(first published online by Eurozine, January 10, 2019)

‘Solitary tears are not wasted.’ René Char – ‘I dreamt about autocorrect last night.’ Darcie Wilder – ‘The personal is impersonal.’ Mark Fisher – ‘Swipe left and move on.’ Motivational speaker – ‘I’m easy but too busy for you.’ T-shirt – ‘Why don’t you just meet me in the middle? I am losing my mind just a little.’ Zedd, Maren Morris, Grey – ‘As the spirit wanes, the form appears.’ Charles Bukowski – ‘I don’t care, I love it.’ Icona Pop – ‘Percent of riders on Shanghai subway staring at their phones: 100%.’ Kevin Kelly – ‘When you get ignored long enough you check peoples ‘last seen’ status to make sure they aren’t dead.’ Addie Wagenknecht – ‘I don’t feel like writing what I have just written, nor do I feel like erasing it.’ Kierkegaard – ‘The very purpose of our life is to seek happiness.’ Dalai Lama.

Try and dream, if you can, of a mourning app. The mobile has come dangerously close to our psychic bone, to the point where the two can no longer be separated. If only my phone could gently weep. McLuhan’s ‘extensions of man’ has imploded right into the exhausted self.[1] Social media and the psyche have fused, turning daily life into a ‘social reality’ that – much like artificial and virtual reality – is overtaking our perception of the world and its inhabitants. Social reality is a corporate hybrid between handheld media and the psychic structure of the user. It’s a distributed form of social ranking that can no longer be reduced to the interests of state and corporate platforms. As online subjects, we too are implicit, far too deeply involved. Social reality works in a peer-to-peer fashion. It’s all about you and your profile. Likes and followers define your social status. But what happens when nothing can motivate you anymore, when all the self-optimization techniques fail and you begin to carefully avoid these forms of emotional analytics? Compared to others your ranking is low – and this makes you sad.



Photo source: pixabay

In *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now,* Jaron Lanier asks, 'why do so many famous tweets end with the word "sad"?'2 He associates the word with a lack of real connection. 'Why must people accept manipulation by a third party as the price of a connection?' According to Lanier, sadness appears in response to 'unreasonable standards for beauty or social status or vulnerability to trolls.' Google and Facebook know how to utilize negative emotions, leading to the new system-wide goal: find personalized ways to make you feel bad. There is no single way to make everyone unhappy. Sadness will be tailored to you. Lanier noticed that certain online designs made him unhappy because social media placed him in a subordinate position. 'It's structurally humiliating. Being addicted and manipulated makes me feel bad… There was a strange, unfamiliar hollow in me after a session. An insecurity, a feeling of not making the grade, a fear of rejection, out of nowhere.'

Lanier discovered his 'inner troll', a troll produced by what he calls the asshole amplification technology: 'I really don't like it when a crowd judges me casually, or when a stupid algorithm has power over me. I don't like it when a program counts whether I have more or fewer friends than other

people.' He refuses to be ranked and concludes: 'The inability to carve out a space in which to invent oneself without constant judgement; *that* is what makes me unhappy.' A similar reference we find in Adam Greenfield's *Radical Technologies*, where he notices that 'it seems strange to assert that anything as broad as a class of technologies might have an emotional tenor, but the internet of things does. That tenor is *sadness*… a melancholy that rolls off it in waves and sheets. The entire pretext on which it depends is a milieu of continuously shattered attention, of overloaded awareness, and of gaps between people just barely annealed with sensors, APIs and scripts.' It is a life 'savaged by bullshit jobs, over-cranked schedules and long commutes, of intimacy stifled by exhaustion and the incapacity by exhaustion and the incapacity or unwillingness to be emotionally present.'[3]

Of course, sadness existed before social media. And even when the smart phone is safely out of reach, you can still feel down. Let's step out of the determinist merry-go-round that all too quickly spins from capitalist alienation and disastrous states of mind to blaming Silicon Valley for your misery. Even technological sadness is a style, albeit a cold one. The sorrow, no matter how short, is real. This is what happens when we can no longer distinguish between telephone and society. If we can't freely change our profile and feel too weak to delete the app, we're condemned to feverishly check for updates during the brief in-between moments of our busy lives. In a split second, the real-time machine has teleported us out of our current situation and onto another playing field filled with mini-reports we quickly have to investigate.

Omnipresent social media places a claim on our elapsed time, our fractured lives. We're all sad in our very own way.[4] As there are no lulls or quiet moments anymore, the result is fatigue, depletion and loss of energy. We're becoming obsessed with waiting. How long have you been forgotten by your love ones? Time, meticulously measured on every app, tells us right to our face. Chronos hurts. Should I post something to attract attention and show I'm still here? Nobody likes me anymore. As the random messages keep relentlessly piling in, there's no way to halt them, to take a moment and think it all through.[5]

Delacroix once declared that every day which is not noted is like a day that does not exist. Diary writing used to fulfil that task. Elements of early blog culture tried to update the diary form for the online realm, but that moment has now passed. Unlike the blog entries of the Web 2.0 era, social media

have surpassed the summary stage of the diary in a desperate attempt to keep up with real-time regime. Instagram Stories, for example, bring back the nostalgia of an unfolding chain of events – and then disappear at the end of the day, like a revenge act, a satire of ancient sentiments gone by. Storage will make the pain permanent. Better forget about it and move on.

