

BANAL INSOMNIA: THE ETHICS OF SLEEPLESSNESS

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January 2023

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

ABSTRACT

In recent years, sleep has been cast by theoretical and activist movements as a powerful act of resistance to the dominance of capitalist culture. Jonathan Crary articulates this potential powerfully in his 2013 work *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, seeing in sleep ‘one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism.’ This thesis counters this one-sided celebration of sleep by first recognising sleep’s inherently asymmetrical nature, namely that sleep requires a vigilant wakeful subject who keeps watch over the sleeper.

This thesis therefore addresses contemporary cultures of sleeplessness by specifically focusing on the sociality of insomnia. By foregrounding the necessity of the vigilant subject for any collective sleep project, this thesis is primarily interested in the ethics of sleep and insomnia. There are two elements to this perspective: on the one hand, this thesis seeks to address, in line with theorists like Crary, the disempowering, oppressive nature of our 24/7 culture in which exhausted modern subjects struggle to keep up with the demands and stimulations of 21st century society. I call this banal insomnia. On the other hand, I consider the phenomenological experience of insomnia as understood by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who characterises it as a visceral and irrepressible awareness of our ethical duty to others. Therefore, the core question of this thesis is: is it possible to perceive in our exhausted, often cynical, culture of sleeplessness a persistent reminder of our duty to the care of others?

This thesis approaches this question by exploring scenes of insomnia in late modernity, what I call “ends” of sleep, which range from 24/7 entertainment to sleepless threats of 21st century acts of terrorism. Through an analysis of literature and art from the last 30 years, I consider how these artworks represent our contemporary exhaustion, revealing not merely the damage of our unsustainable insomniac lifestyles but also our persistent, inextinguishable and above all, wakeful, responsibility to one another.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A PhD is a long and difficult journey and, unfortunately, it is not one which has only burdened me. So, thank you (and sorry) to all who have offered support, words of advice or an ear to my moaning. Without you, this would not have been completed and I would have thrown the towel in long ago. I am immensely grateful for everyone's advice, kindness and above all, patience.

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Josh Cohen. Supervisions were generally preceded by a very anxious student, and I am incredibly grateful that his deep knowledge, support and encouragement never failed to renew my resolve to keep with it.

Thank you to my friends and family. I am fortunate to have in my brother and sister, Pascal and Jessica Jerome, two best friends who have provided support, laughter and solace to me throughout. Thank you too to my dear friend Janay Carrott who I started my university journey with back at Warwick University.

I am beyond grateful to James Pollock for his constant love, support and faith that I would get to the end. I truly would not have completed this without him.

Finally, to my parents, Gerry and Kirsty Jerome, who I owe all my curiosity, smarts and determination. I dedicate this thesis to them.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. 24/7 Wakefulness and the Mythification of Sleep

Insomnia manifests as an internal antagonism: a non-volitional refusal to yield to the darkness of the night and a chronic inability to sleep despite one's own wishes. This affliction has ancient roots, documented as far back as Gilgamesh, our oldest human hero immortalised in ancient Mesopotamian mythology. Famously endowed with a 'restless nature that will not sleep,' Gilgamesh's divinely bestowed sleeplessness alternately indicated the great lengths and limits of human endeavour; at once enabling a voracious and destructive energy capable of violent conquer and conversely, indicating a visceral and exhausted awareness of his own mortality and the inevitable death that awaited him. Here, insomnia is an inescapable confrontation with corporeality proper. As Eluned Summers-Bremner states, Gilgamesh learns that 'insomnia is neither a sign of divinity nor of death, but of the life that makes its way between them.'¹ For the ancients, insomnia served as a perpetual reminder of a mortal obligation to forces beyond one's control; nocturnal, opaque powers which unsteadied the hero's subjective borders and drew them back into a shared world of physical vulnerability and external responsibilities. For the heroes of Greek mythology, the calls of gods rousing them to action confirmed the porosity of mortal consciousness in which divine missives reign supreme over human fatigue. Insomnia served a purpose, always a symptom and not a pathology in and of itself, demonstrating an inability for subjects to entirely extract themselves from their daylight responsibilities. Insomnia implicated its sufferers in unresolved daytime responsibilities in which wakefulness is animated by untameable passions and unfinished business such as love (and an estranged partner) or revenge (and an on-going war).

If only it could be so simple for today's insomniacs. Modern sleeplessness is now spoken of in terms indicating not so much an experience among others or a call to action, but as an affliction to overcome. The modern insomniac is an exhausted figure - a zombified automaton wrung out by the pressures and stimulations of 21st century living. She seeks medical solutions to this disorderly and disruptive experience, with an entire industry built around relieving night-time distress. Insomnia often indicates an intimate, perhaps even

¹ Eluned Summers-Bremner, *Insomnia: A Cultural History* (Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 23. For a detailed analysis of insomnia in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, see the first chapter: 'Sleeplessness in the Ancient World', p.14-34

mimetic, relationship with modern technology; nocturnal "switching off" is synonymous with and dependent on us relinquishing our technological armature. Modern insomnia has also garnered a moral colouring, denoting not an inability to relieve oneself of persecuting thoughts, but rather an inability to manage one's life and responsibilities properly, and thus one's capacity to get the requisite amount of sleep and the right type of sleep every day. The modern insomniac is not the heroic classical figure undertaking grand quests but rather the modern worker trying to keep their head above water. In this way, insomnia as a widespread social phenomenon, in many cases undergone cynically or coercively, demonstrates a collective avowal of cultural values inherent to contemporary Western capitalist society: consumerism, competition, incessant productivity.

Today, the question of why one remains awake in bed is more likely to be debated in between the walls of a therapist's office than in an appeal to the divine. Or, most likely, it will be the malady – or one among others – that requires prescription drugs or the institution of a new lifestyle regimen. The cleavage between neoliberal demands of productivity and perpetual consumption, and the softly indulgent petitions of 'self-care' has produced a diverse and lucrative industry in which sleep is both sold as essential for the happy, healthy self, whilst also being medicated out of existence by stimulants and amphetamines which extend the waking, working day indefinitely. That sleeplessness is viewed both as a personal pathology to be managed as well as an effective necessity for many contemporary subjects seeking to survive in our 24-hour capitalist society is not a contradiction which has gone unmissed. It is a perfect example of what Teresa Brennan terms 'bioderegulation,' a 'human-sacrificing process' in which the body must bear the brunt (often right up to the limits of physical capacity) in order to fulfil the demands of deregulated markets.² Many too refer to the confected sleep industry as the 'Sleep Industrial Complex',³ noting that the ever-expanding arsenal of sleep products, which range from the blandly extortionate to the

² Teresa Brennan, *Globalization and Its Terrors: Daily Life in the West* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 22.

³ Jon Mooallem, 'The Sleep-Industrial Complex', *New York Times*, 18 November 2007 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/health/18iht-18sleep.8377935.html>> [accessed 21 July 2022]; Kristie Serota, 'Quilting Resistance to the Sleep Industrial Complex: A Narrative Account of Sleeplessness', *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 6.2 (2021), 468–77 <<https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29602>>; Harry Barbee, Mairead Eastin Moloney, and Thomas R. Konrad, 'Selling Slumber: American Neoliberalism and the Medicalization of Sleeplessness', *Sociology Compass*, 12.10 (2018), e12622 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12622>>.

downright surreal,⁴ enable and reinforce a profoundly dehumanising culture of overwork and physical exhaustion.

If the suffix ‘industrial complex’ indicates a network or collusion among powerful, disparate actors, the case for this is made most forcefully and influentially by Jonathan Crary in his seductive polemic *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013).⁵ In it, Crary theorises the contemporary crisis of sleep, seeing widespread sleep disorders as evidence of the near-utter encroachment of capitalist technologies and neoliberal culture into our lives. This new hostile and sleepless temporality is ‘24/7 time’: ‘a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability.’⁶ For Crary, sleep is yet another example of the collateral damage of the violence of capitalist conformity. The contemporary figure is subjected to constant and highly stimulative intrusions to their attention from social media to streaming television services to pinging apps on their phone, all keeping them locked into a sleepless, homogeneous world ‘composed of incessant, frictionless operations.’⁷ Devoid of the respite of sleep, the subject cannot fully reckon with the perceptual overload of the modern western world. Crary likens this to a state of emergency where the floodlights are switched on, bathing everything in a glaring, sleepless light and are never turned off: ‘[t]he planet becomes reimagined as a non-stop work site or an always open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions.’⁸

Yet with this revelation comes opportunity. It thus stands to reason, Crary argues, that in this context sleep itself takes on an important counter-ideological, even radical significance. He cites it as ‘one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism’ by claiming that, despite rampant and creative efforts to commodify it, sleep retains an uncompromisingly useless and passive component which sets it in eternal opposition to the rapacious clutches of capitalist appropriation: ‘[t]he stunning

⁴ A recent and concerning development in the sleep market is ‘Targeted Dream Incubation’, a method for guiding dreams using filmic and audio stimuli to trigger specific dream content. This has been lately harnessed by the beverage company Coors to encourage “refreshing” dreams in a marketing ploy its critics call ‘weaponizing sleep’. See more in: Adam Gabbatt, ‘Nightmare Scenario: Alarm as Advertisers Seek to Plug into Our Dreams’, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jul/05/advertisers-targeted-dream-incubation>> [accessed 21 July 2022].

⁵ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London; New York: Verso, 2013).

⁶ Crary, *24/7*, p. 5.

⁷ Crary, *24/7*, p. 29.

⁸ Crary, *24/7*, p. 17.

inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it.’⁹ Crary is not alone in his move to see a radical passive politics in the act of sleeping and, given the success of his work, he no doubt has encouraged many in this trend. Art exhibitions,¹⁰ political movements¹¹ and therapy culture have been born out of an investment in sleep’s profound passivity. All rest on some variation of the premise that ‘[s]leeping is a political act and one of the last bastions against the unfettered ravages of late capitalism.’¹² This approach is persuasive not least because it offers a much-needed and much-justified respite from collective exhaustion.

Even so, this is an approach which this dissertation will largely reject, arguing that Crary’s valorisation of sleep rests on a misguided faith in its exceptionality (as a corporeal human experience) and the impenetrability of capitalist cultural dominance. I contend that this approach fails from the outset by playing into the totalising logic of neoliberal capitalism: namely, that in its attempt to assert a somnolescent “outside”, it ends up essentialising that which it opposes, i.e., all waking experience is necessarily determined by the machinations of the market. This dissertation proposes instead a return to our insomniac selves, recognising, as the ancients did, that within this opaque and nocturnal experience lies the ‘inscrutable darkness of mortality’ – the very material, aberrant aspects of ourselves which cannot be subsumed by capitalist (or any) rationality, no matter how hegemonic it may appear.¹³

While Crary’s slim, though certainly influential, critique may appear meagre grounds to launch the following research project, this thesis aims to challenge more broadly a (presumably unwelcome) affinity between critiques like these and contemporary idealisations of sleep which too identify an almost-utopic, revolutionary potential in healthy

⁹ Crary, 24/7, p. 11.

¹⁰ Notable recent exhibitions on the politics of sleep include the touring exhibit ‘Sleeping with a Vengeance, Dreaming of a Life’ (2018) which was displayed at the Lítost gallery in Prague and the Institute for Provocation in Beijing. This exhibition brought together 21 artists to consider ‘how we might share agency in a future politics of sleep’ (Dutch Art Institute, 2018). Somerset House’s 2019-2020 exhibit ‘24/7: A wake-up call for our non-stop world’ was inspired by Crary’s 2017 work and sought to ‘hold[] up a mirror to our always-on culture and invite[] you to step outside of your day-to-day routine to engage, reflect and reset.’ (Somerset House, 2019) whereas collective performance art piece *Parasomnia* was held in Lisbon in 2019 in which participants were encouraged to conceive of sleep as ‘a form of resistance against the capitalisation of lives’ (Marquez, 2021, p.7).

¹¹ Many organisations have cast the right to sleep in terms of racial justice from decolonising sleep (Dinsmore-Tuli, 2020) to the US-based Nap Ministry who have seek to address the “racial sleep gap” (Kroth, 2019).

¹² Ruth Noack, ‘Outrage: Subversive Sleep’, *Darkness: The Architecture Review*, 9 April 2020.

<<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/outrage/outrage-subversive-sleep>> [accessed 8 January 2022].

¹³ Summers-Bremner, p. 18.

sleeping practices, albeit in the service of individualism and entrepreneurialism. For there is a new tribe of “pro-sleep” gurus who have emerged in the form of entrepreneurs, rejecting the sleepless “hustle” of their forebears and advocating sleep as the ultimate productivity and profit maximiser.¹⁴ It is this line of thinking which has led a recent bestseller to celebrate the introduction of sleep incentivising systems in which companies monitor and reward workers based on their sleep data.¹⁵ For this cohort, ostentatious sleeping, as Crary advocates, does not signal sleep’s ultimate indifference to capitalism, but rather its intrinsic relationship with a healthy, functioning capitalist system. Founder of the Huffington Post and CEO of wellness website *Thrive*, Arianna Huffington is perhaps the most visible and vocal promoter of the entrepreneurial benefits of sleep (though by no means the only one).¹⁶ Through her book, aptly titled *The Sleep Revolution* (2016), and her well-publicised “philosophical” differences with fellow CEO Elon Musk, she has become the face of sensible sleeping and corporate success.¹⁷ She sells a “have it all” business model in which happiness, health, efficiency and innovation are visited upon the well-rested individual, demonstrating a kind of cosmic industrious “rightness” with the world and a belief in the fortuitous correlation between wellness and productivity. However, even in her rationalisation and glorification of sleep as an indispensable resource for productivity, one can hear a half-rhyme with the sentiments of Crary in their mutual romanticisation of sleep. Where Crary sees sleep’s revolutionary potential as a romantic reunion with a long-forgotten, pre-capitalist past (as a ‘ubiquitous unseen reminder of a premodernity that has never been fully exceeded’), Huffington portrays sleep as a gateway to a kind-of Buddhist capitalism, insisting upon both its mystery and sacredness, as well as its career-enhancing, productivity-maximising benefits.¹⁸

¹⁴ Alan Derickson’s *Dangerously Sleepy: Overworked Americans and the Cult of Manly Wakefulness* (2013) provides a comprehensive overview of insomnia in 20th century American capitalist culture, specifically its gendered nature, through entrepreneurs from Thomas Edison and Charles Lindburgh to Mark Zuckerberg.

¹⁵ In Matthew Walker’s *Why We Sleep* (2018), he writes in glowing terms about insurance company Aetna’s new scheme to award bonuses to its well-slept workers. Other proposed schemes to harness the power of sleep include sleep credit-scores for insurance purposes, furnishing homes with AI technology to ensure ideal sleeping conditions for each family member and extensive use of wearable technology to centralise the user’s health data.

¹⁶ Huffington’s book *The Sleep Revolution* (2016) is filled with quotations from other business giants from Warren Buffet to Jeff Bezos proclaiming the benefits of sleep.

¹⁷ Huffington famously responded to a 2018 New York Times profile of Elon Musk in which he revealed the ‘steep personal toll’ of his workload and his chronic insomnia with an open letter pronouncing the importance of sleep for business and innovation (Huffington, 2018)

¹⁸ Crary, 24/7, p. 11.

On the one hand, my critique of their mutual mythification of sleep may appear surface-level; it is clear Crary and Huffington are ideologically opposed to one another. However, in both, their arguments rest on an understanding of sleep and sleeplessness as a private phenomenon which is nonetheless uniformly experienced. Neither attend sufficiently to the sociality of sleep and as such, its ethical implications. What is lost in their ambiguous framing of sleep is the specific, contingent and perhaps surprising ways in which both slumber and sleeplessness is affectively experienced in the modern world. Instead, insomnia is presented as an indiscriminate affliction, veiling the fact that different populations have different experiences of sleep deprivation, some more voluntarily than others. In this sense, Huffington's "debate" with Musk regarding the importance of sleep to innovation does nothing more than expose and codify the primacy of market capitalism; a revelation which will come as no surprise to those who are coercively bound to livelihoods which depend on their ability to manage, curb or defer sleep and rest. Alternatively, in its appeal to a homogenised social landscape, Crary's *24/7* too elides the disproportionate ways in which sleep poverty is experienced. In fact, as one critic notes, for Crary the sleeping population is divided not down class or economic lines but instead into guileless technology users and educated, cultural purveyors: 'his conception of capitalism ... is an abstract placeless force that seems to have no instrumental actors, but, instead, only hapless victims – except for the artists and critics who are able to extricate themselves from capitalism's morass'.¹⁹

This critique is more fairly levelled at sleep gurus like Huffington than Crary as Crary does pay more than merely lip service to the economic inequalities inherent to *24/7* capitalism. Nonetheless, this fuzzy conceptualisation of sleep points to a profound weakness in the contemporary trend to see it as a site of political resistance. It ignores the fundamentally social nature of sleep; namely, that sleep requires the wakeful vigilance of others. The healthy sleeper always relies on the vigilantly wakeful other for protection and preservation. Crary makes this very point in *24/7*: '[a]s the most private, most vulnerable state common to all, sleep is crucially dependent on society in order to be sustained.'²⁰ However, he abandons the necessarily asymmetrical nature of this relation (that in sleep, 'we abandon ourselves to the care of others'²¹) to instead pronounce that within sleep we

¹⁹ Matthew Wolf-Meyer, 'Once More unto the Breach (of Capitalism and Nature) - Jonathan Crary's *24/7*', *Somatosphere*, 2014 <<http://somatosphere.net/2014/once-more-unto-the-breach-of-capitalism-and-nature-jonathan-crarys-247.html/>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

²⁰ Crary, *24/7*, p. 25.

²¹ Crary, *24/7*, p. 126.

‘inhabit[] a world in common, a shared enactment of withdrawal from the calamitous nullity and waste of 24/7 praxis.’²² It is this contradiction upon which this thesis is premised by first recognising that sleep is, on the contrary, a socially-situated, privileged escape founded on a fundamentally non-identical, non-equal relation to wakeful, vigilant others. Today, this sleep economy is diffuse: today’s insomniac watchman may be anything from late-night drivers delivering takeaways to sweatshop labourers toiling long hours to provide cheap goods to western consumers.

In a sense, this thesis attempts to demonstrate not simply the futility of pining for an ahistorical idealisation of sleep untainted by capitalist culture, but also the ethical consequences of doing so. By conceiving the inherently privileged and ignorant (insofar as one becomes unaware of the external, social world) position of sleep as a neutral, individual human right, the atomised sleeper is turning inward, away from an awareness of her commitment to others. In fact, there is dually a defeatism and bad faith in this gesture – individual, subjective escape is dressed up as a noble form of resistance, and in the hyperbole of Crary and others, the *only* form of resistance. It is part and parcel of a recent and self-serving trend to cast banal acts of self-care as radical statements of resistance against hegemonic culture. Therapeutic acts can be cast as ‘expression[s] of self-acceptance’ as well as an ‘affront to the Sleep Industrial Complex’ all the while failing to interrogate the lives of those suffering the debilitating effects of overwork and exhaustion. Needless to say, these acts do nothing to prevent the sleep industry from thriving.²³

Contrary to Crary, I argue that the world of insomnia is the “world in common” and it is this world this thesis will explore. There is necessarily an ambivalence here – widespread exhaustion and sleep deprivation are by no means something to be celebrated and, moreover, Crary is right to conclude that the contemporary phenomenon of sleeplessness indicates a culture and politics indifferent or even antagonistic to human wellbeing; this is the ethical urgency which animates this thesis. Even so, as we have

²² Crary, *24/7*, p. 126.

²³ Serota, p. 471. Here I cite Canadian academic Kristie Serota’s article ‘Quilting resistance to the sleep industrial complex’ as an example of therapy culture being erroneously cast as radical political activity. Serota assumes an idiosyncratic sleep schedule and commits to a quilting project to ‘radically accept[] sleeplessness as a facet of [her] existence.’ Whilst Serota does note that being ‘able to adjust [her] work schedule to fit [her] natural circadian rhythm is a privilege,’ this is arguably the very crux of the oppressiveness of the sleep industrial complex: populations are divided into those who can capably adapt their circadian clocks to their comfort and their advantage, and those that are compelled by external societal pressures to conform to exhausting and dehumanising sleep patterns. (p. 474)

established, a valorisation of sleep does little to counter this indifference. Rather, the inherent sociality of insomnia – that it is characterised by an inability to escape into oneself and from one’s social existence – indicates a persistent reminder of one’s co-existence with others and by extension, one’s responsibility to others. Saying this, contemporary experiences of insomnia may not feel edified by this framing – one does not feel responsible for others when sleeplessly surfing the internet or burning oneself out in zero-hour, precarious jobs. This is what I call banal insomnia: routinised cultures and habituated modes of sleeplessness which, in effect, compel the subject to psychically “check out.” The tension of the thesis can be summarised in the following question: is it possible to perceive in our exhausted, often cynical, culture of sleeplessness a persistent reminder of our duty to the care of others?

This thesis considers scenarios of insomnia in late modernity, ranging from 24/7 entertainment to sleepless threats of 21st century acts of terrorism. At its heart, this thesis attempts to identify scenes of responsibility and social vigilance which persist outside a liberal-capitalist rationality. In doing so, I co-opt an underutilized rich phrase from Crary’s vocabulary: “ends of sleep.” Crary later addressed his evocative subtitle in his article ‘Powering Down’ claiming that whilst some had interpreted this “end” as ‘the advent of a sleepless world,’ he was instead more optimistically proposing that ‘that a primary end or purpose of sleep is rest, withdrawal, quiescence, all of which oppose the demands of 24/7 capitalism.’²⁴ To this I posit yet another interpretation. In this thesis, I consider these “ends” or limits of sleep as fruitful scenes and scenarios in which normative escapist strategies prove impossible. In essence, I seek to unveil an insomniac public space which undergirds our exhausted culture; a sociality characterised by concern for the sleeping other.

1.2 Emmanuel Levinas and the ethical imperative

It is this ethical concern and asymmetrical responsibility which dominates the oeuvre of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, my key interlocuter. Born in Lithuania to a Jewish family in 1905, Levinas studied phenomenology as a young adult in Strasbourg and Freiburg under the mentorship of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. This early

²⁴ Jonathan Crary, ‘Powering Down’, *October*, 176 (2021), 27–29 (p. 28)
<https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00424>.

tutelage proved fundamental and was met with the catastrophe of Hitler's Third Reich; unspeakable disaster which laid an indelible and ultimately irresolvable imprint on Levinas's philosophy. This political horror and Levinas's personal tragedy implicated and determined his philosophical and theological output – an unwavering, intransigent concern for the wellbeing of others and a steadfast commitment to his ethical project. This is best encapsulated by the dedication of his masterwork *Otherwise than Being*:

To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.²⁵

Levinas spent much of the war interned as a prisoner of war in a German camp and there wrote what would become his first book *Existence and Existents*, a lucid articulation of the foundation of his philosophy. What emerged was a clear-eyed challenge to the conception of the singular, rational subject which had been a mainstay of Western philosophy up to that point. Instead, Levinas's ethical assertion was that the autonomy of subjectivity was simply an illusion; all beings and subjects – all 'existents' – were not only constituted by a radical, primordial otherness but ethically beholden to it. This undergirded his foundational claim that ethics, not ontology, is first philosophy.

There is something almost comical in the breadth of the ethical imperative which Levinas tells us may range from the courteous 'After you, Sir' of holding a door open to the persecutory experience of finding oneself completely hostage to the needs of another as Levinas elsewhere describes it as the gift 'of bread from one's mouth, of one's own mouthful of bread.'²⁶ The ethical relation is therefore by no means simply a banal expression of altruism and good will to one's fellow man – rather, it is also a traumatic relation in which one experiences one's utter servitude to the other person. The ethical relation therefore holds an expansive place in Levinasian theory, articulated at times as the automatic sensible reactions to the presence of another whilst also, and more often, depicted as a violent, irrepressible recognition of the illusion of one's coherent, self-sufficient

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, p. 117; p. 74.

identity brought about by the intrusion of another: a ‘break in my universe.’²⁷ Given this, it is unsurprising that the phenomenological experience which Levinas most commonly evokes to describe this encounter with alterity is insomnia: an unremitting, inescapable encounter with the indeterminate *other* night, one in which the subject cannot console themselves with the solipsistic comfort of sleep.²⁸

The phenomenon of insomnia is given full explication in *Existence and Existents*, his first major publication and a slim volume which presents an exceptional clearing of ground for his philosophy. It is also, as Robert Bernasconi notes, a work which palpably evokes the ethical and sensible dimensions of his thinking which undoubtedly were born from personal circumstance: ‘When Levinas described the distance between the ego and the self as less like liberation than slackening the ropes that still bind a prisoner, the metaphor must have had a personal resonance for him. It is unlikely that a book like *Existence and Existents* could have been written in tranquility.’²⁹ This is clearest in his description of the *there is* (the *il y a*): anonymous, undifferentiated Being to which we are all ethically bound. In order to access this primordial realm, Emmanuel Levinas requests,

Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness. One cannot put this return to nothingness outside all events. But what of this nothingness itself? Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness.³⁰

Levinas seeks to articulate this “something” before all beings. This is not a nothingness but the ‘impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable “consummation” of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness.’³¹ Levinas thus begins his rebuke against traditional philosophy, taking aim at what he judges to be an irresponsible fidelity to the rationalisation of subjective experience as taken to provide a comprehension of this pure Being. In response, Levinas turns to the phenomenological experiences of sleep, fatigue and insomnia

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Phaenomenologica, 100 (Dordrecht, The Netherlands; Boston: Hingham, MA, USA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), p. 64.

²⁸ Here, I use philosopher Maurice Blanchot’s term “the other night” which he conceives, in conjunction with Levinasian insomnia, as the night when the subject cannot escape into sleep. As opposed to the “first night” in which the healthy sleeper may recoil into themselves in restful slumber, the “other night” sees the restless subject vigilantly alert to nocturnal darkness (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 1989).

²⁹ Robert Bernasconi, ‘Foreward’, in *Existence and Existents*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 2001), pp. vii–xvi, (p. xi).

³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 2001), p. 51.

³¹ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 52.

to attempt to conceive of the relationship between Being and beings (existence and existents). Levinas claims that philosophy itself is wholly inadequate to do so as it can only account for reflections within and upon the world, for which Being (as part of its constitution) is already established.

In attempting to articulate the pure undifferentiated Being that precedes any existent (thing, object, subject) for which mere existence is simply an attribute, Levinas thus seeks to find the truth of our unaccountable relation with alterity in ‘certain moments in human existence where the adherence of existence to existent appears like a cleaving.’³² For Levinas, Being is not conceived but felt, striking us as a moment of pure alienation and suffocation. As such, Being resides in the unrelenting experience of insomnia where one can find no recourse to sleep:

The impossibility of rending the invading, inevitable, and anonymous rustling of existence manifests itself particularly in certain times when sleep evades our appeal. One watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful. The bare fact of presence is oppressive; one is held by being, held to be. One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence.³³

In insomnia, the subject experiences the impersonal event of Being or what Levinas calls the *there is*. The *there is* is impersonal indifferent Being - it is that which is irreducible to worldly conception and which exists before any relation, distinction or formation: ‘The world of forms opens like a bottomless abyss. The cosmos breaks up and chaos gapes open – the abyss, the absence of place, the *there is*.’³⁴ The insomniac subject experiences their own beholdenness to the *there is* as the impossible relation of an existent to absolute being. This is not a state of attention which would be directed towards an object but a vigilance: ‘Attention presupposes the freedom of the ego which directs it; the vigilance of insomnia which keeps our eyes open has no subject.’³⁵

Levinas’s description seeks to wrest insomnia away from the self-affirming unity of the sleeping-waking self, in which he sees consciousness and unconsciousness locked in a

³² Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 9.

³³ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 61.

³⁴ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 68.

³⁵ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 65.

‘closed circle ... where there can be satisfaction and avowal.’³⁶ Insomnia does not oppose sleep but rather exposes an openness towards the primordial truth of Being, a terrifying intimation of a contentless, infinite presence, which we escape from in sleep. Sleep, conversely, is a soothing respite from conscious existence which maintains an ontological dialectic of being and nothingness. Through its negation of waking consciousness, sleep maintains a habitual replenishment of the subjective self. Insomnia interrupts this neat dialectical unity between the sleeping and waking self, exposing the limit and inadequacy of the subject’s totalising conception of their own being and identity.

For Levinas, the implications of this experience and the subject’s traumatic opening up and undoing towards *there is* strikes at the integrity of the subjective self. Insomnia is not simply the privation of sleep but rather, an understanding of sleep’s impossibility. It intimates to the (undone) subject that escape from this irrepressible and permanent presence is impossible. Consciousness (as opposed to insomniac wakefulness) is dialectically bound to unconsciousness in order to guarantee the totality of the subject’s existence. As Levinas writes, ‘[c]onsciousness, in its very opposition to the unconscious, is not constituted by the opposition, but by this proximity, this communication with its contrary: in its very élan consciousness becomes fatigued and interrupts itself, has a recourse against itself.’³⁷

Levinas’s formulation of the *there is* and insomnia foregrounds his renewal of the question of the ethical. In reformulating Heidegger’s ontological philosophy as a question of ethics, Levinas casts aside the corrupted finitude of Heidegger’s *Dasein* to claim instead that our existence is predicated upon our responsibility to the infinite face of the Other (*le visage d’Atrui*), arguing that our very being is formed by answering the call of the Other before there is even a self to answer.³⁸ Insomnia is thus a primordial experience of this responsibility upon which the subject is constituted. This insomniac ethical encounter – what Levinas will later call the visitation of the face – determines and possesses the subject. Before the subject is an ‘I’, it is oriented toward the Other, brought into being by their call. As Levinas writes, ‘[e]xperience, the idea of infinity, occurs in the relationship with the Other. The idea of infinity is the social relationship.’³⁹

³⁶ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 36.

³⁷ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 64.

³⁸ Throughout the thesis, I will use the capitalised “Other” when referring to Levinas’s concept of alterity.

³⁹ Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 54.

This thesis is thus concerned with what Tom Sparrow has called ‘Levinas’s sustained attention to the tangibility of being and the corporeal dimension of human existence,’ foregrounding primarily ‘the body in its materiality; the irreducibility of aesthetic experience; the transcendental function of sensation; the ecological aspect of sensibility; the horror of experience.’⁴⁰ As Sparrow notes, this approach requires reading Levinas against the grain, prioritising materialist aspects of his philosophy, such as the corporeal constitution of the subject and the centrality of sensibility, over his theological vocabulary. Sparrow somewhat overstates the uniqueness of this approach for it would take a particularly scant eye over Levinas’s oeuvre and attendant scholarship to designate him as ‘little more than a quasi-religious thinker,’ a reputation Sparrow claims Levinas carries.⁴¹ For one, Levinas was keen to distinguish his theological writings from his philosophical ones (subsequently fomenting much debate about the interrelation of theology and philosophy in his thought).⁴² More importantly, however, and key to this thesis, is the centrality of darkness and horror which pervades his writing – a strand of his thought which evidently runs from his first published work *Existence and Existents* to *Otherwise Than Being* and in which the experience of insomnia is exemplary.

Given the centrality of the ethical relation in Levinas’s philosophy, it is interesting that the ethical elements have been dismissed or modified of late, often in the service of philosophies of nature and ecology, in which his anthropocentric and theological terminology (‘the face,’ ‘God’) has been deemed exclusive of the nonhuman. In particular, speculative realist Graham Harman influentially recast the hallmark axiom of Levinasian thought – ethics as first philosophy – as instead aesthetics as first philosophy, a move he admits Levinas himself would be sceptical of. Harman interprets Levinas’s characterisation of the sensibly felt infinite depth of the universe as a recognition that all objects and things, whilst discrete and individual, contain plumbless depths ‘never fully grasped by any

⁴⁰ Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013), pp. 9–10.

⁴¹ Sparrow, p. 10.

⁴² Levinas was somewhat inconsistent on this distinction; at times insisting on the strictly non-theological nature of his thought e.g., in a lecture entitled ‘Transcendence and Height,’ he states that his philosophy was ‘absolutely non-theological ... It is not theology I am doing but philosophy’ (*Basic Philosophical Texts*, 1999, p. 29-30) whereas elsewhere, his vocabulary is distinctly theological and scholars like Claire Katz have seen his faith as integral to understanding his philosophy which she characterises as ‘essentially and profoundly Jewish.’ (2004, p. 5) Stephen Minister and Jackson Murtha provide an overview of the debate regarding the influence and importance of theology for Levinas studies in their essay ‘Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion’ (2010).

handling, bathing, or biting.’⁴³ Harman is a prime example of how an underestimation of the ethical relation in Levinas’s philosophy undermines how sensibility operates in his thought: the insomniac *there is* is not to be abstractly understood as a duty to another human or even a recognition of their fundamentally ungraspable nature but profoundly *felt* as a visceral, affective servitude to the other, preceding a world of abstraction, distinction and subjectivity. There is no choice to be made in the face of the *there is*.

Alternatively, Harman favours Levinas’s understanding of “enjoyment” as a basis for ethics: an absorption and fascination in worldly difference and identity. For Levinas, enjoyment is when the ‘sincere’ subject exhibits an embrace of and intentionality toward the world as it is presented. One experiences a sensible satisfaction (‘sense alimentation’) with the world specifically through the enjoyment of its objects: ‘a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun.’⁴⁴ The objects of enjoyment may well be arbitrary: ‘we live from “good soup,” air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep etc,’ however it is through the very worldiness of these worldly things in which the subject sustains their own continuity in the world: ‘the very egoism of life.’⁴⁵ Enjoyment allows the subject to grapple with the absolute indeterminacy of the future in a way which does not strike the subject as a terrifying essential alterity but rather as a pleasant contingency, ‘a happy chance.’⁴⁶

In this formulation, we hit upon the distinction between the ethical saliency of sleep versus insomnia. Seeing the right to sleep as an ethical enterprise is perfectly in line with Harman’s thought as it conceives of individual objects – both human and non-human – as discrete forms which, though unfathomable, exist absolutely within themselves. From this perspective, the sensible recognition of another existent’s alterity manifests as a sublime recognition of their uncontainability, not as an overriding responsibility. Harman’s ethics therefore emerges as a consequence of this cognitive awareness – a choice one can freely make. In this case, ethical action is therefore another means of “enjoying” and partaking within the communal world. Conversely, Levinas’s formulation forces us to deny the conflation of enjoyment and ethical action. Enjoyment and worldly nourishment feed the

⁴³ Graham Harman, ‘Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human’, *Naked Punch*, 2007, 21–30.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1992), p. 111; p. 112.

⁴⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 110; p. 112.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 141.

egoistic economy of the individual. Ethical encounter, on the other hand, obliterates such an illusion. This is what insomnia is: a visceral awareness of the illusion of the self-identical self and a profound recognition of one's entire servitude to the Other.

1.3 Banal Insomnia

From the outset, this thesis draws a legible yet porous line between Levinasian insomnia and banal insomnia – in fact, this speculative porosity is the problematic that this thesis seeks to investigate. Whereas Levinas's account of insomnia describes the profound and brutal experience of facing the Other as 'a perpetual duty of vigilance and effort that can never slumber,' banal insomnia instead describes the corporeal violence visited upon the body of the modern subject in the face of a conformist capitalist culture.⁴⁷ It is the very mode of being that Crary describes in *24/7*: 'the state in which producing, consuming, and discarding occur without pause, hastening the exhaustion of life and the depletion of resources.'⁴⁸

As such, the modern subject is trained to view sleep as an obstacle or hurdle to be managed in the pursuit of their most productive selves. The promise undergirding contemporary sleep self-help literature is that the magic sleep schedule is possible: there exists an effective systematised way of managing one's time and body which will optimise one's productivity.⁴⁹ Banal insomnia is what emerges when this promise has been exhausted and shown to be false, and there is no alternative to replace it with. Banal insomnia therefore resonates with recent theorisations of burnout syndrome, the state of finding oneself exhausted and at the end of one's rope but with nowhere else to turn. Whilst commonly classed as an occupational phenomenon (a temporary consequence of the emotional and physical toll of workplace stress), burnout describes a psychical, existential unease which

⁴⁷ *Face to Face with Lévinas*, ed. by Richard A. Cohen, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Crary, *24/7*, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Sleep self-help literature is a successful industry. Though far too many to exhaustively list here, a survey of recent titles demonstrates a key theme running through them: that controlling one's circadian clock will lead to optimised professional productivity and will combat one's stress and anxiety. These include Shawn Stevenson's *Sleep Smarter: 21 Essential Strategies to Sleep Your Way to a Better Body, Better Health, and Bigger Success* (2016); Neil Stanley's *How to Sleep Well: The Science of Sleeping Smarter, Living Better and Being Productive* (2018) and Vicki Culpin's *The Business of Sleep: How Sleeping Better Can Transform Your Career* (2018).

cannot be so readily resolved by a good night's sleep. It is the resigned understanding that the vocation of work will never be entirely satisfied and there will always be yet another thing to complete or resolve. As psychoanalyst Josh Cohen puts it, '[t]he exhaustion experienced in burnout combines an intense yearning for this state of completion with the tormenting sense that it cannot be attained, that there is always some demand or anxiety or distraction that can't be silenced.'⁵⁰ In this way, the affliction of burnout is the understanding that one can never entirely escape the demands of life. Even after 'you've exhausted all your internal resources, [you] cannot free yourself of the nervous compulsion to go on regardless. Life becomes something that won't stop bothering you.'⁵¹ In a similar way, banal insomnia is simultaneously the promise and affective recognition of the fallaciousness of worldly satisfaction – a somatic awareness of the artifice and persistence of contemporary life.

In Levinasian terms, banal insomnia appears closer to his description of indolence than insomnia. Deprived of the egoistic enjoyment of self-coincidence (achieved in sleep), indolence is an 'impotent and joyless aversion to the burden of existence itself'; a temporally dislocated, hesitant state 'holding back from the future.'⁵² The indolent subject differs from the healthy sleeper, the imagined product of self-help literature whose successful sleeping keeps her in joyous balance with the world's vicissitudes. Rather, the indolent subject carries a consciousness of the falsity of this happy enjoyment but, even so, cannot relinquish their attachment to the world. This "bad conscience" infuses the culture of banal insomnia, demonstrating not merely the perpetual (though insufficient) possibility of escape through sleep but a wilful orientation toward sleep, a desire for existential self-sufficiency and a turning away from others. It is a fatigue and weariness that can never be fully shaken off.

Banal insomnia thus feels heavy; it is a kind-of managed despair. The subject is compelled to act "as if." Acting "as if" requires effort; it is a burdensome activity. The cynical postures that modern subjects evince to cope with contemporary society come with a bodily toll: a lethargic allergy to existence itself. It is the obverse side of worldly

⁵⁰ Josh Cohen, 'Minds Turned to Ash', *The Economist* (London, 29 June 2016), section 1843 magazine <<https://www.economist.com/1843/2016/06/29/minds-turned-to-ash>> [accessed 30 October 2022].

⁵¹ Josh Cohen, 'Minds Turned to Ash'.

⁵² Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 17; p. 29.

nourishment and sincerity where instead the subject catches a disarming glimpse of the operation in action which does nothing but affirm their impotence:

Existence drags behind it a weight – if only itself – which complicates the trip it takes. Burdened with itself ... it does not have the serene calm of a sage of old. It does not purely and simply exist. Its movement of existence which might be pure and straightforward is bent and caught up in itself, showing that the verb to be is a reflexive verb: it is not just that one is, one is oneself.⁵³

The heaviness that bears down upon the indolent subject is existence itself. If the sincere subject is the joyous subject who can revel happily in existence, the indolent subject is the cynical subject, embittered by their own powerlessness. This existential stance is characterised by a resentful obligation towards the world – as Levinas notes, ‘in weariness existence is like the reminder of a commitment to exist, with all the seriousness and harshness of an unrevokable contract.’⁵⁴ Indolence cowers in the face of the future, demonstrating contempt for the worldly things which nonetheless sustain their attachment to the world. In enjoyment, one faces the future with sincere abandon; in indolence, with cynical resentment.

Indolence therefore presents something of a joyless egoistic economy. Echoing Cohen, Byung-Chul Han’s recent diagnosis of ‘the burnout society’ too understands this as an existential condition within an achievement society in which achievement – entirely resolved – is foreclosed from the outset. He envisions a social world in which duty and action have been accelerated and every activity becomes something to be managed and optimised. This contemporary state is ‘multitasking’: ‘a flat mode of attention’ which forbids contemplation ‘because it must [always] process background states.’⁵⁵ Any excess time dedicated to thoughtful contemplation upon which culture and art can develop is replaced by ‘hyperattention’: a reactive ‘scattered mode of awareness’ in which the subject is simply given no time to think.⁵⁶ Along these same lines, Cressida J. Heyes’ 2020 work *Anaesthetics of Existence* seeks to theorise this exhausted contemporary condition by

⁵³ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. by Erik Butler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 13.

