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Body, Self-Awareness and Humor after the Internet (In progress)

Self-Awareness and the Body

If blind ideology is an opiate, then the relentless self-examination of the modern age is an anesthetic. An opiate is at the very least pleasant, mollifying: but the apathy of my over-examined generation? It is nothing at all.

There's an emptiness which could be more specifically diagnosed as a breakdown of body-mind unity. The over-examined subject lives in a perpetual state of separation. Separation between the body of mind, with layered separations inside this divide: the mind separated to varying degrees towards different tasks, with an inhuman ability to compartmentalize events and explain minute phenomena. The body is so divorced from it's online identity that it barely exists. We float in a half-dematerialized world of extensions of ourselves.

The most violent separation that has occurred the cleavage of our sexuality from our bodies. For past generations, sex was inseparable from the physical. Formative experiences like the first stirring of desire, even if triggered by a dead image or in typed writing, was still rooted in the tactile. Sexual discovery mediated by internet technology cannot possibly be the same, because more often than not this technology is a direct extension of the self. The thing that is triggering desire within us is not the *other* - it is the self. Furthermore, this technology has a panoply of uses. The dirty polaroid remains a polaroid, and one can close the cover of a racy novel. However, the LED screen can switch rapidly from pornography, to newscasts, to high art, to family photos, and somehow, impossibly, we adjust.

But the body is being cleaved. The mind compartmentalizes. Photos, books, images can continue to exist as separate stimuli acting upon one's body. Your technology, on the other hand, is yourself. This creates confusion. There is a breakdown of the viscosity of desire. And so: we are cleaved into atomized parts, operating separate from one another, relentlessly being extended by our technologies until an utter disconnect between what is mind, what is body and what is object settles in.

Then what?

We, unable to see ourselves from within, attempt to see ourselves from without. We wish to see ourselves through others' eyes, but unlike past methods like daydreaming or the creative act of writing, we examine ourselves through our medias: social, interpersonal, even intimate.

Social media and instant communication set permanently and eternally what has always been ephemeral. Small talk, jibber-jabber, coy looks, humor, humor, humor. All these bits and pieces of human relation are externalized through technological mediums, partially due to the satisfaction which extending oneself provides, but also, I'd argue, primarily so that we can look back upon them ourselves.

We build this specific external self so we can experience once and for all what it is like to see ourselves through others' eyes. Yet it is not enough, and never will be, as our neuroses and contemporary self-awareness lacks context. Context is the Other, the sole antidote to our blind narcissism disguised as self-awareness. True self-awareness can only be actualized (if at all) through means utterly disconnected from the absorbed self. Religion, history, philosophy, or simply a dedication to selfless acts are paths to true self-knowledge. One must discover what is internal by discovering the self in the external.

Humor

We unwilling self-regulating morbidly online subjects have found a less corrective antidote to the relentless pursuit of self-awareness. The social internet's answer to this unbearable age of anxiety is an inundation of humor.

Past methods of humor relied on narrative specificity and context to craft a joke. Contemporary online humor could not be more different. There is a reason why the visual medium of jokes online cannot be translated effectively into other mediums like speech or the written word. Describing a meme to someone is both pathetic and difficult, and is a pale shadow of the instantaneous emotional impact of the meme itself.

Secondly, internet humor is a one-on-one experience. We are "laughing" (mentally clocking something as funny) entirely individually, the relationship to the joke only existing between us and our device. Online, we simply acknowledge objects as humorous, but rarely actually laugh - this is in stark contrast to the physical, immediate act of laughing itself.

Humor is often seen as a respite from the internet's hollowing relentlessness, yet it is but another factor cleaving our bodies from our selves. Memes and tweets are not a respite from the spiral of self-awareness. If the popularity of hyperspecific psychoanalytic quips online tells us anything, it is that our jokes are only making it worse.

Final Thoughts

Switching gears: Why are we (young people) all such yuppies? Why do we find it impossible to believe in anything without irony? Why are we taking less risks? Why are our goals so focused on financial and personal stability? Why do none of us have reckless ambitions for true, unabashed greatness? Why have brands started acting like people, and why have people started acting like brands? And what's the deal with "bimbofication"?

It all comes down to the dehumanization, technologification, domestication and over-intellectualization (phew!) of my generation, a generation raised entirely online. But this is not a true explanation - if anything, it sounds a bit like a nursery rhyme.

What I'm trying to get at is: why is it that I can't feel anything anymore without overthinking it? I visited my grandparent's grave and all I could do was think, "what should I be thinking about right now?" Sure, the crushingly neurotic narrator is not something entirely unique to the information age. Dostoyevsky's "Notes From the Underground" is a masterful example of the horrors of living relentlessly within one's own mind. But what sets our age apart is that we have all, to some extent, become the Underground Man. What the internet has done to me and my peers scares me. What I want, most of all, is to find a way to articulate this fear. To bring this fear aboveground, out of the shadows of the cave, and into the light of day.