It's easy to contrast the relentless swing between phone and life with the way anthropologists describe metamorphosis. Initiation and ritual are slow events that require time, instigated by periods of voluntary solitude. The perpetual now that defines the 'smart' condition is anything but an endurance test. By browsing through updates, we're catching up with machine time – at least until we collapse under the weight of participation fatigue. Organic life cycles are short-circuited and accelerated up to a point where the personal life of billions has finally caught up with cybernetics. Time to go slow, *despacito*.

In the online context, sadness appears as a short moment of indecisiveness, a flash that opens up the possibility of a reflection. The frequently used 'sad' label is a vehicle, a strange attractor to enter the liquid mess called social media. Sadness is a container. Each and every situation can potentially be qualified as 'sad'. Through this mild form of suffering, we enter the blues of being in the world. When something's sad, things around it become grey. You trust the machine because you feel you're in control of it. You want to go from zero to hero. But then your propped-up ego implodes and the failure of self-esteem becomes apparent again. The price of self-control in an age of instant gratification is high. We long to revolt against the restless zombie inside us, but we don't know how. Our psychic armour is thin and eroded from within, open to 'behavioural modifications'. Sadness arises at the point we're exhausted by the online world.[6] After yet another app session in which we failed to make a date, purchased a ticket and did a quick round of videos, the post-dopamine mood hits us hard. The sheer busyness and self-importance of the world makes you feel joyless. After a dive into the network we're drained and feel socially awkward. The swiping finger is tired and we have to stop.

Sadness expresses the growing gap between the self-image of a perceived social status and the actual precarious reality. The temporary dip, described here under the code name 'sadness', can best be understood as a mirror phenomenon of the self-promotion machine that constructs the links for us. The mental state is so pervasive, the merging of social media with the self so

totalizing, that we see the sadness complex as a manifestation of an 'anti-self' stage that we slip into and then walk away from.[7] The anti-climax called sadness travels with the smart phone, it's everywhere. It is considered sad when most of your friends are bots. The conservative judgement that many friends indicate a lack of character and *gestalt*[8] falls short here, as most are machine-generated social relationships anyway. As buying followers has become more acceptable, social status no longer has to be built from the ground up through hard online labour.[9]

We should be careful to distinguish sadness from 'anomalies' such as suicide, depression and burn-out. Everything and everyone can be called sad, but not everyone is depressed.[10] Much like boredom, sadness is not a medical condition (though never say never because everything can be turned into one). No matter how brief and mild, sadness is the default mental state of the online billions. Its original intensity gets dissipated, it seeps out, becoming a general atmosphere, a chronic background condition. Occasionally – for a brief moment – we feel the loss. A seething rage emerges. After checking for the tenth time what someone said on Instagram, the pain of the social makes us feel miserable, and we put the phone away. Am I suffering from the phantom vibration syndrome? Wouldn't it be nice if we were offline? Why is life so tragic? He blocked me. At night, you read through the thread again. Do we need to quit again, to go cold turkey again? Others are supposed to move us, to arouse us, and yet we don't feel anything anymore. The heart is frozen.

Once the excitement wears off, we seek distance, searching for mental detachment. The wish for 'anti-experience' arises, as Mark Greif has described it. The reduction of feeling is an essential part of what he calls 'the anaesthetic ideology'. If experience is the 'habit of creating isolated moments within raw occurrence in order to save and recount them,'[11] the desire to anaesthetize experience is a kind of immune response against 'the stimulations of another modern novelty, the total aesthetic environment'.[12]

Most of the time your eyes are glued to screen, as if it's now or never. As Gloria Estefan wrote: 'The sad truth is that opportunity doesn't knock twice.' Then, you stand up and walk away from the intrusions. The fear of missing out backfires, the social battery is empty and you put the phone aside. This is the moment sadness arises. It's all been too much, the intake has been pulverized and you shut down for a moment, poisoning him with your unanswered messages. According to Greif, 'the hallmark of the conversion to

anti-experience is a lowered threshold for eventfulness.' A Facebook event is the one you're interested in, but do not attend. We observe others around us, yet are no longer part of the conversation: 'They are nature's creatures, in the full grace of modernity. The sad truth is that you still want to live in their world. It just somehow seems this world has changed to exile you.'13 You leave the online arena, you need to rest. This is an inverse movement from the constant quest for experience. That is, until we turn our heads away, grab the phone, swipe and text back. God only knows what I'd be without the app.

Los Angeles theorist and artist Audrey Wollen has declared sadness a feminist strategy, a form of political resistance 'to be as goddamn miserable as we want'.14 In a text called *Sad Girl Theory*, she states that 'our pain doesn't need to be discarded in the name of empowerment. It can be used as a material, a weight, a wedge, to jam that machinery and change those patterns.' To Wollen, political protest is usually defined in masculine terms, 'as something external and often violent, a demonstration in the streets, a riot, an occupation of space'. Such a definition excludes 'a whole history of girls who have used their sorrow and their self -destruction to disrupt systems of domination'. Feminism doesn't need to advocate how awesome and fun being a girl is. The endless preaching of empowerment may as well be what Lauren Berlant calls a form of 'cruel optimism'. Sharing feelings online is not a form of narcissism. As Wollen insists: 'Girls' sadness is not passive, self -involved or shallow; it is a gesture of liberation, it is articulate and informed, it is a way of reclaiming agency over our bodies, identities, and lives.'