⁵⁶ Han, *The Burnout Society*, p. 13.

identifying, with Han, a progression from Foucault's disciplinary society to 'postdisciplinary time' claiming that postdisciplinary time 'requires the lessons of disciplinary time be learned and that they be fractured and reapplied to the challenge of simultaneously managing multiple complex tasks.'⁵⁷ She makes an important further step by recognising that the modern subject institutes anaesthetic strategies to counteract this stimulative onslaught. As such, anaesthetic time 'is part and parcel of post-disciplinary temporality – it is a logical response to it and a way of surviving in an economy of temporality that is relentlessly depleting.'⁵⁸

Therefore, in competition with a rising Western-style brand of mindfulness⁵⁹ is a tempting mindlessness – a time which 'sits uneasily in the space between addiction and the everyday.'⁶⁰ By no means uniform, this time is philosophically challenging simply because 'it is so boring, so subtle, so routine, and so socially accepted that it barely stands out as an experience at all.'⁶¹ It's simply another episode on Netflix, another glass of wine, another 10 levels of Candy Crush. Heyes' description of anaesthetic time or what she also calls 'junk time' mirrors the isolating, disjunctive experience of banal insomnia. Cut off from the social world, this temporality is characterised by 'the loss of the long term or organized future in favor of a frozen present, and the loss of temporal synchrony with the world.'⁶² In a time in which we are actively told to "check out" via these anaesthetic strategies, we all inhabit pockets of these temporal dislocations.

Today this process of diminishing returns is commonplace. It is often mockingly used by media producers to console, placate and even deride their users. Brands market themselves as comforting, guilt-free options to while away time. Streaming platforms are just one industry which advertise their products by openly declaring contempt for the user (a contempt that the viewer shares). Though the phrase did not originate from any of these platforms, all embrace the term "binge-watching" in their marketing and their viewers'

⁵⁷ Cressida J. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 21.

⁵⁸ Heyes, p. 99.

⁵⁹ Ronald Purser has dubbed the 21st century western mindfulness revolution 'McMindfulness' which can be broadly summed up as 'stoic self-pacification' (2019, p. 25). Akin to my critique of banal insomnia, he considers the recent corporate embrace of mindful practices as sustaining self-interested neoliberal ideals of productivity and profit.

⁶⁰ Heyes, p. 105.

⁶¹ Heyes, p. 105.

⁶² Heyes, p. 106.

compulsive watching habits are fair game for ridicule.⁶³ This is the cynicism of modern sleeplessness, a constant avowal of just how weak and impressionable we all are. A particularly acute psychic violence is being done to a younger generation who are the inheritors of this postmodern cynicism. The much-maligned Generation Z, so-called digital natives, are characterised by older generations as addicted to their phones and lacking the resilience and traditional values necessary to survive in the contemporary world. And yet, they are also a generation whose youthfulness has been worked over in advance, fatigued by constant critiques of how hollow and meaningless their techno-visual culture is and plagued by the looming threat of climate crisis. One need only look at contemporary representations of youth itself; ones which serve both as entertainment and a grim mirror for this generation. The recent wildly popular HBO series *Euphoria* portrays a young troubled cohort dealing with issues of addiction, trauma and mental health concerns. The US TV show is aimed at an audience that mirrors the young characters the show depicts (though not exclusively) and is known for its shocking content which includes scenes of graphic violence and explicit sexual activity. It is headed by protagonist Rue Bennet – a teenage opioid addict – whose substance dependency finds alternate outlets in recovery. In one such scene, she seeks emotional escape in inert vacant watching by binging 22 hours of British reality series *Love Island*, seeking emotional escape in inert, vacant watching; a practice which may well be being deployed by the many disillusioned teens watching her.⁶⁴ Whilst it is unlikely many watching will identify fully with the show’s portrayal of the extreme edges of youth culture, it nonetheless gives voice to a hopeless generation. The theme tune repeats ‘I’ll live forever’; this sentiment is not jubilant but burdensome, echoing the generation’s deeply internalised understanding of what they have already given up to social media and the futility in attempting to live outside of it. As I will explore, particularly in chapter two, banal insomnia is a generational issue most acutely facing our youth: a hesitation and recoil in the face of an unknown future.

⁶³A notable and illustrative example is Hulu’s ‘binge ad’ in which advertisers can pay to market products ‘during a viewer’s binge session.’ Hulu shamelessly markets addiction itself, rewarding viewers who have watched three or more episodes. The product in question is whisky manufacturer Maker’s Mark and, tongue-in-cheek, the ad tells its viewers to “Have one more” as a model tips her glass to the camera (Hulu, 2022).

⁶⁴ ‘The Trials and Tribulations of Trying to Pee While Depressed’, dir. by Sam Levinson, *Euphoria* (HBO Entertainment, 2019).

1.4 A note on banality

Since Meghan Morris's classic 1988 essay 'Banality in Cultural Studies,' it is clear that the term 'banality' should be approached with consideration. Morris's critique transmits a spine-tingling self-consciousness to any potential theorist who seeks to write about popular culture as she expresses her fatigue with formulaic cultural criticism: 'I get the feeling that somewhere in some English publisher's vault there is a master-disk from which thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations.'⁶⁵ Her reference to the 'catastrophe of Thatcherism' is just about the only thing that dates this critique.⁶⁶ As such, Morris warns against a simplistic theoretical stance which perceives consumers of popular 'banal' culture as either the guileless subjects of ideologically saturated media or eternally canny recipients who, in distracted modes, exhibit a powerful counter-ideology by "using" and "resisting" these media products to their own idiosyncratic ends. Morris makes the point that the preponderance and the simplicity of the latter merely returns circuitously to the fruitless conclusion of the former:

a stylistic enactment of the "popular" as distracted, scanning the surface, and short on attention-span, performs a retrieval, at the level of *enunciative* practice of the thesis of "cultural dopes." ... If cultural dopism is being enunciatively performed (and valorized) in a discourse that tries to contest it, then the argument in fact *cannot* move on, but can only retrieve its point of departure as "banality" (a word pop theorists don't normally use) in the negative sense.⁶⁷

If the foundational premise of cultural studies scholarship is that both modern societies and cultural texts are always myriad and contradictory, then it becomes a tautological and ultimately arbitrary exercise to identify the resistant elements inherent in everyday culture. Morris seeks to counter this shallow thesis by advocating a reconsideration of banality, seeing in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* an expansive critique broad enough to hold both the fatalistic diagnosis of an oppressive hegemonic culture as well as the contingent, ever-present resistance of the modern subject. She cites de Certeau's claim that 'everyday practices "will alternately exacerbate *and disrupt* our logics. Its regrets are

⁶⁵ Meghan Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies', *Discourse*, 10.2 (1988), 3–29 (p. 15).

⁶⁶ Morris, p. 15.

⁶⁷ Morris, p. 19.

like those of the poet, and like him, it struggles against oblivion.”⁶⁸ It is this approach that informs my conception of the “ends of sleep,” seeing in this formulation both scenes of struggle, oppression and indignity as well as a site in which new forms and gestures of sociality and interpersonal concern may, even in faint forms, be enacted.

Furthermore, Morris’s article raises a key concern of Levinas’s: the centrality of vigilant critique to the ethical project. In other words, not allowing oneself to be seduced or mesmerised by the simplicity or even aesthetic beauty of a singular approach. Banal insomnia thus doubles up as not merely a description but an ethical call, serving as a reminder of the moral imperative of critique. In this sense, echoes of Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ are unavoidable. Famously Arendt’s description for Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann’s crimes against the Jewish people, the phrase has ostensibly developed such a ubiquity that it evokes the kind of unthinking application that it warns against.⁶⁹ What is particularly pertinent here regarding Arendt’s conceptualisation of the ‘word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*’ phrase is that she specifically couches it in phenomenological, not abstract, terms.⁷⁰ What is at issue is not the idea but the very act of thinking:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it “conditions” men against evil doing?⁷¹

If we are to answer affirmatively, as Arendt believes we should, it is through the habitual taking up the duty of thinking, not thought in itself, in which ethical action lies. This “conditioning” involves an orientation outside of the self, towards an external realm beyond its own egoist totality; an orientation which can only be achieved through the labour of thought. Eichmann’s crime was in not taking up the duty and action to think and instead resigning himself to a cognitive automatism, a self-satisfied egoism in which he never troubled himself with the ego-surpassing *work* of thinking.

⁶⁸ Morris, p. 23.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Minnich echoes this when she writes of her fear that, ‘*the banality of evil* is itself becoming a banality, a cliché, in ways that gut its force. In general, now, ‘the banality of evil’ means that ordinary people, and not just Grand Villains, are capable of doing excessive harm. That is not wrong, but it is utterly inadequate, sliding as it does toward a notion that goes even further than collective responsibility toward once again swamping individual responsibility. If everyone is guilty, then no one bears actual responsibility’ (2014, pp. 164 -165)

⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New Yorker: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 252.

⁷¹ Hannah Arendt, ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’, *Social Research*, 38.3 (1971), 417–46 (p. 418).

In this formulation, there is a confluence between Arendt and Levinas in the importance of the phenomenology of thought. Levinas similarly rejected the conflation of contemplation with ‘knowing’ (the creation of concrete concepts and theoretical systems), and instead advocated for an ‘externally oriented mode’ of thought ‘which attempts to penetrate into what is radically other than the mind that is thinking it.’⁷² By this, he sought to reveal the phenomenological nature of thought – namely, that thinking is an action which orients itself outwards away from the confines of one’s subjective identity. Consciousness permits the egoistic subject to think beyond itself, ‘not consist[ing] in equaling being with representation, in tending to the full light in which this adequation is to be sought, but rather in overflowing this play of lights.’⁷³ Truth does not lie in the disclosure of any thought or idea but in the *action* of seeking that which is eternally out of its reach: ‘What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying of thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives. ... The aspiration to radical exteriority, thus called metaphysical, the respect for this metaphysical exteriority which, above all, we must “let be,” constitutes truth.’⁷⁴ The ethical dimension of this formulation is a continuous, unyielding orientation towards the radically Other, that which cannot be contained by the thought that thinks it nor the word that names it. Levinas therefore conceives ethics not as a doctrine but an ‘optics’: the ‘essential of ethics is in its *transcendent intention*,’ its refusal to subsist in the self-same abstractions of the conceptual or linguistic. In this way, critique for Levinas has a profound ethical dimension – it is a constant vigilant overturning of any doctrine or law which ‘left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules and thus in absentia.’⁷⁵ As Simon Critchley notes in his classic work exploring the ethical dimensions of Levinas’s criticism, ‘there is a duty in deconstruction.’⁷⁶ To read with a critical eye is to engage in an insomniac vigilance; a duty which can never be entirely accomplished.

⁷² John Wild, ‘Introduction’, in *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008), pp. 11–20 (p. 16).

⁷³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 27.

⁷⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 28–29.

⁷⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 300.

⁷⁶ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Third edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 2.

1.5 A cautionary tale: Cioran's cynical insomniac

The failure to perform this vigilance can have devastating consequences. We find a cautionary tale in a contemporary of Levinas, the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran whose writings were highly influenced by his own lifelong experiences of insomnia. Unlike Levinas, however, his philosophy did not advocate an ethical orientation towards the needs of the other; rather, Cioran developed a nihilistic outlook which, much to his shame as an older man, found sympathy in the fascist, antisemitic regimes taking hold not only in Germany but his home country Romania too.⁷⁷ Composed in the grips of a devastating bout of insomnia, Cioran's early work *On the Heights of Despair* (1934) transforms this desperate sleeplessness into a visceral, organic acknowledgement of the subject's utter isolation: 'the feeling of being absolutely isolated between the earth and the sky.'⁷⁸ Faced with the abyssal terror of insomnia, the subject is disabused of the vulgar empty abstractions which shape the world: 'I am: therefore the world is meaningless,' he writes.⁷⁹ Instead, the subject is cannibalized by the irrepressible sensation of Being itself into what Cioran calls 'being lyrical': 'one's life beats to an essential rhythm and the experience is so intense that it synthesizes the entire meaning of one's personality. What is unique and specific in us is then realized in a form so expressive that the individual rises onto a universal plane.'⁸⁰

What Cioran demonstrates is a seductive and entrancing fatalism which accompanies the ravages of insomnia. As he puts it, '[w]hat meaning is there in the tragic suffering of a man for whom everything is ultimately nothing and whose only law in this world is agony?'⁸¹ For Levinas, this despondency emerges from the legacy of liberalism and its failure to incorporate the issue of the material body into its rationality – to deal with the 'eternal strangeness of the body.'⁸² This specifically 20th century repudiation of liberal thinking emerges as an investment in individual bodily experience as not only essential but eternally mysterious and mesmerising. 'Truth, for man, is no longer contemplation of a foreign spectacle, it is a drama in which he himself is the actor,' Levinas explains in his strikingly insightful and prescient 1934 article 'Reflections on the Philosophy of

⁷⁷ For a detailed account of Cioran's relationship to political extremism and his later remorse, see Marta Petreu, *An Infamous Past: E.M. Cioran and the Rise of Fascism in Romania* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005).

⁷⁸ Emil Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, trans. by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 12.

⁷⁹ Cioran, p. 14.

⁸⁰ Cioran, p. 4.

⁸¹ Cioran, p. 22.

⁸² Emmanuel Levinas, *Unforeseen History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 17.

Hitlerism'.⁸³ The essay provides a convincing diagnosis of the dangerous malaise of Cioran's thinking. Once truth and its attendant appeal to universality is located not in anonymous ideas and values (such that any abstract idealism has been thoroughly discredited) but rather in the knowledge and acceptance of one's ultimate enchainment to their concrete body, a racial order can be violently propagated, propelled by the force of one's spiritual identification with their body. Such an identification, as Levinas points out, has no other justification than the force of one's internally felt drama and is therefore not beholden to a recognition of the humanity of others. Rather, it carries its 'own form of universalization: war, conquest.'⁸⁴ In this light, Cioran's description of the lyrical subject is not only contradictory (the idea that a universal experience can exclude others) but chilling: '[t]he deepest subjective experiences are the most universal, because through them one reaches the original source of life. True interiorization leads to a universality inaccessible to those who remain on the periphery.'⁸⁵

In addition to the threat present in this affirmation of the individual body, Levinas's critique includes an economical genealogy of cynicism in modern thought, stemming from liberalism's foundational doubt:

Thought becomes a game. Man plays with his freedom and doesn't permanently commit himself to any truth. He transforms his capacity for doubt into a lack of conviction. Not being shackled to truth turns into not wanting to engage oneself in the creation of spiritual values. Sincerity becomes impossible, bringing an end to heroism. Civilization is invaded by everything that is not authentic, by cheap substitutes subservient to special interests and passing fashion.⁸⁶

Again, Cioran is exemplary in this regard as cynicism and irony is deeply embedded in his philosophical outlook. This is clear even from his title *On the Heights of Despair* which ironically appropriates a common turn of phrase used in Romanian newspapers at that time, usually preceding reports of suicide by young men; for instance, "On the heights of despair, young so-and-so took his life." Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston explains this rhetorical gesture as a way of casting himself as the suicidal young man: 'Cioran commits suicide metaphorically while managing to survive the call of death by releasing through his invented character the

⁸³ Levinas, *Unforeseen History*, p. 20.

⁸⁴ Levinas, *Unforeseen History*, p. 21.

⁸⁵ Cioran, p. 4.

⁸⁶ Levinas, *Unforeseen History*, p. 19.

surplus of lyrical energy surging in him.’⁸⁷ In this sense, irony becomes justification for a wilful and unthinking pursuit of this lyrical energy. This is the banality of Cioran’s insomnia; not that it is dull or even everyday, but rather that it is, in principle, preceded by a rejection of any values or ideals whatsoever. It rejects the legitimacy of conscious thought from the outset until thought becomes simply a thing to play with, a means to laughingly and retrospectively justify his abandonment to bodily drives. Cioran’s appropriation of these young men’s deaths is not solidarity but rather a self-interested rhetorical flourish which elides the need to reckon with their humanity. ‘Such a society,’ Levinas writes, ‘loses living contact with its true ideal of freedom and accepts degenerate forms of the idea. It does not see that the true ideal requires effort and instead enjoys those aspects of the ideal that make life easier.’⁸⁸

It is for this reason that the recent trend to cast sleep as a radical political project is misguided. There is something profoundly easy and effortless about sleep. Sleep by its nature is atomizing and evasive; it is a turning inwards and away from a collective world, away from the other. Banal insomnia relies on a similar derision and rejection of the shared wakeful world, though without the oblivion that sleep provides. Banal insomnia relies rather on an exhausted cultural outlook which employs an unthinking cynicism which eschews (cognitive) effort and employs rhetorical tools to evade ethical responsibility. It is for this reason that the cultural diagnoses of Crary, Han and others never strike us as entirely unfamiliar. Take a typical Crary admonishment: ‘We are the compliant subject who submits to all manner of biometric and surveillance intrusion and who ingests toxic food and water and lives near nuclear reactors without complaint.’⁸⁹ These are the very things that we – at moments of weakness or unsustainability – say to ourselves when the neoliberal lie of the “hustle” proves too untenable to keep up. It is, for instance, by no means unknown to technology users that their incessant technology use is mere escapism, cutting them off from the “real” world. Young people do not need to be told that social media is a “hellscape” and is deleterious to their self-worth. It is not from ignorance regarding the importance of sleep that modern subjects find themselves perpetually sleep-deprived. Neither these self-accusatory admonishments nor self-congratulatory acts of self-care facilitate a turn towards

⁸⁷ Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston and E. M. Cioran, ‘Introduction: Imagining Cioran’, in *On the Heights of Despair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. xv.

⁸⁸ Levinas, *Unforeseen History*, p. 20.

⁸⁹ Crary, *24/7*, p. 10.

the needs of the other.

1.6. The ends of banal insomnia and the ethics of art

As noted, I seek to explore the “ends” of banal insomnia: scenes and scenarios of modern sleeplessness which may unveil an ethical, public realm. In the following chapters, I will seek such scenes through artworks and literature produced over the last thirty years. The time frame of this thesis therefore commences in the early 1990s, a period defined by Frederic Jameson’s end-of-century periodising hypothesis: late capitalism. Jameson famously opens *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, proclaiming that the late 20th century is a time ‘marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end.’⁹⁰ As I will explore in chapter two, this period is not short of political diagnoses of finitude and cultural exhaustion. Conservative historian Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of the ‘end of history’ was contemporaneous with sociologist Jean Baudrillard’s ‘after the orgy,’ both of whom influentially argued that western states had reached the endpoint of their political and cultural evolution.⁹¹ This starting point is key to this thesis not merely because it gives a detailed account of the development of late capitalist society, which is foundational to our own, but also provides the genesis of key terminology and a collective socio-cultural disposition which accurately characterises our own time of exhaustion, cynicism and routinised disappointment. As contemporary critics note, this feeling of lateness has not been superseded in the 21st century but has instead ossified into a widely and consciously acknowledged disposition. Matthew Noble-Olson puts it succinctly: ‘[w]hether with regard to specific issues such as climate change, worldwide viral pandemics, the anarchic gyrations of global capitalism, challenges to the legitimacy of liberal democracy, or less localized anxieties, there is an enveloping sense that the present is characterized by a distinct futural lack – that it is too late.’⁹²

⁹⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 1.

⁹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James L. Benedict, Radical Thinkers, Paperback edition reprinted (London: Verso, 2009); Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3–18.

⁹² Matthew Noble-Olson, ‘Lateness and the Politics of Filmic Excess’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 27.2 (2020), 273–97 (p. 276) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2020.0023>>.

In linking these late 20th century critiques to the contemporary historical moment, it is not my intention to conflate these two periods. Technological advancement, global politics and social movements have changed our cultural and political landscape dramatically and these developments serve as the historical backdrop to the following chapters. These chapters seek to explore the theoretical framework of banal insomnia that I have outlined here, namely that it both accurately describes a modern condition of cynical and coercive sleeplessness as well as acting as a vigilant call to arms, compelling us to interrogate the material realities of contemporary capitalist culture and initiate a turn towards the suffering Other. The case studies explored are temporally limited (with the exception of Andy Warhol's *Sleep*) to artworks produced after 1990 up to the late 2010s.⁹³ It combines analysis of well-known literary texts and artistic works from the novelists Kazuo Ishiguro, David Foster Wallace, Ian McEwan, Otessa Moshfegh and Teju Cole and artists Andy Warhol and Tracey Emin. The thesis moves chronologically, examining key social questions in the face of our exhausted culture, from political and cultural finitude to the discredited promises of technology to the latent threat of terrorism and finally, to tenuous cosmopolitan ideals in modern Western cities.

In his broad study of literature and sleep in *Sleep and the Novel* (2018), Michael Greaney notes that recent literary interest in sleep and exhaustion has manifested in a prevalence of apocalyptic visions of sleep's scarcity, 'anti-lullaby' stories which 'exhort[] us to IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT SLEEP.'⁹⁴ Seeing in these 'sleep crisis novels' an alarmist and strangely wakeful demand to draw sleep into consciousness-raising projects, he advocates that we too 'attend to what literary fiction can tell us about what it means to live in a world with sleep – a world in which questions around the performance, management and interpretation of human slumber are couched in a quotidian, rather than apocalyptic, register.'⁹⁵ It is precisely this lead that I follow in my consideration of contemporary "ends" of sleep, modern-day scenes of rest and exhaustion in which stagnated ideological promises run up against the material world. Along these lines, I have selected novels and artworks

⁹³ Inspired by a 2019 Super Bowl advert featuring footage of Andy Warhol consuming a Burger King burger, I analyse Andy Warhol's early filmic work *Sleep* (1964) from a contemporary perspective. Whilst *Sleep* directly addresses its 1960s context, I argue that Warhol's continued presence in contemporary popular culture indicates that his critique of commercialism and the power of the camera to pierce through the dominance of capitalist culture remains relevant today.

⁹⁴ Michael Greaney, *Sleep and the Novel: Fictions of Somnolence from Jane Austen to the Present* (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2018), p. 214.

⁹⁵ Greaney, p. 216.

which examine the essentially social nature of sleep, rest and sleeplessness in contemporary Western societies characterised by a high level of affluence and social stability. As I have previously outlined, the action of sleep is always socially situated, requiring wakeful others who facilitate and secure the rest of the privileged sleeping. The chosen artworks therefore address this fundamentally asymmetric social relation by representing geographies and cultures of affluence and thematising the ethical dilemma of living in societies of widespread inequality. By incorporating a Levinasian understanding of insomnia and the ethical imperative into my analysis of these texts and artworks, I seek to highlight a vital political component of his thought – the demand for unyielding critical intervention in even the most seemingly stable of societies. As Howard Caygill puts it, Levinas’s writings serve as ‘warnings against being duped by the post-war truce, admonitions to remember the political horror that continue[s] to cast its shadow over peace.’⁹⁶

Each of the artworks selected thus address the central conflict of liberal modern society: that its ideals of individualism and freedom are continually undermined by the economic forces of neoliberal capitalism which coerce, manipulate and atomise human beings. The ethical dimension of the artworks emerges from the fact that this coercion and manipulation is unequally distributed, and the protagonists are the benefactors of unequal societies which afford them a high degree of comfort and thus allow them to escape their responsibility to others. Their freedom, individuality and capacity to rest – foundational promises of modern liberal societies – rely on their ignorance of the subjugation and suffering of unfree others. The affluent protagonists of the chosen works therefore include classical musicians, elite tennis prodigies, surgeons, psychiatrists and a 21st century heiress. These secure, comfortable individuals indulge in lifestyles of banal insomnia, seeking somnolescent release from the visceral proximity of others through anaesthetic strategies which range from substance abuse and cynical intellectualism to entertainment technology and modern-day flânerie.

Underlying these case studies is an interest in the role of literature and, to a lesser extent, art in facilitating an ethical orientation towards the needs of suffering others, not by making an intellectual or moralistic appeal to humanitarian action but rather by provoking a material confrontation with an otherness which cannot be entirely subsumed by capitalist rationality. In the context of the “lateness” of late capitalism, literature and the novel now

⁹⁶ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

figure as curiously anachronistic artforms which impose an errant and idiosyncratic temporality on its reader, out of step with the hyper-speed of 24/7 temporality. The selected works test this 'post-literary' critique in various ways through their thematic and formal approach to exhaustion and its relationship to a highly stimulative culture industry, of which they are inescapably and consciously part. These artworks, I posit, depict scenes of banal insomnia whilst evoking the sleepless material world which persists beyond it.

In the following two chapters, analysis of literary works has been productively paired with modern artworks to explore their interest in the materiality of the written word. Chapter two considers the art of Kazuo Ishiguro and Tracey Emin and on one level, my decision to pair them is historical: both address a late 20th century end-of-history context. However, in drawing these two British artists together, I too want to highlight their mutual ambivalence in the cultural context they inhabit; at once, engaging with contemporary trends of lethargy and cynicism whilst also establishing a persistent interest in the material world which points beyond it. For Ishiguro, this ambivalence emerges in the aberrant nature of his fourth novel, *The Unconsoled*, which is a self-conscious turn from the other commercially attractive works in his oeuvre. For Emin, it emerges in her heterodoxy from her Young British Artist cohort and her refusal to allow her work to lapse into the jaded cynicism of her peers.

In chapter three, I have paired artist Andy Warhol and novelist David Foster Wallace. Inspired by their persistent presence in contemporary culture, I consider their works in the context of Adorno's late style. Warhol and Wallace's iconographic status, which extends beyond and arguably independently of their artworks, is central to my argument. On the surface, the maximalism of their artworks appears to support the almost-mythical appeal of their creators, however, upon reception, these works exhibit a stubborn materiality which undermines both the commercial and iconographic status of its creators. In both, exhaustiveness serves as a key formal counterpart to the theme of exhaustion, producing artworks which cannot be bracketed as simply critiques of capitalist culture but also indicate an aesthetic autonomy which outlives both their own authorship and any singular, coherent meaning.

Whilst the novels of the latter half of the thesis are more conventional in terms of form, they too retain an interest in the ethics of everyday urban life. Chapter five pairs the very different, though complementary, novels McEwan's *Saturday* and Moshfegh's *My*

Year of Rest and Relaxation which explore the affective aftermath of 21st century terrorism in Western cities. The novels have divergent interests: McEwan's novel seeks to depict the transformation of a formerly stable society wracked by the threat of the unknown in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks whereas Moshfegh's interests, by contrast, are far more contemporary. Through her period novel which concludes with the events of 9/11, Moshfegh depicts a collective cynical disposition which remains with us today. Both these novels address the ethical dilemmas confronting the affluent Western subject at the start of the 21st century by representing protagonists who pursue isolationist strategies in which they attempt and ultimately fail to entirely evade their insomniac responsibility to others.

The final chapter deviates from the previous ones by focusing exclusively on one work: Cole's *Open City*. This novel too follows a privileged central character whose ethical evasion takes a distinctly physical character in the form of the modern-day flaneur who flows through a city coursing with both real and digital social networks. This final case study has been chosen because it addresses the lateness of late capitalism, depicting a cultural moment which is experienced simultaneously as 'something that is outdated, past, obsolescent, dead, but also what is most up to date, most recent, and most fashionable.'⁹⁷ Cole therefore engages both with the theme of anachronism and the (often-invisible) dominance of technology in our lives. Through his protagonist's *flânerie*, Cole recreates the classificatory systems which undergird our 24/7 urban spaces whilst also revealing an unwavering ethical duty which can never be fully subsumed within them.

Given my research material, it is appropriate to bear in mind that Levinas was highly suspicious of art. This is most clearly articulated in Levinas's essay 'Reality and its Shadow' in which he issues a damning critique of the possibility of ethical art. As already observed, Levinas prioritizes critique by arguing that while criticism still deals in finite concepts, art offers merely images – it does not invite conversation or thought. Art is thus inert. While philosophy opens up and invites more thought and discussion, Levinas is suspicious of the seeming completion and totality of art: 'it does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue.'⁹⁸ Furthermore, what makes art dangerous is its rhythmic quality; its capacity to draw the subject into participation with it – but not in a way which would

⁹⁷ Noble-Olson, p. 276.

⁹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), pp. 129–43 (p. 131).

challenge the observer or reader but rather captivates and consoles them. As Jill Robbins explains, art merely mimics the ethical encounter: ‘the aesthetic terms denote (and substitute for) a loss of agency, a self-dispossession: the nurse speaks through us; poetic delirium tears us away from ourselves; the drama is enacted in spite of me.’⁹⁹ Viewing art, we become like Odysseus, bound to the mast to the ship hearing the Sirens song. We save ourselves from violent dispossession in advance, bind ourselves together in a subjective totality so that we do not abandon ourselves to the call of the Other.

In this aesthetic bind, French philosopher and author Maurice Blanchot proves an essential, though not entirely congruent, interlocuter of Levinas. A contemporary and philosophical comrade of Levinas, Blanchot’s aesthetic theory was profoundly influenced and guided by Levinas’s ethical philosophy, and Levinas’s thought was duly shaped by the relationship in turn.¹⁰⁰ Even so, Blanchot complicates Levinas’s stringent position on the ethics of art by presenting an alternative vision of the subject’s relation to the Other, specifically through the sensible intimacy of writing. In particular, he diverges from Levinas’s theological framing of absolute otherness as ‘God’ and essentially ‘Good,’ seeing in this move a codification of the Other which undermines its unknowability. Blanchot, in turn, formulates Levinas’s *there is* as instead a terrifying neutrality which can be obliquely perceived in the act of writing. Whilst Levinas sees in art’s obscurity a dangerous possibility of self-affirmation founded on one’s enjoyment of its foreignness, Blanchot instead foregrounds literature’s uncontainable physicality and hostility to the human subject, sensing in it a profoundly disorientating recollection of a primordial past, prior to worldly forms and even the formation of the subject herself. As he writes in ‘Literature and the Right to Death,’

Literature insists on playing its own game without man, who created it. Literature now dispenses with the writer: it is no longer this inspiration at work, this negation asserting itself, this idea inscribed in the world as though it were the absolute perspective of the world in its totality. It is not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself: it is the presence of things before the *world* exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared, the

⁹⁹ Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 51.

¹⁰⁰ In the final chapter of *Altered Reading* entitled ‘Exceptions’ Robbins notes that ‘on the basis of reading Blanchot, Levinas [] modified somewhat his understanding of the work of art, not so much as regards its ontology than as its possible relation to ethics’ (1999, p.154). This can be seen through Levinas’s ongoing theoretical engagement with Blanchot whose creative works were often being foundational to his writing.

stubbornness of what remains when everything vanishes and the dumbfoundedness of what appears when nothing exists.¹⁰¹

Opposed to Levinas's fear of art's overwhelming claim to totality, Blanchot presents a vision of art which specifically dispels the possibility of such a claim. For Blanchot, the writer is the model ethical figure, engaged in an unending task of insomniac vigilance, constantly overturning language in the impossible pursuit of its 'nocturnal source'. Blanchot sees the writer as the one who keeps conscious of that which emerges at night – the nocturnal recesses, the disastrous *there is* - which torment the insomniac and is thus engaged in the futile task of its representation. For the insomniac writer, there is no end to this pursuit; there cannot be: 'literature by its very activity denies the substance of what it represents. This is its law and its truth.'¹⁰² This is what Derrida would call the writer's endeavour for 'agrammaticality': a constant contortion and distortion of grammar (that which 'thematizes what forbids thematization') to resist the totality and possibility of conclusion.¹⁰³

If for Levinas, art represents an enclosed, totalised space, Blanchot presents the overflowing, disobedient materiality of literature as something inescapable and irresolvable that can never rest in identical unity with itself. Blanchot writes, language is a 'clump of existence ... the word acts not as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things, renders them *really* present outside of themselves.'¹⁰⁴ Blanchot thus centralises a phenomenology of writing and reading citing language's disarming proximity and overwhelming intimacy. He casts any claim to exterior truth or conceptual completion as a literary bad faith and instead invites contemplation on literature's materiality: 'Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book.'¹⁰⁵ Opposed to Levinas's near-blanket rejection, he sees literature as a visceral, dangerous and irrepressible ethical challenge to its viewer or reader. It is with this perspective that I approach the following chapters. For the claim of this thesis is that whilst the following artworks thematise the trappings of banal insomnia, they too

¹⁰¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Mandell, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 317.

¹⁰² Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 310.

¹⁰³ Jacques Derrida, 'At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am', in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, trans. by Ruben Berezdivin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 11–48 (p. 19).

¹⁰⁴ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, pp. 327–28.

¹⁰⁵ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 328.

animate Levinas's ethical imperative through their destabilising physical forms and inspire a wakeful vigilance in the spectator, not banal thoughtlessness.

1.7 Chapter summaries

Chapter 2 seeks to situate banal insomnia within the context of late 20th century cynicism between the two opposing, though complementary, endist narratives: Fukuyama's 'end of history' and Baudrillard's 'after the orgy.' These proclamations of societal finitude suggest an ethical intergenerational crisis: when history is in effect over, what need is there to prepare and conserve a world for future generations? Further, if all institutions are corrupted in advance, what is the point in attempting to build or maintain social institutions for future generations? In this context, I will consider the writings of novelist Kazuo Ishiguro and the artworks of Tracey Emin, two artists who exhibit a profound awareness of generational responsibility to their predecessors, to their peers and to future generations across their decades-long careers. Their artworks therefore exhibit an insomniac vigilance which counters the artistic contexts they inhabit. Through the formal intractability of their works, they demonstrate the fallibility of these endist narratives and their inability to entirely foreclose the future.

In chapter 3, I consider the artistic oeuvres of Andy Warhol and David Foster Wallace in the context of Walter Benjamin's theory of distracted reception. Here, I seek to consider how a habituation to the technologies of banal insomnia may train a receptive mode which is not ideologically determined but instead facilitates an affective, insomniac interaction with the artwork. Key to this chapter is Warhol and Wallace's contemporary cultural presence long after their deaths. In this sense, I consider their ongoing relevance as indicative of an Adornian 'late style' – an aesthetics which continually refuses resolution or categorization. Thus, their works instil a vigilance in their viewers and readers by continually drawing attention to that which cannot be resolved or formalised.

Chapter 4 considers banal insomnia in the context of the War on Terror, exploring the ethical quandary of representing the suffering of others. This chapter considers the novels *Saturday* by Ian McEwan and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh which both thematise the affective aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In this sense, banal insomnia is configured as a restless, persistent inertia felt by western urban subjects which

they cannot fully resolve. In the two novels, this nervous apprehension of the future stands in contrast to the affluence of their characters whose privilege emerges in their capacity to anticipate and manage their futures with accuracy. As such, I will focus on their uneasy encounters with others which not only reveals the unjust suffering of those less fortunate than them but too brings them into confrontation with their own radically contingent existences.

In chapter 5, I will consider the figure of the fugueur (a flâneur-like figure who roams the city in fugue-like states) in Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) as an exemplary figure of banal insomnia. Situating this figure into conversation with themes of cosmopolitanism, ethical responsibility and identity, I ultimately conclude that the fugueur is the exemplary modern figure of ethical evasion and modern exhaustion. Through technology theory and Levinasian ethical philosophy, I will characterise this modern figure as inherently ambivalent and destabilized – constantly attempting, and failing, to escape their ethical responsibility to others.

CHAPTER 2: FOREVER YOUNG: DISENCHANTED DREAMS AND GENERATIONAL FAILURE

2.1 Banal Insomnia: between a dream and a nightmare

Thus far, we have established the social condition of banal insomnia: an oscillation between sincere (and often brutalising) attempts to attain liberal ideals of productivity and conformity, and an affective recognition of the fallaciousness and inconsistency of these very ideals. Banal insomnia therefore shuffles between a capitalist dream and a cynical nightmare. The nightmare is banal insomnia's cruel recursion: if the subject cannot (literally) keep up with the neoliberal demands for continuous output, she must seek refuge in indolence. However, ultimately (for survival, as all but the most privileged must), the jaded subject must suck it up, act "as if" and confront again the sleepless pressures of modern capitalist society.

In this sense, my formulation of banal insomnia appears to follow a long-established understanding of postmodern culture as a kind-of institutionalised cynicism in which the modern cynical stance serves as a lubricant between the promises of neoliberal ideology and a disempowered awareness of their falsity. As Peter Sloterdijk called it back in 1983 in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, this is 'enlightened false consciousness': a modern disposition which sees itself several paces past a moment of effective ideological critique, having already, paradoxically, internalised both the lessons of the Enlightenment and a deeply held suspicion of those very values. In this thesis, there is a risk that banal insomnia could be conceived simply as an unthinking, empty-headed exhaustion and therefore merely the consequence of exhaustive working practices and an ultra-stimulative mediatic environment on a guileless, obedient public. However, akin to Sloterdijk's formulation, banal insomnia emerges at the end of a psychical process of disillusionment, an exhaustion of all possible options: '[i]t is the stance of people who realize that the times of naiveté are gone.'¹ Banal insomnia indicates a precocious exhaustion which internally resolves itself to the inevitability of its perpetuity even as it actively pursues culturally prescribed strategies futilely promising a healthy balance of productivity and restfulness. Physical and mental exhaustion are the price to pay to pre-emptively defend against the disappointment of a fallible ideal. Modern insomniacs are therefore not thoughtless but better described as "over

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. by Michael Eldred (London: Verso, 1988), p. 5.

it,” over investing themselves sincerely in the possibility and hope that the ways of the world may meaningfully change for the better. It is a refusal of optimism itself or, as Sloterdijk puts it, ‘New values? No thanks!’²

And yet, the rub of contemporary cynicism is that externally the guileless subject and the cynical subject look one and the same. Whilst the insomniac subject may console themselves that they are not intellectually a zombie, having pre-emptively ‘reflexively buffered’ against any idealistic thinking, they nonetheless feel like a zombie and act like one too. Think Slavoj Žižek’s famous inversion of Marx: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.’³ This explains the curious, sustaining metabolism of banal insomnia in which phenomena like widespread exhaustion, insomnia and professional burnout do not spell the end of inherently unsustainable working practices but are nominally subsumed by them and become fodder for a self-help industry shamelessly selling silver bullet solutions. Bleak and accurate accounts of the world like Crary’s *24/7* line bookshelves alongside bestselling self-help literature which offer impossibly simple solutions. Sleep scientist Matthew Walker stands out of late, not merely because of the enormous success of his book *Why We Sleep* (2018) but also because he seems particularly unrestricted in marrying his scientific insights to a neoliberal ideal.⁴ For Walker, regulated and consistent sleep toes a delicate and convenient line between medical imperative and a kind of cosmic instruction (allusions to Mother Nature appear frequently throughout *Why We Sleep*). Sleep in this way is part and parcel of the liberal dream – a kind of stabilizing compass which regulates everything from body weight to life expectancy to one’s moral code. This material is just as important to the cynical diet as Crary’s *24/7*: it gives a behavioural model to externally enact and internally deride.

There are two rejoinders that I wish to add to this conception of contemporary cynicism and its relation to banal insomnia: firstly, exhaustion exhausts itself (that is, insomnia is not simply a theoretical dead-end but an experience which is affectively felt); and secondly, as outlined in the introduction, our sleeping (and non-sleeping) selves are always socially constituted, reliant upon the existence and vigilance of others. Sloterdijk avows the former whilst side-lining the latter, seeing the solution to cynicism in rejecting

² Sloterdijk, p. 6.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *The Essential Žižek* (London New York: Verso, 2008), p. 25.

⁴ Matthew Walker, *Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

and ridiculing the stultifying terms of civilized existence to return to the evergreen clarity of earthly experience – ‘the exuberant experience of a well-spent life.’⁵ In this pursuit, the ancient cynic Diogenes of Sinope proves exemplary, a subversive philosopher who challenged the mores of Grecian society by living a life of impoverished nomadism, asceticism and conscious alienation. However, critically, Diogenes’s outlook included a barbed misanthropy – in his overriding contempt for any value of civilization, he too rejected the people themselves and the very concept of social existence and responsibility. As Sloterdijk puts it, ‘he had freed himself from civilization’s chain of needs.’⁶ This is best represented by his ostentatious public masturbation which served to demonstrate both his incapacity for shame (to feel beholden to social standards) and his self-satisfied capacity for sexual gratification. This example was pedagogical, Sloterdijk emphasises, taught ‘as cultural progress ... not as regression to the animalistic.’⁷

Whilst Sloterdijk identified a radical potential in Diogenes’s gestures and passivity (“letting things be”), it is clear that his philosophy of mindful self-sufficiency has gained a currency in today’s self-help culture. Sloterdijk even referred to Diogenes as the ‘father of the idea of self-help’; a self-help founded on ‘distancing himself from and being ironic about needs for whose satisfaction most people pay with their freedom.’⁸ Beth Blum has recently identified this in the ironising of contemporary self-help literature arguing that, whilst irony has always been a component of self-help culture, it has recently become central to the genre’s contemporary reconfiguration, what she calls self-help’s ‘neo-realist imperative.’⁹ More cynically, Kate Kenny and Emma Bell have interpreted self-help’s current cynicism as actively preventing liberation from the oppressive norm it promises to dispel – they argue, ‘the stylistic use of ironic humour ... ideationally distance[s] the reader from these bodily norms while simultaneously entreating her to conform to them.’¹⁰ At best, this self-interested irreverence points to a pragmatic, though questionably effective, approach to self-improvement; at worst, it exhibits a mean-spirited contempt aimed towards

⁵ Sloterdijk, p. 547.

