).

Video games and adult entertainment do not allow for the easy formation of parasocial relationships, but they are essential parts of the system that enables the replacement/substitution of the physical with the virtual. Para-antisociality is another, shunting to ground the viciousness of humanity with equal effectiveness.

And this leads to a reiteration of a critical hypothesis of this paper: Para-antisociality is a morally, legally, and socially preferable substitute for *actual* (physical world) antisocial behaviour, for which it is a lower-cost, notably safer alternative. Additionally, while there is a risk of those who do or cannot consent being subjected to vitriol, a certain type of microcelebrity, most often described in the previous section as *trolls*, actively court para-antisociality. Such wilful targets of antipathy may go to great lengths to provoke an audience, doing everything from posting footage of the bodies of those who committed suicide to engaging in decidedly tasteless and vulgar pranks (Asarch, 2021). There can and should be limits to the extent and hatred these people receive, just as there should be limits to the extent they entangle other parties in their hate-making, manipulation, and bickering. But if carefully, responsibly, and knowingly done, being a wilful target of para-antisociality, can prove remunerative and fulfilling. And by focusing their audience's anger and frustration, those who wilfully seek the role

of *para-antisocial heel* can shield those less well-prepared from much of the inchoate fury and frustration that is a seemingly unavoidable by-product of social modernisation.

4.2 Consent, Commerce, and Boundaries: A Utilitarian Framework for Ethical and Practical Para-antisociality

A recurring theme throughout this paper is that being the unwitting and unwilling subject of para-antisociality can be traumatic. Turning back to the JonBenét Ramsey case, one can see how years of broadcast and print attention harmed the Ramsey family and interfered with its members' abilities to live normal and productive lives. That John and Patsy chose to engage in television interviews not long after their daughter's death did something to *explain* why they were reviled by the public, but it did not constitute consent to their trial by the media.

As previously observed, *consent* is a key principle of ethical and practical engagement in para-antisociality, both in regards to engagement by the audience with the microcelebrity and engagement of the microcelebrity with the audience and the larger public. The goal of the para-antisocial experience is to serve as a purifying *hate theatre*, one in which no one is harmed any more than he (or she) desires to be. With that in mind, this paper proposes seven conditions for an ethical and practical para-antisocial relationship. They are:

1) All parties participating in the active hostilities of para-antisociality must consent to the engagement and be of sufficient mental maturity to do so.
2) Outside of sanctioned fights or athletic events, no physical injury should come to any participating party.
3) Para-antisocial hostilities should be demarcated as performative, with some signifier of the vitriol as being towards the *persona* more than the *content creator* (assuming they can be distinguished).
4) Para-antisocial hostilities should be *cathartic* rather than emotionally stifling or destructively inflammatory.
5) Para-antisocial hostilities should induce a sense of connection, if only to the virtual mob, rather than a sense of isolation.
6) Para-antisocial hostilities should *consume* the time and energy of participants, leaving them with less of either to inflict their ire upon the world.
7) Para-antisocial hostilities should avoid fomenting *categorical* (racial, religious, et cetera) hatred, except for hatred directed towards those who choose to commit singularly intolerable acts (child molestation, perversion of justice, et cetera).

As it stands, none of the well-known para-antisocial heels' performances and personas fulfil all seven of these conditions. The Paul brothers (Jake and Logan) meet *most* of the requirements in that they manage to be *personally* and performatively disliked, rather than fomenting more generalized antipathy, but it is debatable if they wilfully engage in the construction of para-antisocial relationships or if they are simply predisposed to graceless conduct. Given their years of online presence, they may well have started in one state and transitioned to another.

Admittedly, meeting all of these conditions *all* of the time, perfectly and without error, would require a degree of control over para-antisocial interaction and engagement few, if any, possess. Yet even if a para-antisocial heel who could consistently do so is to be taken as a platonic ideal more than an actual person, an enumeration of these conditions has merit.

Looking back to the assumptions on which this section is established, one can see how a well-structured para-antisocial relationship can reduce the frustration and isolation endemic to the modern world in a way that neither endangers the content creator's nor the audience's reputation to the same extent uncurated behaviour would. But to successfully construct and maintain the persona of para-antisocial heel, one must be of an unusual sort—resistant to insult, emotionally stable, and well-attuned to the finer points of the human psyche. *One must be, first and foremost, a skilled actor and character creator*. Ideally, one should have a sense of self-worth that is *antifragile*. The content creator must be able to take pride in the work of engaging others, despite the unpleasantness of the engagement.

Putting aside his politics or effectiveness at governance, President Donald Trump can be considered an example of one who appeared to relish interaction with the public, regardless of the positive or negative extent of any given encounter. And with his heavy use of superlatives (*greatest*, *huge*, *best*, et cetera), comfort with aggressive Twitter exchanges, and experience with professional wrestling, Trump developed an uncommon ability to emotionally involve audience members in a way content creators in the para-antisocial sphere might find worthy of study (Francisco, 2017; Holmes, 2018; Quealy, 2021). Intellectually, the para-antisocial dynamic should be defined as a *commercial/ emotional* transaction, much as Trump appears to treat most of his *brand-building behaviour*. By doing so, one can both recognise that the content creator has an *economic* function and that the persona is not identical to the person.