By reading sadness through a gender lens and contextualizing affect as a female response, Wollen turns sadness into a political weapon. And yet, in one sense, this weapon has already been defused. Today sadness has been compressed into code, turning it into a techno-sentiment. Audrey Wollen admits that social media ultimately abuses feelings with the aim of a 'positive' quantifiable outcome. 'Sadness has become quippy,' she writes. 'I can tweet about how depressed I am instead of writing a sonnet in iambic pentameter. We spend a lot of time talking about how we want to kill ourselves over social media, but when was the last time all of your friends got together and cried? We still participate in upholding the idea of "happiness" as a goal or object that can be worked for, something you "earn" instead of just chilling with our misery.'15

Sadness has neighbouring feelings we can check out. There is the sense of worthlessness, blankness, joylessness, the fear of accelerating boredom, the feeling of nothingness, plain self-hatred while trying to get off drug dependency, those lapses of self-esteem, the laying low in the mornings, those moments of being overtaken by a sense of dread and alienation, up to your neck in crippling anxiety, there is the self-violence, panic attacks, and deep despondency before we cycle all the way back to reoccurring despair. We can go into the deep emotional territory of the Russian word *toska*.16 Or we can think of online sadness as part of that moment of cosmic loneliness Camus imagined after God created the earth. I wish that every chat was never ending. But what do you do when your inability to respond takes over? You're heartbroken and delete the session. After yet another stretch of compulsory 'engagement' with those cruel Likes, silly comments, empty text messages, detached emails and vacuous selfies, you feel empty and indifferent. You hover for a moment, vaguely unsatisfied. You want to stay calm, yet start to lose your edge, disgusted by your own Facebook Memories. But what's this message that just came in? Strange. Did they respond?

Anxieties that go untreated build up to a breaking point. Yet unlike burn-out, sadness is a continuous state of mind. Sadness pops up the second events start to fade away – and now you're down the rabbit hole once more. The perpetual now can no longer be captured and leaves us isolated, a scattered set of online subjects. What happens when the soul is caught in the permanent present? Is this what Franco Berardi calls the 'slow cancellation of the future'? By scrolling, swiping and flipping, we hungry ghosts try to fill the existential emptiness, frantically searching for a determining sign – and failing. When the phone hurts and you cry together, that's technological sadness. 'I miss your voice. Call, don't text.'17

Sad by design occurrences

Our cult of sentimentality manifests itself inside specific apps. This applies equally to users and producers. Let's first look at online video. Julie Alexander has documented the burn-outs, panic attacks and other mental health issues of YouTube's top creators. Alexander reports that 'constant changes to the platform's algorithm, unhealthy obsessions with remaining relevant in a rapidly growing field and social media pressures are making it almost impossible to continue creating at the pace both the platform and audience want.' 'This is all I've ever wanted. Why am I so unhappy?'18 the 19-year-old YouTuber Elle Mills once cried out, echoing the earlier

breakdown of Britney Spears in front of a television audience. Her life had changed so fast, that it resulted in a breakdown in front of the camera. While daily television shows have large crews with editors and studio spaces, vloggers often broadcast out of their own apartments, producing clips on their own or with a small crew. And whereas TV hosts receive famous guests and deal with societal issues, YouTube celebs are more likely to report on their own ups and downs. Millennials, as one recently explained to me, have grown up talking more openly about their state of mind. As work/life distinctions disappear, subjectivity becomes their core content. Confessions and opinions are externalized instantly. Individuation is no longer confined to the diary or small group of friends, but is shared out there, exposed for all to see.

'When the careers of so many video personalities involve exposing their personal lives, striking a work/life balance is next to impossible,' Alexander notes. Keeping up the vlogs is hardly a voluntary choice. If you take a break, even for a day, you immediately drop in the 'algorithm rank' that favours frequency and engagement. We're dealing here with pre-programmed mental breakdowns, exhaustion directly brought on by software settings, collapse coded in by developers under the supervision of senior engineers. 'No one is telling YouTubers to chill out,' Alexander concludes. 'It's the opposite. People constantly ask for more, and there's only so much that one person can offer.'

A next case would be Snapstreaks, the 'best friends' fire emoji next to a friend's name indicating that 'you and that special person in your life have snapped one another within 24 hours for at least two days in a row.'[19] Streaks are considered a proof of friendship or commitment to someone. So it's heartbreaking when you lose a streak you've put months of work into. The feature all but destroys the accumulated social capital when users are offline for a few days. The Snap regime forces teenagers, the largest Snapchat user group, to use the app every single day, making an offline break virtually impossible.[20] While relationships amongst teens are pretty much always in flux, with friendships being on the edge and always questioned, Snap-induced feelings sync with the rapidly changing teenage body, making puberty even more intense.