⁶ Sloterdijk, p. 165.

⁷ Sloterdijk, p. 168.

⁸ Sloterdijk, p. 158.

⁹ Beth Blum, *The Self-Help Compulsion: Searching for Advice in Modern Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/1258095/the-selfhelp-compulsion-pdf>> [accessed 8 October 2022].

¹⁰ Kate Kenny and Emma Bell, ‘Irony as Discipline: Self-Help and Gender in the Knowledge Economy’, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 21.4, 562–84 (p. 563).

those considered unwise enough to sincerely commit to worldly pursuits (which may well include the reader of such a work).

In this sense, there seems to be an institutionalisation of the once-subversive tactics of Diogenes. Self-sufficiency has been transformed from a lifestyle and political outlook freely chosen to now the duty of the modern subject under a cultural and political landscape monopolised by disillusionment – as Timothy Bewes puts it, ‘the consequence of the *formalization* of an endemic disappointment – unknowability, undecidability – as the definitive modern condition.’¹¹ Diogenes did, it must be noted, have a society from which to extricate himself and to proudly proclaim his superiority over. For the modern, disillusioned subject, there is no such friction; rather they face what Alain Ehrenberg calls ‘an inner *chasm*, where there is neither conflict, nor relation.’¹² Ehrenberg describes this modern phenomenon in his seminal *The Weariness of the Self* (2009) outlining an historical Western progression occurring in the latter half of the 20th century, in which 1960’s “liberation” – the ‘word that brought young people together’ – deteriorated from its egalitarian roots into its oppressive ‘second wave’: ‘that of personal initiative and submission to the norms of performance.’¹³ This constitutes the failure of society itself in which “institution” becomes synonymous with oppression and domination and thus a curb on one’s liberties: ‘The family stifled you, school was another form of barracks, work (and its product, consumerism) was alienation, and the law (the bourgeois variety, of course) was an instrument of domination that had to be thrown off.’¹⁴ The only institution that remains once the unsatiated eye of scepticism has been roundly cast is the ‘institution of the self.’

In this chapter, I approach this political and social impasse as a generational failure: a reluctance and hesitance – or in Levinasian terms, indolence – towards the future, the left of which is felt predominantly by our prematurely exhausted young. Charged with the facile and discredited dreams of liberalism and an unresolved cynical hopelessness, they find respite in the anaesthetizing and atomizing technologies they were born into. They neither find support nor opposition from a society which institutes a harsh self-reliance and exhibits a cruel indifference. This is ultimately the malaise of a society which lacks vigilance and

¹¹ Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London ; New York: Verso, 1997), p. 6.

¹² Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. by Enrico Caouette and others (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), p. 228.

¹³ Ehrenberg, p. 228; p. 227

¹⁴ Ehrenberg, p. 228.

orientation towards its others, which is resigned to the cynical conclusions of its jaded predecessors and in which the inevitability of the same has long been self-evident. In this context, I will consider the works of novelist Kazuo Ishiguro and artist Tracey Emin – two artists who demonstrate through their decades-long aesthetic projects a generational concern and responsibility. It is what I call their “middle-age”: a two-fold avowal of their position as both recipients and producers of culture.

That being said, their artwork, and the proposed generational responsibility inherent to it, first emerged at a time in which it was widely reported to be unnecessary. This chapter begins in the 1990s at which time Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of the end of history had begun to crystallize into common parlance and had acquired a bleak theoretical counterpart in the form of Jean Baudrillard’s ‘after the orgy’: ‘the state of utopia realized, of all utopias realized, wherein paradoxically we must continue to live as though they had not been.’¹⁵ This axiom of finitude therefore emerged in both the form of dream and nightmare where, on the one hand, the liberal democracy had prevailed as the best possible form of government and the final resting place of national governments, and on the other, the deflationary period after the explosive moment of modernity in which we are resigned to perpetual regurgitation of past cultural forms. It is in this period where Ishiguro and Emin first cut their teeth: Ishiguro’s first novel precedes Fukuyama’s infamous article by only two years whilst Emin’s first exhibition (aptly a ‘retrospective’) comes three years after.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this dream and nightmare are oddly congruent with one another. Both rely on an inherent communal cynicism and a profound awareness in the futility of “trying to make things better.” This is why when Fukuyama envisaged the accomplishment of the best of all possible governing systems, he nonetheless predicted that ‘[t]he end of history will be a very sad time.’¹⁶ Recognising that the important battles had been fought and the correct political ideologies had prevailed, the post-historical world, he predicted, would be cold and bureaucratic: ‘daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.’ He adds: ‘there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3–18; Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James L. Benedict, Radical Thinkers, Paperback edition reprinted (London: Verso, 2009), p. 4.

¹⁶ Fukuyama, p. 18.

human history.’¹⁷ Baudrillard’s vision is more dramatic, though no less disheartening and whilst he attempts to distance himself from Fukuyama, he nonetheless shares the same premonition of a cold and banally recurrent future. For Baudrillard, the end of history is ‘not on the basis of democratic fulfilment, as Fukuyama has it, but on the basis of preventive terror, of a counter-terror that puts an end to any possible events.’¹⁸ However, this proves an arbitrary distinction as they both reach the same conclusion: the Western liberal state represents the endpoint of historical progression and subsequent historical time will merely be an endless, circular underscoring of this finality. Whereas Fukuyama views the end of history as akin to an historical trial and error, Baudrillard posits something more essential and totalising: an utter wringing out of time, culture and progress. For Baudrillard, we are living in the deflationary time ‘after the orgy,’ ‘the moment when modernity exploded on us, the moment of liberation in every sphere.’¹⁹ A time in which the promise of the future has already been extinguished and in this ‘state of utopia, of all utopias realised,’ we must ‘live as though they had not been.’²⁰ This historical endpoint is banal insomnia: an endless, unthinking recycling of cultural and political forms, propelled by a collective cynical demeanour. In this post-historical age, we adopt a false consciousness, believing that history has not ended, that the future to come is not merely a regurgitation of the past that has been and that art retains its capacity to transcend the boundaries of its own making and anticipate a radically unknown future.

On this point, Baudrillard claims that after the orgy, there is no scarcity of art. In fact, its ubiquity is dizzying, reproducing itself at high speed and touching on all aspects of contemporary existence. However, it is the ‘soul of Art’ – ‘its power of illusion, its capacity for negating reality, for selling up an ‘other scene’ in opposition to reality’ – that has been vanquished.²¹ The utopian aspect of art (its unrealisable gesture to other realities and possibilities) has been realised and functionalised: we are witnessing ‘a *materialisation* of aesthetics everywhere under an operational form.’²² Art, no longer buoyed by its capacity to transcend itself, says nothing new; it merely condenses and recirculates images of the world (and its adherence to market ideology) back to us, over and over again. For the viewer, we

¹⁷ Fukuyama, p. 18.

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil, or, The Lucidity Pact*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 92–93.

¹⁹ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 4.

²⁰ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 4.

²¹ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 15.

²² Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 18.

are subject only to images ‘in which there is nothing to see,’ simply a proliferation of signs which intoxicate and numb us to the ‘Hell of the Same.’²³

In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Jacques Derrida responds to Fukuyama and Baudrillard’s despondency. The antidote to this “hell of the same”? To recall that the end has always been nigh and this question of finitude is hardly novel: ‘the eschatological themes of the “end of history,” of the “end of Marxism,” of the “end of philosophy,” of the “ends of man,” of the “last man” and so forth were, in the 50s, that is, forty years ago, our daily bread.’²⁴ It was this very ‘historical entanglement’ and the horrifying consequences of the totalitarian terror of Soviet bureaucracies well before the collapse of the Berlin wall, he argues, upon which deconstruction was not only developed but deemed ethically necessary. Addressing Fukuyama directly, he decries the ethical resignation and ‘manic disavowal’ of terror which comes with this endist thinking: ‘[f]or it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and humanity.’²⁵ He too attacks a Baudrillardian resignation which treats this ‘new world order’ as essential and irrevocable. Whilst he acknowledges the risks presented by a radically other future, ‘without the opening of this possibility, there remains, perhaps beyond good and evil, only the necessity of the worst. A necessity that would not (even) be a fated one.’²⁶

In his 1990 lecture ‘The Other Heading’, Derrida uncharacteristically puts this responsibility in explicitly political and urgent terms. Simultaneously addressing the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ongoing atrocities committed within Europe’s border, he claims ‘something unique is afoot in Europe, in what is still called Europe even if we no longer know very well *what* or *who* goes by this name. Indeed to what concept, to what real individual, to what singular entity should this name be assigned to today?’²⁷ Derrida admits

²³ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 18; p. 129.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge Classics, Repr (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 16.

²⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 106.

²⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 34.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 5.

he is already exhausted with the ‘somewhat weary feelings of an old European.’²⁸ And yet, at this historical juncture, Derrida notes, ‘we are younger than ever, we Europeans, since a certain Europe does not yet exist.’²⁹ It is from this position of exhausted youth that Europe must seek to depart from: ‘[t]his *axiom of finitude* is a swarm or storm of questions. From what state of exhaustion must these young old-Europeans who we are set out again, re-embark?’³⁰

Europe cannot fall into either guileless Eurocentricism or anti-Eurocentricism in this new epoch but instead must assume Europe’s heritage with the full weight of that responsibility. This responsibility, fully in line with Levinas, is not a choice, he notes: ‘We did not choose this responsibility; it imposes itself upon us.’³¹ In *Specters*, Derrida describes this responsibility as inheritance, an ontological condition which constitutes us and endows us with an inextinguishable duty: ‘That we are heirs does not mean that we *have* or that we *receive* this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but that the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not.’³² To inherit and to be this inheritance is not a wholesale assumption of a complete self-identical identity but a ‘radical and necessary heterogeneity.’³³

Europe must therefore *be* this heretogeneity, this heritage and this responsibility; it must continually and simultaneously identify and disidentify with its European legacy: ‘The duty to respond to the call of European memory, to recall what has been promised under the name of Europe, to re-identify Europe ... This duty also dictates opening Europe ... opening it onto that which it is not, never was and never will be.’³⁴ Derrida describes this double bind in the dialectical relationship between the capital (Europe’s heading) and its radical other, the a-capital (the other of its heading). ‘One must try therefore to *invent* gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices that inscribe the alliance of these two imperatives, of those two promises and contracts: the capital and the a-capital [a-capitale], the other of the capital.’³⁵

²⁸ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, p. 6.

²⁹ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, p. 7.

³⁰ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, p. 7.

³¹ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, p. 28.

³² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 68.

³³ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 18.

³⁴ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, pp. 74–76.

³⁵ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, p. 44.

In his call for new gestures, Derrida is betraying the pessimism of Baudrillard who rejects outright the possibility of an aesthetics which could develop new forms to challenge the spectacular world order which has effectively colonised all modern experience. To Derrida, this is cowardice and an inexcusable relinquishment of responsibility, especially during a time of continued suffering. This new Europe is an aesthetic challenge, simply because it must be other to what it is. It must look back as it takes steps forward. It is this vein that I will consider the works of Ishiguro and Emin, recipients of this exhausted, cultural inheritance and both carrying a complex relationship to European-British history.³⁶ In the following, I will argue that both implement an insomniac aesthetics which refuses to deliver, exhibiting a formal intractability which forces a confrontation with the materiality of their works. Both Ishiguro and Emin ground this endeavour in works which address societies plagued by indolence, exhaustion and cynicism and in which intergenerational ties and duties have atrophied; in short, societies of banal insomnia. Through their insomniac aesthetics, their works compel a meditation on the material existence of the artwork, thus producing an aesthetic interaction outside the totality of ideology and historical inheritance. Furthermore, they both address the question of nationalism and Europe, neither advocating simplistic patriotic platitudes nor ignoring the plight of others, but rather, through a clear-eyed reckoning with Europe's obligation of hospitality and duty to itself and others.

2.2 Kazuo Ishiguro's frustrating dream in *The Unconsoled*

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* holds a unique position in his oeuvre. It is not only the most explicitly experimental of his works but also an avowed thematic shift from his three previous novels which sit firmly in the realm of historical fiction, staging personal dramas against historical moments of political fracture and instability. As the title indicates, Ishiguro's novel sought to depict a far more complicated understanding of historical continuity and its salience for personal narratives and, in doing so, to meditate on the discontinuous nature of his protagonist's internal life. Published in 1995, the novel was met with polarised opinions and near-universal bewilderment; the most negative proving the

³⁶ Born in Japan and raised in Southern England from five, Ishiguro has referred to himself as a 'kind of homeless writer,' stating that he 'had no obvious social role [in British literature], because I wasn't a very English Englishman and I wasn't a very Japanese Japanese either.' (1991, p. 115; p. 110). Emin, on the other hand, grew up in Margate and has Turkish and English heritage. During the British EU referendum, she was vociferous in her support for the remain campaign.

most enduring. Whilst Amit Chaudhuri diplomatically concluded it ‘a failure’ caveated with ‘a failure usually implies the presence of artistic vision and talent,’ James Wood’s notorious claim that ‘it invented its own category of badness’ has proved infinitely citable – however, this is usually used as a critique of first impressions since the novel now enjoys a reputation among many as not only one of Ishiguro’s finest works but a masterpiece of recent times.³⁷ Even so, the context is important and the ensuing bafflement regarding the book was no doubt inevitable: six years after the publication of the career-defining *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* proved a bolshy retort to the sophisticated limpid prose of its predecessor. *The Unconsoled* is a dense 500+ page novel recounting the dream-like, fitful meanderings of its protagonist Mr Ryder, a musician who arrives in an unknown city scheduled to perform at a concert. In true Beckettian fashion, he never does play his much-heralded piece – a metafictional irony which could only be achieved on the back of the author’s revered 1989 Booker Prize win.

On one level, the novel’s title perfectly critiques and plays a literary industry which rewards carefully-manufactured conformity and successful promotion. Chaudhuri notes the novel’s satirical edge in his review: ‘[where] literary success, too often, is the product of carefully manipulated kitsch which is then cleverly marketed.’³⁸ It is also of course an industry the book is inextricably tied up in, without which the product – in all its weighty wordiness – would not exist. However, critically, Ishiguro’s methodological turn in *The Unconsoled* signals, above all, the erratic, contingent nature of circumstance – the non-necessary nature of historical progression and, as such, the non-necessary, non-deterministic nature of Ishiguro’s literary output. This is summed up well by Ishiguro himself in a 1995 interview with the *Wasafiri* journal where he responded to the putative placelessness of the novel: ‘It doesn’t have to be central Europe, but it has to be somewhere.’³⁹ Ishiguro’s literary circuit promoting the novel is a trove of similar sentiments regarding the undeliberated nature of the book. He tells another interviewer that decisions like the use of Germanic names were ‘late in the day’ and could just as well have been French or

³⁷ Amit Chaudhuri, ‘Unlike Kafka’, *London Review of Books*, 17.11 (1995) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v17/n11/amit-chaudhuri/unlike-kafka>> [accessed 8 December 2022]; James Wood, ‘The Unconsoled’, *The New Republic* (Washington: New Republic, 16 October 2000), 43–49 (p. 44), 212942145.

³⁸ Chaudhuri.

³⁹ Maya Jaggi and Kazuo Ishiguro, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro with Maya Jaggi’, in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, Literary Conversations Series, 1st ed (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 110–19 (p. 110).

Scandinavian: ‘you could almost set that thing down anywhere.’⁴⁰ Such a setting offers an ironic illumination of the novel’s central point: the illusion of being able to fully explain or justify the existence of the book sitting right in front of you, or even, in Ishiguro’s case, one you have written. In yet another interview, he wryly links his experience of ‘account[ing] for himself in front of the mass market’ to the panicked wanderings of his protagonist. It ‘could be seen to be about the third week of an American tour,’ he remarked.⁴¹

In this context, Ishiguro’s impenetrable, baffling and, yes, inconsolable work interrupts the assumptions implicit in his previous works (determinism, teleology and historical causality) to reveal a profoundly discontinuous, disorienting world in which the future appears radically, and often disturbingly, open. Given this, Ishiguro’s novel issues a quiet critique of the endist narratives outlined previously in this chapter – narratives which form the poles between which the dialectical relation of banal insomnia shuttles. *The Unconsoled* posits a challenge to this dialectic rather counter-intuitively through its intractably unproductive nature – a trenchant resistance to posit a coherent vision of the future, neither dream nor nightmare. It is therefore ironic that the novel pursues this aim through its literal commitment to Mr Ryder’s dream. However, this strikes right at the complexity of Levinasian ethics: at once, a recognition of the abstract rationalities (economy, politics, technology) which cohere and form our social existence, as well as a vigilance to how this reality is *felt* – an affective existence which is always in excess of its purported function or identity. In *The Unconsoled*, these dual concerns emerge in the difference between Ryder’s narrative and its reception by the reader. Ryder, on the one hand, strikes an indolent figure, roaming the city and pulled between different responsibilities (none of which he successfully fulfils) and is constantly denied the sleep he seeks. Ryder’s sleeplessness is banal insofar as he never questions these obligations nor does he much care about fulfilling them. The reader, on the other hand, cannot help but question what she reads, all the while knowing that no single interpretation will account for the novel’s oddities. Ryder’s banal insomnia finds its vigilant counterpart in the reader who is bound to interrogate the novel’s disjunctions and discontinuities, knowing from the outset the futility of doing so.

⁴⁰ Dylan Otto Krider, ‘Rooted in a Small Space: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro’, *The Kenyon Review*, 20.2 (1998), 146–54 (p. 151).

⁴¹ Boyd Tonkin, ‘Artist of His Floating World’, *The Independent*, 1 April 2000
<<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/artist-of-his-floating-world-284078.html>>
[accessed 21 October 2022].

The Unconsoled's form is therefore profoundly obstinate and often infuriating – the first-person narrative takes place within Ryder's dream which we never once wake up from. Pierre Francois has called this 'oneiric realism'; an attempt to recount a dream directly from within the dream, and not as remembered.⁴² He compares this form to magical realism, revealing oneiric realism to be its narcissistic, self-serving shadow: 'While in magic realism, the role of imagination is often to reveal spiritual presences in objective reality, the daydream appears here to be informed by a kind of wish-fulfilling logic.'⁴³ Ryder does not exist as a waking subject, he is simply the dreamer, or more precisely the subject of the dream. To say he was the dreamer would be to allude to an external, vital presence outside of the dream. Rather, all we can say is that he is simply an amalgam of memories; ones which cannot be determined by the reader who has no access to his external, worldly existence. These memories may be collated in a way which is entirely arbitrary (à la Bergson) or entirely meaningful (à la Freud), yet these statements are irrelevant if there is no waking subject to whom they can be attributed and as such, for the reader, any attempt at interpretation is stymied from the start.⁴⁴ The enclosed narcissism of the dream thus delimits the scope of action to the finite resource of Mr Ryder's memory, rendering any straightforward allegorical modelling of political resolution or community impossible.

In many ways, it is the realism rather than the fantastical elements of the novel that prove most disconcerting. It would be easier for the reader if this interior world did not display so many features of our own. Following Ryder, one feels as though one is traversing a disconcerting uncanny valley populated with familiar features of a modern European city which nonetheless follow a slightly different, unconfigurable logic. These are banal modifications, revealing an oneiric indifference to the reality principle: elevator rides can take half an hour; Ryder can conduct conversations on the basis of information he has gleaned from reading his acquaintance's mind; the young boy Boris can both be an absolute stranger and his son. This is not a world of utter fantasy in which anything can happen – no characters suddenly acquire wings and fly into the sunset. Instead, this is a rather

⁴² Pierre François, 'The Spectral Return of Depths in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 26.2 (2004), 77-90, 120 (p. 79).

⁴³ François, pp. 79–80.

⁴⁴ In an interview with Dylan Otto Krider, he notes one moment in the novel where he slips up and explicitly alludes to the dream's discontinuity with the external world. This occurs when Ryder sees *2001: A Space Odyssey* in a cinema, describing Clint Eastwood acting in a scene (Eastwood was not in *2001*). Ishiguro responded to this as a misstep: 'It's the one place in the book you can actually point to where there is a difference between the book and reality in real life ... I would've preferred it if people couldn't have put their finger on what was going on.' (1998, p. 148)

unexceptional world which is nonetheless indifferent to the reader where communal cognitive footholds can be picked up and discarded seemingly randomly.

This oneiric form therefore asserts itself most powerfully as a perceptual cleavage between the reader and the narrator. As noted, the narrative is often baffling – for instance, there are times when Ryder walks through a single door to arrive at a place from which he had previously driven miles away from. Yet none of these experiences appear to bewilder or change him either as an affective individual or as a vessel of knowledge insofar as he neither registers surprise nor does this new experience modify his future behaviour. As such, the novel’s temporality is disordered and disorientating. The novel’s ‘present’ is not rendered as a chronological consequence of the past but is oddly paratactic, often demonstrating no correlation to even immediately preceding action. Without the stability of a known present tense, the actions of the plot and Ryder himself become utterly unlocatable within a secure chronology, thus denying the reader any historical sense with which to chart the events in the novel. Furthermore, what Freud would call ‘reality testing’ is bypassed in the dream state due to its absolute reclusiveness and sheer egoism: ‘[t]he state of sleep does not wish to know anything of the external world; it takes no interest in reality, or only so far as abandoning the state of sleep – waking up – is concerned.’⁴⁵ Ryder, cocooned in a world literally of his own making, need not probe the reality of his world. He merely accepts, unquestioningly, the course of events which unravels in front of him.

The novel thus issues an interpretative provocation to its readers: how is one to understand a novel which neither shares a reality or temporality in common with the reader? And in which any commonalities between this fictional world and our own must be viewed with suspicion and not as an epistemological advantage? This provocation to its readers is particularly arduous as the novel eschews any historical and geographical markers which would enable social or political explanations for the novel’s aporias; aporias which due to the absence of an historically situated rationality are experienced only as affective ruptures experienced by the reader. As Chaudhuri notes, *The Unconsoled* refuses ‘to allow its allegory to be engaged in any lively way, with the social shape of our age,’ or any age for that matter.⁴⁶ By its committed dramatization of Ryder’s “dream” (or “nightmare”) and the

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. 14: (1914 - 1916), On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey (London: Random House, 2001), p. 234.

⁴⁶ Chaudhuri.

fantasy of finite knowledge as a stringent and totalising reality, Ishiguro reveals both historical and present ‘dreams’ – that is, the “social shape” of history – to be hegemonic, not totalising, thereby evoking the ever-present excess or otherness which cannot be reconciled with the normative order and can only be experienced affectively as an uncomfortable sense of disjunction. The novel in this sense defies the endist narratives of Fukuyama and Baudrillard by evoking an affective discordance even as it, or rather *because* it, exhibits an absolute fidelity to the wholeness of the dream. *The Unconsoled* is in this sense irrepressibly fecund, not because it delivers a counter-ideological vision of the future but because it institutes an affective encounter with alterity (that which cannot be contained within the dream) which refuses to either define or foreclose the future.

In this sense, *The Unconsoled* takes Fukuyama and Baudrillard’s endist pronouncements very seriously and literally. There is no future for the inhabitants of the sad town of Ishiguro’s novel as it is circumscribed from the outset by the limit of Ryder himself and his oneiric imagination. ‘Ryder’s life is entrapped in the myth of the never-new,’⁴⁷ as Pierre François puts it. The self-serving narrative and Ryder’s fear of interpersonal intimacy produces ‘an end-of-civilization novel, with a gaping hole in the place of love and its social extension, community.’⁴⁸ However, due to its hostility to the reader, it evokes an insomniac vigilance in its readers who, through their perspectival divergence from Mr Ryder and their passivity to his dream, are able to remain alert to what he is oblivious to. In what follows, I will consider how a thematic concern of the novel – the social and cultural future of this sad, lonely town – is addressed by its formal intransigence. Resolution to this problem does not rest in its nominal identification (which the town identifies over and over again) but instead in a willingness to turn towards the other, a willingness to be sensibly vulnerable in the face of the other.

2.3 The European Dream: Ishiguro’s oneiric somewhere

As discussed, Ishiguro’s dreamscape presents an intriguing narrative form which, on the surface, resonates with contemporaneous European concerns of geographic liminality, historical responsibility and an indeterminate cultural identity. The town in question is nameless and, despite Ishiguro’s hope that ‘people won’t get too hung up on where it’s set,’

⁴⁷ François, p. 88.

⁴⁸ François, p. 86.

it has been much speculated on.⁴⁹ However, within the narrative itself, it appears that the question of *what* the town identifies as is superseded by instead *how* the town identifies itself. A curious situation is at play in which many of the townspeople are engaged in an agitated movement to restore the town's cultural scene in the hopes that it will revive its international standing and thereby alleviate the profound and widespread sadness of its inhabitants. It is, on the surface, a proactive approach to the 'cold' city's 'crisis' which sees its 'ordinary people ... growing ever more miserable.'⁵⁰ As such, the town invites esteemed musicians, hosts grand concerts and holds seminars on musical theory. Even so, as the novel unravels, these events seem more indicative of the novel's Kafkaean bureaucracy – continuous obligations for Ryder to meet which do not move the dial in the ways the townspeople wish it would. The townspeople, in turn, blankly consume these cultural outputs and wait for the climax which will transform their fortunes. Unsurprisingly, it never transpires.

As such, a banal nationalism occupies the town, ironized by the town's lack of name and specificity. From this perspective, the town's compulsive cultural programming indicates a desperate and futile attempt to assert its own relevance and intellectual aptitude, without any of the necessary effort involved in engaging with the artworks that it hosts. In his 1995 study of Western nationalism in the modern era, Michael Billig coined the term 'banal nationalism,' arguing that it is the habitual, unexceptional nature of Western nationalism which makes it banal – signs, symbols and practices which go unnoticed and unremarked, and yet furnish the social worlds and imaginations of its citizenry. 'The metonymic image of banal nationalism,' he writes, 'is not a flag consciously waved with fervent passion; it is a flag hanging unnoticed on a public building.'⁵¹ Whilst the townspeople populate their city with "culture," it is not served by an engaged populace but rather limply decorates the city, requiring no more interaction from its spectators than distracted observation. As Benedict Anderson famously argued in *Imagined Communities*, modern nationalism is akin to the pre-Enlightenment role religion once played in Western civilization; its ubiquitous iconography, collective following and unchallenged authority instituting a communal defence against daily sufferings wrought by a seemingly indifferent world. 'With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did

⁴⁹ Jaggi and Ishiguro, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1st American ed (New York: Vintage international, 1995), p. 101.

⁵¹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1995), p. 8.

not disappear,' he argues.⁵² The church is thus replaced by the generic public buildings whose quiet national iconography provide communal succour; 'a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.'⁵³ *The Unconsoled*, however, demonstrates the limitations of such a defence. Whilst the townspeople do not suffer the horrors of political conflict, they nonetheless endure a cold, lonely pain born from social atomization and an unwillingness to be sensibly open to their fellow citizens.

As modern literature has demonstrated time and time again, nationalism proves an unstable substitute for the eternal promises of religion. Postcolonial fictions, in particular, unveil the restless, groundless and arbitrary basis for national identity; in many cases, the identity of a nation does not inhibit or stem the anxieties of its citizens but focalizes and cannibalises them. For if it is true that national identity is so habituated as to be the very medium through which one's environment is experienced and comprehended, it is also the target of fears and anxieties when these social and environmental facades begin to tremble. In *The Unconsoled*, we see Ehrenberg's depiction of the atrophied Western modern state explicitly rendered. The town's namelessness and lack of specificity engender a tortuous melange of unspecified opportunity and a profound absence of conflict. The town is organised around a drama of 'responsibility and action' (all the townspeople feel that something *must* be done) and yet, these obligations appear to serve no communal purpose except to support the persistent demands of the 'institution of the self.'⁵⁴ The town's malaise is thus paradoxical: a collective loneliness and inertia which is accompanied by a compulsive and unthinking consumption of cultural products in the futile hope that they – in and of themselves – will bring about change and manifest a sociality which can only be achieved by the town's orientation outside of itself. The metabolism of this seemingly exhaustive situation is precisely in the way the town toggles between its cynical despair and its sincere belief in the power of art to transform social relations. Ehrenberg describes this as the modern subject's two faces: the 'deficient and compulsive human being.'⁵⁵ In the language of banal insomnia, it resides in the dialectic of cynical exhaustion and optimistic self-care.

⁵² Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), p. 11.

⁵³ Anderson, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Ehrenberg, p. 229.

⁵⁵ Ehrenberg, p. 233.

As such, communal identity is trapped between a nostalgic attachment to the city's idealised (and long lost) origins and a postcolonial scepticism of the promise and fruition of those ideals. On the one hand, a kind of banal nationalism is at work providing a source of comfort and stability. Whilst Ryder is ostensibly entering a "new" city at the start of the novel, it is the city's awnings that not only put the weary traveller at ease but reconnect him to a forgotten past. Seemingly innocuous objects burnish his inner world with forgotten memories, from ceilings to cars to rugs. In one recollection, Ryder describes unattended domestic muck jolting him: '[t]he grimy walls, the traces of cobwebs near the cornicing, the dilapidated laundry equipment all tugged naggingly away at my memory.'⁵⁶ Just a few lines later, he reads in a newspaper of a local campaign to 'conserve the Old Town.'⁵⁷ For Ryder and the city's inhabitants, the preservation of the past points to an attempt to hold fast to an (imagined) trace of stability and innocence, even as those spaces themselves start to decay and deteriorate from inattention. The past is sealed inaccessibly by an idealistic nostalgia, as a local drunkard tautologically puts it: 'Ah yes, the good old days. ... Things were good here in the good old days.'⁵⁸

The cynical nature of these observations – that they are instrumentalised to evade one's ethical duty – is demonstrated in a key scene at the start of the novel. At the end of the first chapter, Mr Ryder is resting in his room lying on his bed. Suddenly he becomes aware that the hotel room he is staying in is a childhood bedroom he lived in for two years as a child in his aunt's house in Britain. He remembers a childhood game of playing with plastic soldiers on a green mat on the bedroom floor and how the room's features became incorporated into his childhood fantasy: 'Near the centre of that green mat had been a torn patch that had always been a source of much irritation to me. But that afternoon, as the voices raged on downstairs, it had occurred to me for the first time that this tear could be used as a sort of bush terrain for my soldiers to cross.'⁵⁹ The young Ryder boy incorporates the rift which has been symbolically entwined with the dispute he hears and it thus becomes an ideal environmental feature for his imaginary war scene. The "bush terrain" becomes an accommodating feature for the soldiers "to cross," demonstrating the successful incorporation of real violence into the imagined and playful world of mock violence. It is no

⁵⁶ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 284.

⁵⁷ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 284.

⁵⁸ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 103.

⁵⁹ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 16.

surprise therefore that upon this successful realisation, Mr Ryder is able to relax into the self-sufficient world of sleep: ‘Nevertheless, the realisation that after all this time I was once more back in my old childhood sanctuary caused a profound feeling of peace to come over me.’⁶⁰ The rift therefore depicts an ethical elision in Ryder’s self-satisfied appeal to his memory and imagination, allowing him to sidestep his responsibilities (‘the long flight, the confusions over my schedule, Gustav’s problems’) or the more unsavoury elements of his past (‘the ferocity of the voices had been such that, even as a child of six or seven, I had realised this to be no ordinary row.’)⁶¹ Memory and nostalgia are a self-serving convenience, facilitating Ryder’s ethical evasion of responsibilities both distant and immediate. The town’s nostalgia for the past operates in much the same way by obscuring its unsavoury history in favour of an idealised, unrealizable realm.

On the other hand, these historical reveries contrast with a desperate and conflicted present. Early on, Ryder learns of the city’s woes through its elected officials who tell him straight: ‘Our city is close to crisis. There’s widespread misery. We have to start putting things right somewhere.’⁶² Ryder has been summoned to the city to redeem them from this impasse; his musical artistry holding out the promise of a new order which will revitalise the community, ‘to re-discover the happiness we once had.’⁶³ He is not the first, he finds out, to present such a promise. The much-maligned musician Mr Christoff preceded him and publicly failed to revive the town’s fortunes, thus becoming the town’s symbol for dashed hope – a failed saviour role which no doubt inspired his name. Christoff thus suffers as much disdain as a symbol of disappointment as Ryder enjoys adulation as the town’s new hope. Whilst he continues to live in the city even still hosting sparsely attended seminars in the hope of reviving the promise he once held, to the rest of the town he is as good as banished. ‘He and everything he has come to represent must now be put away in some dark corner of our history,’ a council member tells Ryder.⁶⁴ Christoff’s musical crime, it transpires, is a modernist “coldness”: an approach which ‘celebrates the mechanical ... [and] stifle[s] natural emotion.’⁶⁵ In one humiliating scene, he shakes a folder of musical “facts” at Ryder in an attempt to convince the town that the resolution to their malaise lay in a commitment

⁶⁰ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 17.

⁶¹ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 17; p.16.

⁶² Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 99.

⁶³ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 115.

⁶⁴ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 100.

⁶⁵ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 190.

to aesthetic intellectualism, not unstructured passion. To this, Ryder retorts to great acclaim from the surrounding audience that the answer is ‘not to resort to restraints ... One should not, in any case, attempt to make a virtue out of one’s limitations.’⁶⁶

This is the position of another would-be saviour musician Brodsky who has recently been rehabilitated by the town after Christoff’s disappointment. Buoyed by the town’s nostalgia, the aged, drunken Brodsky accompanies Ryder in attempting to resurrect the “soul” of the city. In this respect, he opposes the mechanistic style of Christoff by indulging (to a dangerous degree) in his musical fervour. Exclaiming to Ryder, he explains his aesthetic philosophy: ‘All the way, take it all the way! Hold back nothing!’⁶⁷ In this, he appears to be inspired by the controversial and elusive historical figure Max Sattler whose monument looms over the town, evoking a mixture of shame and nationalistic pride from its citizenry. As Natalie Reitano points out, Sattler is another evocative nominal allusion (‘Stalin-Hitler’⁶⁸) which foreshadows the extreme turn that Brodsky’s final performance takes at the end of the novel. During the concert recital, Brodsky conducts a gripping but ultimately sinister performance. ‘Enter[ing] some deeper part of himself,’ Brodsky goes off-piste, ‘perversely ignoring the outer structure of the music ... focus[ing] instead on the peculiar life-forms hiding just under the shell.’⁶⁹ The music takes a ‘manic’ turn, ‘veer[ing] dangerously towards the realms of perversity.’⁷⁰ The danger, it seems, is that the music takes a life of its own, dragging the conductor, the audience and the musicians along with it: ‘Brodsky was himself profoundly embarrassed by the nature of what he was uncovering, but could not resist the compulsion to go yet further,’ whilst the musicians contort themselves to keep up with the frenetic piece, ‘wearing expressions of incredulity, distress, even disgust’ but nonetheless still playing.⁷¹ The peril of the scene emerges in the passivity of the accompanying musicians and the spectators. Despite Brodsky’s concerning descent, they are irredeemably hitched to inaction and passive observation, outsourcing their own responsibilities to the momentum of the art, no matter how immoral it turns out to be.

⁶⁶ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 201.

⁶⁷ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 365.

⁶⁸ Natalie Reitano, ‘The Good Wound: Memory and Community in *The Unconsoled*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 49.4 (2007), 361–86 (p. 383) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/tsl.2007.0019>>.

⁶⁹ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 491; p. 492.

⁷⁰ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 494.

⁷¹ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 492; p. 494.

As Cynthia Quarrie has argued, Christoff and Brodsky present two ultimately unsatisfying and, in Brodsky's case, particularly hazardous approaches to the town's future: 'Christoff neutralizes the idea of Sattler by giving the people order and mediocrity, and the people are ashamed of him; Brodsky witnesses and acts out his inheritance of Sattler, and he is reviled for it.'⁷² At the end of the performance, the town's citizens appear to decide that they would prefer Christoff's staid, sanitized approach, recognising that Brodsky's Sattler-inspired approach 'bordered on the immoral.'⁷³ Whilst Christoff fails to atone for the historical sins of the town and instead proffers an aesthetic elision of this shameful past, Brodsky is undoubtedly the more concerning by uncritically indulging in this legacy and compelling his musicians to follow. The faith and disappointment placed in both demonstrates how the town conceives art to be the solution to all their problems. Art figures as an enigma machine: the perfect construction of various aesthetic elements which will illuminate a dream of the future sublimated in the artwork. Critique or aesthetic engagement do not figure. Rather the town is doomed to oscillate between Christoff and Brodsky in this futile venture, at once embracing the mechanistic innovation of the new and the dangerous nostalgia of the old.

If Ryder was brought in as an intermediary presence, his response is silence and inaction – perhaps noting the intractable, futile bind of choosing the “correct” musical path. However, for all three, their personal relationships enact the stasis of the town, demonstrating that their musical prowess is a useless solution to the town's lack of community – and may in fact be aggravating it. Ryder is oddly aloof from his wife Sophie and son Boris whom he initially encounters as strangers before the reader realises they are in fact kin. His craft stands in the way of his familial duties – in one early scene, he berates Sophie about the importance of his work: 'You have no idea! ... Some of the places I visit, the people don't know a thing. They don't understand the first thing about modern music and if you leave them to themselves, it's obvious, they'll just get deeper and deeper into trouble.'⁷⁴ Christoff, however, despairs at the poor reception of his artistry and sees it leading to the demise of his marriage to the beautiful Rosa who is put in the untenable position of being married to a failure. He speaks enviously to Ryder, 'Ah but if only I had

⁷² Cynthia Quarrie, 'Impossible Inheritance: Filiation and Patrimony in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.2 (2014), 138–51 (p. 148)

<<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2013.783543>>.

⁷³ Quarrie, p. 502.

⁷⁴ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 37.

your talent, Mr Ryder! Then Rosa and I, we could grow old together.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Brodsky's wish to reconcile with his former lover, Miss Collins, is left in tatters after his disastrous performance. Berating him, she cites his selfish, monomaniacal obsession with his "wound," the source of his musical inspiration. '[Y]ou'd destroy it all, you'd destroy everything, pull it all down around you just as you did before,' she cries. 'And all that because of that wound. Me, the music, we're neither of us anything to you than mistresses you seek consolation from.'⁷⁶ Here, without the expectation of engaged reception, artwork entrenches the institution of the self and promotes the ideal of self-sufficiency. The cultural outputs do not engender the community that the town craves because they do not inspire its creators or spectators to imagine beyond the confines of their socially circumscribed identities. This is why the town clings to the imagined ideal of the past because they are unable to orient themselves towards the unknown nature of the future yet to come.

It is ironic therefore that the affliction which the town hopes the musicians will solve is an epidemic of loneliness. It is commented on frequently, usually during cries for change. As one citizen states, '[e]ach of us could recount dozens of sad cases. Of lives blighted by loneliness. Of families despairing of ever discovering the happiness they'd once taken for granted.'⁷⁷ It is perhaps not surprising to read this – everywhere Ryder turns there are families unable to speak to one another, including his own. This citizen puts the crisis in explicitly generational terms: it's '[t]ime we admitted how misguided we ha[ve] been ... Otherwise our grandchildren, their children after them, would never forgive us.'⁷⁸ This phrasing is striking because it quietly elides the most glaring intergenerational silences which haunt the novel; that is, the silence between the most direct and immediate descendants: parent and child. For it is Ryder who does not see or speak to his own parents and repeats this relation with his son Boris. Gustav cruelly refused to speak to his infant daughter and this precedent has been maintained into her adulthood and right up to his death. The Hoffman parents' disappointment in their son's musical development has forever punctured their relationship with silence and regret. In this sense, the inhabitants' alternately hopeful yet urgent appeals for change and their nihilistic resignation to an opportunity lost indicate a profound hesitation to act in the present and an incapacity to recognise their

⁷⁵ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 191.

⁷⁶ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 498.

⁷⁷ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 113.

⁷⁸ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 112.

responsibility to their most immediate kin. The dream of hospitality is always conceived at a generational remove, in an opaque, lost past or an illusory, forever-out-of-reach future.