These points addressed, this paper now turns to a broader mental-wellbeing improvement system of which para-antisocial relationships are an important part.

4.3 Suffering Bodies/Liberated Minds: A Counterintuitive Approach to Wellbeing

The tragedy of modernity is the tragedy of *hope*—the hope that suffering can be eradicated, that science, that progress, will serve as a balm for the perennial pain of the body, mind, and spirit. This is a tragedy of success—a pyrrhic victory against suffering of one type that has allowed other forms of misery to take its place. Para-antisocial relationships play a critical role in the proper direction of the more dangerous libidinal energies that are forever integral to the human being, but para-antisocial relationships alone are insufficient for the task.

Another critical element to maintaining a functional level of sanity and the proper channelling of libidinal energies *is suffering*. Without suffering of an unambiguous sort— that of a certain origin and with a specific remedy, the mind is bound to construct misery of its own design. There is an interesting parallel between this and the *hygiene hypothesis*, which argues that a lack of exposure to bacteria can lead to an increase in autoimmune

diseases and allergies. The hygiene hypothesis is not absolute. *Unlimited filth* is not beneficial to the immune system, nor is exposure to *all* types of bacteria (Okada et al., 2010). The parallel holds in regards to this as well. *Some* suffering of the correct sort stands to strengthen the mind and prevent the development of *mental allergies*—disproportionate and dangerous responses to otherwise innocuous stimuli.

The remedies for mental allergies need not be severe, and if properly effectuated, their introduction can have secondary beneficial effects. Extremely parsimonious use of climate control in unpleasant environments stands to impose a sensible level of discomfort on the body of the *misery deprived*. It has the added benefit of reducing fossil fuel waste. Assigning students demanding maintenance and groundskeeping tasks could mentally stabilise students, save schools money, and afford students an appreciation of the importance of honest labour in maintaining a presentable physical space.

On a more profound level, both young and middle-aged people throughout the developed world might well benefit from more exposure to sickness and death. This can be done in a way that is *appropriately and manageably* traumatic. A visit to a nursing home, funeral home, or morgue grants one a certain perspective as to the smallness of a great many modern complaints.

And on a technological level, the automation of bureaucracy by way of artificial intelligence could liberate the desk-bound and furious from their bullshit jobs. Rather than continuing professional lives without purpose, these workers could be reassigned to tasks *that matter* and that modern robotics and artificial intelligence cannot yet perform. Plumbing, construction, infrastructure repair, and the maintenance of civil order (law enforcement, et cetera) are all jobs where *the human* has yet to be replaced by *the machine*. Some of these entail physical discomfort and risk to life and limb. But they are not pointless. They are useful. This must count for something.

Next is the elimination of false sentiment. Lying is exhausting. It demands more of the brain than does telling the truth (Hadhazy, 2013). Mental fatigue is a nefarious poison, casting a shadow of frustration and violence over experiences good and bad alike (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). And the expectation that one must *lie* to protect the feelings of others is both a moral hazard and a burden. The solution to this is *honesty*. A people less confused are likely to be a people less angry. And where there are fewer lies there is less confusion. Likewise, acknowledgement of the naturalness of *indifference*—the truth that one might well care not one way or the other if his neighbour wins a million dollars in a card game or is hit by a bus (or both)—could do much to liberate the courteously dishonest from their slowly building antipathy.

The *truth* is that communities grow weak when necessity does not dictate otherwise. The better part of humanity is neither overwhelmingly loveable nor prodigiously likeable. Under the appropriate pressure—that which demands that the members of a community learn to work together despite their differences—they will adapt as they must. But this exacting pressure is rare at present. And in those times between crises, parasocial and para-antisocial relationships can serve an essential role in regulating the libidinal energies of a people increasingly removed from the immediate

and awful threats of the natural world. These relationships, combined with a sensible and sustainable level of imposed suffering that is optimised to tempering the human mind and body, stand to make for a mentally healthier and better-balanced people who are less inclined to acts of wanton cruelty or destruction.

5. Conclusion: Delusion, Not Fantasy, Is the Enemy

The past is forever behind us, and the people and ways thereof are gone. Even those who survive to the present are not who they once were. The relationship model of decades prior—small, interpersonal, slowly formulated—was of a certain time and place. Such relationships continue to *exist*, but their utility and sustainability make them imperfect fits for the present and future world. And where these *do not and cannot fit*, parasocial and para-antisocial relationships function well in their staid.

The fantasy—the *unreality*—of microcelebrity and parasocial relationships is not corrosive to the mental health of a people or the prosperity and wellbeing of a nation, *delusion* is. If modernity is to survive, the peoples of technologically advanced nations must maintain and cultivate their appreciation for the tools that allow them to render their imaginings tangible and substantial. And they must come to fully understand reality as conventionally categorised, hyperreality, and how fictions can evolve into realities of their own.

Finally, they must be forever mindful of the human animal's libidinal nature and learn to discipline it. This, not abandonment of humanity's tremendous creative capacity, is the way to a future of prosperity, purpose, and mental fortitude.

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