Evidence that sadness today is designed is overwhelming. Let's take the 'social reality' of the WhatsApp billions seriously; these are not some small-town plodders. The grey and blue tick marks alongside each message in the

app may seem a trivial detail, but let's not ignore the mass anxiety it's causing. Forget being ignored. Forget pretending you didn't read a friend's text. Some thought that this feature already existed, but in fact two grey tick marks signify only that a message was sent and received – not read. The user thinks: 'My message was delivered. I read in airplane mode.' A site explains: 'Once this mode has been enabled, the user can then open the app and read the message without alerting the sender's attention to their action by triggering the blue ticks.'[21] Your blue tick marks haunt me in my sleepless nights. Those blue ticks.[22]

In response to rising anxiety levels, WhatsApp provided a list of reasons why someone may not have yet received your message. Their phone might be off; they could be sleeping, especially if they live in a different time zone; they might be experiencing network connection issues; they might have seen the notification on their screen but did not launch the app (especially common if the recipient uses an iPhone); and, most importantly, they might have blocked you. There may be a temporary inability to communicate. You keep opening the app in the hope of finding something good, even though you know you are going to find nothing. You keep guessing and go mad. 'You are craving for some appreciation, love, respect, attention which you are not getting in real world, hence you are having an expectation from virtual world that somebody may admire/like/respect you, due to these expectations you get anxious and get worked up as those things rarely or never happen!'[23] This is online despair, the worst trip ever: 'It's easier to deal with not knowing why someone isn't replying, than to deal with repeatedly questioning why someone had read your message but refused to reply.'[24]

Even if you know what the 'double tick syndrome' is about, it still incites jealousy, anxiety and suspicion. It may be possible that ignorance is bliss, that by intentionally *not* knowing whether the person has seen or received the message, your relationship will improve. The bare-all nature of social media causes rifts between lovers who would rather not have this information. But in the information age, this does not bode well with the social pressure to participate in social networks. The WhatsApp colour feature might also expose the fatal flaws in an emerging relationship – for some, this may be a way to 'dodge a bullet'. One response is to change the settings and disable the colour function so that no more blue ticks show up after you read a message, shunting all communication into the ambiguous zone of the grey tick. This design is for dummies. You may not understand a thing about the technicalities of wi-fi or algorithms, but it's damn easy to

grasp the relational stakes of the double check syndrome. ‘You obviously read it, so why didn’t you respond?’

The last case centers around dating apps like Tinder. These are described as time-killing machines – the reality game that overcomes boredom, or alternatively as social e-commerce – shopping my soul around. After many hours of swiping, suddenly there’s a rush of dopamine when someone likes you back. ‘The goal of the game is to have your egos boosted. If you swipe right and you match with a little celebration on the screen, sometimes that’s all that is needed. ‘We want to scoop up all our options immediately and then decide what we actually *really* want later.’25 On the other hand, ‘crippling social anxiety’ is when you match with somebody you are interested in, but you can’t bring yourself to send a message or respond to theirs ‘because oh god all I could think of was stupid responses or openers and she’ll think I’m an idiot and I am an idiot and…’

Sherlyn from Singapore talks about her experiences on that lonely sea called OKCupid: ‘I am not entirely sure why I venture in and out of this site. I always feel at once gutted and hopeful. I have chatted with many, but never have actually met anyone. I am highly anxious of translating anything to the real world. Where is this anxiety coming from? Is it the rejection I am worried about, or in fact falling into the trap of it?’ In one instance, Sherlyn started chatting with a person who claimed to be a documentary filmmaker for humanitarian organisations. ‘It appealed to me. We started mailing, and I sent him a link to my profile on academia, just as a way to put myself out there and asked more specific and pointed questions about his work. He responded: “This sounds more like a job interview than meeting on OKC.” I got the message and responded with: “My work is what defines my politics, passion, and poetic, and it is perhaps the only way I can define my being. I can sense that you are expecting something else, considering where we met, thus I suggest you move on. Thanks.” His response was rather prompt: “I don’t have time for politics, go waste someone else’s time, you political whore and slut.”’26

No melancholy for you

Let’s compare fleeting sadness in its technical form with the ancient state of melancholy. The melancholic personality seems to suffer from a disease. Unable to act, she withdraws from the world, contemplating death and other transient phenomena. While some read this condition as depression and

boredom, others reframe this 'lazy' passivity as a creative strategy, waiting for inspiration to strike. Instead of a *dérive* into the vast arsenal of literary sources, I propose here a digital hermeneutics that short-circuits philology with the eternal presence of the digital that surrounds us.

Take Susan Sontag's musings on Walter Benjamin as a man beset by a profound sadness, *un triste*.27 As Benjamin wrote: 'I came into the world under the sign of Saturn – the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays.' Compare this deep, lingering melancholy with the snark we receive from others in response to a selfie with a friend, and the way it troubles us to no end.28 How do today's 'children of Saturn' (that planet of detours) deal with the unbearable lightness of the social that turned reflection into a rare state of exception?

It's not quite *un bonheur d'être triste*. Nor does it quite match classic German-style boredom, the feeling that you hate everything.