2.4 Nameless: the town's generational failure

In many ways, the town exhibits the same exhausted inertia described by Derrida in *The Other Heading*: unable to extricate themselves from their past, the inhabitants hesitate before a new territory which does not yet exist. Where the town deviates from Derrida's aporia, however, is in its namelessness. Though many critics have speculated that the novel's location is "somewhere" in central Europe, the novel offers no distinctive historical or cultural markers to indicate where that would be.⁷⁹ For the inhabitants, this nominal absence manifests as a vague, barely articulable desire for resolution – 'to build a new mood, a new era,' one posits.⁸⁰ In *The Other Heading*, conversely, Derrida's object ("heading") is Europe – all that is contained within the name and all that overflows it. He writes,

Like all the names we are invoking, like all names in general, these designate at once a limit, a negative limit, and a chance. For perhaps responsibility consists in making of the name recalled, of the memory of the name, of the idiomatic limit, a chance, that is, an opening of identity to its very future.⁸¹

For Derrida, an alternative future relies on the assumption of the name, as that which lives on as both what it is and what it is not. Derrida attempts to capture Europe (both heading and its other) in an ontological-ethical moment of tension – a simultaneous confluence and rupture of Europe and its other. In this sense, the town's namelessness depicts the institutionalisation of its ethical stagnation in which it refuses the responsibility that it has nonetheless irrevocably inherited: to recall our previous image, it is unable to confront its memories as they are now, encased by the abject grime accrued by history. This dynamic is replicated in the relationship between Ryder and his son Boris. As with Ryder's failure to

⁷⁹ In her interview with Ishiguro, Jaggi introduces the book stating Ryder 'arrives in central Europe to give a concert' (1995, p. 20); in *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*, Brian Shaffer describes the setting as an 'unidentified but apparently middle European city' (2008, p. 156) ; Jeanette Baxter refers to 'an unspecified city somewhere in the heart of central Europe' (2011, p.134) and similarly, Richard Robinson in *Narratives of the European Border* (2007) aligns the unnamed city to a Kafkaian central Europe.

⁸⁰ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 112.

⁸¹ Derrida, *The Other Heading*, p. 35.

live up to his other obligations, it is his unthinking indolence and his inability to orient himself towards the needs of others which sees him utterly inadequate in his duty as a father and therefore by extension, to the future generation.

The issue of stunted inheritance emerges in the nominal relationship between Mr Ryder and Boris whose familial relations are not codified by a shared name. Rather, Boris is exclusively known by his first name, or ‘the boy,’ whereas Ryder enjoys the formality of Mr Ryder or simply Ryder. Despite this, Ryder and the young boy share a clear familial relation, albeit one that Ryder is reluctant to acknowledge. Boris alternately figures as an absolute stranger, Ryder’s son and even Ryder’s younger self. For Matthew Mead, this relationship between Ryder and Boris is central, ‘hint[ing] at a primary trauma that goes right to the heart of Ryder’s dislocation.’⁸² In terms of the uninherited name and Ryder’s refusal to acknowledge the relation, it further represents Ryder’s irresponsibility to the younger generation and his cowardice in the face of the future. For Boris in his multiplicity (stranger / son / father) indicates the radical alterity of the future to come. Ryder’s duty to this younger generation is precisely by recognising that he is both of and beholden to that which exists outside of his subjective self. Ultimately, it requires an insomniac perspective which moves beyond the solipsistic confines of his own egoism.

The Unconsoled thus shares with Levinas a tripartite understanding of the paternal relation. As Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, ‘[p]aternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other ... is me, a relation of the I with a self which is yet not me.’⁸³ Paternity exposes the male subject to infinite time in which the child, who is both the father and not, replaces his father in an infinite lineage, an inexhaustible youth which traverses the passage of time. Ryder’s inaction – both in terms of his performance and his assumption of fatherhood – therefore demonstrates not simply a selfish dereliction of duty but also a hesitance before the alterity of the future to come. As Levinas states, ‘the relation with the child – that is, the relation with the other that is not a power, but fecundity – establishes a relationship with the absolute future, or infinite time.’⁸⁴ Paternity is thus a sensible vigilance of the Other – in fatherhood, the subject is beholden to their child who is both of them and radically other, and therefore signifies their passivity to a future which is utterly open and

⁸² Matthew Mead, ‘Caressing the Wound: Modalities of Trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*’, *Textual Practice*, 28.3 (2014), 501–20 (p. 508) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2013.858065>>.

⁸³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 277.

⁸⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 268.

over which they have no control. The relation is insomniac as it never recedes and is tied irrevocably into a genealogical contract with infinite time. Levinas calls this ‘trans-substantiation’: the father survives his own singular mortality in this paternal relation with otherness. Ryder’s cowardice in his relationship with his son is an additional element of his indolence in the face of the future and his commitment to his solipsistic dreamscape which sustains the illusion of the isolated, self-sufficient ego.

Ryder’s inability to affirm this lineage and to recognise his son is replicated in familial relationships throughout the novel which through their impossible dimensions and various incompatible iterations, sustain a process of traumatic repetition and a recoil from an unknown future. The isomorphic parent-child relationships (Boris / Ryder; Sophie / Gustav; Ryder / his parents) demonstrate a continual generational failure to act in the face of their parental responsibilities and situates it in a breakdown of authority. Key characters in the novel are Gustav, the hotel porter and his daughter and Ryder’s wife, Sophie. Akin to the cruelty and lack of recognition that Ryder shows Boris, Gustav and Sophie have maintained a steely and stubborn silence between one another since her childhood. As Gustav recounts to Ryder, one day he flippantly decided to stop speaking to his previously much-loved infant daughter. Although it is initially justified as an ‘understanding’ between the two of them, we find out that this silent pact was exclusively implemented by him and Sophie subsequently learned its rules through his sustained disregard for her, despite her appeals to him. In a particularly heartless episode, we find his cruelty extends to later not comforting his daughter when she cries inconsolably in the next room after discovering her dead pet hamster. Excusing himself by claiming that, though untrue, it was entirely possible that he could not have heard her cries, and further, expressing his resolve to enter only if she explicitly called out to him, Gustav’s cruelty dissolves into pitiful cowardice which he unconvincingly attempts to explain away as an irrational respect for convention: ‘even in these present circumstances it doesn’t seem appropriate that I should suddenly break such a long-standing arrangement.’⁸⁵ Ryder too carries on this vindictive routine in his interactions with his son Boris: abandoning him for hours at a time, refusing to interact or respond to him and not consoling him upon the death of his grandfather. At one point Sophie pleads with him, ‘Please be warm to him again. Like you used to be. He so misses it’; an appeal

⁸⁵ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 85.

that Ryder never fulfils.⁸⁶ As a son himself, Ryder is continually neglected by his parents who haunt his consciousness, though they never appear in the book. There are oblique references to the elderly couple who, despite his international success, have never seen him perform and are due to see him perform for the first time at the Thursday concert. After they inevitably do not show, Ryder berates himself for his unjustified faith in their appearance: 'I remembered all at once just how tenuous had been the whole possibility of my parents coming to town.'⁸⁷

The children, in turn, accommodate their parents' cowardice, compensating for their inaction and selfishness. Sophie maintains her side of the 'understanding' despite never agreeing to it. She does not, even in that desperate moment upon finding her hamster, call out for her father. As Gustav recalls, 'Sophie *knew* I'd been listening. And what was more, she wasn't resenting me for it ... she understood our arrangement and respected it.'⁸⁸ Boris musters great enthusiasm for the little recognition his father shows him, effusively praising an old manual Ryder gives him. Even after Ryder declares 'this is a useless present. Utterly useless. No thought, no affection, nothing went into it' and flings it across the room, Boris maintains an attachment to it as the only indication of his father's love.⁸⁹ Ryder too summons up a fantasy of his parents previously visiting the city in order to manage the disappointment of their absence at his concert. Miss Stratmann tells him of the elderly English couple, 'a very pleasant couple. Very kind and considerate to one another' enjoying an 'idyllic' break in the city,⁹⁰ thus rewriting an allusion made throughout the novel to their conflictual, perhaps violent, relationship.⁹¹ In one sense, the children are the ultimate victims of the indolence of their forebears, innocent inheritors of their neglect and inability to face up to their duty to the future generation. However, in their compensatory actions, their capacity to derive meaning from the dregs that their parents give them, they hold out a faint yet vital hope of a sociality and generational vigilance not entirely extinguished. These neglected children therefore align with the readers who persist with the novel despite the inhospitable form. Both continually attempt to derive meaning and remain watchful over the guileless characters who are entrapped in their own self-centred, lonely worlds.

⁸⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 470.

⁸⁷ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 512.

⁸⁸ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 85.

⁸⁹ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 471.

⁹⁰ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 513.

⁹¹ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 172; p. 239; p. 264.

In this repetitive generational structure of disappointment and resignation, Ishiguro addresses the historical Europe question. Through the parent's blind attachment to their routinised cowardice, they become unable to address their own parental responsibilities and thus Ishiguro depicts what becomes of the inheritors of such a legacy who not only harden themselves to the history they inherit but also continue to inflict harm on their offspring. The unknown name of the city is pertinent here as it reveals the unresolved inertia of a place which cannot reckon with its past yet nonetheless persists. Ryder continually disavows any responsibility, even in his most intimate relationships. Speaking to Gustav about Sophie at the beginning, he distances himself from 'these family matters.' 'I'm merely an outsider,' he tells him.⁹² As a result, Ryder is never able to fully assume the title of father or husband and his social standing in terms of his relationships can never be concretely codified. Sophie tells him after one instance of inaction that Boris is not really his, '[y]ou'll never feel towards him like a real father.'⁹³ This is solidified at the end of the novel when she declares that '[y]ou were always on the outside of our love' and to Boris, '[h]e'll never love you like a real father.'⁹⁴ By the end, Ryder has reneged on his major responsibilities – performing at the concert, supporting his family, witnessing Gustav's death – demonstrating his inability to make good on his name. In one scene that foreshadows his alienation at the very end, Ryder finds himself in an old friend's home where his only task is to identify himself to her friends. In this bizarre scene, Ryder goes through a series of physical contortions, endlessly hesitating to intervene in the conversation and pronounce himself for the sake of his friend. His cowardice instead finds himself animalistically contorted, only able to grunt and strain himself 'bright red and squashed into pig-like features' thus disfiguring himself in the process to the point where he barely resembles a human.⁹⁵ This scene is, of course, analogous to the town itself whose inability to assume its name in all its contradiction keeps it locked in an unbreakable state of passive inertia, unable to take action on behalf of the future generation.

Due to the novel's institutionalised torpor, it is not surprising that Ryder finds himself alone at the end of the novel, riding on a circuitous bus route. He has just acrimoniously split from his family and is left sobbing after crying out – far too late – to

⁹² Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 86.

⁹³ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 95.

⁹⁴ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 532.

⁹⁵ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 240.

Boris: “Boris! That bus ride, you remember it? Remember, Boris, how good it was? ... You remember, Boris?”⁹⁶ Like everything else in the novel, the scene is bizarre insofar as Ryder is unaware of his sobbing or even his grief until a fellow passenger comforts him. The automatic comfort and care of a stranger mirrors the vigilance of the reader in this regard: tertiary characters who fulfil the faint promise of communal duty and recognition. Even so, the novel ends with Ryder returning to his self-delusion. Confronted with an abundant breakfast buffet – ‘there was virtually everything one could wish for’ – he indulges in the possibility of utter satiation and contentment.⁹⁷ Again, his surroundings become part of this selfish fantasy and the fellow townspeople serve to fulfil his egoistic project as he reflects on his trip: ‘Whatever disappointments this city had brought, there was no doubting that my presence had been greatly appreciated – just as it had been everywhere else I had ever gone. And now here I was, my visit almost at its close, a thoroughly impressive buffet before me ... I started to serve myself a little of everything.’⁹⁸ Even the passenger who had reached out to him in a gesture of care becomes part of his confected dream as a comically accommodating conversationalist as Ryder speculates that they would ‘go on sitting there together, eating. Exchanging views on football and whatever else took our fancy, while outside the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, brightening the streets and our side of the carriage.’⁹⁹

True to form, the novel closes in a sequence of oneiric wish fulfilment. It takes the perspective of the reader, outside the confines of the dream, to perceive Ryder’s situation clearly: a cowardly figure whose selfish inaction has left him isolated and wholly unable to fulfil his duty to others, doomed to repeat this pattern of disappointment. Akin to the novel’s children and marginal characters, the reader bears witness to those whom Ryder blithely ignores and harms in his oneiric wake, whether it is the small Boris left for hours in a café alone, the broken promise made to Gustav and fellow local porters that he would praise their profession publicly or the young practicing musician Stephen Hoffman who he continually keeps waiting. Through the novel’s formal difficulty which never allows the reader to comfortably traverse the narrative, she assumes a vital role of vigilance, noting the quiet disappointments and isolation of the townspeople who bypass Ryder’s perception. As the

⁹⁶ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 532.

⁹⁷ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 534.

⁹⁸ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 534.

⁹⁹ Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, p. 535.

town's failed musicians attest, the artwork in itself is not enough: it requires the wakeful vigilance of the reader.

2.5 Tracey Emin: 'My Bed's Other Heading

In a 1999 interview at the Sorbonne, Ishiguro revealed that his interest in generational responsibility and his suspicion of straightforward historical linearity came with middle age. The recognition of the dwindling numbers of the generations preceding him silently tasked him and his peers with the challenge of keeping this historical memory alive because, he claimed, 'we are now the best there is, we are a distant link to the war through our parents and what our parents told us.'¹⁰⁰ This intermediary age therefore placed an ethical demand on the writer who could no longer blithely assume that they were simply the recipients of cultural and historical knowledge – rather, Ishiguro now perceived his own importance in this economy and his ethical responsibility to both inherit and bequeath this history on behalf of the now-absent. This is, of course, also the same position his protagonist Ryder utterly failed to live up to.

It is this intermediary inheritor-bequeather (parent-child) stance which I propose characterises the artwork of this chapter's other case study, British artist Tracey Emin. It is indicative of the ethical dimension of her work which places her uneasily in the oeuvre of her yBa (Young British Artists) cohort. This artistic movement encouraged self-conscious decadence, giving voice to a burgeoning insomniac culture: a precociously exhausted and disillusioned youth. My interest in Emin emerges from her heterodoxy with her peers and her persistent, indefatigable appeal to the promise of love and intimacy. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend have described this heterodoxy as Emin's unique approach to the yBa's unifying strategy of the "re": 'Think reprise; think reply; think repeat; think reinterpretation.'¹⁰¹ Where her peers speculated endlessly on re-presentation and recycling of popular references and forms (from Hirst's reworking of Dali and Warhol to Martin Creed's ironization of Duchamp and Mazoni), Emin mobilizes a strategy of the "in": 'Think 'introspection,' think 'intention,' think 'intelligence.'¹⁰² Emin's conscious allusions to her Expressionist and Modernist predecessors does not manifest in their ironic replication, but

¹⁰⁰ François Gallix, 'Kazuo Ishiguro: The Sorbonne Lecture', in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, Literary Conversations Series, 1st ed (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 135–55 (p. 141).

¹⁰¹ Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, 'Eminent Domain: The Cultural Location of Tracey Emin', in *The Art of Tracey Emin* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), pp. 6–21 (p. 8).

¹⁰² Merck and Townsend, p. 11.

rather in generous gestures of connection and affinity to ‘her generation’ where she becomes an artist of reinterpretation as much as one of intensity.’¹⁰³ It is this persistent commitment to a then somewhat suspicious artistic ideal, ‘the immediacy of expression,’ in which Emin spiritualises this legacy and as Merck and Townsend put it, ‘occults the reality of an ethical engagement both with her own time and personal history, and with the history of art.’¹⁰⁴

This generational engagement subsists in Emin’s perpetual “middle age”: a palpable sense of responsibility which pervades her works, even those which revel in the naivete and idealism of inexperience. It is apt, therefore, that her first solo exhibition at the age of 30 was entitled ‘My Major Retrospective’. Whilst clearly ironic, there is also something very literal about Emin’s exhibition which collates artifacts from throughout her young life – adolescent letters to boyfriends, tortured diary entries, newspaper cuttings detailing the tragic death of a beloved uncle – establishing key themes of retrieval, renewal and generosity which would be mainstays of her career. Accusations of vanity and self-indulgence have long beset her public persona, however what these early artistic outputs demonstrate is that Emin’s subject was never exclusively herself but testaments to intimate relationships now over. She does not merely pay tribute to ex-lovers, late family members or even her long-gone teenage self, but seeks to hold fast to the fragmented relics of these interpersonal relationships in which these objects limply evoke that now-absent other. It goes hand in hand with her penchant for writing both upon and alongside her artworks: scrawling aphorisms which desperately seek out an unknown listener, much of the time communicating nothing more than the desire for connection. In exhuming these objects and exhibiting them, she shares with her contemporary generation a tangible relic of her grief over these lost relationships. Rosemary Betterton calls this a ‘stencilling ‘off the real’ of traces, material vestiges of life experience that appear to be indexical rather than iconic.’¹⁰⁵ The ‘indexical’ nature of her artwork demonstrates the vulnerability of Emin’s gesture; for in displaying these relics, it demonstrates not only the power of the material trace (there is a certain profundity in seeing a hand-written adolescent diary) but also its inadequacy to fulfil or even fully account for the relationship of which it is the product. By making these items

¹⁰³ Merck and Townsend, p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Merck and Townsend, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Rosemary Betterton, ‘Why Is My Art Not as Good as Me’, in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. by Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (New York, N.Y: Thames & Hudson, 2002), pp. 22–40 (p. 27).

public, Emin sacrifices the personal illusion that these items could signify more than simply their inert presence. She shares what faint diminished promise they have with the spectator.

This aesthetic project of generosity may be summed up, though certainly not limited, to her most famous work 'My Bed'. 'My Bed' is Emin's 1999 installation of her bed. Littered with everyday detritus (fag butts, bloody underwear, vodka bottles), it is commonly perceived as her ode to a fin-de-siecle culture of promiscuity, lassitude and loneliness, as well as thinly veiled autobiography. In this way, it exhibits the lethargy of banal insomnia culture acutely: unabashed sloth, contempt for propriety and substance dependency. 'My Bed' is often referred to by another name: 'the unmade bed.' This informal title eschews the autonomy and allusion to autobiography of its official title; it instead denotes the gracelessness, laziness and lack of artistry that many of its detractors accused her of. The installation however has outlived these criticisms having last been exhibited in 2015 at the Tate Britain gallery, over 15 years since its initial appearance. The longevity of the art piece – its continual relevance and fecundity – may very well derive from the tension between these two titles: an artwork that continually "unmakes" itself or, alternatively, an unmade object which is continually made – brought into being – by the possessive artist. 'My Bed' and the 'unmade bed': a heading and an other heading. As such, Emin's artwork continually animates this other heading, evoking the spirit of hospitality and openness which accompanies a bedsheet pulled to the side. In keeping with the themes of this thesis, 'My Bed' is not in fact banal, but insomniac in a Levinasian sense, continuously marking out a space and keeping vigil over the vulnerable sleeping other.

On the one hand, one need not even look at the installation itself to understand its social provocation. Whilst it fomented a nationwide debate regarding domestic hygiene and the propriety of confessional art, it also invited illicit public interaction.¹⁰⁶ A Welsh mother drove over 200 miles to the Tate with the explicit desire to wash the bedsheets, claiming 'I thought I would clean up this woman's life a bit.'¹⁰⁷ More famously, it was the site of another art performance, 'Two Naked Men Jump Into Tracey Emin's Bed.' Performance artists Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi jumped on Emin's bed and engaged in a pillow fight, ostensibly to critique institutionalised art. Though, in another way, this action too seemed to

¹⁰⁶ Merck provides a review of the public debate surrounding *My Bed* upon its debut in her essay 'Bedtime' (2002)

¹⁰⁷ 'UK: Wales Housewife "outraged" by Dirty Bed Exhibit', *BBC News*, 25 October 1999 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/485270.stm>> [accessed 7 November 2022].

be led by a compulsion to get closer to the artwork on a tangible level – as Cai claimed, ‘I thought I should touch the bed and smell the bed.’¹⁰⁸ For there is something about *My Bed* which resists the performative nature of these acts. It does not lend itself well as a stage of action but rather emits a profound passivity. Cai and Xi found this in their performance where, upon getting on the bed, onlookers observed that they found themselves at a loss. As one spectator noted, ‘after a few minutes of hopping about and shouting, I think they ran out of things to do.’¹⁰⁹ This is not from lack of forethought as it was later reported they had in mind to simulate a ‘critical sex act’ on the bed feeling that ‘a sexual act was necessary to respond to Emin’s piece.’¹¹⁰ And yet, in the face of the bed, all they could manage was to engage in a ‘half-hearted pillow fight’ and to shout in Mandarin.¹¹¹ Whilst this could have been performance anxiety, the same pressure did not seem to prevent the very same pair a couple of months prior from a similarly provocative gesture at the Tate Modern in which they urinated on Duchamp’s the Fountain (though this artwork was protected by a Perspex case).

What Cai and Xi’s lacklustre performance indicates is a profound misunderstanding of the power of Emin’s piece and a desecration of its gesture of hospitality and generosity. ‘My Bed’ is not scandal for the sake of scandal, nor is it performative. Instead, there is a limp resignation to the piece, a profound lack of dynamism. The provenance of the piece is well-known. Emin was inspired by a ‘kind-of mini breakdown’ in her small flat in which she did not leave her bed for four days. Upon rousing from this depressive bender, she woke to all the filth that had piled around her. Looking at her bed, she thought:

What if here wasn’t here? What if I took out this bed – with all its detritus, with all the bottles, the shitty sheets, the vomit stains, the used condoms, the dirty underwear, the old newspapers - what if I took all of that out of this bedroom and placed it into a white space? How would it look then?¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Sam Wallace, ‘Tate Protesters Wreck Artist’s Unmade Bed’, *The Telegraph*, 25 October 1999 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20060303161643/http://www.telegraph.co.uk/htmlContent.jhtml?html=/archive/1999/10/25/nbed25.html>> [accessed 7 November 2022].

¹⁰⁹ Fiachra Gibbons, ‘Satirists Jump into Tracey’s Bed’, *The Guardian*, 25 October 1999 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/oct/25/fiachragibbons1>> [accessed 7 November 2022].

¹¹⁰ Nick Paton Walsh, “‘It’s a New Cultural Revolution’”, *The Guardian*, 11 June 2000 <<https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2000/jun/11/features.review37>> [accessed 7 November 2022].

¹¹¹ Gibbons.

¹¹² ‘Modern Classics: Tracey Emin - My Bed, 1998’, *Artlead*, 2021 <<https://artlead.net/journal/modern-classics-tracey-emin-bed-1998/>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

This extrapolation of her domestic situation into the neutral space of the gallery has been interpreted as an easy, cynical exploitation of her depression. However arguably the most notable aspect of 'My Bed' is that Emin is nowhere to be found. The bed in this way is gifted to the blank space of the gallery without the sleeper present. The bed, which symbolises on a personal level Emin's intense isolation and depression, no longer belongs to her; it is no longer materially connected to her but is instead gifted to whoever's gaze falls upon it. This is its artifice, the art's autonomy: the fact that it is there, it remains, and she does not. Emin reveals that in the starkest gestures of candour and confession, there is a gaping divide between the spectator and the aesthetic subject (or object). It is why Cai and Xi's performative art which attempted to conflate the two and gratify the artists fell flat. In this work, that (banal) revelation is not scandalised with the presence of a living subject as if to add further intimacy and exposure to the artwork: the bed really isn't about Emin. Emin's work therefore seeks the ideal of intimacy but can only gesture towards it negatively, unaided by a purported "presence" of the creator. She shuttles between the messy, excessive, contingent material of her artwork and the necessary ideal which undergirds it; an ideal which is nevertheless undermined by its materialisation but continues to be animated all the same. Thus, the strewn condoms simultaneously allude to the superficiality of casual sex as well as an ideal of sexual intimacy. The soiled bedsheets depict the dirtiness of her lethargic existence yet point to an ideal of cleanliness and purity. Her unmade bed in its messy exposure signifies hospitality and welcome. It is in the messy materiality of the work, which can never be entirely expunged or ordered, that the necessary yet ultimately unreconcilable, ideal resides. Banal insomnia presented in this way cannot deny the insomniac duty which underlies it – her eternally inadequate bed is nonetheless an aesthetic gift of great fecundity, always promising more than what it is.

Though Emin envisioned the "white space" of the gallery for her bed, it is clear that the gallery space is never entirely white or vacuous. The artwork can never rest solely in itself and always carries with it a worldly presence, subtending with that which surrounds it. This was the somewhat nebulous critique of Cai and Xi; that Emin's work was tainted by its institutionalisation at the Tate Modern. This accounts for the duplicity of her artwork which both affirms its name whilst reaching out to that which cannot be contained within it. Emin's work trains us to look for those marginal elements which accompany the artwork or exist quietly on its edges. *My Bed* is thus an attempt to circumscribe the marginalia of domestic living – the bed and everything that falls upon or around it – into one disjunctive,

fragmentary artwork. This consideration of the artwork's "outside" and its thematic incorporation of the abject inspires a vigilance in the spectator: Emin's quiet curatorial decisions gain an outsized importance in light of the inertness of *My Bed*. It is notable therefore that Emin chose to display *My Bed* alongside her applique quilt *No Chance* for the London exhibition. This was the only time she displayed them together; for other exhibitions, she displayed the quilt *Psyco Slut*. The significance of this gesture is found in *No Chance*'s incorporation of the tattered Union Jack with its title stitched in large letters across its front. Exhibited during the passage of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, Emin's work addressed a climate of growing intolerance and fear of immigration. Sitting parallel to the tattered Union Jack, *My Bed* echoes the sentiment of "No Chance" demonstrating in its aberrance and excessiveness the impossibility of Britain living up to its ideals of hospitality whilst also loudly proclaiming the unyielding responsibility of Britain to do so.

2.6 'There's in me something which is too much': Emin's impossible fecundity

Ishiguro's dystopian fiction *Never Let Me Go* (2005) depicts a world of state-sanctioned and state-managed human cloning. Set in rural England in the 1990s, the novel opens with the narrator, an adult clone called Kathy H., reflecting on her childhood in a boarding school. Clones, we find out, are raised and bred for the purpose of providing organs to the non-clone society who live a wholly separate existence. In a key scene which gives the novel its name, young Kathy finds herself dancing to an old pop song entitled 'Never let me go' in her dorm room. It is a scene of highly idiosyncratic imaginative extrapolation which, through inadvertent exposure to another, becomes a site of multiple, divergent interpretations. In this scene, Kathy listens to the record, knowingly misinterpreting its lines 'Oh baby, baby ... never let me go' as referring to a literal infant. Kathy recognises that her interpretation is erroneous but indulges it nonetheless by imagining,

a woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really really wanted them all her life. Then there's a sort of miracle and she has a baby and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: "Baby, never let me go . . ." partly because she's

so happy, but also because she's so afraid something will happen,
that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her.¹¹³

Listening to the record, she enacts her imagined scenario – slow dancing, hugging her pillow to her chest in the form of a baby and softly singing the words of the song. She's interrupted by Madame, a usually forbidding older presence who is vaguely involved in the cloning programme. Upon seeing Kathy, she breaks down in tears and retreats without saying a word.

This scene in *Never Let Me Go* revives the aesthetic question at the heart of *The Unconsoled*: how does an artistic scene or object come to be? The imaginative capacities of Kathy H. provide not merely the title of the novel but a formal arrangement (Kathy H. slowly spinning, clutching her pillow to her chest as if holding a child) which creates an aesthetic scene which can be read and interpreted. Madame's interpretation differs from Kathy's: 'I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading never to let her go.'¹¹⁴ Both Madame's and Kathy's interpretation of the lyrics are thus profoundly different from the song's original, bland expression of romantic love. This detour back to Ishiguro illuminates a common theme which runs between his works and Emin's – an interest in the impossibility yet necessity of reproduction. In *Never Let Me Go*, this emerges at the level of the narrative – clones who cannot reproduce but are rather reproduction itself, bred simply for use. Their "organ-ic" existence is given over to invisible others in advance and it is likely that it is for this reason that Kathy's song proves so heart-breaking for Madame: in Kathy's imaginative extrapolation of the banal pop song, she exhibits a material presence outside the rationality of her situation. The gesture demonstrates the contradiction of the non-fertile body engaged in an impossible act of care and maternal vigilance; an impossible fecundity given material form in the aesthetic gesture.

It is this sentiment which characterises Emin's oeuvre – this impossible fecundity can be considered as a sleepless, never satiated responsibility to the other. Here, I am referring to Emin's continual interest and return to themes of maternity, birth and abortion. In this sense, it is not only her aesthetic project but Emin herself who embodies this impossible fecundity – a childless artist who relentlessly returns to scenes of motherhood

¹¹³ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber, 2010), p. 64.

¹¹⁴ Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, p. 249.

throughout her work, drawing painfully and palpably from her own experience of abortion. As she has noted in many interviews, it was her decision not to have children which enabled her to become an artist. The experience was highly ambivalent, both devastatingly painful and creatively transformative. As she states in the voiceover in her autobiographical documentary *How It Feels*, it radically changed her aesthetic outlook: art could no 'longer be fucking picture, it couldn't be about something visual, it had to be about where it was really coming from and because of the abortion and because of conceiving, I had a greater understanding of where things really came from.'¹¹⁵ Her sense of life itself – the very quality of what it is to be alive – was profoundly altered: 'It's like, it's like the branches in a tree in winter and they never blossom and they never have leaves ever again, but the tree is still alive.'¹¹⁶

Her refusal to relinquish the experience of her undelivered maternity from her artistic project demonstrates a continual vigilance and responsibility to the absent other. It emerges in cries throughout her work which tell a story of this irrevocable responsibility, lodged immovably in both her past and present: neon signs with longing messages of 'Live Without You Never' (2001) and 'I Whisper to My Past Do I Have Another Choice' (2010),¹¹⁷ desperate, crude line drawings which depict the artist in imagined states of pregnancy and birthing; applied quilts which shout 'I do not expect to be a mother but I do expect to die alone' and 'Yea I know nothing stays in my body.'¹¹⁸ Emin perhaps best and most disturbingly encapsulates this eternally raw, unassailable wound and its intimate entanglement with her artistic practice in her short film *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children* (1998).¹¹⁹ The film is less than two and a half minutes long and depicts a naked Emin curled in a foetal position on a jetty outside a home of Munch's in Norway. The camera pans over Emin's body before focusing on the sunlit water. With Emin out of frame, we hear her piercing, unbearable scream which lasts for a minute before the camera returns to her still-foetal, still-evasive naked form. The scream in this sense formalises not only her position within a modernist artistic tradition – she is a 'child,' foetally depicted, of Munch's

¹¹⁵ Tracey Emin and others, *Tracey Emin: Works 1963-2006* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), p. 67.

¹¹⁶ Emin and others, p. 63.

¹¹⁷ *Tracey Emin: Love Is What You Want; [... on the Occasion of the Exhibition Tracey Emin: Love Is What You Want, Hayward Gallery, London 18 May 2011 - 29 August 2011]*, ed. by Tracey Emin, Ralph Rugoff, and Hayward Gallery (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2011), p. 52; p. 66.

¹¹⁸ *Tracey Emin: Love Is What You Want*, p. 61; p. 47.

¹¹⁹ *Homage to Edvard Munch and All My Dead Children*, dir. by Tracey Emin, 1998

<<https://www.xavierhufkens.com/artworks/tracey-emin-homage-to-edvard-munch-and-all-my-dead-children>> [accessed 23 January 2023].

legacy – but also her unremitting attachment to those others, referred to as her ‘dead children,’ who can only be gestured to in the non-signifying, hair-raising terror of the scream. The scream, which to the listener feels endless, stands in for the irrevocability of this relation: self and other.

In these artworks, Emin reveals the insomniac impulse of her oeuvre which is thematically rendered in *My Bed*. Emin creates artworks which muddy their own edges and refuse their own enclosure. This emerges from her own relentless productivity and her refusal to shut the door on past experiences and relationships. Through her artwork, she tethers the incompleteness of the past to the future’s unknowability, refusing to ever foreclose the past or let it subsist in itself. It is, as I have noted, an act of intergenerational vigilance. For Emin, aesthetic creation is a two-way movement: a bold grappling with the indeterminacy of the future coupled with the animation and revival of past figures and events. This, for Emin, is the essence of reproduction. Emin’s almost obsessive interest in her capacity for reproduction is not limited to potential children. Across Emin’s work, her crotch is the site of endless fecundity, from a proliferation of money (*I’ve got it all* 2000) to a burst of springtime flowers (*Saying goodbye to Mummy* 2002).¹²⁰ As such, Emin’s work exhibits a frantic productivity and, in turn, address of the other which was never delivered, which simultaneously gave birth to her as an artist and upon which she must keep continual vigil. In Emin’s articulations, this takes a compulsive, almost involuntary form. Her piece *The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl* (1999) is described by Emin as a subconscious urge to create for another, even before she knew there was another to create for:

I started to make this thing – Maybe in some subconscious way I believed it could become a shawl, it started off quite beautiful, And slowly as the days and the weeks went by – and pregnancy followed by abortion, I carried on making the thing – like I was making a whole mental physical fucking mess – It took some kind of life of its own, like it had nothing to do with me – But then – I suppose it didn’t it grew as an extension to the way I felt, useless, without control –¹²¹

Emin’s productivity traverses her abortion, and she continues to create in spite of her trauma; the shawl taking on a life of its own as a continuous gesture towards the absent

¹²⁰ Tracey Emin: *Love Is What You Want*, p. 119; p. 135.

¹²¹ Tracey Emin: *Love Is What You Want*, p. 244.

other. Intriguingly, this piece aligns with one of her earliest works from *My Major Retrospective: May Dodge, My Nan*. In this, she exhibited a gift from her grandmother: crocheted baby clothes intended for Emin's children.¹²² In Emin's irrepressible productivity, she is both inheritor of this tradition and responsible for its continuation, both recognising a relationship now over and one that will never come to be.

In 2015, *My Bed* was exhibited once again at the Tate Britain. This time there was no public outrage or attempts to tamper with it. It was a different artwork by then and had become an integral part of British art history. For Emin, it was a salutation to yet another relationship long gone, that internal struggle of her 30-something self. Tearful at its reinstallation, Emin reiterated its gift; that it would persist as recognition of this relationship, outliving the material presences that once inhabited it: 'There are things on that bed that have no place in my life any more. That bed belonged to a young woman, and hopefully in 20 or 30 years' time the bed will be here but I won't probably.'¹²³ Her commitment to the past and future is resounding: her art functions as the faint trace which connects the two. *My Bed* requires a recognition of one's responsibility to others and therefore it is unsurprising that in 2022, over twenty years after her infamous bed was first installed, it is how she reflects on her artistic contribution: 'I don't want to die being an artist that made really interesting work. I want to make a future. If my art can make something happen for the future, then I'm doing the right thing.'¹²⁴

This chapter began linking banal insomnia to a cynical posture in which modern subjects find themselves obligated to pursue brutalizing ideals of excessive productivity, all the while internally disavowing the legitimacy of those ideals. Whilst Ishiguro and Emin depict this cultural cynicism in their works (respectively through indolent self-centred characters or exhibited objects of lethargy and exhaustion), what links these two artists is their emphasis on the *fact* of their works which stand testament to their refusal to lapse into banal insomnia's recursive, cynical trap. As such, they perform a kind-of aesthetic sincerity. Unlike Levinasian sincerity which facilitates easy, unthinking enjoyment of the world's

¹²² Tracey Emin: *Love Is What You Want*, p. 231.

¹²³ Liz Hoggard and Sarah Crompton, 'Does Tracey Emin's Bed Still Have the Power to Shock?', *The Guardian*, 4 April 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/04/tracey-emin-my-bed-power-to-shock>> [accessed 11 July 2022].

¹²⁴ Sheila Lam, 'Tracey Emin Interview: "If I Hadn't Made Art, I Would Be Dead by Now"', *Wallpaper*, 23 September 2022 <<https://www.wallpaper.com/art/tracey-emin-interview-tke-studios-margate>> [accessed 24 October 2022].

otherness, this sincerity instead represents an aesthetic intransigence which refuses any bad faith which would see it reconciled with any worldly order. This sincerity subsists in the artworks' facticity – that it continually, ceaselessly, draws attention to the irrevocable fact of its existence which cannot be theorised away.

As noted, the intransigence of the artworks fulfils an insomniac ethical function: it denies the reader or viewer the opportunity to turn away from the alterity of the future, either through the comfort of an idealised nostalgic past or an enthusiasm for a carefully plotted future. For both Ishiguro and Emin, the irresolution of the past implicates and dovetails with a radically unknown future. In *The Unconsoled*, this emerges paradoxically through the recurrence of familial disappointment which is nevertheless uniquely experienced each time by the reader who, due to the novel's irrational oneiric form, remains alert to the uncanny twists and turns of the plot. For observers of Emin's artwork, it emerges in the generosity of her artwork which ceaselessly memorialises past relationships and absent others whilst at the same time, proffering the artwork as a gift to current and future generations by upholding, though never entirely living up to, the ideal of hospitality. In this sense, both Ishiguro and Emin counter the cynical narratives of finitude which characterise their generation. It is through their committed depiction of their indolent, exhausted culture that they reveal the inadequacy of Fukuyama and Baudrillard's axioms of finitude. Rather they reveal, as Derrida would have it, the inextinguishable youth which underlies the end of history: the prospect of the unknown which can never entirely be put to bed.

CHAPTER 3: ANAESTHETICS, THEN AESTHETICS: THE LATENESS OF ANDY WARHOL AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

3.1. Piercing the nightmare in Wallace's 'Oblivion'

As noted in the introduction, Meaghan Morris's essay 'Banality in Cultural Studies' argues against a simplistic rendering of popular culture and its public reception in a manner which glibly avows its repressive form whilst purporting a simplistic understanding of collective "resistance" which is achieved through its subversive consumption. She refers to this as 'the voxpop style ... offering us the sanitized world of a deodorant commercial where there's always a way to redemption.'¹ In this chapter, I skirt most hazardously close to this fate, so it is only proper to temper such claims from the outset. In short, this chapter considers how nightmares of the present may be pierced or challenged by a thorough acculturation to contemporary technologies, even those which encourage indolence. Or, to put it in terms more suited to the themes of this thesis, to consider how features of banal insomnia culture can be so thoroughly embodied by modern subjects that it can, inadvertently, facilitate potential ethical or insomniac experiences.

My criticism of recent attempts to cast sleep *in itself* as a resistance to hegemonic capitalist culture is predicated on the ease with which sleep is undertaken when its conditions are accounted for – conditions which necessarily rely on wakeful others to provide. If, as I have argued, banal insomnia functions as a poor substitute for sleep's escapism (a Levinasian indolence), it appears perverse to argue that indulging in these practices would facilitate ethical encounters and subvert dehumanising cultures of exhaustion. This is not the claim of this chapter. Rather, this chapter aims not at the possibility of the ethical relation but rather at evoking its intransigence, the impossibility of ever entirely escaping it. Ultimately, it points to the moment at which contemporary mediatic technologies fail – they offer no resistance at all – to the affective experience of the *there is*; a moment in which one's escapist strategies fail to maintain the illusion of the separate total, subjective self. In Levinas's own words, this is the violent instance of substitution (the awareness of one's irrepressible responsibility to the other) which 'frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself

¹ Morris, p. 21.

due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out.’²

To initially illustrate this point, I will turn to a short story of one of the chapter’s protagonists, David Foster Wallace. A curious story lies at the heart of his short story collection, sharing the collection’s name: ‘Oblivion’.³ The tale recounts the marital woes of a narrator who cannot sleep in the same bed as his wife, and she too suffers the same problem. The problematic at the centre of the story is the irreconcilability of the spouses’ perception – the wife is certain the issue is the husband’s oppressively loud snoring, keeping her awake whereas the husband maintains he is not in fact sleeping and that the wife dreams his snores at which point she wakes up with outbursts which wrack his nerves to such an extent that he is left unable to sleep. The story concludes with the exhausted pair visiting a sleep lab – the ‘Darling Sleep Clinic’ – to ascertain who is right and which perception proves most “accurate.”

This story depicts banal insomnia acutely: exhausted subjects seeking technological intervention to adjudicate on their most intimate relationships. The Darling Sleep Clinic invites the sleepless characters to spend the night there once a week as a team of homogeneously white-coated sleep scientists (“somnologists”) monitor them through one-way mirrored walls. The clinic is a strange techno-domestic hybrid of spartan twin beds and bland wall-sized natural landscapes which shield patients from the scientists on the other side. Patients are encouraged to act as they would at home, following hygiene and grooming regimes as closely as possible, all the while wired up to a panoply of medical equipment monitoring their every movement. In a sense, this scene demonstrates Wallace’s oft commented on prescience as this setting may well appear less alien to us at a time in which such technology has been integrated into our daily existence in the form of wearables and home gadgets.

Unsurprisingly, neither of the characters are satisfied by the outcome of the sleep clinic. The conclusion of the experiment sees them watching a recording in which they are seen lying side by side, *both* asleep. Far from conclusive, the recording is, in fact, deeply disturbing. Watching in ‘rigid fascination,’ Hope and the narrator look upon their sleeping

² Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, p. 124.