Melancholy, often described as 'sadness without a cause', has strong existential connotations. With respect to Kierkegaard, who liberated melancholia once and for all of its medical stigma, describing it as the deepest foundation of the human in a godless society, the problem here is not a vertical one of going deeper, but a horizontal one. The democratization of sadness happens through its thin spread across our plateau – homeopathic doses flatly distributed via technical means. Ever since antiquity, melancholia has been described either as something natural, rooted in the human condition, or as a chronic disease, brought on by heavy meals and dark red wines. In *Problemata XXX.1* Aristotle brings the constitution of the fluids, the dry and the wet, into relation with hot and cold temperatures of the body.29 The next layer is the technical temperament. For centuries, melancholia has been conceived as a gloomy state of mind. While ancient descriptions explain that the gloom stems from a particular mix of black and yellow bile, blood and phlegm, this diagnosis could be updated to include blue gall, the color of our saturnine apps.30

And yet if fluids keep on flowing, they may no longer be the best way to analyze our sociotechnical condition. The metric to measure today's symptoms would be time – or 'attention', as it is called in the industry. While for the archaic melancholic the past never passes, techno-sadness is caught in the perpetual now. Forward focused, we bet on acceleration and never mourn a lost object. The primary identification is there, in our hand. Everything is evident, on the screen, right in your face. Contrasted with the

rich historical sources on melancholia, our present condition becomes immediately apparent. Whereas melancholy in the past was defined by separation from others, reduced contacts and reflection on oneself, today's *tristesse* plays itself out amidst busy social (media) interactions. In Sherry Turkle's phrase, we are alone together, as part of the crowd – a form of loneliness that is particularly cruel, frantic and tiring.

What we see today are systems that constantly disrupt the timeless aspect of melancholy.[31] There's no time for contemplation, or *Weltschmerz*. Social reality does not allow us to retreat.[32] Even in our deepest state of solitude we're surrounded by (online) others that babble on and on, demanding our attention. But distraction does not just take us away from the world – this is the old, if still prevalent way of framing the fatal attraction of smart phones. No, distraction does not pull us away, but instead draws us back into the social. Social reality is the magic realm where we belong. That's where the tribes gather, and that's the place to be – on top of the world. Social relations in 'real life' have lost their supremacy. The idea of going back to the village mentality of the place formerly known as 'real life' is daunting indeed.

So sad today

Social media anxiety has found its literary expressions, even if these take decidedly different forms than the despair on display in Franz Kafka's letters to Felice Bauer. The willingness to publicly perform your own mental health is now a viable strategy in our attention economy.

Anyone who can bundle up the dreary processes of living into an entertaining package gains at least the prospect of monetization and celebrity. Take the US writer Melissa Broder, who joined Twitter in 2012 with her 'So Sad Today' account after she moved from New York to Los Angeles. Her 'twitterature' benefitted from her previous literary activities as a poet. Broder has mastered the art of the aphorism like few others, compressing feelings and anxieties into bite-sized tweets.

Broder writes about issues such as low self-esteem, botox and addiction in an emotional manner. She is the contemporary expert in matters of apathy, sorrow and uselessness. In one afternoon she can feel compulsive about cheesecakes, show her true self as an online exhibitionist, be lonely out in public, babble and then cry, go on about her short attention span, hate everything and desire 'to fuck up life'. Internet obsession is her self-

obsession. In between taking care of her sick husband and the obligatory meeting with Santa Monica socialites, there are always more 'insatiable spiritual holes' to be filled. The more we intensify events, the sadder we are once they're over. The moment we leave, the urge for the next experiential high arises. Fashion magazine *Elle* has called Broder 'Twitter's reigning queen of angst, insecurity, sexual obsession and existential terror.'33 Others have labeled her as yet another worker in the 'first-person industrial complex.'34 I would call her the ideal *Internetgesamtsubjekt*.

After having a suicide vision on a Venice Beach sidewalk, Lucy, the main character in Broder's 2018 novel *The Pisces*, suddenly becomes afraid. 'I took out my phone and pressed the buttons to get a car to take me home. This was just what people did now. We went from emotion to phone. This was how you didn't die in the twenty-first century.' As phone and life can no longer be separated, neither can we distinguish between real and virtual, fact or fiction, data or poetry. In Broder's universe it's all part of one large delirium, an inexorable spiral downwards. 'What I have sought in love is a reprieve from the itch of consciousness.' She sums up her 'lifetime of fictional love stories' through the veil of her insecurities. In her book of essays *So Sad Today*, we find Twitter or SMS-length messages that all end with: 'a love story'. 'Sorry I fell asleep while you were going down on me: a love story.' 'I've been on your FB page for five hours today: a love story.' 'I don't even masturbate to you anymore because it's too sad: a love story.' 'I don't want to get off the internet or consider anyone else's needs: a love story.' 'When I send nudes, I like to receive a full dissertation on their greatness: a love story.' 'We're going to spend the rest of our lives in my head: a love story.' 'No teeth on the clit, thanks: a love story.' 'Tell me if I'm texting too much: a love story.'35

Another episode in *So Sad Today* deals with a not-so-imaginary internet love affair. It started off with 'silly messages and praise for my writing and a picture drawn in my favorite candy. (..) He poked and messaged and liked my every Internet itch'. One afternoon they started a sexting game, which takes up six pages of seductive, explicit language: 'Him: I want to feel your moans on my cock. Me: I want you to tease my belly, pussy and thighs until I am begging.' The sexting continued for a year until they met in a Manhattan hotel. They met a few times, had sex in all colors of the rainbow, then went back to sexting, but that too was now ruined by reflection – spiraling down into more sadness. They realized they could not have a normal relationship and broke up. 'i have decided to give monogamy a try. This means the end

for you and me in a sexual/textual way. i am deeply sad as i write this. we did so good. good love. another lifetime? :)' After months of agony, she starts to write up the story. 'What I maybe miss most is being able to lapse into space land and fantasize about the sex with him. (..) I want to say: was I real to you? (..)' We got to be magic together. But is magic even real? She ends: 'Online dating is sad. Attending holidays and weddings alone is sad. Marriage, too, is sad but love, lust, infatuation – for a few moments I was not sad.'