³ David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion*, 1st ed (New York: Little, Brown, 2004).

bodies as grotesque corpses: ‘prone, twisted figures of a vehicular accident or ‘Crime Scene.’”⁴ These recorded figures are reflected back to them in an utterly alien, abstract form: ‘wholly unfamiliar, inhuman, unconscious visage.’⁵ A perceptual reconciliation is therefore accomplished between the couple insofar as they are both equally horrified upon reception of the recording. One may assume that this horror emerges from the couple’s unfamiliarity with visual technology which has left them startled by their mediated forms, but rather, the opposite is true. It is the narrator’s technical familiarity – his cultivated perception which has been trained on the technology itself – which makes the experience so bewildering. The narrator works for a company providing data for insurance companies, spending his days monitoring charts which bear a striking resemblance to his and his wife’s sleep data. He is therefore adept at spotting patterns across different data, reading his own body like a graph. Upon viewing his EEG graph, he likens its ‘dramatic troughs and spikes’ to ‘an arrhythmic heart,’ a ‘financially troubled or erratic ‘Cash Flow’ graph’ and a ‘series of Hewlett-Packard HP9400B mainframes arrayed in sequence for co-sequential ... data processing.’⁶ Similarly, his jargonistic account of the sleep video suggests that the source of the horror lies not in the technology but the ‘reality’ it reveals; one which can be seen only by one so acquainted with the technical apparatus. The fact that he cannot interpret his own image in the technologies he knows so well opens up a new reality – in ‘Oblivion,’ this is literal.

The twist of the story, detailed economically in the last half page, is that this narrative has been a nightmare experienced (perplexingly) by the narrator’s wife, Hope. Profoundly shocked by the image of *his* unconscious inert form, the sleeper (the subjectivities now swapped) wakes to the sound of *her* husband trying to rouse her:

“*up*. Wake up, for the love of.”
“God. My God I was having”
“Wake up.”
“Having the worst dream.”⁷

Upon waking in this new reality, the combative relationship is transformed into one of care, as we understand that the husband has been alertly watching over his wife, trying to wake her from the distress of her nightmare. His marital vigilance strangely mirrors the horrified and intense vigilance the “dream” narrator exhibited over his own sleeping form, aided by a

⁴ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 236.

⁵ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 236.

⁶ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 228.

⁷ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 237.

perception cultivated by modern technology. In both (awake and asleep), a vigilant experience is provoked by an overwhelming fascination with the unconscious other. Perception is not to be reconciled with the other's perception but instead is engaged in a relation of radical asymmetry with the dreamer-waker occupied by an obsessive care for the other.

In this way, the tale renders allegorically Levinas's ethical enterprise – an 'other-oriented mode of speaking and thinking' which 'pays less attention to things as they appear to the separated self, and more attention to the search for what they are in themselves, in their radical otherness, even though this is less certain and always more difficult to find.'⁸ What the data reveals is not a conclusive answer to a fraught marital dispute but instead the cooperation and unconscious vigilance of a couple who are experiencing the heartbreak of their daughter, Audrey, leaving home. The snoring was not the issue – the fact that the narrator does not snore is beside the point. The problem identified was the very mechanism, unbeknownst to the couple, which allowed them to cope with their familial crisis: 'empty nest' syndrome. When the narrator is informed by the clinic that his wife is in fact sleeping when she "hears" his snoring, this does not bring triumph but instead emotional clarity: 'My heart had, as it were, 'sunk several inches; I missed our Audrey terribly; I wanted now to go alone to help her pack and Withdraw and be borne back home,' he admits.⁹ Technology here does not resolve their marital problems but instead reveals strategies that they were unaware of – a hidden sociality between the two. In the final page of the novel where the husband shakes his wife awake out of her nightmare, he re-formalises this connection to his traumatised, adrift spouse whose grief over her absent daughter has left her in a profound state of abandonment. Calling out, she questions all her familial relations ('Wait – am I even married?'; 'And who's this Audrey' and 'And what's that – Daddy?') to which the husband can only reiterate 'You are my wife' in an insomniac gesture of care and protection.¹⁰

In this sense, Wallace's tale is exemplary of Walter Benjamin's elusive concept of 'reception in distraction,' the theoretical focus of this chapter. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' Benjamin introduced reception in distraction by claiming that the habituated nature of modern existence – the fact that the modern subject

⁸ Wild, p. 16.

⁹ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 231.

¹⁰ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 237.

has unconsciously developed its sensorium to parry the shocks of everyday life – cultivates a new receptive mode, allowing an interaction with technologically mediated images which are not ideologically determined in advance. In ‘Oblivion,’ the husband’s sustained familiarity with the technology allows him to by-pass its ostensible function (an expensive means to resolve his marital dispute) to perceive the real living presence beside him. Reception in distraction therefore relates to both the subject’s subordination to a technologically mediated reality and their subsequent capacity to perform ‘new tasks of apperception’ as a consequence of their habituation to it.¹¹ It is a dual moment of profound passivity to these technologies and our subsequent “learned” mastery of them. In this chapter I will explore the possibility that art can train this mastery in the spectator. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it, I will probe Benjamin’s demand that art ‘undo the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, [] restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self preservation, and [] do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them.’¹²

3.2. Walter Benjamin’s reception in distraction

Whilst illuminating the theme of distracted reception in Benjamin’s essay, Buck-Morss’s article ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’ also transmits a profound warning against any easy celebration of new technologies and their effects on the masses; indeed, it is this warning which is the impetus of the article. Early on, she cites Benjamin’s ominous claim at the end of the artwork essay: ‘[Humanity’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment of the highest order.’¹³ Her focus on anaesthetics is therefore highly ambivalent and she dedicates a great deal of the essay outlining the dangers of embracing novel anaesthetic technologies ranging from opiates to mass media, which effectively numb the subject from the aesthetic (that is, sensory) shock of modernity. With Benjamin, Buck-Morss traces an historical transformation of the human sensorium

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4: 1938 - 1940* by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, 1st pbk. ed (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), p. 268.

¹² Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered’, *October*, 62 (1992), 3 (p. 5) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/778700>>.

¹³ Buck-Morss, p. 4.

which has adapted to weather the perceptual shocks which have come to characterise modern existence in all its different guises, '[i]n industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos.'¹⁴ Such perceptual conditioning – its ubiquity and uniformity – has inaugurated a new form of hegemonic social control in which subjects are manipulated and paralysed by these seductive phantasmagorias which sustain these technologically-mediated realities.

In this sense, Buck-Morss describes a modern phenomenon which I have come to describe as banal insomnia: a public administration of anaesthetic technologies which expose a 'conscious, intentional manipulation of the [subject's] synaesthetic system.'¹⁵ 'It's goal,' she writes, is 'to *numb* the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory.'¹⁶ It operates as a form of mass social control as the pliant anaesthetized subject is now unable to cognitively reconcile the affective shocks of the modern world but instead, in a compensatory fashion, merely learns to buffer themselves against them through anaesthetic strategies. '[R]esponse to stimuli *without* thinking has become necessary for survival,' Buck-Morss explains. A paradigmatic example she uses to document this 'transformation in perception' is the introduction of anaesthesia into medicine. Whilst she does not decry the advent of anaesthetics for the purposes of surgery, it does lend an evocative analogy to this new form of governance fuelled by the narcotic administration of everyday life:

Labor specialization, rationalization and integration of social functions, created a techno-body of society, and it was imagined to be as insensate to pain as the individual body under general anaesthetics, so that any number of operations could be performed upon the social body without need to concern oneself lest the patient – society itself – "utter piteous cries and moans"¹⁷

What is vital here is not merely how the anaesthesia saves the patient from the agony of surgery but how it in turn transforms the experience of the surgeon: 'Whereas surgeons earlier had to train themselves to repress empathic identification with the suffering patient, now they had only to confront an inert, insensate mass that they could tinker with without emotional involvement.'¹⁸ For Buck-Morss, this is a prime example of the ways in which the alienation and numbing of the senses caused by a myriad of anaesthetic operations in

¹⁴ Buck-Morss, p. 16.

¹⁵ Buck-Morss, p. 18.

¹⁶ Buck-Morss, p. 18.

¹⁷ Buck-Morss, p. 30.

¹⁸ Buck-Morss, p. 28.

modernity displaces a sensuous sociality (between surgeon and patient) with a social atomization in which subjects are trained to accept, and even celebrate, their subjugation through the careful manipulation of their external stimuli. Whereas previously, without anaesthesia, the surgeon would be compelled by a profound physiological response to aid the suffering other in a manner which echoes a Levinasian ethical call,¹⁹ this relationship is now radically sanitised by anaesthetic technology with the unconscious patient perceived as mere brute matter to be penetrated and worked on.

As noted, this development is most palatable in its use for surgical procedures, however, Buck-Morss also describes how mass identification with the anaesthetised subject – through anaesthetic operations from drug abuse to highly stimulative mediatic environments – leads the public to ‘see [themselves] as a physical body divorced from sensory vulnerability – a statistical body, the behaviour of which can be calculated.’²⁰ The threat of fascism resides in the management of these technologies which render the public a “body” which can be manipulated and operated on. The public’s identification with the anaesthetised subject and self-administered anaesthetic strategies prevents them from seeing their exploitation. Even worse, it may lead them, as Benjamin warns, to see their ‘own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure.’²¹

There is, therefore, seemingly undergirding this ethical critique what appears to be an intuitive nostalgia for a time prior to these anaesthetic interventions which have rendered the human and political body pliable and manipulable; a time in which the intersubjective interactions are less mediated by oppressive technologies. However, this would be to misinterpret Benjamin’s argument: fascism is not inherent to these technologies; rather, it thrives in its *management* of these new technologies. It thrives by exploiting a crisis brought about independently by technological and social revolution, a revolution, Benjamin claims in the first paragraph of the artwork essay, that promised ‘not only an increasingly harsh exploitation of the proletariat but, ultimately, the creation of conditions which would make

¹⁹ Buck-Morss cites Sir Charles Bell, a Scottish anatomist practicing in the early 19th century who recalls his experience performing limb operations without anaesthesia as a field doctor: ‘“But there must ever be associated with the honours of Waterloo, in my eyes, the shocking signs of woe: to my ears, accents of intensity, outcry from the manly breast, interrupted, forcible expressions from the dying – and noisome smells.”’ (p. 15)

²⁰ Buck-Morss, p. 37.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 242.

it possible for capitalism to abolish itself.’²² This accounts for the ambivalence of Benjamin’s essay and his equivocal stance on novel technologies. Fascism disassembles the public through anaesthetic and phantasmagoric strategies in order to subsequently reorder it into a totality which can be manipulated. However, the promise that these technologies hold (the “conditions” they create) emerge from their ability to penetrate the modern subject’s habitual existence to such an extent that the purported ideological messages of the technology are displaced by the subject’s unconsciously trained mastery of the technology. The sensory shock of modernity initiates a physiological change in the subject and through repeated interaction with the technologies, the subject’s apperception is conditioned to ‘see through’ the technologies, such that they are divested of any totalising ideology.

Cinema, Benjamin claims, is the ideal training ground for this purpose. Film destroys the “aura” of the artwork. Associated with traditional art, the aura signifies uniqueness and authenticity evoking art’s inaccessibility and unassailable distance from the viewer. It refers to a kind of intersubjective experience between the viewer and the artwork in which the art object gazes back at the viewer producing a harmonious union between the viewer and the elusive mystery of the artwork. The artwork is therefore reminiscent of the approach of another person; the ‘aura in all its fullness’ elicits a ‘response characteristic of human relationships’ which is now ‘transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects.’²³ Given its unique, elusive quality, Benjamin argues that the aura is what withers away in the age of mechanically produced art when the replicated artwork has none of the auratic originality or uniqueness of its predecessors: ‘In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the artwork – its unique existence in a particular place.’²⁴ Speaking of the Dadaists, Benjamin describes their ‘ruthless annihilation of the aura’ by identifying in their films an undeniably tactile quality which eschews meditative contemplation. Unable to be subsumed by fascistic ideology because the filmic images shift too quickly and do not conform to a clear semantic intention, ‘film [frees] the physical shock effect.’²⁵ If as Benjamin noted, the anaesthetic technologies shock the subject thus rendering them pliable, he also points to an alternate possibility – that through habituated interaction with these technologies and the fact that it is consumed in such a way

²² Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, p. 251.

²³ Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, p. 338.

²⁴ Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, p. 253.

²⁵ Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, p. 267.

that bypasses cognitive thought, the subject may develop an apperception which is not vulnerable to the ideology which appears to undergird these technologies. It enables instead an ‘optical unconscious,’ to emerge, one which is not determined by political ideology in advance but, rather, by an ‘other nature’ altogether.

In her detailed essay ‘Benjamin’s Aura,’ Miriam Bratu Hansen bemoans what she perceives as the straitened legacy of Benjamin’s concept, namely that aura’s uncanny, daemonic aspect has been excluded in this one-sided view, bolstered by the artwork essay, which associates the aura exclusively with the idea of beautiful semblance, a regressive valorisation of the cult of beauty and tradition.²⁶ As Hanson notes, the decision by Benjamin in this late essay to distance this ‘optical unconscious’ from the aura concept is likely rooted in political fears: a profound awareness of its effectiveness in a nationalist, fascist project. However, in doing so, reception in distraction as a strategy suffers from the absence of the clarification which his elsewhere analysis of the aura offers. It may very well be that Benjamin sought to distinguish between a ‘genuine’ aura and a ‘simulated’ aura but, as Hansen argues, the artwork essay rhetorically attacks both by attributing a ‘destructive, cathartic’ function to the two.²⁷ Nevertheless, Benjamin does appear to separate the two when he refers to *genuine* aura in more constructive terms, identifying it as an omnipresent and ubiquitous perceptual possibility:

First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in kinds of things, as people imagine. Second, the aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement of the object whose aura it is. Third, genuine aura can in no sense be thought of as a spruced-up version of the magic rays beloved of spiritualists which we find depicted and described in vulgar works of mysticism. On the contrary, the distinctive feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo, in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case.²⁸

Grounded in tactile experience, Benjamin reveals the constant possibility that the material reality of the everyday may be grasped by the illuminating auratic quality of all objects. Benjamin’s description of the aura as an ‘ornamental halo’ enclosing its objects in

²⁶ Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Benjamin’s Aura’, *Critical Inquiry*, 34.2 (2008), 336–75 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/529060>>.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 22.

²⁸ Bratu Hansen, p. 358.

a case echoes his characterization of the aura elsewhere as a paradoxical sensible proximity which expresses only distance between viewer and object: ‘a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance however near it may be.’²⁹ This intimately and sensibly felt distance does not afford the cathartic comfort in tradition and mysticism that the ‘simulated’ aura does. Rather, the ‘genuine’ aura, shorn of its mythic buffer, involuntarily involves the viewer in a perceptual relation in which the inanimate object antagonistically returns their gaze. The waning, persistently ‘in decline’ status of the genuine aura offers only a deathly stare. Benjamin describes this in early photography: ‘What was inevitably felt to be inhuman – one might even say deadly – in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze.’³⁰ He is right to say the camera does not return our gaze; rather it is our searching perception (‘the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed’) which meets an indistinct yet nonetheless visceral response in that upon which we look. As Hansen puts it, ‘[i]n this mode of vision, the gaze of the object, however familiar, is experienced by the subject as other and prior, strange and heteronomous. Whether conceptualized in terms of a constitutive lack, split, or loss, this other gaze in turn confronts the subject with a fundamental strangeness within and of the self.’³¹

As such, it is in reception, ignited by the distracted nonintentional gaze of the viewer in which the archaic, alien element of ourselves “flashes” in a moment of uncanny recognition: ‘not only do its images appear without being called up; rather, they are images we have never seen before we remember them.’³² He links this directly to a Proustian *memoire involuntaire*: a sensibly felt auratic experience which rekindles an archaic, ahistoric past, and in so doing, resurrects ‘the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now,’³³ the promise of another future nestled within the relics of the past. This recollection is not seized by a legible chain of association but shocked into existence by a visceral, unanticipated response. Levinas shares Benjamin’s interest in Proust’s uncanny ability to draw the Other out of the known, unveiling the mysterious indeterminate shadow which resides beneath our intelligible world: ‘Behind the mainsprings of the soul lies the shiver

²⁹ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, p. 23.

³⁰ Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, p. 338.

³¹ Bratu Hansen, p. 345.

³² Benjamin qtd. in Bratu Hansen, p. 348.

³³ Benjamin qtd. in Bratu Hansen, p. 341.

through which the self takes possession of self, the dialogue in the self with the other, the soul of the soul.³⁴ It is Proust's 'amorality,' his capacity to surpass the novel's worldliness and 'fill[] his world with the wildest freedom, and confer[] on definite objects and beings a scintillating sense of possibility undulled by definition.'³⁵ This sense of limitless possibility is not a transportation to another world but a reconnection with a 'reality [which] exceeds its definition ... where the ego must assume that which it quite naturally felt was already its own.'³⁶ For Benjamin and Levinas, this experience is facilitated by our habituation and socialisation to a language and culture which, in its very appeal to totality, inevitably fails to subsume the silent archaic presence which haunts it. As Levinas puts it:

The manifestation of the other is, to be sure, produced from the first conformably with the way every meaning is produced. ... The other is given in the concreteness of the totality in which he is immanent, and ... is expressed and disclosed by our own cultural initiative, by corporeal, linguistic or artistic gestures.³⁷

In the following sections, I will explore this 'cultural initiative' through two figures, Andy Warhol and David Foster Wallace, tracking the ways in which their respective art practices simultaneously mirror and penetrate contemporary society. Inspired by their persistent relevance as cultural figures, I will first examine how Warhol's recent appearance in a 2019 Super Bowl advert encourages a mode of reception in distraction first modelled in his early cinematic works. After this, I will focus on novelist Wallace's thematization of anaesthetics in his novel *Infinite Jest*, exploring how Wallace's portrayal of recovery programmes like Alcoholics Anonymous advocates a disavowal of worldly mastery in order to facilitate ethical relationships. Both Warhol and Wallace serve as multifaceted subjects of critique: on the one hand, their artworks provide indispensable meditations on our commercially saturated societies whilst, on the other hand, they serve as symbolic figures in and of themselves with names and distinctive appearances which stretch beyond the reach of their artworks. It's a friction which determines the reception of their works. With Warhol and Wallace, their respective fame and extra-textual iconography coupled with the excessive, passive nature of their works analogically replicates the tension of this thesis: the seductive thoughtlessness of banal insomnia culture and the irrepressible insomniac burden which can never be entirely contained within it.

³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), p. 163.

³⁵ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, p. 162.

³⁶ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, p. 162.

³⁷ Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 95.

As noted, the two protagonists of this chapter are artists who intrude upon our no-longer-early-21st century world with surprising frequency; posthumously enjoying a relevance that persists beyond their respective eras as figures of our time. In 2022 alone, Warhol was the subject of two separate documentary series and a West End play dramatizing his collaboration with Jean-Michel Basquiat (another late figure who is subject to a contemporary James Dean-like fascination). Wallace too exhibits an unwavering relevance (in 2022, a three-day conference on his work was held in Texas), though this seems to be more suffused into the general zeitgeist of the young, affluent and university educated. Reading *Infinite Jest* figures as the *Ulysses*-like accomplishment of our time whilst Wallace's 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech 'This is Water' serves as a collegiate rite of passage, expressing the ennui of a growing class of educated youth who strain to establish meaning in their secular, cynical lives – the cultivated descendants of jaded postmodernists. Given their ubiquity and the dangerous romanticisation of their respective biographies, Warhol and Wallace come to us with their own auratic quality: absent, complicated geniuses who perpetually haunt and explain our cultural landscape. In a sense, the current nostalgia for these two figures demonstrates a desire to unearth from their past works a pre-emptive critique of a world that has now come to pass. The “narcissism of the now” sees them more accurately interpreted as *ahead* of their time, addressing the contemporary moment in which irony, commodification and artifice has reached its pinnacle – of which they were vigilant observers and enlightened prophets.

There is, however, something in our contemporary fascination with these two icons that suggests that we are still left wanting. We have obsessively mined their biographies and display their paraphernalia as if to capture the personality and material traces left behind.³⁸ We agitate to know more of these artists' lives— their relationships, fears, desires, vulnerabilities and vices. And yet, there is something in their respective artworks which holds us as viewers or readers at a perpetual distance, unable to move closer to the creators who inhere on the other side of it. Despite the expansiveness and excess of their creative outputs, it is almost not enough for spectators and readers. Any allusion to depth is an

³⁸ A comprehensive inventory of David Foster Wallace's papers is held at the Harry Ransom Center in Texas. The collection is seen as a vital resource for David Foster Wallace studies and includes material 'research materials, his own heavily annotated library, and early work stretching through his college and graduate school writings to a poem he wrote as a young child.' (Irvine, 2010) Andy Warhol's retrieved "Time Capsules" evoke a similar enthusiasm regarding the minutiae of his life and creative process. Held at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, the collection includes 300,000 of Warhol's everyday possessions (from junk mail and unopened letters to sweet packets) which he accumulated over the course of his life. (Elmes, 2014)

anathema to Warhol's cold, clinical style whereas Wallace continuously fails to deliver the sincerity and straightforwardness that his public persona advocates for.

They both exhibit something akin to Adorno's theory of 'late style'; Warhol and Wallace do in a sense haunt their work but always at a remove, only negatively under the shadow of their absence. One may be inclined to see this in biographical terms: two artists considered to have died before their time. However, Adorno rejects any biographical explanation for 'late style'. 'Late style' rather refers to an artwork's ambivalent subjective presence which can only be sensed in the creator's absence, 'the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves.'³⁹ For in the formal gratuitousness of Warhol and Wallace's art, there lies a profound passivity which relinquishes control over its own elements: an 'overabundance of material ... that are no longer penetrated and mastered by subjectivity, but simply left to stand.'⁴⁰ The author is no longer present to formalise the works but has instead 'set[] free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being are its final work.'⁴¹ These works are testament to the inadequacy of the author to harmonise his material into a conceptualisation which transcends its aberrant, untameable materiality. As such, I will explore the vacuity of Warhol and Wallace's artworks: both formally and thematically engage with the anaesthetic technologies of banal insomnia however through their intentionless passivity of their art, they provide a means to "see through" them.

3.3. Andy Warhol's commercial black hole

For a foreign observer, the Super Bowl is a curious phenomenon. The annual final NFL (National Football League) playoff is a celebration of consumption, competition and capitalism, often marketed as much for its extravagant half-time show and high-budget commercials. Dubbed the 'second largest food consumption day' by the US department of Agriculture (second only to Thanksgiving), the Super Bowl brings an array of eye-popping feats of consumption each year and is the stage for the world's most expensive and anticipated adverts. According to Matthew McAllister and Elysia Galindo-Ramirez, the

³⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard D. Leppert, trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2002), p. 566.

⁴⁰ Adorno, p. 566.

⁴¹ Adorno, p. 566.

Super Bowl (or alternatively ‘Ad Bowl’) is ‘groundbreaking’ in its successful integration of advertising and entertainment in its over 50 year history: ‘it has perhaps been the single biggest force in moving American culture into a digital world in which the categories of advertising, promotion, and media content are increasingly blurred, and where this blurring is more anticipated and accepted.’⁴²

At the 2019 Super Bowl, a Burger King advert surprised the many millions of Americans watching the year’s largest sporting event. The 45-second video, filmed in a static wide-shot, rested on the figure of Andy Warhol, seated, opening and consuming a Burger King Whopper. The film is mostly silent save the rustle of wrappers and Andy at one point softly stating, “It doesn’t come out”, as he struggles with a Heinz ketchup bottle. Andy is bashful and unassuming, his gaze lowered onto his food. The film ends simply, with the imperative hashtag #EatLikeAndy printed across the frame.

The use of this video for the Burger King advert is remarkable, not least because its retro aesthetic, slow pace and low-cost production trumps its commercial counterparts in the vastly expensive competition for high-concept advertising. The advert is uncanny, the union of product and artist representing a convergence almost too perfect to be believable (a common response was to ask: “is it even him?”). Further, withholding any explanation, it plays on the insecurities of a not insubstantial number of the audience to whom Warhol’s appearance is unrecognisable and for that reason not notable. The point being that the audience *should* recognise the iconic Warhol despite the fact that the footage was nearly 40 years old at that point: US culture is not determined by historical proximity. The long dead Andy is as quintessentially American as American football (or Heinz Tomato Soup or Marilyn Monroe for that matter). Hence, the hashtag #EatLikeAndy reverberates with patriotic duty and a 21st century call to indulge in a specifically American pastime.

In 2019, this commercial is supremely Warholian in its duplicity with its dual capacity to function as a canny marketing strategy, as well as an irresistible subject of academic and cultural critique.⁴³ It’s characteristic of Warhol’s edged superficiality which

⁴² Matthew P. McAllister and Elysia Galindo-Ramirez, ‘Fifty Years of Super Bowl Commercials, Thirty-Two Years of Spectacular Consumption’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 34.1–2 (2017), 46–64 (p. 58) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1336162>>.

⁴³ ⁴³ The clip, however, is not from Warhol’s own work. Directed by Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth, Warhol’s burger-eating is the standout scene from *66 Scenes from America*, a 1982 documentary seeking to present short scenes of US daily life: highways, New York taxi cabs, the Grand Canyon. Its commercial use, therefore,

encourages and glories in passive consumption whilst, almost reluctantly, eliciting a critical eye. Since airing, the advert has sparked copious think-pieces, the theme of a 2020 issue of *Short Film Studies* and worked its way into this thesis; none of which staunch its ostensibly first-order function to sell. The use of Warhol as a brand representative reveals the fallacy of celebrity endorsement as incentivising consumers – legend has it, he wanted a McDonald’s Big Mac for the shoot instead. Rather the advert asks viewers to reward a promotional kismet which providentially bestowed the Burger King marketing team (and us) with the meeting of two icons. This overlapping iconography captures something of the sublimated cynicism of the viewers in its glamorous appeal to conformity. It’s there in the straightforwardness of the punchline: #EatLikeAndy.

Critical theory has long seen advertising as exemplary of the insidious mechanics of mass culture; Adorno and Horkheimer’s famous chapter closer, ‘the triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false,’ remains true here.⁴⁴ The intriguing thing about #EatLikeAndy, however, is its disarming candidness, albeit with a set-up (the original documentary) which is overtly contrived and artificial. Rather there is something that feels authentic – or perhaps better, unmediated – about Warhol’s bashfulness and the video’s minimalism. In his critique of Warhol’s prints, Jameson describes this inertness or perceived lack of intention as a hostility to the viewer unique to photography: ‘Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer, who confronts it at the turning of a museum corridor or gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object.’⁴⁵ Here, the museum is now the television screen and #EatLikeAndy emerges with all the anonymity of an archaeological retrieval. As one critic has it, this constitutes a perverse exhumation:

In an almost visceral way, the morbid mood of Sunday’s ads hinted at an expansion of Warhol’s 15-minutes-of-fame principle past the truism it’s already become. One day we will each leave this Earth, but our image no longer will. If gods or accomplishments or loved

becomes a European-produced selling of America to Americans; a critique which would not be out of place in a review of Warhol’s own oeuvre.

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, 2016), p. 136.

⁴⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 8.

ones do not ensure immortality, at least the corporations might, as there's no buyer that can't also become a seller.⁴⁶

Warhol's self-image transformed posthumously into commodity is perhaps the final instalment of his oeuvre. What is deathly, of course, is that Warhol cannot die – he endures, obstinately, echoing a persistent capitalist culture in which his iconic signification of the ubiquity of commodities remains relevant. Our awareness of the iconography of Warhol endows us with the negligible cultural literacy to “get” the advert. Such comprehension – this lazy half-recognition – quells any committed artistic engagement by instantly marking out the limited territory required for its reception. Warhol becomes commercial signification itself, the reified representative of Jameson's ‘isolated Signifier,’ shorn of context or a narrative chain of signification.⁴⁷ Andy and the whopper: nothing more is needed.

And yet, there he is, still looking at the camera. Though only 45-seconds long, Warhol still appears to outstay his welcome. As the advert critic remarked, there is something deathly in the image. In those interminable 45 seconds, Warhol is drained of his iconography and all that is left is his awkward, outdated presence. Warhol's image persists after its commercial function has been realised, inspiring a kind of obsessive and unnerving fascination with his movements. It's these unconscious movements which concern the majority of scholarly reflections in the *Short Films Studies* journal dedicated to the film: in one, Gills details his eye contact, a ‘repetitive action of establishing and then breaking eye contact, which occurs about fifteen times throughout the film’⁴⁸; in another, Bohlinger tracks his body language minutely: ‘He leans forward slightly, resting his arms on the table, and alternately flits his eyes directly at the camera while staring off into some middle distance in a number of directions. All the while, his face modules between different expressions, all equally quizzical and inviting interpretation as to what he is thinking.’⁴⁹ Another academic helpfully breaks down the video into 30 photographic shots to aid closer examination, providing ‘a schematic outline of the film, making it possible to refer to

⁴⁶ Spencer Kornhaber, ‘Andy Warhol's Meta and Morbid Message Haunted the Super Bowl Ads’, *The Atlantic*, 4 February 2019 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/02/burger-kings-andy-warhol-super-bowl-ad-meta-morbid/581992/>> [accessed 8 November 2022].

⁴⁷ Jameson, p. 26.

⁴⁸ Libertad Gills, ‘Eye Contact in *Andy Warhol Eating a Hamburger*’, *Short Film Studies*, 10.2 (2020), 149–52 (p. 149) <https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs_00006_1>.

⁴⁹ Vincent Bohlinger, ‘Commercialism and the Quotidian’, *Short Film Studies*, 10.2 (2020), 141–44 (p. 142) <https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs_00004_1>.

specific moments by number.’⁵⁰ What’s intriguing about these responses is that they broadly concur with the puzzled response of the average viewer who, having been trained on the medium of TV and advertising, is similarly an expert analyst. In a poll likely to have Adorno and Horkheimer spinning, viewers were asked to review the advert and a few interesting things emerge. Firstly, only 35% of viewers recognised the figure as Andy Warhol. And yet most, whether they liked the advert or not, commented on its oddity and the awkwardness of its hero: ‘Andy is just a character, his mannerisms are like a child almost’; ‘I thought the guy was pretty odd-looking and really couldn’t figure out exactly what he was going to do’; ‘just an odd man eating a burger with too much ketchup.’⁵¹

Warhol, over thirty years after his death, suffers the same ruthless exposure that his own muses faced in his filmic works. The harsh ‘optical unconscious’ of the camera has stripped him of his iconography, relegating him to some weird guy eating a burger. His iconography does not save him from the camera’s unforgiving and extensive lens. Rather, as the reviewers’ discomfort demonstrates, the commercial spell of Warhol’s image is broken and he instead functions as a disconcerting mirror to the Super Bowl consumers. In this sense, the advert’s commercial function is transformed via its excessive form from, as Buck-Morss would have it, a ‘phantasmagoric, or narcissistic, escape from’ the external world into a ‘reflective’ technology, ‘giving back to the man-in-the-crowd his own image – the narcissistic image of the intact ego, constructed against the fear of the body-in-pieces.’⁵² The guilelessly compulsive Super Bowl consumers see themselves unflatteringly rendered on the screen – awkward, obedient burger eaters, fulfilling the commercial dictates laid down by near-constant advertising.

Warhol is unlikely to have been too perturbed by his uncanny appearance; he may have in fact embraced it. As he famously said: ‘If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.’⁵³ In this, he accedes the power of his films to reveal more than he could say or even know in advance. Rather, the penetrating prolonged gaze of the camera draws

⁵⁰ Richard Raskin, ‘A Schematic Breakdown of *Andy Warhol Eating a Hamburger*’, *Short Film Studies*, 10.2 (2020), 138–40 (pp. 138–40) <https://doi.org/10.1386/sfs_00003_7>.

⁵¹ Danny Klein, ‘Did Burger King’s Andy Warhol Ad Resonate?’, *QSR Magazine*, February 2019, section Marketing and Promotions <<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/marketing-promotions/did-burger-kings-andy-warhol-ad-resonate>> [accessed 11 September 2022].

⁵² Buck-Morss, p. 39.

⁵³ J. J. Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera: The Films of Andy Warhol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 15.

out all. As one *Screen Test* “sitter” put it: ‘if you sit somebody in front of a camera for an hour and a half and don’t tell them what to do, they’re going to do everything, their whole vocabulary. I went through my entire history of gestures.’⁵⁴ The excess emerges in the camera’s shameless persistence, rejecting the diverting logic of the advert through its longevity. Warhol too may well have embraced the practice of reviewing adverts as it was the reception of his artworks, far above any thematic value, which was of the utmost importance. Justin Remes points out that one of his lesser-known films *Water* (1971), a 32-minute fixed-shot film of a watercooler, most explicitly identifies Warhol’s focus. ‘A watercooler is a quintessential site of sociality, a locus of snacking, drinking, chatting, joking, and so on – precisely the kind of object that Warhol’s static film yearns to be.’⁵⁵ As Remes argues, it is precisely the unassuming, eminently ignorable ‘furniture’ status of the water cooler which Warhol hoped to replicate in his films. Remes’s term here was inspired by composer Erik Satie’s description of his own music as ‘furniture music’: ‘music that would be a part of the surrounding noises ...[,] masking the clatter of knives and forks without drowning it completely, without imposing itself.’⁵⁶ In interpreting Warhol’s films as an attempt to accommodate and perhaps even be subsumed by its surrounding environment, Remes counters the impulse to watch the films intently from start to finish. As Warhol himself tells us, ‘You could do more things watching my movies than with other kinds of movies: you could eat and drink and smoke and cough and look away and then look back and they’d still be there.’⁵⁷

Here Warhol reveals the other side of this ‘furniture’ status – its omnipresence, the very quotidian things that the eye misses but are nonetheless *there, always there*. It is therefore in Warhol’s carefully cultivated vacuity in which a presence persists, a kind of insomniac gaze, impervious to the passage of time. It waits inexhaustibly, imperishably, as its viewers distract themselves with other activities. In this sense, these distractions enjoyed against the backdrop of ‘furniture art’ take on a kind-of escapist, errant quality as the viewers voluntarily busy themselves away from the omnipresent broadcast. The films offer no conflict nor vying for attention – they simply sit there, playing in the background awaiting a distracted glance. This disinterested reception is not unique to Super Bowl

⁵⁴ Murphy, p. 5.

⁵⁵ J. Remes, ‘Serious Immobilities: Andy Warhol, Erik Satie and the Furniture Film’, *Screen*, 55.4 (2014), 447–59 (p. 451) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hju035>>.

⁵⁶ Remes, p. 448.

⁵⁷ Remes, p. 449.

viewers; it was elicited from the outset of Warhol's career. Reflecting on the reception of Warhol's debut film *Sleep*, Stephen Koch describes the animated distraction of its viewers who would treat the film as a casual backdrop to a social event: 'People would chat during the screening, leave for a hamburger and return, greet friends and talk over old times. All the while the film serenely devolved up there on the screen of the Film-Makers Cinematheque. The Sleeper breathed, stirred sometimes on the couch.'⁵⁸ As previously noted, this was just the reception that Warhol sought.

Given the passivity inherent to his filmic form, it is perhaps not surprising that the subject of Warhol's first film is sleep. Filmed in 1964, Warhol's debut *Sleep* consists of over five hours of his lover John Giorno asleep. In this early creation, Warhol best summarises the paradoxical nature of his work: a relentless documentation of somnolence. It serves as a neat description of his aesthetic project – an unyielding insomniac lens on the subject of anaesthetic, commercial culture. *Sleep*, in its tedium and hostility to the gaze of the viewer, connects the two elements required to induce a Benjaminian distracted reception: anaesthesia and phantasmagoric technology. Through the extended use of phantasmagoric technology (in this case, film), the capitalist ideology underpinning it is warped by the film's persistence; in its refusal to end, the viewer becomes desensitized to the ostensible "message" of the medium. Even so, the hostility of the form is, of course, only noticed if there is a viewer present. As such, Warhol's interest in reception over and above any thematic value of his artworks is instructive. Warhol's artworks are vigilant – they maintain a watchful eye on the subject of the artwork even if this subject is engaged in the solipsistic, self-affirming practice of sleep. The camera never stops watching.

Composed in the 1960s, the vigilance of Warhol's camera entailed a social component and an impulse to memorialise the sleeping subject in the face of an era of alertness which introduced new means of sustaining wakefulness. In his memoir from that time, *POPism*, Warhol reveals that the inspiration for *Sleep* emerged from the advent of a quintessentially 60s amphetamine-fuelled wakefulness, an extreme work and play ethic artificially boosted by uppers 'to give you that wired, happy go-go-go feeling in your

⁵⁸ Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: Andy Warhol's World and His Films* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), p. 39.

stomach that made you want to work-work-work.’⁵⁹ Sensing this emerging, hedonistic temporality – ‘a nonstop party ... everything just flowed into everything else’ – Warhol saw in sleep a fading experience and temporality which needed capturing. ‘Seeing everybody so up all the time made me think that sleep was becoming pretty obsolete, so I decided I’d better quickly do a movie of a person sleeping.’⁶⁰ He thus saw in the sleeping figure the soon-to-be anachronistic subject, a victim of modernity’s voracious drive. Akin to Benjamin’s concept of the genuine aura, Warhol’s film seeks to capture something of the “fundamental strangeness” of the sleeping figure which cannot entirely be subsumed by modernity’s allure. The irony here of course was that Warhol’s pursuit required something of the insomniac energy he had perceived in order to capture the restful sleeper. It was not simply that Warhol had to stay awake throughout the filming but also that the filming itself was limited to 3-minute shots in one go, as the camera he used only accepted one hundred rolls of film at a time. In this committed project, Warhol could not relieve himself from a close, restless attention of his subject. In its creation, *Sleep* required an insomniac labour which was not demanded of its privileged future audience. This disparity between its creation and consumption anticipates the contradiction of the artwork; one that makes no demands on the audience and in fact encourages escape and distraction, all the while revealing in momentary glances an interrogative, sleepless vigilance.

Warhol’s three-minute editing gives his film a disjunctive quality. Unlike his other filmic works which were often filmed with a stationary camera, frequently unmanned (Warhol had a habit of abandoning his camera as it rolled), Warhol “cheated” with *Sleep*, splicing long body shots with close ups of *Giorno*’s torso and face respectively. Nevertheless, the sleeper projects an impossible stillness in the slow movement of these shots – a temporality exaggerated by Warhol’s decision to slow the film from 24 to 16 frames-per-second. The film’s autonomy and slow yet perceptible progression transforms the sleeping subject (under the gaze of the viewer or not) into an eerily unstable figure, whose presence ranges in tone from the erotic to the cadaverous. His continuous breath, however, keeps the figure animated by a palpability, however inhuman. The image is never allowed to rest in itself. Further, its discordant time is maintained internally and self-sufficiently, imposing upon any watchers an unaccommodating temporality which

⁵⁹ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties*, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 33.

⁶⁰ Warhol and Hackett, p. 33.

expresses, above all, the insurmountable distance of the image. Along these lines, Koch argues that the film does not need the intense gaze of the committed viewer; rather, all it takes is a glimpse at the screen to invade one's worldly consciousness with its alien presence: 'Even if one only glances at the image from time to time, it plunges one into a cinematic profundity; in a single stroke, that image effects a complete transformation of all temporal modes ordinarily associated with looking at a movie.'⁶¹ Again, Benjamin's genuine aura is helpful to elucidate the effect of Warhol's film. In its unassuming lack of provocation, Warhol's film inspires a Proustian *memoire involuntaire* through its ability to make 'images appear without being called up.' Due to its atemporality, the film, 'developed in a darkroom of the lived moment,' cuts through modernity's appeal to totality by revealing a picture of reality unsupported by any kind of cultural literacy.⁶² Upon receiving the film, one cannot escape into any of the narcissistic illusions which populate capitalist culture. Rather the film institutes an ahistorical moment of confrontation which Benjamin describes explicitly in insomniac terms: 'We stand in front of ourselves, the way we might have stood somewhere in a prehistoric past, but never before our waking gaze.'⁶³

It is telling that Warhol's first subject in film was sleep; it certainly was not John Giorno himself whose physical force was often barely intelligible as human in the film. Warhol's recognition of sleep's diminishing value in the 1960s coincides with the fragile, not yet extinguished vitality that it holds in the film. If sleep signifies a solipsistic withdrawal into one's subjective being, then the film imposes an insomniac receptive mode on the viewer, specifically through its unyielding exploration of the subject's fleshy and impenetrable encasement. The experience is visceral; as Koch puts it, 'one senses life before grasping what is being seen.'⁶⁴ Even so, it pronounces over and over again the distance between the viewer and the subject, no matter the perceived proximity. Importantly, this insomniac experience is not compulsory – the viewer is free to leave, look away or do something else. However, this evasion does not eliminate the film's eternal returning gaze, a gaze which is incomparable in its patience; it lies in wait for an unthinking glance or unintended caught eye.

⁶¹ Koch, p. 39.

⁶² Benjamin qtd. in Bratu Hansen, p. 348.

⁶³ Benjamin qtd. in Bratu Hansen, p. 348.

⁶⁴ Koch, p. 40.

To return to the 21st century viewers of the Super Bowl and Warhol's deathly exhumation, we find his 20th century critique survive relatively unaltered. #EatLikeAndy makes no demands on the viewer however, as the congruent critical and mainstream reactions demonstrate, Warhol's crude, unanticipated appearance nevertheless has a provocative and enervating quality. In a passage from Benjamin's early work *One Way Street* called 'This Space for Rent,' he describes the critical power of the advertising, specifically highlighting its ability to bypass intellectual mediation and confront the viewer viscerally in their unique situation: 'Today the most real, the most mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen.'⁶⁵ According to Benjamin, advertising institutes a new economy of the sensory system, establishing the supremacy of phantasmagoric technologies to move and condition the docile viewer. The result is as ambivalent as Warhol's artworks, at once successfully aiding and celebrating commercialism's promises ('sentimentality ... restored to health and liberated in American style'⁶⁶) whilst at the same time, revealing a strange, interrogative afterimage. He concludes, '[w]hat, in the end makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says – but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.'⁶⁷

Warhol's awkward consumption does not present an aggressive critique of commercialism – as noted, #EatLikeAndy is an effective advertising strategy. Even so, it contains a persistent, though wholly ignorable element which underlines and passively contradicts its glorification of banal consumption. In Andy's tedious burger eating, we perceive obliquely, almost imperceptibly, an insomniac aberrant component which inspires a strange and ancient form of recognition. This recognition can never entirely be accounted for by the promises of banal insomnia culture.

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), p. 89.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 89.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 90.

3.4. David Foster Wallace and 'irony's special straight face'

As exemplified in the short story 'Oblivion' which opened this chapter, David Foster Wallace shares with Warhol a deep interest in aesthetic reception. Like the bewildered viewers of Warhol's films, 'Oblivion's' characters were engrossed by technology's unexpected transparency, revealing a perspective of themselves which was both disturbingly familiar and recognisable, whilst at the same time, utterly alien and dissociative. It is interesting, therefore, that the technology that lies at the heart of his most famous work, *Infinite Jest*, is the Entertainment – a technology which is the absolute opposite of the horror revealed by the 'Oblivion' video. Rather, it is a technology which encapsulates and fulfils the promise of banal insomnia: an anaesthetic, cynical operation which keeps its viewers in a solipsistic state of unfeeling, unthinking, barely waking bliss. In a sense, these two videos represent the extremes in which Warhol's work hovers between: an exceptionally accommodating consumerist culture combined with sharp, unnerving moments of a Proustian *memoire involuntaire*. Whilst both approach the theme of sociality under late capitalism, Wallace's aesthetic aim is certainly more frustrated than Warhol's (if Warhol's artworks can claim to have an aim at all). If, as I have outlined, Warhol's artwork illuminates, even briefly, the primordial vigilant excess which inheres passively on the outskirts of consumerist culture, Wallace aims to enact a social connection with his readers in the face of a cynical culture which, from the outset, rejects such a possibility. Over the course of Wallace's oeuvre, he sustains a committed attempt to forge and represent such a connection, even as he cannot help but counteract such an aim by intellectualising and rationalising against this premise. It is this very friction which propels his works and keeps his goal perpetually out of reach. In Wallace's works, we are confronted with an artist who faithfully and perceptively replicates the cruelties and isolation of our millennial culture and who, at the same time, cannot shirk his idealistic pursuit of sincere interpersonal connection.

In what follows, I will frame Wallace's pursuit in insomniac terms. On the one hand, Wallace's novels provide a forensic depiction of banal insomnia culture in which characters indulge in all manner of anaesthetic technologies – substance abuse, TV, extreme cynicism – to facilitate sensory reclusion to avoid any sensible interaction with the external world. On the other hand, through his vigilant writing which refuses to lapse into bad faith platitudes, he continuously pronounces a concern for others which can never be

reconciled nor reciprocated as such a satisfaction would break the terms of this asymmetrical ethical gesture. Like the watchful spouse of ‘Oblivion,’ Wallace’s vigilance is obsessive and precludes the possibility of exchange. It is in this sense Levinasian as it avows that the self-affirming consequence of exchange corrupts the one-way gesture of the gift. He is thus doomed to hear only silence from the recipients of his artwork. Even so, Wallace’s works echo with his desire for such a connection. It is through his unabating attempt to fulfil this impossible task in which he posits a fragile yet persistent opposition to the cynicism and cruelties of late capitalist culture.

In the introduction, I speculated that Warhol and Wallace exhibited something akin to an Adornian ‘late style.’ On the surface, there is something outrageous about this claim with regard to Wallace – it is a style, as I have noted, which Adorno characterises as marked by the author’s absence: ‘no longer ... an expression of the solitary I, but of the mythical nature of the created being and its fall.’⁶⁸ To the contrary, Wallace appears alertly present and deeply interwoven in all his works, and consciously so. It is characteristic of Wallace to place himself as a character within his works; for instance, in one of his best-known short stories ‘Good Old Neon,’ he emerges as the character David Wallace who is trying desperately to get inside the mind of a young man whose picture he comes across in his school yearbook. Similarly, in his final unfinished work *The Pale King*, he places an ‘Author’s foreward’ 66 pages into the meat of the novel. He’s emphatic in declaring his real authorial self:

Author her. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona. Granted there sometimes is such a persona in *The Pale King*, but that’s mainly a pro forma statutory construct, an entity that exists just for legal and commercial purposes, rather like a corporation; it has no direct, provable connection to me as a person. But this right here is me as a real person, David Wallace, age forty, SS no. 975-04-2012, addressing you from my Form 8829-deductible home office at 725 Indian Hill Blvd., Claremonth 91711 CA, on this fifth day of spring, 2005.⁶⁹

In fact, many of the characters in his novels appear as Wallace proxies who chime with his avowed crippling insecurity and desire to connect with others, causing one reviewer to note

⁶⁸ Adorno, p. 566.

⁶⁹ David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), pp. 66–67.

‘they all sound like David Foster Wallace.’⁷⁰ As such, a debilitating, idiosyncratic self-consciousness recurs in his writing; characters who long for connection and communication with others but have so deeply internalised this desire that it emerges as a kind-of stultifying anticipatory inertia in which their very actions are subjected to a voracious and unedifying torrent of contemplation. Notable examples include *The Pale King*’s David Cusk: a young “sweater” who is locked in a tortuous recursive loop of anxiety and sweating whereby even just the fear of perspiring precipitates an attack ‘of shattering public sweats.’⁷¹ Or *Infinite Jest*’s Charles Tavis, ‘possibly the openest man of all time’ who counters his incapacitating self-consciousness with a compulsive self-deprecating honesty – an outsider who would nonetheless own up to his self-exile by remarking ‘something like, ‘I’m afraid I’m far too self-conscious really to join in here, so I’m just going to lurk creepily at the fringe and listen, if that’s all right.’⁷² Akin to these characters, countless interviews reveal an author who seeks to forge a connection with others through his work and who sees fiction as a means to ‘affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way, allow them to enter into relationships with ideas and with characters that are not permitted within the cinctures of the ordinary verbal intercourse.’⁷³

These sentiments inform his desire for a new literary movement to emerge which eschews the cynicism and cold distance of their forebears: the ‘next real literary “rebels” ... *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles ... Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue.’⁷⁴ This famous declaration comes at the end of his early essay ‘E Unibus Pluram,’ his manifesto for millennial sincerity. It serves as an introduction to the idealistic foundations of his work in which he bravely risks ‘accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness’ in the pursuit of a writing which unashamedly tries to “speak” to its reader. What Wallace desires is a sincere rhetorical simplicity; one which cannot be destroyed or relentlessly pulled apart by deconstructionist critique but instead can rest easy in its own self-evidence. Due to this,

⁷⁰ Steven Poole, ‘Clause and Effect’, *The Guardian*, 24 July 2004
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jul/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview16>> [accessed 9 November 2022].

⁷¹ Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 93.

⁷² David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, Twentieth anniversary edition (London: Abacus, 2016), p. 517.

⁷³ *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen Burn, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 19.

⁷⁴ David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 2013), p. 81.

many see his involvement in his work, even to the point of entering into it, as part of this aim: a sacrificial honesty in which he proffers himself to the reader as a simple surrogate for the modern subject. Reading ‘Good Old Neon,’ Lee Konstantinou gives such an interpretation, seeing Wallace’s intervention into the text as a kind of ‘meta-nonfiction’: ‘the purpose of this revelation seems to be to cause the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as writer ... not “Dave Wallace” the character, but the author.’⁷⁵ According to Konstantinou, such a gesture suggests an interaction with the writer which is not burdened by postmodern concerns of identity or the extrapolation of language. Instead, Wallace serves himself openly and unproblematically to the reader herself.

These authorial interruptions amount to what Cory M. Hudson has called a ‘Wallace-as-a-human-presence reading’ of his work.⁷⁶ Hudson outlines the temptation to read Wallace’s works as a successful execution of the hopes he declares in his interviews: ‘So if Wallace says in a few interviews that a piece of fiction should make a reader feel less alone, Wallace’s fiction, therefore, must be trying to make a reader feel less alone. ... The sum, the end product is provided; all you need to do is figure out what variable is needed to get to that predetermined end.’⁷⁷ However, such an interpretation elides the avowed failure of his fiction writing. This is evident simply in its scope. If ‘single-entendre’ principles were truly the aim of his writing, the length of his work would give lie to that possibility. Excess goes all the way down: lengthy tomes beget lengthy chapters beget lengthy paragraphs beget sentences which can seem to last forever. One does not retrieve moralistic treasure at the bottom of this dive. As Josh Cohen has noted, this is the trademark feature of Wallace’s “slacker writer”: ‘extravagantly long sentences ... peopled by chains of associative clauses.’⁷⁸ Unlike his modernist forebear Proust, Wallace’s errant sentences do not distil or organise the scene but rather have a sedative quality, ‘dispersing [the scene’s] elements and so loosening our focus.’⁷⁹ And this, in a sense, is how Wallace inhabits his texts, not with the vitality of an alert writerly authority but in the long wistful deliberation of his ultimately fruitless sentences, in left-over traces of his “working out.” As much as

⁷⁵ Lee Konstantinou, ‘No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief’, in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel S. Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, *The New American Canon: The Iowa Series in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 98.

⁷⁶ Cory M. Hudson, ‘David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend: The Fraudulence of Empathy in David Foster Wallace Studies and “Good Old Neon”’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.3 (2018), 295–306 (p. 296) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1399856>>.

⁷⁷ Hudson, p. 298.

⁷⁸ Josh Cohen, *Not Working: Why We Have to Stop* (London: Granta, 2018), p. 212.

⁷⁹ Josh Cohen, *Not Working*, p. 213.

Wallace openly wishes that well-meaning banalities can be true, it is the relentless, sleepless nature of his prose which belies this possibility.

What emerges in his fiction writing is not the cynical upending of the idealism of his interviews but a magnified and plotted account of its failure to manifest. Wallace's desire to inhabit the work and forge a legitimate connection with the reader appears not with the simplicity of the 'single-entendre' but in a continuous, futile digging which can never hit upon the treasure it seeks. It is why reading Wallace's interviews in tandem with his fiction can seem like a disillusioned forebear annihilating the bright-eyed optimism of an intellectual newbie and any guileless reader who may be duped by literary flourish. Take his interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk in 1993 in which he considers fiction to be the exemplary 'anodyne against loneliness': 'there's a way, at least in prose fiction, that can allow you to be intimate with the world and with a mind and with characters that you just can't be in the real world.'⁸⁰ How does this square with the brutal accounts of his hideous men six years later who question even the possibility of love all the while manipulating the women unlucky enough to encounter them? One doesn't need to interpret these men as master manipulators or even take their accounts at face-value to recognise the corruptible transmission of one person's story to another. This is particularly clear in the case of "B.I. #20," where a woman's confession of personal trauma simply becomes an 'anecdote' to be mulled and ridiculed by a hideous interviewee.⁸¹

At other times, this critique is not as excoriating but rather emerges as a faint and futile cry for connection. In these moments, the appearance of the character "David Foster Wallace" in his texts can seem less like a "human presence" and more akin to a desperate final move of a creator attempting to break down the fourth wall of his creation. In another famous early interview with Larry McCaffery from 1993, he states 'We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. *But* if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own.'⁸² And it appears all Wallace's fiction revolves around that "but" – an avowal of the impossibility of such a connection and his undying

⁸⁰ *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, p. 16.

⁸¹ David Foster Wallace, 'B.I. #20', in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2009), pp. 287–318.

⁸² *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen Burn, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 22, emphasis added.

determination to try anyhow. So, when in ‘Good Old Neon,’ “David Wallace” enters blinking into the short story of a young man’s suicide revealing that he is the narrator trying to imagine the man’s thoughts, it is not as Konstatinou has it, a revelation that we have been reading a ‘kind of meta-fiction’ this whole time, in which Wallace pulls back the curtain to reveal his own beating heart. Rather, as soon as “Dave Wallace” enters the page blinking at a high school yearbook, it’s game over and the transcendent promise of imagination has been proven to be facile. In this context, Wallace’s breathless confession at the end (‘David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inert spiral that keeps you from getting anywhere’⁸³) hardly seems necessary.

To return to Wallace’s long sentences which populate his fiction, we can see that they are a triumph of lassitude, a non-hierarchical ‘proliferation of facts’ which focus in on nothing in particular but merely seem to accumulate and dissolve almost immediately.⁸⁴ For there is no point: as Wallace’s fiction reveals time and time again, one cannot break out of the prison of one’s ego and truly understand another’s perspective. In this way, vacuity is expressed in Wallace’s fiction not through Warhol’s ostentatious indifference but explicitly *in spite of* the author’s best efforts to fill the space of literature with a real, vital and positive presence. The tragedy of his work emerges from the impossibility of being able to dignify his characters as anything more than anthropomorphic outlines, their racing thoughts and their shameful desires. The characters are engulfed by irrepressible thought streams; ones which continually renew an unabating desire to affirm the self. Wallace cannot partake in the fallacy of authorship (to positively posit characters, concepts and people in such a way that they mimic “reality”) nor – by virtue of writing itself – can he escape from it. Wallace is therefore akin to Maurice Blanchot’s furiously productive yet eternally unsatisfied insomniac writer, locked in a ‘comical’ bind ‘of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it. The world, things, knowledge, are for him only reference points across the

⁸³ Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 181.

⁸⁴ Josh Cohen, *Not Working*, p. 213.

void.’⁸⁵ Wallace’s irrepressible desire to achieve connection through writing sees him bound in a tortuous loop of “essential solitude” in which his desire for the depthless other – what Blanchot calls ‘inspiration’ – ‘collapses into the certainty of failure where there remains only, as compensation, the work’s uncertainty.’⁸⁶

However, there is a duplicity to Wallace as a public and literary figure. In the millennial context, Wallace was well aware that the illusion of his guru-like status sells. This is the banal iconography that Wallace shares with Warhol who, alternatively, became a similarly superficial symbol for the supremacy of commercial culture. In the McCaffery interview, he confides that he must tackle the self-serving impulse of the author who wishes to be liked, suppressing that ‘darker purpose of communicating to the reader “Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! *Like* me!”’⁸⁷ And the problem is, Wallace is incredibly *likable*. His talent for writing makes the desire ‘to get the reader to like and admire’ him such a temptation that it is remarkable how few times his resolve slips.⁸⁸ One such time may be his “This Is Water” commencement address at Kenyon College, a speech which is revealing in its ideological discordance from the rest of his works. It begins with the well-known fish parable:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”⁸⁹

Here, Wallace is uncharacteristically explicit and to the point: ‘The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about ... the fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal

⁸⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed. by George Quasha, trans. by Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, and Robert Lamberton (Barrytown, N.Y: Station Hill/Barrytown, Ltd, 1999), p. 345.

⁸⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The space of literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 174.

⁸⁷ Burn, p. 25.

⁸⁸ Burn, p. 25.

⁸⁹ David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York, NY: Little, Brown & Co., 2009), pp. 2-3.

platitudes can have a life or death importance.’⁹⁰ He concludes, we have a ‘choice of what to think about.’⁹¹

Wallace’s speech is replete with pre-emptory defensive statements undermining his status as “truth teller” (‘Please don’t worry that I’m getting ready to preach to you about compassion’; ‘I’m not the wise old fish’) however it is clear that Wallace can now hear the silent reader he yearns for, his guru-like status offering a captive audience for his easily digestible teachings.⁹² Unfortunately, it’s not for the right reasons. As so often with Wallace, he is just too good at the sneering irony he detests. Ranting about the daily ‘petty, frustrating crap’, he charms his audience with his bitter account of the repulsive people that intrude on his life.⁹³ It’s shocking how vindictive it sounds: ‘how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman they seem to look in the checkout line ... I can dwell on the fact that the patriotic or religious bumper stickers always seem to be on the biggest, most disgustingly selfish vehicles driven by the ugliest, most inconsiderate and aggressive driver.’ When this last line is met with cheers and applause, he clarifies: ‘This is an example of how not to think.’⁹⁴

For in this commencement speech, Wallace cannot escape his own voice. The gift he gives is returned with adulation and gratitude for a speech easily received and despite his rhetorical appeals to the contrary, with a relatively undemanding message. Wallace concludes his speech encouraging conscious and careful awareness. One cannot rid oneself of the inevitable task of seeking social value – “worship” as he calls it – yet one can decide what they are. He suggests spiritual worship over material value (beauty, wealth, youth), as ‘pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.’⁹⁵ For all its discussion of compassion for others, the speech proposes a self-sufficiency and autonomy which precludes reliance on externality, or anything that is not within cognitive grasp. In this way, it is really a strong defence of the isolated imagination. You can make your own reality and truth: ‘It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful but sacred.’⁹⁶ Here, Wallace allows himself to

⁹⁰ Wallace, *This Is Water*, pp. 7–8.

⁹¹ Wallace, *This Is Water*, p. 13.

⁹² Wallace, *This Is Water*, p. 6; p.42.

⁹³ Wallace, *This Is Water*, p. 75.

⁹⁴ Wallace, *This Is Water*, pp. 77–78.

⁹⁵ Wallace, *This Is Water*, p. 100.

⁹⁶ Wallace, *This Is Water*, p. 91.

indulge in a “single-entendre” banality – the notion that you can control what you think and this can easily be oriented towards the needs of others.

Such an exposition differs dramatically to the fish parable when it appears in *Infinite Jest* during an AA meeting. Recovering addict Don Gately is told the tale from one of the veteran “crocodile” AA members, known as Bob Death, who after telling the story does not stay to provide an explanation but merely gives an ‘affable shrug and blatts away.’⁹⁷ In one sense, Bob Death could be simply following Wallace’s writerly lead by telling a pointless story which simply sits in the conversation passively, neither pointing to an essential truth or setting up a punchline. This would be in keeping with the other gratuitous platitudes Gately has received throughout the evening. He’s just given a speech saying that, frankly, he has no idea what he’s doing: ‘Gately, at like ten months clean, at the TSBYSCD podium in Braintree, opines that at this juncture he’s so totally clueless and lost ... he feels Nothing – not nothing but *Nothing*, an edgeless blankness that somehow feels worse than the sort of unconsidered atheism he Came In with.’⁹⁸ After, he is overwhelmed by a sea of recovering addicts praising him, ‘fall[ing] all over themselves to tell him how good it was to hear him and to for God’s sake Keep Coming, for them if not for himself, whatever the fuck that means.’⁹⁹ The arbitrariness of it all is not lost on Gately; it’s what he finds so perplexing: ‘Gately still feels like he has no access to the Big spiritual Picture. He feels about the ritualistic daily *Please* and *Thank you* prayers rather like like a hitter that’s on a hitting streak and doesn’t want to change his jock or socks or pre-game routine for as long as he’s on the streak.’¹⁰⁰ The others do not help in this regard. Their only advice: keep to the programme. For there is no redemption in trying to “work it out.” Such futile attempts have a variety of names in *Infinite Jest*: the Spider; Analysis Paralysis; marijuana thinking. All tortuous cognitive traps which incapacitate the subject: ‘labyrinths of reflexive abstraction that seem to cast doubt on the very possibility of practical functioning, and the mental labor of finding one’s way out consumes all available attention.’¹⁰¹ Later after the meeting, Gately will have such an epiphany when he realises that escape – intellectual or otherwise – is very much not the answer: ‘the way it gets better and you get better is *through* pain. Not around

⁹⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 445.

⁹⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 443.

⁹⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 444.

¹⁰⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 443.

¹⁰¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1048.

it, or in spite of it.’¹⁰² Sobriety, Gately learns, is the visceral experience of inhabiting the world without the illusion of subjective escape. As Katherine Hayles writes, ‘Gately’s struggle reveals what it means to attempt on a daily basis to shed the illusion of autonomous selfhood and accept citizenship in a world in which actions have consequences that rebound to the self because everything is connected with everything else.’¹⁰³ And surely this is the “point” of the fish parable; not that one can through concerted will orient one’s perception to obtain a more omniscient view of the world. But rather, that one inhabits the world, is of it and within it, and recognition of this fact necessarily entails an avowal of one’s unmasterable contingency within it, a relinquishment of the ‘deadly illusion of autonomy.’¹⁰⁴

The different interpretations of this same parable illuminate the central opposition in Wallace’s works: his accurate depiction of banal insomnia culture in which characters indulge fantasies of their own omnipotent agency through a self-administration of anaesthetics versus the difficult, painful experience of Levinasian insomnia, a confrontation with one’s powerlessness and inherent lack of autonomy. The anaesthetic element of the former gently nourishes the worldly subject whereas the latter holds none of the consolation and self-gratification of the former. This contradiction is momentarily perceptible in Wallace’s commencement speech when he acknowledges the seductiveness of his contempt for others which wins applause from his audience. As I will explore in the next section, much of Wallace’s oeuvre is an attempt to dissuade the reader from the lure of the self-gratifying Entertainment and rather a turn to the difficulty and futility of being responsible for others. It’s the difficult, sobering Levinasian insomnia which persists underneath and beyond the all-encompassing lure of sheer entertainment and anaesthetic abandon. It is a sleepless responsibility which cannot be put to bed with easy reciprocation but instead an unending, eternally unsatisfying orientation towards the other. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace depicts a myriad of anaesthetic strategies which facilitate narcissistic escape from a sensible awareness of others. In his refusal to allow his readers the same individualistic fantasy, he forces them to confront their sensible proximity to the aberrant suffering bodies which are victim to the cruelties of our individualistic world. He thus endows his readers with his own

¹⁰² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 446, emphasis added.

¹⁰³ N. Katherine Hayles, ‘The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and “Infinite Jest”’, *New Literary History*, Ecocriticism, 30.3 (1999), 675–97 (p. 693).

¹⁰⁴ Hayles, p. 692.

frustrating task: to forge an interpersonal relation which can never be fulfilled nor resolved, but instead requires a constant, unabating vigilance.

3.5. The silent bodies of *Infinite Jest*

Despite Wallace's appeals to single-entendre principles, it is my contention that Wallace's ethical project is surreptitious, embedded in the difficult, excessive form of *Infinite Jest*. He instils in his readers a kind of Benjaminian distracted reception through a habituation to the difficulty and wildly variable nature of the novel's form. Nevertheless, his thematic concern most directly addresses the anaesthetic methods we use to bypass such an ethical confrontation. *Infinite Jest* is populated with characters who go to extreme lengths to evade interpersonal interactions with others, manifesting viscerally in debilitating addictions whether it is to narcotics, cultural products or irony – in its magnitude, *Infinite Jest* thematises all three.

As mentioned, the Entertainment sits at the heart of the novel, a movie so pleasurable for viewers that upon watching they are irrevocably captured and rendered powerless to all other stimulations. Created by James Incandenza, the novel's absent patriarch, the Entertainment was inspired by a strange confluence of addiction, indolence and the urge to connect with others. He produced the Entertainment for his mute son Hal, who had (according to James, refuted by Hal) stopped speaking to him. The reason for their inability to reconcile their perceptions and thus to communicate is unclear, however one possible explanation may be their respective addictive entanglements in "analysis paralysis" which leaves them both unable to overcome their own internal quandaries to communicate with one another. With Hal, this is evident from the first scene in which he suffers from an inability to express himself during a college interview or really to say anything at all. In spite of Hal's internal efforts at lucidity ('I believe I appear neutral'), he in turn provokes horror from those interviewing him upon speaking: '[d]irected my way is horror... Eight eyes have become blank discs that stare at whatever they see.'¹⁰⁵ Unbeknownst to Hal, he has lost the ability to discursively communicate with others and instead simply *effects* a

¹⁰⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1; p. 12.

physical unintelligibility of ‘[u]ndescribable ... *subanimalistic* noises and sounds.’¹⁰⁶ Whilst there is much speculation about what triggered this (the mould he ate as a child? Marijuana withdrawal or DMT use? Watching the Entertainment?), it is clear that the inadequacy of language to fully account for his complexity is what stops Hal from engaging with others. It’s a kind of intellectual black hole which leaves him incapable of even the most simple of utterances: ‘I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I’m complex,’¹⁰⁷ he *tries* to say. Turning to his father, James Incandenza’s addictive vices are similarly linked to his all-consuming intellectual pursuit; obsessive filmmaking in which he dedicates all his time to experimenting with different optical technologies to produce ‘rather aloof and cerebrally technical works.’¹⁰⁸ This, we find out, was not a lifelong career but merely his last obsession before his suicide which predates the present of the novel. As Hal remarks, James ‘remained obsessed with something until he became successful at it, then transferred his obsession to something else.’¹⁰⁹ In his filmic career, he reaches the same intellectual impasse that prevents Hal from being able to speak. His works revel in difficulty and the impossibility of successful communication, ‘characterized by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence.’¹¹⁰ Given their entrenchment in the certitude of language’s fallibility and hence in the impossibility of undiluted communication, they both seek solace in their addictions. For Hal, his marijuana addiction quells his cognitive conundrum by providing individualistic escape and therefore its secrecy proves essential in this aim: ‘when he gets high he develops a powerful obsession with having nobody – not even the neurochemical cadre – know he’s high ... this No-One-Must-Know thing.’¹¹¹ Alternatively, James Incandenza’s alcohol abuse is the only thing that can act as a sop against his existential anxiety. As one character states, alcohol was ‘all that was keeping the man’s tether ravelled, the ingestion such that without it he was unable to withstand the psychic pressures that pushed him over the edge into ... ‘self-erasure’.’¹¹²

Between these two characters who recoil from the inadequacy of their expressive capability sits the Entertainment. Concerned by his son’s burdensome silence, the

¹⁰⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 791.

¹⁰⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 949.

¹¹⁰ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 996.

¹¹¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 54.

¹¹² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 791.

Entertainment was James's desperate yet ill-advised attempt to goad his son to speak: '[t]o concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out* – even if it was only to ask for more.'¹¹³ In this, James's diagnosis of Hal's (or perhaps, more correctly both their) condition was wrong. James's fatal flaw was seeing their communicative troubles in an economy of cognitive mastery and escape. He therefore attempted to rectify the situation by asserting his manipulative superiority, by attempting to control his son through the brilliance of his craft. The result was precisely the opposite of his intention: 'Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on the young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life.'¹¹⁴ Instead, the sedative bliss of the Entertainment induced the very same effect as their respective analysis paralysis (though with happier participants): a 'physically torpid and apathetic and amotivated sitting there.'¹¹⁵ Incandenza's technical brilliance created "entertainment" in its purest form, a grim dramatization of television's atomistic 'one-way watching,' creating a legion of 'voluntary shut-ins.'¹¹⁶

For its viewers, the Entertainment offers only the spectacle of sociality, optimally designed around human weakness. Bizarre scenes of communal Entertainment-watching accumulate where atomised individuals share nothing but a screen alongside one another:

By mid-afternoon on 2 April Y.D.A.U., the Near Eastern medical attaché, his devout wife, the Saudi Prince Q -----'s personal physician's personal assistant ... the personal assistant himself ... two Embassy security guards w/sidearms and two neatly groomed Seventh Day Adventist pamphleteers all watching the recursive loop.¹¹⁷

Externally and superficially this scene depicts physical proximity in a multicultural porosity of boundaries of class, ethnicity, and religion. However, the viewers are in a state of profound indifference to their environment and those surrounding them. Contented in psychical bliss, they are relieved of all sense of propriety or care for themselves and others, as they allow their bodies to become abject through neglect and obliviousness. In the same scene as above, the watchers start to collectively fester in their hypnotised state: 'all were

¹¹³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 839.

¹¹⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 839.

¹¹⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 1048.

¹¹⁶ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, p. 22.

¹¹⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 87.

watching the recursive loop the medical attaché had rigged on the TP's viewer the night before, sitting and standing there very still and attentive, looking not one bit distressed or in any way displeased even though the room smelled very bad indeed.'¹¹⁸

In a sense, the Entertainment is the somnolescent counterpart to its creator's addictive banal insomnia. Whilst James's addictions represent an indolence induced by the impossibility of pure communication, the Entertainment depicts the possibility of utter escape through the self-sufficient fantasy of phantasmagoric technology. Viewers revel in their subservience to the filmic form. Elsewhere, Wallace describes film as an 'authoritarian medium': '[t]hey vulnerabilize and then dominate you.'¹¹⁹ Here, in this same essay, he provides a neat description of the Entertainment's seductive sedative power: 'a commercial movie doesn't try to wake people up but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it – this seduction, a fantasy-for-money transaction, is a commercial movie's basic point.'¹²⁰ The viewers' silence or lack of interaction with the external world is freely given. They do not face the indeterminacy of the world as an intellectual irresolvable challenge (as Hal and James do) but sincerely revel in it. It is not so much that the film induces utter thoughtlessness, but rather that it provides an internal coherence which is utterly sedative and gratifying for the viewer. It is hermeneutically airtight seducing the viewer with a message in which viewers are simultaneously held in a state of infantile security whilst also being relieved of any sense of shame and guilt which is transposed on to the film's "mother" character.

The story of the Entertainment is as follows. It consists of two scenes: in the first, Joelle, its beautiful star, is filmed continuously looping around a glass revolving door and then encounters someone by chance who she knows from her past. He then joins her looping. In the next, Joelle stands over a baby's crib with the camera pointing upwards out of the crib giving the audience a 'crib's-eye view.'¹²¹ Joelle, as the maternal figure, caresses the infantile viewer with profuse apologies ("I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. I am so, so sorry. Please know how very, very, very sorry I am") whilst at the same time offering an explanation of their existence.¹²² It is explained: in the Entertainment, '[d]eath is always

¹¹⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 87.

¹¹⁹ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, p. 169.

¹²⁰ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, p. 170.

¹²¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 939.

¹²² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 939.

female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life's mother.'¹²³ As such, Joelle explains to the needy viewer 'why mothers [are] so obsessively, consumingly, drivenly, and yet somehow narcissistically loving of you, their kid: the mothers are trying frantically to make amends for a murder neither of you quite remember.'¹²⁴

Wallace is thus presenting the modern narcissistic subject in a state of child-like arrested development and in its sublimity, the "Entertainment" provides ongoing sustenance and care for the subject in this hypostatized state. The two scenes in the "Entertainment" work in tandem. The first signifies the external world of chance, contingency and easy recognition. The second represents an internalised psychological world in which reflection is outsourced to the abject mother figure whose duty it is to remember the origins of the child/viewer, to reflect on behalf of them whilst continually pronouncing her own indebtedness to them. The recursivity in each scene (the revolving door in the first and the connected birth/death narrative in the second) keeps the two worlds insulated from one another. The viewers' engrossment in the film maintains their content inner narcissism to the exclusion of their embodied material existence.

The Entertainment thus dramatizes Benjamin's dire prediction that contemporary forms of aestheticized politics will lead to humanity experiencing their own destruction as aesthetic enjoyment. Entranced by the film, viewers soil themselves, deprive themselves of food and even cut off their own fingers to avoid any interruption to viewing. The power of the film sees the body treated contemptuously as abject body parts are cast aside as collateral damage in this compulsive watching. This has international implications as the Entertainment functions as an effective weapon of warfare: a significant subplot sees an organisation of Quebecois separatists (the Assassins Fateuils Rolents) attempt to seize a copy in the hopes of disseminating it to an American public. Covert conversations between double – or triple or quadruple – A.F.R. agent Rémy Marathe and U.S. undercover agent M. Hugh Steeply outline this political strategy; one which Marathe claims is simply a self-destructive and self-made feature of U.S. culture: 'This is a U.S.A. production, this Entertainment cartridge. Made by an American man in the U.S.A. The appetite for the

¹²³ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 787.

¹²⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 789.

appeal for it: this also is U.S.A.’¹²⁵ Marathe reminds us that the threat of the “Entertainment” would not exist if it were not for the assumed pre-existing weaknesses – and cynicism – of the American public. In this way, Marathe echoes Benjamin’s ambivalence about modern technologies, recognising that the Entertainment’s power derives first and foremost from a degraded, hesitant and most of all, atomised culture (‘who has taught them to care?’¹²⁶), in which individualism reigns supreme and therefore securing eternal pleasure for oneself is the ultimate goal. It’s result: ‘[t]his appeal to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose.’¹²⁷

As noted previously, the difficulty of Wallace’s works emerges from his refusal to provide the reader with the same escapist strategies that his characters indulge in. The very body parts which viewers of the Entertainment treat with contempt or even complete obliviousness, cannot so easily go unrecognised by the reader. Rather, their deformation and, in an odd way, their autonomy from their original bodies forces the reader to confront an ultimately irreconcilable otherness which she nonetheless feels obligated to acknowledge. The necessity of such a recognition emerges from the political stakes of the novel which are not confined to the circulation of the Entertainment; rather, the political manipulation of bodies is replicated throughout the book in nightmarish visions of deformed, impassive casualties of geopolitical action.

One of the novel’s villains is former ‘Famous Crooner’ and current US President Johnny Gentle who works in league with advertisers Viney and Veals to create a ‘Tighter, Tidier nation.’¹²⁸ This sinister convergence of political and commercial interests manifests in his plan to dump toxic waste in the Great Concavity / Convexity as part of his strategy of ‘Reconfiguration.’ Gentle seeks to offload this area of the north-eastern US to Canada and transform it into the US’s toxic waste dumping ground. Elizabeth Freudenthal identifies this as another action in the novel motivated by irrepressible compulsion: Gentle’s compulsive cleanliness¹²⁹ takes on international dimensions in his desire to rid the country of any waste,

¹²⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 318.

¹²⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 318.

¹²⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 319.

¹²⁸ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 283; p. 382.

¹²⁹ Gentle’s OCD is described in Wallace’s characteristically verbose style: ‘This is Johnny Gentle ... for two long-past decades known unkindly as the ‘Cleanest Man in Entertainment’ (the man’s a world-class retentive, the late Howard-Hughes kind, the really severe kind, the kind with the paralyzing fear of free-floating contamination, the either-wear-a-surgical-microfiltration-mask-or-make-the-people-around-you-wear-surgical-caps-and-masks-and-touch-doorknobs-only-with-a-boiled-hankie-and-take-fourteen-showers-a-day only

turning his personal ‘compulsion into a perpetual cycle of nuclear fission and waste that structures daily life throughout all of North America.’¹³⁰ As Hayles notes, the ensuing ecological disaster is indicative of the eternal return of the ignored waste and destruction associated with the myriad addictions which populate the novel – ‘the abjected does not disappear but rather returns in magnified form.’¹³¹ This is certainly true in the case of the convexity in which the victims of this waste “reconfiguration” are infants – ‘soft-skulled and extra-eyed newborns’ – birthed in these toxic areas. The corporeal disfigurements which the Entertainment viewers blissfully and obliviously inflict on themselves thus find their most innocent victims: new-borns.

The case for sober vigilance regarding these anaesthetic strategies need no greater justification than this, though the novel abounds in bodies disfigured by compulsive addictions. The reader becomes the silent observer of maimed bodies which are obscured from the characters through their idiosyncratic addictions. The novel’s ethical strategy, however, is not simply a straightforward vigilant, close reading of all the suffering characters. In fact, reading the novel shares a strangely close resemblance to the anaesthetic vices of its characters, one which, counter-intuitively, encourages a kind of thoughtless, automatic consumption of the novel. This is not a unique observation: many critics have identified a correlation between the thematic addictions and the compulsive experience of reading this mammoth work. It is my contention that such a reading experience facilitates a distracted reception of the novel which allows the reader to “see through” the various plot lines, characters and events to perceive a glimpse of the real bodies undergirding the text, divested of any overdetermined cultural meaning.

Frank Louis Cioffi perhaps most perceptively renders the experience of reading *Infinite Jest*:

Wallace draws the reader in with his virtuoso, *tour de force* performance, a one-can-only-stand-back-and-clap kind of performance that breaks down the reader’s defenses so that scenes of exquisite horror and pain come in, as it were, under the radar, and hence make an enormous impact. ... Reading the work cannot

they’re-with-this-Dermatix-brand-shower-sized-Hypospectral-Flash-Booth-that-actually-like-burns-your-outermost-layer-of-skin-off-in-a-dazzling-flash-and-leaves-you-baby’s-butt-new-and-sterile-once-you-wipe-off-the-coating-of-fine-epidermal-ash-with-a-boiled-hankie kind. (*Infinite Jest*, p. 381)

¹³⁰ Elizabeth Freudenthal, ‘Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*’, *New Literary History*, 41.1 (2010), 191–211 (p. 127) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0145>>.

¹³¹ Hayles, p. 692.

be a passive or static activity for the reader cocreates the world of the novel non-noetically, in the manner of the stagehand.¹³²

As Cioffi notes, the novel bewilders by flooding the senses with ‘wildly metastasizing inventiveness’ but also requires an active engagement from the reader; the reader must keep track of different plots and characters and must consult footnotes and references in order to keep up with the text. The disorientation of the text and the physicality required to read it displaces generic concerns regarding plot, tone and structure as readers are too busy trying to keep up with the novel’s interruptions and infinitely referential form.¹³³ Most importantly, Wallace refuses, right down to the level of the sentence, to impose an intelligible organisation of descriptive details which would provide a singular meaning. In this way, the novel effects a Benjaminian distracted reception in its commitment not to cohere the excessive text it places before the reader, filled with red herrings and gratuitous details.

Though the reader has not been given the tools to cohere the text, they have been trained to pay attention to the aberrant body parts which fill the novel. From the outset, bodies are described as fragmented and disordered, warped under the scrutiny of the narration. Bodily distortion is foundational, as the novel opens with the line: ‘I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies.’¹³⁴ In fact, this opening scene acts as a primer for the rest of the work in which human corporeality continuously emerges in nonintuitive and often grotesque forms, and with language which is insufficient to fully rationalise it. As mentioned previously, in the opening scene, Hal Incandenza is facing a panel of academic faculty and his internal monologue sees him attempt to make sense of the bodily figurations that fill the room, both his own and those seated before him. He attempts to coordinate his own individual body parts in a way that will be perceived as natural and relaxed: ‘I have committed to crossing my legs I hope carefully, ankle on knee, hands together in the lap of my slacks.’¹³⁵ His perception of the characters who sit before him is similarly disjunctive, identifiable metonymically by way of one magnified physical feature:

¹³² Frank Louis Cioffi, “‘An Anguish Become Thing’: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s “Infinite Jest”, *Narrative*, 8.2 (2000), 161–81 (p. 162).

¹³³ This should not be underestimated. The novel is over 1000 pages making it a physically demanding book to read and the footnotes require a constant negotiation with its size. The internet is full of advice on “how to read *Infinite Jest*” with advice such as cutting the book in half, using multiple bookmarks and reading alongside a reader’s guide. (Bucher et al., 2009)

¹³⁴ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 3.

the Director of Composition's oddly excessive eyebrows, the Dean's 'fixed smile'¹³⁶ and CT's quivering muscles. In one particularly bizarre formulation, Hal conjoins two Deans in one physical feature: 'Right and center Deans have inclined together in soft conference forming a kind of tepee of skin and hair.'¹³⁷ In this scene, Hal's inability to speak is linked to his inability to cohere the figures and body parts in front of him into discrete, individualised forms. Rather bodies – not discrete figures but fleshy indeterminate forms – are dispersed across the room. As noted, Hal's inability to speak leads him to become a figure of corporeal disharmony eliciting extreme alarm from those observing him. This first chapter therefore introduces a novel which replicates this same effect by presenting abject, suffering bodies in ways which can neither be sufficiently rationalised nor ignored.