Her tweets cover the spectrum from female sensibility to social anxiety: she despises modern life ('waking up today was a disappointment', 'staying alive is a lot of fucking pressure'), hates herself ('i wouldn't fuck me'), is self-destructive ('a positive feeling can fuck you up forever', 'i don't want to do what's good for me'), never pretends that life is better than it is ('i'm not moisturized, hydrated or full of self-love'), makes demands ('i don't think we get the dick we think we deserve', 'don't tell me about the science of the brain just tell me how to feel better'). So Sad Today registers the widely felt numbness ('can't decide if i'm alive', 'my drug of choice is low self-esteem'), is addicted to instantaneous changes ('fell in love with 8 people in 10 minutes'), lives the inevitable ('horoscope: you shouldn't text him but you will'), feels empty ('i've been awake 5 minutes and it's already too much'), judges others ('your positivity feels like a lie'), has suicidal tendencies ('i want to donate all my blood'), radicalizes human relationships ('being just friends is a nightmare'), is excellent in summarizing her ongoing short affairs ('loving you was an illness'), presenting her followers with a never-ending stream of hypermodern dilemmas ('should i eat, nap or masturbate: the musical').[36]

Is Broder's sadness merely a literary effect that gives synthetic love a human touch? Broder's polyamorous relationship status is neither desperate nor liberating. There's a brutal honesty in the way she describes her multiple sexual relationships that reminds us of Michel Houellebecq. Is Broder's sadness merely a literary effect that gives synthetic love a human touch? We can contrast the Broder persona with the femme fatale in Amos Kollek's 1997 film *Sue*, a tragic New York tale of a déclassé secretary who's losing her job and apartment.[37] The medical metaphor of 'sex addiction' in the movie here stands for economic decline. Two decades later there's not a trace of victimhood or poverty in Melissa Broder's work. The polyamorous lifestyle is already an integral part of the precarious condition. Instead of empathy, the cold despair invites us to see the larger picture of a society in

permanent anxiety. If anything, Broder embodies Slavoj Žižek's courage of hopelessness: 'Forget the light at the end of the tunnel – it's actually the headlight of a train about to hit us.'38

Mourning the loss of communication

The purpose of sadness by design is, as Paul B. Preciado calls it, 'the production of frustrating satisfaction'.39 Should we have an opinion about internet-induced sadness? How can we address this topic without looking down on the online billions, without resorting to fast-food comparisons or patronizingly viewing people as fragile beings that need to be liberated and taken care of.40 The Italian design theorist Silvio Lorusso writes: 'If design becomes just an expression of bureaucreativity hidden by an exhausting online and away-from-keyboard emotional labour, the refusal of work, of its bodily and cognitive dimension, should go hand in hand with the refusal of mandatory enthusiasm, of the positive disposition that such work requires. This is why my call for sadness is actually a plea for an emotional counterculture, a collective reaction against the occultation of material circumstances by means of artificial self-motivation. Fellow imposters, stop smiling and coalesce.'41 Before we call, yet again, to overcome 'western melancholy', it's important to study and deconstruct its mechanisms. In a design context, our aim should be to highlight 'the process in which a designer focuses on the consequences of the current situation instead of dealing with the causes of a particular problem'.42

We overcome sadness not through happiness, but rather, as media theorist Andrew Culp has insisted, through a hatred of this world. Sadness occurs in situations where stagnant 'becoming' has turned into a blatant lie. We suffer, and there's no form of absurdism that can offer an escape. Public access to a 21st-century version of dadaism has been blocked. The absence of surrealism hurts. What could our social fantasies look like? Are legal constructs such as creative commons and cooperatives all we can come up with? It seems we're trapped in smoothness, skimming a surface littered with impressions and notifications. The collective imaginary is on hold. What's worse, this banality itself is seamless, offering no indicators of its dangers and distortions. As a result, we've become subdued. Has the possibility of myth become technologically impossible?

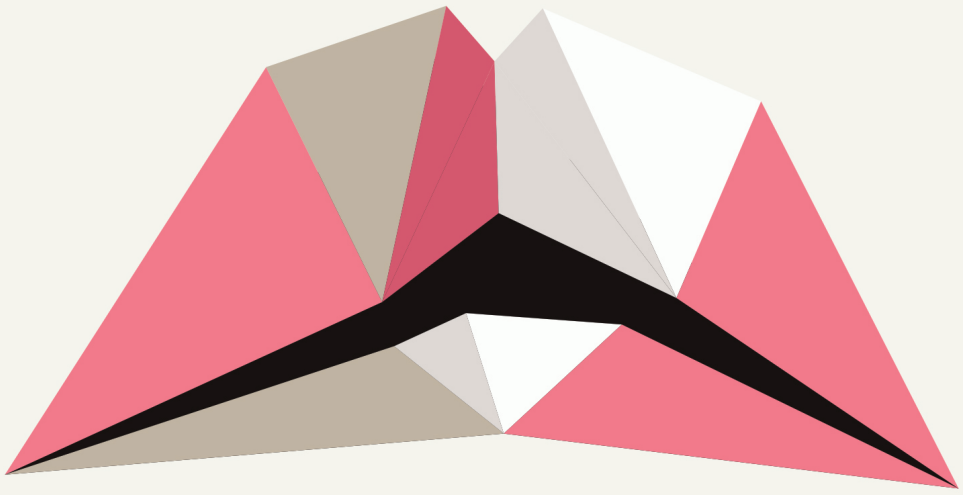
Instead of creatively externalizing our inner shipwrecks, we project our need for strangeness onto humanized robots. The digital is neither new or old, but