An intensely felt corporeality haunts the book through the visceral experiences of its characters; excessively long and detailed scenes of dissociating, fragmenting bodies from Don Gately's excruciating recovery to Orin's insomniac 'spider-and-heights dreams' to Tony Krauss's prolonged withdrawal. It is the excess of the bodily, not its conscious emphasis, which continually draws the reader into a sensible confrontation with the bodies of the novel. While the Entertainment viewers avidly delight in the menial comfort of their isolated existence, the novel institutes an abiding and vigilance of the very things that the Entertainment allows its viewers to remain oblivious to: those intensely vulnerable to the material consequences of living in the world. In this way, Wallace provides an antidote to the modern subject's self-imposed alienation in which they continually seek an evasion of the 'psychic costs of being around other humans.'¹³⁸ In *Infinite Jest*, these psychic costs are proven inescapable as the novel is populated with bodies and material presences which cannot be contained. Overwhelmed by all the requirements necessary to read the novel, the reader cannot impose a meaning nor rationalise these bodies. This is the fundamental difference between the Entertainment's addictive quality and that of *Infinite Jest*. The Entertainment soothes its watchers allowing them to relish shamelessly and guiltlessly in its overwhelming embrace. *Infinite Jest* offers no such succour. Ailing bodies inhabit the novel providing no coherent meaning other than their visceral, unavoidable presences. This is precisely Wallace's absence from the text. Reading the novel, there is no conclusive

¹³⁶ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 6.

¹³⁸ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, p. 22.

guidance from the author on how to navigate and make sense of its scenes. Wallace proffers the gift of his text and then immediately absents himself from it.

Readers, burdened with the effort of parrying the novel's excessive, varied form, cannot attain ultimate control of the text but instead must journey through it without the security of a wise guide or any premonition of what will arise. In this way, character Don Gately's journey of recovery through AA is most akin to the reader's voyage. He too discovers that sobriety requires an endlessly patient passivity. Just as he acknowledges that his addictions never fully satisfy the escape he yearns for, he also recognises the impossibility of outsmarting his addiction. As Gately states, 'it seemed impossible to figure out just *how* AA worked.'¹³⁹ And yet, it just does. The rituals, the habits and the meetings constitute Gately's blind faith in something he can neither define nor identify. In a similar way, the reader trawls through the text of *Infinite Jest* with a commitment that is not founded on any promised meaning or revelation, but in a trance-like obedience to its erratic rhythm.

In the end, Don Gately is one of the novel's only characters who succeeds in living in the world without the sedative oblivion of the Entertainment or the cynical anaesthetic escapes that his fellow characters indulge in. Freudenthal describes this as Gately's 'anti-interiority,' 'a compulsive, ritual and physical investment in an entity outside of himself that may or may not exist.'¹⁴⁰ Gately abides the indeterminacy of the world in ways which are physically punitive (he spends the last section of the novel in hospital recovering from being shot and stabbed resisting the aid of painkillers) but which nonetheless offer him a means to live without the fallacy of simulated escape (the Entertainment) or cynical escape (his substance addiction). This 'generative embrace of materiality' allows him to graciously and uncynically inhabit the world, abiding in 'this sense of endless Now.'¹⁴¹ He thus receives the 'present' in its dual sense: 'It's a gift, the Now: it's AA's real gift: it's no accident they call it the Present.'¹⁴² As mentioned previously, this is not a feat of intellectualism but a visceral vigilance and acceptance of the external world; the refusal of any fantasy which promises its viewers their own fully detached subjectivity. In a sense, the gift of *Infinite Jest* to the reader is similarly un-generative. There is no firm meaning provided by Wallace. Rather, the novel

¹³⁹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 349.

¹⁴⁰ Freudenthal, p. 192.

¹⁴¹ Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 860.

¹⁴² Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 860.

imposes an alternative receptive mode on its reader. For the readers that persist with its impenetrable form, they end up inhabiting the work, being drawn along by its unintuitive, demanding and unpredictable pace. Readers therefore cannot categorize the figures they encounter but rather share an odd and often uncomfortable physical proximity to them as their uncanny forms are dispersed throughout the novel. Wallace's receptive training can therefore also be characterised as an insomniac conditioning: an inability to turn away from the novel's errant others.

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate a similar ethical operation in the artworks of two dramatically different artists: Warhol and Wallace. They are undoubtedly an odd pair – one is recognisable by his flat, cold superficial style; the other by interminable, relentless and at times, needy prose. However, what unites the two is their dual capacity to insightfully represent the dominance and seduction of US popular culture as well as providing a means to “see through” it. Both their works enervate the viewer or reader out of habituated spectatorship in order to engender an alternative perspective, what Benjamin would call the ‘optical unconscious.’ Engaging with Warhol's slow cinema and Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is a tall order – both require active engagement without the promise of singular meaning or conclusion. Instead, they instil a vigilant passivity which presents a constant, though oftentimes faint, resistance to the seeming totality of hegemonic culture.

CHAPTER 4: FORENSIC NARRATIVES: IAN MCEWAN & OTTESSA MOSHFEGH'S
SLEEPY AFFLUENCE

4.1. 'Naming it': Representation and the War on Terror

In the summer of 2021, the new President of the United States issued the provocative date 9/11/2021 to have removed all American troops from Afghanistan, putting an end to the decades-long US involvement in the region and further, issuing a closure to the endlessly symbolic resonance the original date held in American (and global) consciousness since 2001. In doing so, President Biden attempted a rhetorical shift which sought to preemptively consign the 9/11 attacks and their geopolitical aftermath to the realm of recent history – even as this aftermath was still being felt, and brutally so, by the people of Afghanistan. The political opportunism of this calendrical scoop went by largely unremarked, despite the fact that any sustained scrutiny would have deemed the association questionable at the very least – as *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson asked at the time: ‘what was it supposed to symbolize that the United States was abandoning the Afghan people to likely Taliban rule just as we commemorate the nearly 3,000 lives taken by Taliban-sheltered terrorism?’¹

This symbolism worked in part because of the haziness of the association and the lack of specificity surrounding the date and its relation to that 2001 day. The ever-proliferating associations and functions related to the metonymic “9/11” (simultaneously a terror event, historical date, political focal point and conspiracy theory) created a semiotically-overloaded term which can be more effectively understood as a collectively felt site of personal and national insecurity than a discrete historical event. And, in a sense, it may well have been the morbid similarity between both events (mass chaos and desperation) which allowed Biden to uncritically conjoin the events symbolically under the same date. Despite assurances to the contrary, the Afghanistan withdrawal was plagued by scenes of chaos on the ground and did not display the considered humanitarian approach that Biden’s preceding speeches suggested.

¹ Michael Gerson, ‘Why Did Biden Want the Afghanistan Withdrawal Tied to the 20th Anniversary of 9/11?’, *The Washington Post* (Washington DC, USA, 23 August 2021) <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/23/biden-afghanistan-withdrawal-911-anniversary-taliban-celebration/>> [accessed 9 December 2022].

This chapter is not primarily concerned with US foreign policy, though the context is important. This chapter is instead concerned with the ethical dimensions of the War on Terror as it was experienced by the western urban subject. As W.J.T. Mitchell notes, the War on Terror – defined both by acts of terrorism and western government responses – signified a new era of warfare founded on unpredictability and definitional ambiguity: the ‘concept of a war on terror has brought something radically new into the world, perhaps at last forcing a confrontation with the *what* – not “who” – is the enemy ... Taken literally, it is something like a war on anxiety. How could it ever end? How could it be won?’² This chapter explores the ethical ramifications of the ambiguity and hesitation around representing terror. On one level, this speaks to the age of terror and how it instituted a profoundly muddled form – a shock which enabled the establishment of foreign and domestic policy which played on fear and often evaded the scrutiny of a more vigilant public. On another level, this chapter addresses the ethical consequences, in Levinasian terms, of such a reformulation and how this more broadly challenges liberal humanist notions of aesthetics, namely, that art fulfils a primarily empathic function to let us know what it is like to be another person. In the context of terrorism, this conception has an unwelcome affinity with the action of terrorism itself. For as is often said, the object of terrorism is not the primary victims but the survivors who through the threat of terror – precisely their empathic identification with the victims and the fear it will recur – can be manipulated. The implication of this on art is two-pronged in this sense: neither can one be content to leave the event in silence (to be co-opted by a political agenda) nor is a reader-centred approach dependent on empathy with the victim sufficient either.

In this chapter, I consider a 21st century context characterised by the aftermath and threat of terrorism – the age of security. In one sense, this focus appears antithetical to the themes of this thesis as it approaches a culture and political system, shocked and reactive to a very un-banal threat – global terrorism. As such, I hope to mobilise an alternative understanding of sleepless culture which departs from a lethargic indifference to the external world (as in our previous chapters) and is instead characterised by a restless, persistent inertia which determines the everyday experience of living in urban localities affected by and under potential siege from global politics (all the while ignoring the very real and realised threats that are taking place on behalf of Western governments in other corners of

² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 1.

the world). There is of course nothing particularly novel in this depiction of modern cognitive overload – since Georg Simmel, we have had the vocabulary to describe the modernist strategy of assuming an unfazed demeanour in the face of overwhelming urban stimulation.³ In the 21st century too, Naomi Klein’s ‘shock doctrine’ has proved axiomatic in explaining the political manipulation of shock and disorientation in a post-9/11 landscape. She argues that collective shock instrumentalises banality – a stunned thoughtlessness – which inhibits public scrutiny of governmental action. It’s a kind of banal insomnia: a dual relinquishment of vigilance and power in the aftermath of profound crisis. Her articulation of political opportunism in the face of disaster declares a clear warning against resigning oneself to the unrepresentability of terror. If, as she writes, ‘extreme violence has a way of preventing us from seeing the interests it serves,’ we are duty-bound to demystify this shock by orienting ourselves unflinchingly towards the suffering other.⁴

This is a question of representation: how can one ethically represent the suffering other? In a 21st century western context, this aesthetic predicament is emblematised by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. On the one hand, it demonstrated an unprecedented level of coverage in a 24/7 media landscape which made witnesses of all who had access to a television or radio. On the other, it laid an ethical burden on any who sought to approach its magnitude. In an interview given five weeks after the attacks, Derrida considered “9/11” on both these counts, at once recognising that the “feeling” associated with the date was ‘to a large extent conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-socio-political machine,’ whilst also not being able to articulate the “something” that did happen:

this very thing, the place and meaning of this "event," remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about.⁵

³ Georg Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), pp. 409–24.

⁴ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 1st Picador ed (New York: Picador, 2008), p. 327.

⁵ Giovanna Borradori, ‘9/11 Global Terrorism: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida’, *The University of Chicago Press*, 2003 <<https://press.uchicago.edu/books/derrida/derrida911.html>> [accessed 19 October 2022].

Asking ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’, Jacques Rancière dubs this representational aporia ‘the aura of holy terror’ and in doing so, demonstrates that these two poles are not contradictory but entirely complementary.⁶ Whilst it was commonplace to comment on the profound inadequacy of language after the disaster,⁷ Rancière recognises that within this consensus – that there are things and events which are inherently unthinkable and therefore are utterly unrepresentable – the events themselves are ‘rendered entirely thinkable, entirely necessary according to thought’ by virtue of their exclusion from representational practice.⁸ As noted, rendering an event unrepresentable is not ethically neutral – one risks its political instrumentalization and further, the possibility that the victims’ suffering is not recognised at all. Rancière sees this ethical position as utterly misguided, associating it with the millennial “ethical turn” which ‘signifies the constitution of an indistinct sphere where not only is the specificity of political and artistic practices dissolved, but also ... the distinction between fact and law, what is and what ought to be.’⁹ If ethics simply becomes a judgement founded on the stringency of a pre-existing moral ‘order of things,’ it prevents any political or ethical action or change from taking place as the ethical simply devolves into a ‘dramaturgy of infinite evil, justice and redemption.’¹⁰

Therefore, this occlusion of terror from the artwork is starkly counter to Rancière’s formulation of art itself: ‘Art exists as a separate world since anything whatsoever can belong to it.’¹¹ For Rancière, art has a specifically political function as it has the capacity to create a scene of dissensus, a sensible interruption of the normative order in which commonly assumed social organisations and rules break down. As such, artworks can call into question those seemingly obvious principles – the distribution of people, voices and objects – which the rational, socialised subject takes for granted. Rendering some subjects eternally unthinkable and unrepresentable implies that the contemporary consensus – the current ‘distribution of the sensible’ – holds a privileged position, expressing an essentially

⁶ Jacques Rancière, ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’, in *The Future of the Image*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London; New York: Verso), pp. 109–38 (p. 109).

⁷ Richard Gray’s book *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011) opens with a survey of writers from Toni Morrison and W.S. Merwin to Jacques Derrida who commented on the ineffability of the attacks: ‘If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made tools of their trade seem absurd’ (p. 1)

⁸ Rancière, ‘Are Some Things Unrepresentable?’, p. 138.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, ‘The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics’, *Critical Horizons*, 7.1 (2006), 1–20 (p. 2) <<https://doi.org/10.1163/156851606779308242>>.

¹⁰ Rancière, ‘The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics’, p. 2.

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. by Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2019), p. 51.

“correct” view of the world, forbidding any potential scenes of dissensus. In the following, I will outline a theory of the ‘forensic image’ through two scenes of terror which operate by sensibly bypassing the contemporary political and social order and implicating the viewer into an irrevocable ethical relation. Through a further exploration of the forensic image in two recent works of fiction, I hope to demonstrate how contemporary anaesthetic strategies (as identified in the previous chapter) become a means to bypass and escape this ethical relation and aid an ethical ignorance of those who fall outside the ‘distribution of the sensible.’ In both these fictions which thematise the aftermath of Western terrorism, this ethical escape proves untenable, interrupted by the sensible proximity of the radically other.

4.2. The Forensic Image

As the Fall of Kabul was broadcast on Western screens on 15th August 2021, a darkly familiar sight emerged linking the withdrawal to that fateful September day nearly two decades before: the falling man. Unlike the close-up images of 2001 which were circulated in global newspapers the following day, these falling figures were barely recognisable as men; rather they were two nearly invisible pixelated dots which trailed behind an immense plane pointed determinedly in the opposite direction. That plane was a US air force jet evacuating over 800 people from Afghanistan’s capital which had been taken over by the Taliban. The two young men – 17-year-old Zaki Anwari and 24-year-old Fada Mohammad – were attempting to escape on the plane, having not managed to get inside. They were caught on camera from miles away as the plane was in full flight, falling from the sky. The words of Tom Junod speaking of the US disaster resonate in these images too: ‘struggling against discrepancies of scale ...[,] [t]hey are made puny by the backdrop of the towers, which loom like colossi, and then by the event itself.’¹² Rather than towering buildings, it was an immense blue sky which engulfed these tiny figures.

Some have speculated that the exceptionality of the 9/11 terror attacks emerged from the clarity of its photographic documentation. In contrast to his writings on the irreality of the Gulf War, Jean Baudrillard wrote of the exceptionality of 9/11 attacks, calling it ‘the absolute event, the ‘mother’ of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events

¹² Tom Junod, ‘The Falling Man’, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 14.1 (2004), 211–27 (p. 211) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700408571450>>.

that have never taken place.’¹³ In arguing this, he cited its ‘phantasmagorical’ nature, claiming that it revealed the ‘terroristic images which dwell in all of us.’¹⁴ Its exceptionality Baudrillard notes, is not the images’ ability to transcend the symbolic visual economy but to dominate it completely: ‘the irruption of a death which is far more than real: a death which is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event.’¹⁵ The visceral nature of the images do not protect the viewer but are an additional peril: ‘the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror, like an additional *frisson*: not only is it terrifying but, what is more, it is real.’¹⁶ It is from this standpoint that Baudrillard, like others at the time, were able to claim that this was a case of reality mimicking fiction – disastrous scenes which had been rehearsed in disaster movies many times over. ‘We might almost say that reality is jealous of fiction,’ he postulates. ‘It is a kind of duel between them, a contest to see which can be the most unimaginable.’¹⁷

However, the horror, or rather the “reality” of these images, manifested in how uncinematic they were. As Junod writes, ‘it was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided a corrective to those who insisted on saying that what they were witnessing was “like a movie,” for this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable.’¹⁸ Looking at these images, there is something visceral and awkward about them – they could not be devised. Rather, there’s a human exposure which feels too intimate and too raw for the viewer. One cannot “enjoy” these as if watching a disaster film. Though ‘The Falling Man’ generally refers to the famous image which appeared the following morning in *The New York Times*, it was by no means the only one. Photographic evidence gave close, vigilant, ongoing evidence of the victim falling to his death. ‘[N]ot augmented by aesthetics; he is merely human and his humanity, startled and in some cases horizontal, obliterates everything else in the frame.’¹⁹ The initial fascination these images provoked almost immediately gave way to a collective shame and a national nausea: ‘In a nation of voyeurs, the desire to face the most disturbing aspects of our most disturbing day was somehow ascribed to voyeurism, as

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism: And, Other Essays*, trans. by Chris Turner, New ed (London ; New York: Verso, 2003), p. 4.

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 29.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, p. 28.

¹⁸ Junod, p. 213.

¹⁹ Junod, p. 219.

though the jumpers' experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten.'²⁰

In Afghanistan nearly 20 years later, the falling men of Kabul are not the stuff of movies either; instead, their pixelated form mark an infinite distance between the viewer and the image's subjects. Like the falling figures of 9/11, these images are not cinematic but *forensic*, speaking to a crime which exceeds the politics of the event taking place. The terror does not lie in their formal recognisability as falling people but rather, another recognition occurs. This recognition is an evocation of the Other – an inhuman, unworldly and unbearable evocation of the Other's suffering. As part of his work on forensic architecture, Eyal Weizman has described forensic images as those which sit on 'the threshold of detectability: things that hover between being identifiable and not.' This condition, he writes, 'forces us to remember that the negative is not only an image representing reality, but that it is itself a material thing, simultaneously both presence and representation.'²¹ The material reality imposes itself on the viewer, penetrating the two dimensionality of its form. 'No matter if you are a building, a territory, a photograph, a pixel, or a person, to sense is to be imprinted by the world around you, to internalize its force fields and to transform. And to transform is to feel pain.'²²

The forensic image makes us all detectives of a crime scene which can never be resolved nor atoned for. To look upon these images is to arouse what Levinas calls 'useless suffering,' the absurd meaninglessness of suffering. This is a suffering which cannot be reconciled with a rational order. This suffering is not an additive "*frisson*," nor is it "jealous" of the horror possible in fiction. It is horror itself – real, material and concrete. The useless suffering evoked in these images animates the realm of justice; not a legalistic world of laws and politics, but an archaic and infinite justice of being-for-the-other. It is what Levinas calls the 'ethical perspective of the interhuman': 'the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the Other.'²³ This suffering is antagonistic to any political or

²⁰ Junod, p.217.

²¹ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2017), p. 20.

²² Weizman, p. 129.

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, trans. by Richard Cohen, 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 156–67 (p. 159).

social order which would seek to justify or explain it: 'The evil of pain, the harm-itself, is the explosion and most profound articulation of absurdity.'²⁴

The rest of this chapter frames this 'inter-human perspective' in terms of an insomniac calling: a concern for the other which stands prior to any expectation of reciprocation or concern for the self. It also stands outside any political or social logic. As we have already established, Levinas's ethical theory is concerned with the omnipresence of the ethical imperative, our inability to escape or evade our essential responsibility to the Other. Marinos Diamantides puts it this way:

the challenge of Levinas's ethics is to show itself capable of responding to the kind of theory that understands social reality as produced by pure politics and management by impersonal forces (economy, technology etc.) *and* to expose the dramatic manner in which even a subject reduced to pure functions (like a computer game player) experiences its existence (computer games are exhausting ...)²⁵

As Levinas states, this does not mean to say that we do not attempt to escape our responsibility to the Other; on the contrary, our political and social orders often facilitate such an evasion. Yet, our ancient responsibility is never entirely extinguished; it is reignited in unexpected moments of insomniac clarity where the unavoidable useless suffering of the other imposes itself upon us like the desperate, helpless call of people falling to their deaths. 'The task,' Diamantides advises, 'is to look for traces of excessive affectivity that has empirical effects yet never enters historical time.'²⁶

The case studies of this chapter, McEwan's *Saturday* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, both thematise the affective aftermath of the 2001 terror attacks on the World Trade Center – a feeling of being perpetually on the cusp of disaster. However, in both, this nervous apprehension stands in contrast to the affluence of their respective protagonists whose upper-middle class comfort emerges specifically in their ability to predict and plan for the future with a high level of accuracy. Each exhibit attachments to social institutions and customs which effectively insulate them from the calls of the less fortunate, lives which are far less capable of managing contingency and the

²⁴ Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 157.

²⁵ Marinos Diamantides, 'Editor's Introduction: Responsibility in the Wake of the Subject's Demise: The Appeal and Dangers of Levinas's Ethical Anarchy', in *Levinas, Law, Politics*, ed. by Marinos Diamantides (Oxon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), pp. 1–27 (p. 15).

²⁶ Diamantides, p. 15.

unexpected. In these novels, anaesthesia is harnessed in different ways for this purpose. In *Saturday*, Perowne literally administers anaesthetics to his patients in order to work upon their bodies. Instead of experiencing an overwhelming responsibility when confronting another, he finds enjoyment cutting into their fleshy inert mass which not only secures him an affluent social status as a surgeon but replicates his world view in which his external environment can be controlled and manipulated in predictable, docile ways. For the protagonist of *My Year*, her self-imposed 'hibernation' is sustained through a varied supply of sedatives which allow her to indulge in a numb fantasy of subjective self-sufficiency and enclosure in which she remains protected from the alterity of others and the future. In both, banal insomnia culture is harnessed by the protagonists to evade their duty to others.

On the one hand, *Saturday* more directly addresses the theme of terrorism through its narrator who witnesses what he believes to be a terrorist attack. He takes a humanistic approach, rationalising this event by imagining himself to be one of the victims. However, the limitations of this approach are revealed when he is later confronted with a forensic presence which he can neither contain nor predict. This revelation emerges at the level of form, unsteading the modernist prose which, until then, deftly conflated the protagonist's idiosyncratic viewpoint with conventional wisdom, or what Rancière calls the 'distribution of the sensible.' The forensic presence sits uncomfortably within the narrative, neither allowing a consolatory reflection of the world as perceived by the protagonist nor allowing him to substitute himself for this unwieldy, non-conforming presence. On the other hand, *My Year* follows a narrator whose fear of the unexpected takes a far more general form. Taking place in the year before the 9/11 terror attacks, the narrator commits herself to an ambitious project to sleep as much as humanly possible, thus enabling her to cordon herself off from the external world. The novel ends with a forensic scene from the terrorist attacks which reveals the ethical consequences of the narrator's self-atomisation. Despite being set at the very start of the new millennium, *My Year* more effectively reflects the current moment by analogously replicating the anaesthetic technological strategies of contemporary youth – excessive social media usage, binge TV watching and social withdrawal. In this sense, *My Year* reflects the aftermath of the new millennium decades after the events themselves. Inertia, by this stage, has been cemented into youth culture, birthing a new generation who cannot relate to the source of their anxiety but instead experience it as an inherent feature of their young lives. Through an exploration of the novel's central characters, the lethargic narrator and her boundlessly optimistic friend Reva, I will argue

that they depict the uneasy coexistence of banal cynicism alongside a persistent hope for change and community which can be detected in contemporary youth culture.

4.3. Narrative empathy in *Saturday*'s free indirect style

McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday* fits self-consciously into the genre of post-9/11 fiction: it follows Henry Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon who wakes in the early hours of the morning to see what he believes to be a terrorist attack from his central London window. At first, he is delighted by a perceived meteor shower however this delight quickly transforms into a familiar horror. As he calibrates this vision, identifying not a meteor but a plane on fire, he notes, '[i]n fact, the spectacle has the familiarity of a recurrent dream.' It does not take long for the implications of such a scene to come to him; eighteen months after 9/11, he has had plenty of time to imagine: 'the screaming in the cabin partly muffled by that deadening acoustic, the fumbling in bags for phones and last words, the airline staff in their terror clinging to remembered fragments of procedure.'²⁷ The scene in front of him merely projects the worst of his fears and the most extreme elements of his imaginings. Perowne, we later find out, has misinterpreted – the malfunctioning plane is not an act of terrorism and its consequences are comparatively very benign – and yet, this moment conclusively positions the novel as post-disaster, an investigation into the psychological consequences of the terrorist attack. Perowne's imagination here takes on a stridently material quality; whether or not it happens in the "now" of the narrative, it has always already happened. What used to be banal features of western urban life are now undergirded with the risk of terrorism, whether it is London's busy skyline or 'a packaged meal' on a plane. As he concludes: 'Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed.'²⁸

While visions of the attack determine Perowne's outlook and haunt London's skyline, the political fallout also forms the background drama of the novel: it takes place on Saturday 15th February 2003, the day of the Iraq War protests. The mundane title – *Saturday* – reflects its attempt to portray this "new normal," in which the events of 9/11 and the threat of terrorism have transformed the everyday lives of Western subjects. In the

²⁷ Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, Nachdr. (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 16.

²⁸ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 15; p. 16.

epigraph, McEwan borrows from Saul Bellow to articulate the central dilemma of a society caught in the aftermath of this tragedy: ‘what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass.’ Most pertinently, ‘[a]fter the late failure of radical hopes.’ The accusatory ending of the passage provides the moral impetus of the novel in the form of a tripartite threat: ‘You – you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest. Or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot.’²⁹ This epigraph denies McEwan the excuse of non-involvement or ignorance. Per Bellow’s address, McEwan, amongst all other city dwellers, must recognise himself as essentially a product of his environment and thus responsible for it.

Here, it is important to remember McEwan’s small yet not insignificant role in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 disaster. McEwan was not only an observer of the disaster but one of the main – certainly one of the first – architects in giving the amorphous tragedy a form, in cohering the raw and frenzied facts on the ground into a collective sense which could be mourned. His two Guardian articles published on 12th and 15th September 2001 have the strange tone of a foreign correspondent (he was living in New York city at the time) and priestly consolation by answering the renewed and urgent call for the dormant public intellectual to make sense of that in which statistics and footage prove wholly insufficient.³⁰ The conclusion of the latter declared an unusually sincere defence of Western civilization in the name of love:

As for their victims in the planes and in the towers, in their terror they would not have felt it at the time, but those snatched and anguished assertions of love were their defiance.³¹

Despite McEwan’s authoritative appeal to unity, one can detect a discomfort with his public role in these essays, a role he cannot fully assume. Instead, he aligns himself with the shellshocked mass who can only helplessly watch in horror: ‘Most of us have had no active role to play in these terrible events. We simply watch the television, read the papers, turn on

²⁹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 1.

³⁰ Ian McEwan, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion. Love Was All They Had to Set against Their Murderers’, *The Guardian* (London, 15 September 2001) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>> [accessed 9 August 2022] ; Ian McEwan, ‘Beyond Belief’, *The Guardian*, 12 September 2001 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/12/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety>> [accessed 18 August 2022].

³¹ McEwan, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’.

the radio again.’³² This “us” is, in a sense, the subject and aim of these essays: an attempt to tether those helpless bystanders to the innocent victims – two categories which mere chance stops from being interchangeable with one another. In this strange impasse, McEwan sees the imaginative extrapolation of bystanders into the victims (‘we fantasize ourselves into the events ... [w]hat if it was me?’) as an act of empathy, ‘the essence of compassion and ... the beginning of morality.’³³ To mine one’s imaginative faculties and to search deep for the most everyday, banal details of the tragedy is the very ‘mechanics of compassion,’ McEwan claims. He demonstrates this imaginative, empathetic move himself: ‘you are under the bedclothes, unable to sleep, and you are crouching in the brushed-steel lavatory at the rear of the plane.’³⁴

As others have pointed out, this sentiment aligns not only with what he sees as the ethical role of the novelist but more broadly with a ‘common humanist conception that sees in literature an important exploration of human nature with potential to enrich the readers’ knowledge of themselves and others.’³⁵ He uses precisely the same language in an interview with the *Guardian* which – unbelievably – took place on 11 September 2001, just a few hours before the twin towers fell. Novels are ‘about showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else,’ he states. ‘Other people are as alive as you are. Cruelty is a failure of imagination.’³⁶ Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that McEwan opens *Saturday* with a character who appears, like the author himself, to have spent much time meditating on what it would be like – or what it would *have been* like – to be a victim of a terrorist attack. Perowne’s analytic mind recognises this as a distinct possibility – why not his building or his plane? In this way, he conceives himself as infinitely substitutable for the ‘many millions’ of Londoners living in the city at that moment. In this imaginative mode, he rejects any thought of fate or divine power as ‘the primitive of the supernaturally inclined

³² McEwan, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’.

³³ McEwan, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’.

³⁴ McEwan, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’.

³⁵ Tammy Amiel-Houser, ‘The Ethics of Otherness in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*’, *Connotations*, 21.1 (2011), 128–57 (p. 128). This chapter follows the same thread as Amiel-Houser’s essay, seeing in *Saturday* a ‘moral turn that goes against McEwan’s own declared liberal-humanist views,’ inspired by Levinasian ethics (128). Where my analysis deviates from Amiel-Houser is my interest in the formal dimension of the novel which appears at odds with the ethical imperative that the character Baxter inspires (in part) in Perowne. The novel’s free indirect discourse gives the impression of a multi-perspectival approach (one which may on the surface appear inclusive of otherness or contradiction) but in fact turns against Levinasian ethics through its exclusion of the ‘you’ other.

³⁶ Kate Kellaway, ‘At Home with His Worries’, *The Guardian* (London, 16 November 2001) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/16/fiction.ianmcewan>> [accessed 9 August 2022].

amount[ing] to what his psychiatric colleagues call a problem, or an idea, of reference.’³⁷ It is rather through objective thought – the one that allows him to reject ‘an excess of the subjective, the ordering of the world in line with you needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance’³⁸ – from which he draws his concern and care for the other: by imagining they are just like himself.

Given McEwan’s avowed ethical conceptualization of literature (both before and after the disaster), it is remarkable that *Saturday*, his “9/11 novel” if you like, is emphatically concerned with what it is like to not be able to enter the consciousness of another and to be confronted with the fleshy materiality of a consciousness which is utterly impenetrable instead. Two of the novel’s characters fit the bill in this regard: the novel’s antagonist Baxter and Perowne’s mother who is afflicted with dementia. It is one of the novel’s central ironies that Perowne’s esteemed status as a neurosurgeon makes him most adept at diagnosing these afflictions and consequently, he most profoundly understands the intractability of their illnesses. Only Baxter makes a second appearance after his first chance encounter with Perowne, breaking into his home to menace his family in the novel’s disturbing climax. The other, his mother, figures instead as a quiet obligation which takes a few hours out of his Saturday. Unlike his encounter with Baxter, her alterity is blunted through her institutionalisation in a home where Perowne’s interaction with her is spatially and temporally circumscribed in advance by the formality of the visiting hour. Even so, both problematise the cool, modernist prose which McEwan establishes at the outset of the novel; prose which, until their arrival, enacts the “dream” of literature which seeks to ‘show[] the possibility of what is like to be someone else.’³⁹

Prior to meeting these characters however, McEwan’s narration has all the clarity of a scientific, logical mind. The novel opens with unabashed transparency with Perowne waking from slumber and standing naked before his window: ‘It’s as if, standing there in the darkness, he’s materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered.’⁴⁰ Perowne’s presence requires no existential handwringing; he simply is. His perspective is as assured as the narration: ‘And he’s entirely himself, he is certain of it, and he knows that sleep is behind him: to know the difference between it and waking, to know the boundaries, is the

³⁷ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 17.

³⁸ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 17.

³⁹ Kellaway.

⁴⁰ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 3.

essence of sanity.’⁴¹ It is this sanity and clarity of mind which Perowne prides himself on, understanding that his situational compass will give an accurate prediction of the future more times than not. ‘His vision – always good,’ the narration tells us, Perowne is ‘a habitual observer.’⁴² Perowne’s superior observation is not limited to himself but, in fact, he is a professional observer of others, identifying in their barely perceptible features – perceptible only to him – their neurological state.

Whilst Perowne congratulates himself on his objectivity, it is his affluence which provides the panopticism he ascribes solely to his superior perspective. Looking down from the window of his central London apartment, he admires the ‘emptiness and clarity of the scene’: ‘the city is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef, sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly everyone wanting it to work.’⁴³ It is this capacity for perceptual and conceptual unity which allows Perowne to conceive such a romantic view of the city, even in the face of its uglier elements. It is, it appears, simply a matter of the “right” perspective: ‘pigeon excrement hardened by distance and cold into something almost beautiful like the scattering of snow’ or ‘overfull litter baskets suggest[ing] abundance rather than squalor.’⁴⁴

Such a viewpoint, however, garners an ethical ambiguity in the face of the human suffering he becomes privy to from his exalted standing. After finding out that the burning plane he witnessed was not a terrorist attack, he returns to the window the next morning to see two troubled young people standing in the square below, elsewhere referred to as ‘Perownes’ own corner’ where Londoners ‘act out their dramas.’⁴⁵ Unlike the burning plane, Perowne watches with fascinated, though not horrified, attention. He identifies one of the young people as suffering from substance withdrawal. He scours her body – ‘[s]he’s agitated and crying, and undecided in her movements. ... Repeatedly, her left hand wanders behind her back, to dig under her T-shirt and scratch hard’⁴⁶ – not out of concern but in a diagnostic mode, attempting to figure out the answer to the puzzle of this girl’s behaviour. He concludes, ‘Aphetamine-driven fornication – the phantom ants crawling through her

⁴¹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 4.

⁴² McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 4; p. 5.

⁴³ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 4; p. 5.

⁴⁴ McEwan, *Saturday*, pp. 4–5.

⁴⁵ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 5; p.60.

⁴⁶ McEwan, *Saturday*, pp. 59–60.

arteries, the itch that can never be reached' and this scene becomes simply one of many others seen from his window, like the loud boy who shouted into his phone for two hours the Sunday before, or the woman who broke her husband's phone in a fit of rage.⁴⁷

Perowne's cavalier attitude to witnessing this personal tragedy juxtaposed against his horror upon seeing a potential plane attack the previous night thus undermines the ethical philosophy he previously established. For the class boundaries separating him and the young woman he sees below make such a substitutive extrapolation – that he would ever be in her position – almost impossible. Rather he's guided by an intellectual contempt, deciding that she would not choose a different path even if she was given the opportunity. He does consider running after her to give her a prescription ('he is, after all, dressed for running') but his analysis of the scene and her gets the better of him: 'she also needs a boyfriend who isn't a pusher. And a new life.'⁴⁸ As he often does in the novel, he contentedly resigns himself to his inability to change the state of the world and does not burden himself with imagining what it would be like to be in her position. It is this resolve which in effect codifies his position of privilege in relation to others' suffering. His proposed inability to make a difference insulates him from the pain of others, leaving him coldly unaffected by the scene. It allows him merely two pages after observing the young couple to declare that 'the scene has an air of innocence and English dottiness.'⁴⁹ This innocence has a sinister edge as the narration continues: 'Perowne, dressed for combat on court, imagines himself as Saddam, surveying the crowd with satisfaction from some Baghdad ministry balcony: the good-hearted electorates of the Western democracies will never allow their governments to attack his country.'⁵⁰ All at once, the expansive narrative voice casts Perowne as dictator, victim and observer. His own privileged situatedness, looking out his London window, enables him to be multiply interpellated onto the precarious global landscape, basking in the illusion of an omniscient perspective.

This perspective is replicated on the level of form. The novel employs a modernist free indirect style, what Moretti calls 'a sort of stylistic panopticon.'⁵¹ In many ways, this style reveals the conformity of Perowne's world view as ethical and political stances slip

⁴⁷ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 60.

⁴⁸ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 65.

⁴⁹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 62.

⁵⁰ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 62.

⁵¹ Franco Moretti, 'Serious Century', in *The Novel*, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 364–400 (p. 399).

into the narrative, formally detached from any character. So when the narrative advocates a relativised approach to ethical action, for instance: '[t]he trick, as always, the key to human success and domination, is to be selective in your mercies. For all the discerning talk, it's the close at hand, the visible that exerts the overpowering force. And what you don't see ...', Perowne finds the perfect justification for his lack of intervention, one which is not merely subjective reasoning but edified by the objective address of the third person narrator.⁵² Moretti understands this blurred distinction between character and narrator as the novel's "voicing" of 'current ideology': '[t]he emotional tone, the lexicon, the shape of the sentence – all the elements on which we rely to extricate the subjective from the objective side of free indirect style – are now amalgamated in the truly "objective" impersonality" of the *idée reçue*.'⁵³

The totalising nature of the novel's free indirect style and its formal establishment of social convention thus precludes recognition of any suffering which exists outside of what Rancière would call the 'distribution of the sensible': the socially circumscribed limitations on what can be perceived and acknowledged.⁵⁴ This is mirrored by Perowne's privileged social status. Perowne's role as a surgeon has given him an elevated position which, within an anaestheticised culture, allows him to inoculate himself against the visceral nature of others' suffering. Whilst his occupation enables him to help and heal others, it also offers a useful tool to distance himself from others' pain. Therefore, his daily administering of anaesthesia which enables him to operate upon inert bodies is akin to his casualised observation of others who serve as nothing more than fleshy characters of a London scene. As previously noted, however, *Saturday* encounters two characters who destabilize this distribution: Perowne's mother and a stranger named Baxter. Here I will focus on the latter whose intrusion into the narrative creates a scene of dissensus, 'a demonstration of the gap in the sensible itself.'⁵⁵ Such a figure denies Perowne the ethical escape he justifies to himself throughout the novel and instead forces him to confront a radically other presence who he cannot manipulate or control. The intrusion enters at the level of form demonstrating the limitation of McEwan's free indirect style, namely its incapacity to accommodate the

⁵² McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 127.

⁵³ Moretti, p. 399.

⁵⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁵⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran, Reprinted (London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 88.

second-person “you” (*not-I*) figure. It is notable that immediately before Perowne encounters Baxter, he has a non-verbal interaction with a police officer in which the narrative expresses a conversation which has passed wordlessly between them. Perowne knowingly drives down a blocked off street and is prepared to feign ignorance in confrontation with law enforcement: ‘a little drama of exchange between a firm but apologetic policeman and the solemnly tolerant citizen.’⁵⁶ Upon meeting, the officer is called off to attend another concern: ‘Perowne meets his eye, and with a self-deprecating, interrogative look, points across the road at University Street. The cop shrugs, and then nods, and makes a gesture with his hand to say, Do it quickly then. What the hell.’⁵⁷ There is a confluence in perspective – that ‘What the hell’ appears to belong to both of them and through the novel’s extrapolation, Perowne substitutes himself for the police, knowing when, where and most importantly who can transgress the law in particular contexts. Perowne is therefore part of the police in a Rancièrian sense, well versed in the social ‘allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying.’⁵⁸ So when he encounters Baxter, his presence is not merely an affront to him on a personal level but also an affront to a common order. Baxter is a forensic presence forcing Perowne to reckon with a corporeality he cannot contain.

4.4. Baxter’s forensic intrusion

Many have argued that McEwan’s skill as a writer is analogically replicated in Perowne’s skill with the scalpel and his daily manipulation of fleshy human bodies. For some, this similarity goes further: Perowne is McEwan’s proxy on the page, attempting to figure out ‘what it means to be a man today,’ lest he be condemned to be an ‘ingrate, dilettante, idiot.’⁵⁹ As Christopher Hitchens noted in his review, Perowne shares many things with his creator: ‘Perowne has Ian McEwan’s wife, Ian McEwan’s parents, a representative cross-section of Ian McEwan’s children and stepchildren, and also Ian McEwan’s house.’⁶⁰ Given these biographical similarities, it is easy to draw a link between

⁵⁶ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 79.

⁵⁷ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 80.

⁵⁸ Jacques Rancièrè and Julie Rose, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 29.

⁵⁹ McEwan, *Saturday*.

⁶⁰ Christopher Hitchens, ‘Civilization and Its Malcontents’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 295.3 (2005), 107–8 (p. 107).

the expansive impulse of McEwan's free indirect style which seeks worldly comprehension and Perowne's surgical skill, which he explicitly describes as an artform. Perowne *enjoys* his work, describing the lush pleasure of confronting the passive bodies of his patients and the aesthetic harmony of stitching them back together. At the surgery table, Perowne appreciates his art: 'skulls which give way to expose the tentorium – the tent – a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the little whirl of a veiled dancer'; tumours expertly shaved from view, 'rolling away neatly before the probing of his Rhoton dissector – an entirely curative process.'⁶¹ His love for surgery is romantic – it's where he met and fell in love with his future wife when she was a patient and he a trainee doctor. Enamoured simultaneously by his wife's beauty and the seamless surgical procedure, he sought to dedicate his life to both: 'As the closing up began and the face, this particular, beautiful face, was reassembled without a single disfiguring mark ... He was falling in love with a life. He was also, of course, falling in love. The two were inseparable.'⁶² In love and surgery, Perowne can reconcile his sensible desire for the radically Other. This desire manifests in the seductive mystery of his wife and the fragmented human bodies of his patients who require surgical repair. These encounters with alterity do not lead to subjective disassociation for Perowne but operate in the same way as a Levinasian enjoyment. The world's alterity nourishes the subjective ego; in this case, through Perowne's identification as a husband and surgeon.