– to use Culp's phrase – it will become cataclysmic when smooth services fall apart into tragic ruins. Faced with the limited possibilities of the individual domain, we cannot positively identify with the tragic manifestation of the collective being called social media. We can neither return to mysticism nor to positivism. The naive act of communication is lost – and this is why we cry.[43]

Geert Lovink

SAD

BY DESIGN



On Platform Nihilism

This is the title essay of Geert Lovink's new book *Sad by Design*, forthcoming in May 2019 with Pluto Press, London.

1. 'Having my phone closer to me while I'm sleeping gives me comfort.' Quote from research by Jean M. Twenge, 'Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?' *The Atlantic*, September 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has---the---smartphone---destroyed---a---generation/534198/. Twenge observes that 'teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy'. She sees a decrease in social skills. 'As teens spend less time with their friends face-to-face, they have fewer opportunities to practice them. In the next decade, we may see more adults who know just the right emoji for a situation, but not the right facial expression.'
2. Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, 'Argument 7: Social Media is Making You Unhappy', Vintage, London, 2018, 81–92.
3. Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies*, Verso Books, London, 2017 (thanks to Miriam Rasch for the reference).
4. Contrast this with the statement of Amos Oz: 'You probably recall the famous statement at the beginning of Anna Karenina, in which Tolstoy declares from on high that all happy families resemble one another, while unhappy families are all unhappy in their own way. With all due respect to Tolstoy, I'm telling you that the opposite is true: unhappy people are mainly in conventional suffering, living out in sterile routine one of five or six threadbare clichés of misery.' *The Black Box*, Vintage, 1993, 94 (thanks to Franco Berardi for the reference).
5. Earlier I dealt with the psychopathology of information overload, in part influenced by the writings of Howard Rheingold, for instance in my 2011 book *Networks Without a Cause*. While this diagnosis may still relevant, psychological conditions such as sadness come in when we're online 24/7, the distinction between psyche and phone has all but collapsed and we're no longer administrating incoming information flows on large screens in front of us via dashboards.
6. I am using the exhaustion here in the way Gilles Deleuze once described it, in contrast with feeling tired. Unlike tiredness we cannot easily recover from exhaustion. There is no 'healing tiredness' (Byung-Chul Han) at play here. Take Teju Cole's description of life in Lagos. 'There is a disconnect between the wealth of stories available here and

the rarity of creative refuge. Writing is difficult, reading impossible. People are so exhausted after all the hassle of a normal Lagos day that, for the vast majority, mindless entertainment is preferable to any other kind. The ten-minute journeys that take forty-five. By day's end, the mind is worn, the body ragged.' *Everyday is for the Thief,* Random House, New York, 2014, 68.

7. In his blog post 'Social Media as Masochism', Rob Horning writes: 'Much of social media is a calculated effort to "accumulate" esteem and grant agency. Self-conciousness of ongoing social media use could trigger an intense need to escape from self. Social media, he proposes, 'has affordances to make 'self-construction' masochistic and self-negating.' 'One puts an aspect of oneself out there to dream of it being mocked, and that pain of mockery disassociates us from the deeper vulnerabilities of the 'real self' that is being deferred and protected for the moment.' https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/social-media-as-masochism.
8. Byung-Chul Han, discussing Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction in the Facebook age, in: *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, 2016, 71.
9. Adrienne Matei, 'Seeing is Believing, What's so Bad about Buying Followers?', http://reallifemag.com/seeing-is-believing/. The essay deals with the stylized performance of authenticity of Instagram images and their accompanying captions that 'often denounce superficiality and strategic image manipulation and emphasize the value of embracing rather than concealing imperfections.' She observes that for influencers, 'authenticity tends to be bound up with aspiration: an image is "true" if it captures and triggers desire, even if the image is carefully and even deceptively constructed. The feeling it inspires in the midst of scrolling is what matters.' Using something faked, edited, misleading, or out of context to attract attention isn't the platform's problem but its point. Matei argues that, while there may not be fake images, there are fake audiences. As one influencer explained: 'It's not so much outrage as people pity you. It's like people who pay for all the drinks at the bar just to feel like they have friends. It's sad.' Matei concludes: 'Buying followers can alleviate hassle, but it entails embracing the paradox of all counterfeiting: coveting a currency whose legitimacy you are in the process of undermining.'
10. This is written with William Styron's *Depression* in mind, Vintage Minis, 2017, written in 1990, in respect of all those that suffer from severe forms of depression.

11. Mark Greif, *Against Everything*, 225.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid. 227.
14. Quotes from interview with Audrey Wollen by Tracy Watson in *Dazed*, November 23, 2015, http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/28463/1/girls-are-finding-empowerment-through-internet-sadness. See also https://www.instagram.com/audreywollen/ and https://www.tumblr.com/search/audrey%20wollen (thanks to Miriam Rasch for the reference).
15. Interview with Audrey Wollen by Yasi Salek for Cultist Zine, June 19, 2014, http://www.cultistzine.com/2014/06/19/cult-talk-audrey-wollen-on-sad-girl-theory/.
16. Vladimir Nabokov described *toska* as 'a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom.' More here: https://advokatdyavola.wordpress.com/2012/05/07/an-elegy-for-passion/ (thanks to Ellen Rutten for the reference).
17. https://www.captionstatus.com/sad-whatsapp-status/.
18. Julia Alexander, 'YouTube's top creators are burning out and breaking down en masse', June 1, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/6/1/17413542/burnout-mental-health-awareness-youtube-elle-mills-el-rubius-bobby-burns-pewdiepie.
19. https://www.bustle.com/articles/162803-what-is-a-snapchat-streak-heres-everything-you-need-to-know-about-snapstreaks.
20. Taylor Lorenz, 'Teens explain the world of Snapchat's addictive streaks, where friendships live or die', April 14, 2017, http://www.businessinsider.com/teens-explain-snapchat-streaks-why-theyre-so-addictive-and-important-to-friendships-2017-4.
21. http://www.ingeniotechsarl.com/how-to-receive-your-boyfriends-whatsapp-messages-online-using-android-phones-without-jailbreak-2018.
22. The two blue check marks appear when all participants in the group have read your message. Alternatively, you can long press on a message to access a 'message info' screen, detailing the times when the message was received, read or played. Users can check 'last seen' indicators on the top left of a conversation to know when a contact was

last in the app, but the blue check marks are more direct. One can disable the feature, though WhatsApp will 'punish' you by not letting you see what others have 'last seen' online. There is contractual power here in who sets the rules. It is not reciprocity, it is a mutual obligation, both towards the app and to the contacts.

23. https://www.quora.com/Why-do-I-feel-anxiety-while-using-WhatsApp#
24. https://vulcanpost.com/71431/why-im-not-keen-on-whatsapp-blue-ticks/.
25. Suzannah Weiss, 'Why We Swipe Right And Then Ignore Our Tinder Matches', May 10, 2016, https://www.bustle.com/articles/157940-why-we-swipe-right-and-then-ignore-our-tinder-matches.
26. Email to the author, August 7, 2018.
27. Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Vintage Books, New York, 1981, 111. She writes: 'Slowness is one characteristic of the melancholic temperament. Blending is another, from noticing too many possibilities, from noticing one's lack of practical sense.'
28. Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Vintage Books, New York, 1981, p. 111. She writes: 'Slowness is one characteristic of the melancholic temperament. Blending is another, from noticing too many possibilities, from noticing one's lack of practical sense.'
29. See analysis of Aristotle in Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, Basic Books, New York, 1964. I have used the updated German translation, *Saturn und Melancholie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, 76–92.
30. Blue is not only the color of Facebook, Twitter and IBM, there's an avalanche of medical stories on popular news websites about the dark side of blue light in terms of sleep deprivation. See for instance: https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/blue-light-has-a-dark-side.
31. What does this impossibility to access melancholy mean for the imagination, if we stick to Julia Kristeva who once asserted that 'there is no writing that symbolically refers to love, and no imagination that is not openly and secretly melancholy.' See: Julia Kristeva, 'On the Melancholic Imaginary', *New Formation* number 2, fall 1987. It is Marc Fisher who does have a kind of melancholia he can relate to, one which 'consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield. It consists in a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call 'reality – even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time…' *Ghosts of my Life*, Zero Book, Winchester, 2014, 24.
32. In that sense sadness is an unexpected side effect of the social media

business. According to Wolf Lepenies, both historical sketches of utopian societies and the 20th century avant-garde promised to overcome the hesitation to act that came with this bourgeois disease. A true revolutionary is not melancholic. In some instances melancholy was even forbidden. *Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, 40.

33. Whitney Joiner, 'Why is Melissa Broder So Sad Today?', *Elle Online*, March 14, 2016.
34. Laura Bennett in *Slate Magazine*, quoted in *Elle Online*, March 14, 2016.
35. All quotes from the chapter 'Help Me Not Be a Human Being', in: Melissa Broder, *So Sad Today*, Scribe, London, 2016, 29–36.
36. Selected tweets from Melissa Broder's @sosadtoday twitter account, May-July 2018.
37. Thanks to Katharina Teichgräber for the reference.
38. Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness*, Penguin, London, 2018, p. xi. He writes: 'We have to gather the strength to fully assume the hopelessness.'
39. Paul B. Preciado, *Testojunkie*, Feminist Press, New York, 2013, 304.
40. Translation of a phrase from Hans Demeyer, Uitgeput op drift, Over Mark Fisher, in: *De Witte Raaf* 193, May–June 2018.
41. http://networkcultures.org/entreprecariat/the-designer-without-qualities/.
42. 'Western Melancholy/ How to Imagine Different Futures in the Real World', http://interakcije.net/en/2018/08/27/western-melancholy-how-to-imagine-different-futures-in-the-real-world/#rf3-2509.
43. See interview with George Didi-Huberman in *Liberation*, September 1, 2016, 'Tears are a Manifestation of Political Power', https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/09/01/georges-didi-huberman-les-larmes-sont-une-manifestation-de-la-puissance-politique_1476324 (thanks to Marie Lechner for the reference).