Surgery therefore serves to support Perowne's privileged social position. It is a practice of self-sufficiency and possession of otherness where he is master. It serves a restorative purpose: 'Operating never wearies him – once busy within the enclosed world of his firm ... he experiences a superhuman capacity, more like a craving for work.'⁶³ Perowne's work gives him the twinned satisfaction of personal invigoration and subjective completion, suturing fleshly edges seemingly without consequence: 'able to excise almost all of it without damaging any eloquent region.'⁶⁴ Perowne is therefore a slick remover of aberrant elements. It is this clinical proficiency which informs his first meeting with Baxter.

They first meet when Perowne hits Baxter's car whilst driving illegally down a cordoned road. Perowne's confidence in his own ability is comical: he's driving with 'unconscious expertise' when he crashes and he angrily refers to Baxter as an 'intruder,'

⁶¹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 11; p. 8.

⁶² McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 45.

⁶³ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 11.

despite the fact that it is he who is at fault, knowingly in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nevertheless, the term 'intruder' takes on an axiomatic importance in Perowne's reading of the scene – for Baxter, as yet unknown, is the intrusive presence who has spoiled his carefully mapped out Saturday and forces him to remember that he is subject to forces outside of his control. He lists the consequences of this interaction: insurance claims, car repair, a scheduled squash game. His textually embedded fury is the first indication that the novel's free indirect style is not as rational or objective as it first appears: 'just pulled out, no signal, stupid bastard, didn't even look, what's his mirror for, fucking bastard. The only person in the world he hates is sitting in the car behind.'⁶⁵ During these heightened moments, we realise that Perowne's capacity for empathetic identification can take on pathetically self-pitying forms, as he imagines himself in the place of another: 'receding obviously down a side street is the other, most likely version of himself, like a vanishing rich uncle, introspective and happy, motoring carefree through his Saturday, leaving him alone and wretched in his new, improbable, inescapable fate.'⁶⁶ Given this textual outburst, it is surprising that Perowne comes out of this accident well; his car suffered no damage whatsoever, '[n]ot a blemish.'⁶⁷ Baxter, on the other hand, was not so lucky as Perowne's car tore off his wing mirror. This is the first indication of the asymmetry which characterises their first encounter.

Perowne's experience as a surgeon allows him to chasten himself in advance; he even contemplates the potential that he may enjoy the encounter. His medical experience allows him to prefigure this first meeting and reinforce the pre-established social organisation of these two characters: 'clinical experience is, among all else, an abrasive, toughening process, bound to wear away at his sensitivities.'⁶⁸ Recounting previous professional moments of high emotion, he reflects that they 'have a purity and innocence about them; everything is stripped down to the bare essentials of being.'⁶⁹ In such moments, his medically trained desensitization allows him to come away 'obscurely purified,' revelling in a scene of human drama while remaining subjectively unmoved.⁷⁰ It is through Perowne's social and medical judgement that he is able to escape this encounter relatively

⁶⁵ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 82.

⁶⁶ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 83.

⁶⁷ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 84.

⁶⁸ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 85.

⁶⁹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 85.

⁷⁰ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 86.

unscathed. He scans his antagonist to identify the risk, assuming from his appearance a propensity for violence and thus placing him in the category of ‘thugs,’ ‘drug dealers and pimps’ who ‘settle their quarrels their own way.’⁷¹ However, what gives Perowne the upper hand is his identification of Baxter’s devastating neurological condition which indicates Perowne’s escape route. ‘The persistent tremor [of his right hand] draws Perowne’s professional attention. Perhaps there’s reassurance to be had in the unsteadiness of the grip.’⁷² As Baxter continues to exhibit more symptoms, Perowne garners more assurance and even pleasure from his antagonist’s debilitating condition. ‘[S]peculating about it soothes him,’ Perowne observes, and it is this knowledge of the severity of Baxter’s condition which allows him to escape the threat of physical violence.⁷³ Finally, when Perowne identifies the condition to Baxter, the scene turns and he ‘senses the power passing to him.’⁷⁴

Perowne’s knowledge of Baxter’s condition is paradoxical. On the one hand, his expertise makes him uniquely capable of diagnosing the disorder. On the other hand, it is precisely Perowne’s inability to imagine what it is like to suffer Baxter’s condition and to be in his position which gives him the power in this scene. As he explains to the reader, Baxter’s ‘future is fixed and easily foretold’:

Between ten and twenty years to complete the course, from the first small alterations of character, tremors in the hands and face, emotional disturbance, including – most notably – sudden, uncontrollable alterations of mood, to the helpless jerky dance-like movements, intellectual dilapidation, memory failure, agnosia, apraxia, dementia, total loss of muscular control, rigidity sometimes, nightmarish hallucinations and a meaningless end.⁷⁵

We learn that Baxter stands to lose all the ‘essentials of being’ Perowne has just outlined a few pages before: ‘memory, vision, the ability to recognise faces, chronic pain, motor function, even a sense of self.’⁷⁶ It’s a reeling description which highlights the divide between the two men: Baxter knows this is his future but would not be able to articulate it in the way Perowne does. Rather, the unexpected terror lives within him – his knowledge of

⁷¹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 88.

⁷² McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 87.

⁷³ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 90.

⁷⁴ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 95.

⁷⁵ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 94.

⁷⁶ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 85.

this opaque, bewildering future is viscerally real. Perowne's training as a doctor, however, leaves him ethically unmoved: 'clinical experience wrung that from him long ago ... Besides, the matter is beyond pity.'⁷⁷ He can instead quite perversely rejoice in Baxter's condition as a matter of convenience as it allows him to escape and continue with his day with his plans and car intact. He has performed his professional function and therefore can draw a line under the encounter. With Baxter bewildered by Perowne's diagnosis, he escapes to the comforts of a squash game aptly played against his anaesthetist colleague, the competition between the two middle-aged men weighing far more heavily on his mind. The juxtaposition of the anticipated squash game between the two doctors and the abandoned Baxter distils and reinforces the sensible distribution of the characters: Perowne's social capital allows him to escape the emotional consequences of his proximity to Baxter and to indulge in a playful and ultimately inconsequential competition with his colleague. On the other hand, Baxter is dispensed with from the narrative, left to suffer the consequences of his debilitating condition off the page.

As already mentioned, Baxter appears on two occasions in the novel. The climax of the novel sees Baxter return, this time intruding into Perowne's home and menacing his family. Unlike the first encounter, this second meeting is informed by the knowledge garnered by the first encounter. In this domestic setting, Perowne no longer has the power of his high social status, nor does he have the advantage of superior knowledge. Baxter too represents a different figure for Perowne; knowledge of his condition has transformed him from a situational inconvenience into a threatening and unpredictable figure. Upon his arrival in the home, Perowne first senses Baxter's presence in its restlessness, not the body in its entirety but a disjunctive, uncontrolled movement: 'A moment before he can recall the name, he recognises the face too, and the peculiarity of the gait, the fidgety tremors.'⁷⁸ In this enclosed space, his knowledge of Baxter's condition makes him more aware of his and his family's vulnerability to his unpredictability, which previously was only Baxter's burden to bear. Perowne's recognition of Baxter is therefore two-sided. He remembers not just his 'existence' as the person previously encountered but also as an 'agitated physical reality,' a

⁷⁷ McEwan, *Saturday*, pp. 93–94.

⁷⁸ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 206.

coalescence of intangible, barely perceptible features – ‘the sour nicotine tang, the tremulous right hand, the monkeyish air.’⁷⁹

Perowne returns to his tactic of imaginative extrapolation, ‘try[ing] to see the room through [Baxter’s] eyes, as if that might help predict the degree of trouble ahead.’⁸⁰ However after Baxter violently strikes his father-in-law, he realises the futility of such an aim: ‘Baxter is a special case – a man who believes he has no future and is therefore free of consequences.’⁸¹ The symptoms Perowne so proficiently listed previously now gain the sinister intensity of inhering in the figure before him who he cannot predict: ‘impulsiveness, poor self-control, paranoia, mood swings, depression balanced by outbursts of temper.’⁸² Confronted with perilous nature of these symptoms and sensibly troubled by Baxter’s presence, Perowne’s concern turns to the plight of the figure in front of him as he overcomes his medically-trained lack of pity: ‘At some point he’ll find himself writhing and hallucinating on a bed he’ll never leave, in a long-term psychiatric ward, probably friendless, certainly unlovable, and there his slow deterioration will be managed.’⁸³ During this moment in which his cultivated intuitions fail to predict or manage the immediate future, Perowne too reflects on the previous encounter, recognising his arrogant foolishness: ‘He used or misused his authority to avoid one crisis, and his actions have steered him into another, far worse. The responsibility is his.’⁸⁴ In this way, Perowne’s social status and medical knowledge do not provide the ethical inoculation of the first encounter; rather, he is now compelled to confront his own inability to accurately anticipate the future, given the unpredictability of the figure that stands before him: ‘Baxter so volatile, so savagely carefree, the possibilities for harm multiply.’⁸⁵

Despite Perowne’s self-awareness, this scene is not exultant and is a deeply disturbing episode of the novel. The threats of violence are distributed along gendered lines – Perowne’s wife has a knife held to her throat throughout the scene whilst Perowne’s daughter is forced to strip naked and threatened with sexual violence. This scene of instability is a dangerous moment of the unknown as anything can happen. The presence of

⁷⁹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 207.

⁸⁰ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 207.

⁸¹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 210.

⁸² McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 210.

⁸³ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 211.

⁸⁴ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 211.

⁸⁵ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 213.

Baxter is a moment of dissensus; he reorders the social dynamics of the scene to the extent that all – ‘[a]ll this beloved and vulnerable flesh’⁸⁶ – appear equally fragile in the face of the future’s opacity. The scene represents a moment of insomniac vigilance in which its participants, fully aware of their powerlessness, must anxiously abide the agitated flux of the situation and their social organisation. In Rancièrian terms, it is unsurprising therefore that this scene can be described as “aesthetic” in more ways than one. For Rancière, scenes of political dissensus in which the distribution of the sensible is momentarily suspended entail an essentially *aesthetic* rupture: ‘a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or bodies.’⁸⁷ This rupture is not akin to the humanist ideal of literature that McEwan espoused in his *Guardian* articles – it does not entertain literature’s capacity for empathetic extrapolation. Rather, Rancière perceives the political salience of aesthetic rupture in the ways that it ‘breaks with sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled.’⁸⁸ In this scene, this sensory rearrangement quite literally emerges in the gift of literature (albeit coerced) which momentarily transforms the conventional social order.

Perowne’s poet daughter Daisy – naked and revealing to everyone her pregnancy for the first time – is forced by Baxter to read a poem from her new collection. Instead, prompted silently by her grandfather, she recites Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ which she learned as a child by heart. This is unbeknownst to Perowne who neither recognises it as one of his daughter’s poems nor has ever come across it before. It therefore strikes both him and Baxter alike as entirely new and seemingly written by Daisy’s hand. The ambiguous authorship of the poem and its de-canonised status in the scene has a politically radical effect; it makes the scene a moment of uniqueness and aesthetic purity. Shockingly, the poem has a bewildering effect on Baxter who requests that Daisy repeat it. Upon hearing Arnold’s poem, Baxter is overcome by a physical levity and enjoyment which manifests in a kind of dancing movement and a transformed emotional demeanour. ‘Upon hearing it, he makes frenetic little dips with his body. He’s becoming manic, he’s tripping over his words, and shifting weight rapidly from one foot to the other.’⁸⁹ The reader is of course not able to

⁸⁶ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 213.

⁸⁷ Rancière, *Dissensus*, p. 139.

⁸⁸ Rancière, *Dissensus*, p. 139.

⁸⁹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 223.

conceive what Baxter is thinking and what in Arnold's poem has inspired this change 'from lord of terror to amazed admirer.'⁹⁰ However, we are privy to Perowne's thought pattern which also exhibits a rapid change in emotion upon the poem's two readings. In its first reading, Perowne envisions two young lovers (his daughter and her boyfriend) on a terrace listening to the sounds of the shore, declaring their love for one another. On the second reading, 'it appears there's no terrace, but an open window; there's no young man ... Instead he sees Baxter standing alone, elbows propped against the sill, listening to the waves 'bring the eternal note of sadness in.'⁹¹ The initial declaration of love now sounds 'hopeless in the absence of joy or love or light or peace or 'help for pain.'⁹² The solidity of the poem codified in its textual form is given a plasticity in speech. Within mere seconds of one another, the same poem evokes for Perowne a variety of meanings, some of which contradict one another. Unlike McEwan's idealistic conception of art's empathetic function, Perowne's reception of the poem does not lead him to "understand what it is like to be someone else" but rather manifests as a vigilant awareness of the present moment in all its flux, fluidity and potential to radically change. It gives rise to a concept which previously appeared inconceivable – that his daughter may be substitutable or occupy the same aesthetic space as Baxter.

In this, we get closest to the incorporation of Baxter into McEwan's free indirect style. Baxter does not enter the narrative in the form of a determinate presence but in the simultaneity of these two interpretations. It's a scene of Rancièrian dissensus: 'the putting of two worlds in one and the same world.'⁹³ In his susceptibility and sensible vulnerability to the external world, Baxter is transformed into another person quite literally. Throughout the novel, Perowne has emphasised the inevitability of Baxter's condition, stating that it is 'biological determinism in its purest form,' that Baxter's 'future is fixed and easily foretold' and finally, '[i]t is written.'⁹⁴ However, it is in this instance that he recognises Baxter's alterity beyond his medical diagnosis; as Perowne states, it is not 'molecules and faulty genes alone [that] are terrorising his family.'⁹⁵ Perowne thus becomes both intellectually

⁹⁰ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 223.

⁹¹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 221.

⁹² McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 222.

⁹³ Rancière, *Dissensus*, p. 69.

⁹⁴ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 93; p. 93; p. 210.

⁹⁵ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 210.

and sensibly aware of Baxter's as a radically Other presence who he can neither contain nor predict.

In this fit of enthusiasm, Baxter is led upstairs by Perowne's invitation onto a (non-existent) clinical trial: after the jubilant disorder Daisy's poem provoked, Baxter wants his future. Ultimately, however, the novel ends with a re-establishment of the distribution of the sensible. Upon leading Baxter upstairs, Perowne is able to disarm him but in the process, Baxter sustains an injury and is taken unconscious to hospital. The novel thus ends by reinstating their social roles with Perowne operating on an anaesthetized, unconscious Baxter. Safe, Perowne can now resume his masterful role, observing his subject without being in the thrall of his instability. In this empowered position, Perowne marvels at the brain, gratuitously placing his finger 'on the surface of Baxter's cortex.'⁹⁶ He is back, superpowers and all, in his enclosed kingdom. With his finger on Baxter's brain, he thinks: 'What a wonderful fairy story, how understandable and human it was, the dream of the healing touch.'⁹⁷ This fairy story allows Perowne to return to the illusion of his non-contingent, subjective self and in this way, his surgical touch is self-healing. Returning to his work, he reaffirms himself through surgery and the manipulation of the fleshly existences which lie on his table.

At the end of the novel, the forensic instability of Baxter's presence is institutionalised in more ways than one. After operating on him, Perowne seeks to use all his bureaucratic tools to remove Baxter from his life. He resolves that '[t]he matter must be dropped. Let them go after the other man. Baxter has a diminishing slice of life worth living, before his descent into nightmare hallucination begins.'⁹⁸ Perowne can do so because he has colleagues who can readily facilitate this arrangement. He has the social levers (diagnoses from colleagues and acquaintances with the Crown Prosecution Service) who can harness their institutional powers on his behalf. As he remarks, '[h]e knows how the system works.'⁹⁹ Reflecting on this decision, he asks 'is this forgiveness?,' knowing that it is his self-interest over and above any altruistic sentiment which has influenced his decision to insulate himself from Baxter's uncontainable presence.

⁹⁶ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 255.

⁹⁷ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 255.

⁹⁸ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 278.

⁹⁹ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 278.

Perowne's neutralisation of Baxter at the close of the novel is replicated formally by McEwan's decision to end the novel as his protagonist is falling asleep. In this sense, Perowne's narration returns to him and it is his retirement into sleep which conclusively ends the book, re-aligning *Saturday* with a modernist literary tradition of single-day narratives. In its final moments, sleep is most directly posited as the evasive counterpart to Baxter's disarming presence: it replaces the terrifying materiality of Baxter with the comforting mystery of slumber. 'Sleep's no longer a concept, it's a material thing, ... There's always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there's only this. And at last, faintly, falling: this day's over.'¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, Baxter's presence is not reconciled – as Perowne has admitted, it cannot be. Rather, it is forgotten by the ethical evasion of sleep. For Perowne, the forensic presence of Baxter is denied in favour of the singularity of sleep's abyss.

Sleep is an example of Perowne's privilege. He ends the novel as he began – exposed and naked, getting into bed and falling asleep, kept secure by his social privilege. Just as he administers anaesthesia to his patients so that he can bypass their visceral proximity, so too does sleep allow him the fantasy of the singular subject, immune to the vicissitudes of the external world. The following section picks up where this section has left off. *My Year* follows a similarly affluent subject who similarly pursues sleep as a way to sidestep her social responsibilities and ultimately her fear of the unpredictability of the future. The protagonist seeks to keep herself in a constant state of sleep in order to insulate herself from the alterity of others. Unlike *Saturday*, the forensic presences of *My Year* are first and foremost those that are closest to the narrator. It is her inability to be assured of emotional reciprocation – the constant danger of one's asymmetric vulnerability to another – which keeps her locked in a pattern of perpetual sleeping in order to inhibit her nonvolitional sensible exposure to others.

4.5. The end of the long nineties: *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

In *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001* (2009), Philip Wegner describes the long nineties:

¹⁰⁰ McEwan, *Saturday*, p. 279.

the 1990s are the strange space between an ending (of the Cold War) and a beginning (of our post-September 11 world) ... This place, located as it is between the Real Event and its symbolic repetition, is strictly speaking “non-historical,” and such an “empty space” is experienced in its lived reality ... On the one hand, it feels like a moment of “terrifying monsters,” of haunting by a living dead past. Yet it is also experienced as a moment of “sublime beauty,” of openness and insecurity – a place, in other words, wherein history might move in a number of very different directions.¹⁰¹

If the long nineties were, as Wegner recounts, a ‘strange space’, a case can be made that the strangest years were its very last – those between January 2000 and September 2001. This period, of course, connects the disaster that never was (the new millennium / Y2K) with the disaster unforeseen (the 9/11 terrorist attacks). It is a period which, when viewed in retrospect, is always coloured by the disaster which proceeded and ended it. Ottessa Moshfegh’s 2017 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is set at the tail end of this long-nineties period. Her novel cites this very early 21st century period as a key indexical historical moment which, by establishing a constant and pervasive ambient threat, mirrors our own.

My Year follows an unnamed narrator as she embarks on a venture to sleep around the clock. Armed with a trove of medication, supplied to her by her incompetent therapist, she seeks to check out for a year – to “hibernate,” as she puts it. The narrator is a beautiful blonde in her mid-twenties. Financially secure and deeply depressed, she lives in a lonely Manhattan apartment and has only one very persistent and tolerant friend, Reva. What we find in Moshfegh’s novel is a protagonist who suffers from a severe bout of banal insomnia - not because she cannot sleep; in fact, she sleeps all the time. Rather the sleep never satiates; it does not release her.

My Year was published in 2018 and in its short shelf-life thus far, Moshfegh’s novel has undergone a transformation, escalating from being the highly anticipated follow-up to her 2015 acclaimed novel *Eileen* to garnering a unique and niche reputation on social media and blogging platforms, TikTok and Tumblr, used primarily by Generation Z. Outlets now market the novel alongside capitalised phrases: TIKTOK MADE ME BUY IT or THE TIKTOK SENSATION. The novel is a darling of #BookTok – an index on TikTok which connects a “community” (that much loved term of social media) of mostly young, mostly female readers. As one Vice article explains, *My Year* is part of a new coquette aesthetic popular on these visual platforms: ‘a dedication to the sensorium of luxurious, feminine

¹⁰¹ Phillip E. Wegner, *Life between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 28.

solitude ... [it] presents passivity and self-destruction, as a site of potential power rather than weakness.’¹⁰²

Critical reception has sought to similarly stress the lethargic “resistance” of the protagonist seeing in her a neo-Bartleby figure – a refusal to bow to the conformist demands of a neoliberal society. Juliane Strätz employs a Caryian framework interpreting the protagonist’s ‘passive, immobile and anaesthetized body as a signifier of revolt,’ noting that her self-sedation ‘subverts the system by instrumentalizing its own methods of subjection.’¹⁰³ Such a reading chimes with the philosophy of the protagonist herself who sees in her cynical postures a cool rejection of the outside world. She boasts of her social detachment, claiming that she only catches news events from sensational newspaper headlines in her bodega and ironically jokes that her apartment’s trash chute is her most direct connection to the outside world: ‘My trash with the trash of others. The things I touched touched things other people had touched. I was contributing. I was connecting.’¹⁰⁴ It is clear that Strätz also shares a contempt for the narrator’s earnest friend Reva who represents the ‘foil the protagonist turns against’: naiveté, sincerity and an earnest investment in ‘the promise of hope ... tied to specific life choices in late modernity.’¹⁰⁵ Reva is easy to ridicule, especially seen through the unforgiving eyes of the narrator. Brutally, she is a loser of the New York rat race – as the narrator states, ‘I had chosen my solitude and purposelessness and Reva had, despite her hard work, simply failed to get what she wanted – no husband, no children, no fabulous career.’¹⁰⁶

Unlike the narrator, Reva does not have the secure income that the narrator enjoys and her personal insecurities are exposed in the face of her rich, beautiful, thin friend. The narrator speculates that Reva ‘saw my struggle with misery as a cruel parody of her own misfortunes’: ‘I looked like a model, had money I hadn’t earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history so I was “cultured.” Reva, on the other hand, came from Long Island, was an 8 out of 10 but called herself “a New York three,” and had majored in

¹⁰² Emma Madden, ‘How “*My Year of Rest and Relaxation*” Became an Unlikely Aesthetic Trend’, *Vice*, 21 June 2022 <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/93a587/my-year-of-rest-and-relaxation-tiktok>> [accessed 12 September 2022].

¹⁰³ Juliane Strätz, ‘Revolt Through Passivity? Getting High and Staying in with Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*’, in *Work: The Labors of Language, Culture, and History in North America*, ed. by J. Jesse Ramírez and Sixta Quassdorf, SPELL, 40 (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2021), p. 102; p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (London: Vintage, 2019), p. 115.

¹⁰⁵ Strätz, p. 113.

¹⁰⁶ Moshfegh, p. 13.

economics.’¹⁰⁷ She must settle for second-best: not a boyfriend but a workplace affair with an older, married man ‘so nondescript, so boring, he may as well have been molded out of plastic’; not a fabulous career but an ‘an executive assistant for an insurance brokerage firm’; not the designer items that she desperately craves (and the protagonist owns in abundance) but market-bought knockoffs and ‘shop-lifted [make-up] testers.’¹⁰⁸ A slavish consumer of the self-help industry, Reva ventriloquises banal mantras of ‘wish fulfilment’ and ‘manifesting your own reality’ while the narrator rolls her eyes. One can imagine Reva today as a prime mark of the wellness and sleep industry, overworked and obsessively tracking her health on a Fitbit and poring over sleep data in the hopes of getting closer to her “goals” – whether that’s love, profession or generalised “fulfilment”. In short, the suckered subject of banal insomnia.

The narrator sneers at Reva’s earnestness and constant desire to connect to others or seek improvement to her life, continually pondering why she maintains her friendship with her. In part, this is because Reva’s shortcomings and dashed hopes provide nourishment to the narrator’s cynicism. Reva experiences the sharp cruelties of a cold, corporate New York and the narrator witnesses this as a continual justification for her own self-banishment. The narrator puts it this way,

Her repression, her transparent denial, her futile attempts to tap into the pain with me in the car, it all satisfied me somehow. Reva scratched at an itch that, on my own, I couldn’t reach. Watching her take what was deep and real and painful and ruin it by expressing it with such trite precision gave me reason to think Reva was an idiot, and therefore I could discount her pain, and with it, mine. Reva was like the pills I took. They turned everything, even love, into fluff I could bat away.¹⁰⁹

In this sense, Reva clearly functions as the narrator’s naïve counterpart without which her cynicism would not be able to flourish and her conscious sloth would have no meaning. Privilege evidently enters into this dynamic – the wealthy WASP narrator can resign herself to a lifestyle of lethargy and leisure whilst self-supporting Reva who comes from a lower middle-class Jewish family has no choice but to enter the daily grind of work and presentation. Through her emotionally shallow contact with Reva, the atomised narrator retains a faint tether to the external world, albeit one founded on misanthropy and contempt.

¹⁰⁷ Moshfegh, p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ Moshfegh, p. 8; 7; 9.

¹⁰⁹ Moshfegh, p. 166.

The narrator is a modern Diogenes, parasitically using (and abusing) Reva to maintain the allure of cool, cold self-sufficiency.

A common claim amongst the #BookTok clan who extol the book online is that Moshfegh's novel and, in particular, the narrator are 'intensely relatable' and 'real enough to feel like a sort of terrible friend'; her lethargy, her depression and even her selfishness, demonstrating an authenticity which resonates with the Gen Z girls and women who, book-in-hand, film themselves in front of their computers praising the book's richness and hidden depths.¹¹⁰ These videos abound in analysis of the novel's critique of class, "white pretty privilege" and praise for its accurate depiction of the squalor of depression. Watching these videos is a disorientating experience: young women, most unlikely to have been alive at the time of the book's setting, speak effusively of the book's resonance in a technological format which is profoundly novel and very much not lethargic. There is a frantic, performative nature to these videos which seem to imply the creators' awareness of the finite attention span of any would-be viewers. The girls speak fast and fluently, and the videos are cut economically and disjunctively, trimming any excess fat of dead air from the broadcast. Watching them, I do not see the narrator, but rather a flurry of Revas.

For Reva, if anything, represents the persistent desire for connection even amongst the wilderness of millennial New York. She continues to act and grind in the face of its vicissitudes and cruelties, never giving up on the faint hope of the communal project, embedded in that restless and isolating urban space. Faced with the opaque, hostile world of the internet, the young women of #BookTok similarly continue to speak, to "create content" for that nameless, faceless viewer on the other side of the screen – the very opposite of taking to one's bed for a year. Especially from the protagonist's perspective, it is easy to see Reva as a naïve lemming, an obedient follower of conformist trends and persuasive marketing. However, there are times when Reva demonstrates a striking worldly wisdom in her recognition of both the superficiality of social expectations as well as the futility of attempting to live outside of them. In these moments, she will tell the narrator, "Sometimes you need to *act as if*" or berates her sleeping project: "Sleeping all the time isn't really going to make you feel any better ... You're just avoiding your problems."¹¹¹ Of course,

¹¹⁰ Freya Deyell, 'My Year of Rest and Relaxation: The TikTok Sensation Lives up to the Hype', *Brig Newspaper* (Stirling, 16 February 2022) <<https://brignews.com/2022/02/16/my-year-of-rest-and-relaxation-the-tiktok-sensation-lives-up-to-the-hype/>>; Madden.

¹¹¹ Moshfegh, p. 57; p. 58

framed this way, it is not Reva who is naïve but the narrator who insists that perpetually sleeping will resolve all and that, in doing so, she will ‘become a whole new person.’¹¹²

Reva exhibits a fearlessness which is formalised on the novel’s final page – a forensic scene of her jumping from the building of the North Tower in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The narrator records this scene from the news coverage onto VCR and tells us she subsequently returns to it, ‘usually on a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living, or when I need courage, or when I am bored.’¹¹³ In this way, the novel’s finale demonstrates the ultimate risk that Reva’s participation in communal life entailed. Early in the novel, the narrator described how sleep shielded her from the events that suffused the lives of her fellow New Yorkers. Read in the context of Reva’s death, it is also a dramatic statement of the unethical underpinning of the narrator’s sleep project:

Things were happening in New York City – they always are – but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleep – reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream. It was easy to ignore things that didn’t concern me. Subway workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn’t have worried.¹¹⁴

Unlike the narrator, the final image of Reva is a resounding statement of her existence and participation within the crowd. She is one who is utterly vulnerable and utterly innocent in the face of a catastrophe that could not have been foreseen. Her leap is not a reclusiveness or an escapist recoil into herself but instead a gesture and movement towards the radically other. In closing the novel, the narrator sees Reva: ‘There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is awake.’¹¹⁵

4.6. Waking up to the irrepressible Other

Thus far, my analysis continues to promote a binary understanding of the relationship between the narrator and Reva, seeing Reva as the fearless, ethical counterpart to the narrator’s misanthropic hermit. However, Reva’s function in the novel exceeds simply

¹¹² Moshfegh, p. 26.

¹¹³ Moshfegh, p. 289.

¹¹⁴ Moshfegh, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Moshfegh, p. 289.

her unabating desire for connection; she is also the object of the narrator's sleepless desire and concern for the other, one which seems to operate at an almost unconscious level and which she can never entirely shirk. This desire is indeed shrouded in the narrator's disdain for her friend – at one point, she takes a polaroid picture of Reva which Reva misinterprets as a loving gesture but instead, 'the photo was really meant as a reminder of how little I enjoyed her company if I felt like calling her late while I was under the influence.'¹¹⁶ However, it is also in these anaesthetised states in which she continuously reaches out to not only Reva but her ex and anonymous others too. In fact, in the course of the novel, her somnolescent self becomes surprising active and social, what she describes as 'a startling subliminal rebellion.'¹¹⁷ She thus becomes an unknowingly enthusiastic participant of the New York social scene: 'sleepwalking, sleeptalking, sleep-online-chatting, sleepeating ... sleepshopping on the computer and at the bodega. I'd sleepordered Chinese delivery. I'd sleepsmoked. I'd sleeptexted and sleeptelephoned.'¹¹⁸ When sober, she spends much of her time investigating and sometimes rectifying these actions, going so far as to cancel her credit card 'in the hope that doing so might deter me from filling my nonexistent datebook with the frills of someone I used to think I was supposed to be.'¹¹⁹ This is futile as another one arrives within the week.

The narrator's 'subliminal rebellion' gives way to unexpected expressions of love and affection – for instance, it is only in a moment of drifting off into anaesthetic oblivion that she utters 'I love you' to Reva, too high to hear any reply.¹²⁰ At other times, she will wake with all-consuming thoughts of another person on her mind whether that is Reva ('"Reva?" The thought jolted me awake'¹²¹) or her ex Trevor ('thoughts of Trevor called me out of sleep like rats scabbling the walls'¹²²). Her late parents too plague her dreams but only by way of their absence – she dreams of a fictional 'pale, undernourished' illegitimate child of her father or her mother's old bar of soap covered in her hair. She morbidly dreams of dragging her parents' corpses to a ravine, awaiting them to be fed on by vultures. In one dream, they are simply the unspeaking callers at the other end of the phone line: 'I'd answer the phone and hear a long silence, which I interpreted as my mother's speechless disdain. Or

¹¹⁶ Moshfegh, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ Moshfegh, p. 85.

¹¹⁸ Moshfegh, p. 115.

¹¹⁹ Moshfegh, p. 86.

¹²⁰ Moshfegh, p. 177.

¹²¹ Moshfegh, p. 227.

¹²² Moshfegh, p. 99.

I heard crackling static, and cried out, “Mom? Dad?” into the receiver, desperate and devastated that I couldn’t hear what they were saying.’¹²³ The excruciating silence of reaching out to another without reciprocation is what drives her into this somnolescent cycle. It is an attempt to shut down any exposure or orientation outside of herself. She aims to incapacitate herself so she can make no gestures at all, inadvertent or otherwise, and thus not be vulnerable to the rejection of others.

She is therefore seeking utter self-sufficiency. By controlling her material body, she hopes to indulge in the fantasy of a detached subjectivity, separated from her immediate environment. This optimism is, as Lauren Berlant would have it, cruel: the narrator engages in a project of perpetual self-interruption through sleep to continually renew her own personhood however, this just keeps her locked in a routine of hope and disappointment.¹²⁴ In order to get the means for her perpetual stupor, she must engage with a US healthcare system; one which she does not need to try hard to manipulate. In this way, even in her limited interaction with the outside world, she still experiences the sting of apathy. Her comically irresponsible therapist and the healthcare system itself continually affirm their indifference to her wellbeing whilst providing her with an array of medication which ensures psychological oblivion. Without the temporal diversity of work or a social life, the narrator builds her existence around this asocial ‘anaesthetic time’: ‘the permanent organization of life around one’s habit in a holding pattern without trajectory.’¹²⁵ The narrator flees from the unknown of the future but cannot reckon with the pain of the past so she exists in a ‘holding’ state, not the ‘here and now’ of the present but an indolent, self-effacing waiting.

As her somnolescent ‘subliminal rebellion’ attests, she is unable to sustain her posture of radical inexpression. Reflecting on her past, the narrator shows too that simply following social convention – even in a cynical vein – can never eliminate the possibility of an unexpected affective experience. Despite her dysfunctional relationship with her mother and father, the social arrangement of the family, albeit artificial and shallow, renders her sensibly exposed to both their presence and their subsequent absence. The narrator’s indulgent relationship to sleep began with her mother, becoming a symbol of her maternal irresponsibility. In third grade, her mother and she developed a routine of sleeping in the

¹²³ Moshfegh, p. 62.

¹²⁴ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹²⁵ Heyes, p. 105.

same bed, ostensibly out of a lethargic convenience: 'it was easier to wake me up in the mornings if she didn't have to get up and go across the hall.'¹²⁶ Even so, this arrangement did not aid the morning routine. Rather, the narrator became victim to her mother's oblivious, drug-induced slumber as they made a habit of sleeping in, causing the narrator to rack up 37 tardies and 24 absences at school. Their physical proximity thus led to a circadian synchronisation between the two which had no emotional counterpart. This led the narrator to develop a life-long affection for sleep: 'I'd always loved sleeping. It was one thing my mother and I had enjoyed doing together when I was a child. ... We got along best when we were asleep.'¹²⁷

Their intimacy had an impact on another social institution: marriage. Consigned to the sofa bed, her father would sleep alone and isolated from them both. He was a figure she barely recognised: 'fairly nondescript – thinning brown hair, loosening jowls, a single wrinkle of worry etched deep into his brow.'¹²⁸ This increased the distance the narrator already felt in his presence, giving literal form to their alienation from one another: '[h]e was a kind of non-entity ... a stranger gently puppeting his way through his life at home with two strange females he could never hope to understand.'¹²⁹ Upon his death, this alien figure emerges again when the narrator visits him on his death bed. His death-bed visage evinced the same strangeness as his sleeping face; a strange scene she likened to the Picasso artwork she's studying: 'My father fit right into Picasso's Blue Period. *Man on Morphine*.'¹³⁰ Nonetheless, she felt compelled to sit by his bedside, not out of desire to do so or even a feeling of duty but rather in order to 'prove to my mother I was a better person than she was: I was willing to be inconvenienced by someone else's suffering.'¹³¹ Moments like these, however, reveal uncanny situations in which formal imitation of ritualistic or normative behaviour gives way to a genuine affective experience: 'during the week I'd spent by his side, we had bonded without my knowledge or consent, and all of a sudden, I loved him'. 'So', she explains, 'I lost it. I started crying.'¹³² Love here is not the exchange of affection willingly given but the painful experience of being vulnerable to a force you cannot control. Her father's response to her tears is not the comfort that she pleads for but a

¹²⁶ Moshfegh, p. 46.

¹²⁷ Moshfegh, p. 46.

¹²⁸ Moshfegh, p. 47.

¹²⁹ Moshfegh, p. 47.

¹³⁰ Moshfegh, p. 139.

¹³¹ Moshfegh, p. 138.

¹³² Moshfegh, p. 139.

refutation of reciprocity and connection. “I’ll be alright,” my father told me. ... I wanted him to pet my head. I wanted him to soothe me. He stared up at the ceiling as I begged him not to leave me alone with my mother. I was passionate in my supplication.’¹³³

The narrator dwells in an unbearable intimacy alone. Her willingness to engage in the performance of familial love and duty renders her vulnerable to her father’s reluctance to join her in this play. He jerks his hand away from hers as she reaches out. She continues to seek – to beg – for a reciprocity to sanction her emotions. She pleads with him to send her a sign after death: ‘that you’re still here, that there’s life on the other side.’¹³⁴ Years later, she will have nightmares recreating this futile attempt to connect. Her relationship with her mother is similar; she still, in spite of herself, desires the love and caress of a maternal figure. Recalling her father’s death, she writes, ‘I wanted a mother, I could admit that.’¹³⁵ She too feels pain – though this is a harder, more numb pain – at her mother’s posthumous rejection of her. She finds her mother’s suicide note and it’s predictably half-hearted and insincere, her name counting sixth on a list of twenty-five people she’d known. It is a note she nevertheless returns to: ‘Occasionally, over the years, when I’d felt abandoned and scared and heard a voice in my mind say, “I want my mommy,” I took the note out and read it as a reminder of what she’d actually been like and how little she cared about me. It helped. Rejection, I have found, can be the only antidote to delusion.’¹³⁶

The ‘totally unoriginal’ letter’s trite clichéd language signifies the interpersonal relation between mother and daughter which she was too self-centred and indolent to embrace when alive. The performative action – of firstly, her mother writing the letter, and secondly, the sentimental way the narrator returns to it when she thinks of her parents – gives way to an affective experience for the narrator, one which does not provide comfort but rather induces a compulsion to continuously return to the letter to excavate it for deeper meaning. Rejection may well be an antidote to delusion, but it also sustains the possibility of reciprocity. Returning to the site of rejection is a speculative return to the possibility that it could be different. Her mother’s words may reveal something else, something hidden, something other than rejection; her father may send a sign beyond the grave that it is not all over. Her ex, Trevor, conjures the same hope: ‘Trevor Trevor Trevor. I might have felt

¹³³ Moshfegh, p. 139.

¹³⁴ Moshfegh, p. 140.

¹³⁵ Moshfegh, p. 147.

¹³⁶ Moshfegh, pp. 152–53.

better if he were dead, I thought, since behind every memory of him was the possibility of reconciling, and thus more heartbreak and indignity.¹³⁷ Reva's final moments captured on film too sustain this promise ('I watched the videotape over and over to sooth myself').¹³⁸ This desire is for the discontinuous, something that disrupts these now bookended relationships and for a meaning to emerge in which her mother and father did care for her, Trevor did love her and in which her relationship with Reva was fulfilling and loving. It is a desire that things can be – and were – different.

This commitment to the possibility of difference does not simply manifest itself through her relationships with people but through objects – her childhood home which she cannot bear to give up, her VCR player and even her semi-conscious expenditure which maintains her beauty and physical likeness to her mother.¹³⁹ By holding on to these items, she invests in the possibility that the symbolic significance of these objects can be transformed. This accounts for the optimism of her sleep. She believes that sleep is her only way of restoring her future. Through sleep she can erase the emotional legacy of her past such that she can be 'renewed, reborn ... [her] past life ... but a dream.'¹⁴⁰ Sleep divests her of her passivity to the past: 'I could picture my selfhood, my past, my psyche like a dump truck filled with trash. Sleep was the hydraulic piston that lifted the bed of the truck up, ready to dump everything out somewhere.'¹⁴¹ What she forgets, and what continuously makes it way back to her, is that her sleep too has a history – an ambivalent one in which the physical proximity of her mother is combined with emotional indifference; one in which her avowed desire to sleep at work goes unnoticed confirming her lack of importance; and one in which her abusive ex-boyfriend sexually exploits her in one-way fantasies.

This history has worked its way into her body in ways which cannot be theorised away. Sleep allows her to indulge in a fantasy of her detached body where it can 'float up and away, higher and higher into the ether until [it is] just an anecdote, a symbol, a portrait hanging in another world.'¹⁴² But, in the end, it returns her to herself, where she buys into a delusional concept of her own self-transformation 'like a baby being born' while simultaneously indulging in her mother's inherited vices, relying 'on alcohol only on the

¹³⁷ Moshfegh, p. 99.

¹³⁸ Moshfegh, p. 289.

¹³⁹ Moshfegh, p. 69; p. 268; p. 86.

¹⁴⁰ Moshfegh, p. 51.

¹⁴¹ Moshfegh, p. 99.

¹⁴² Moshfegh, p. 177.

days of excursions – a shot of vodka before’ going out.¹⁴³ Or where she wakes devastated by her failed attempt at self-obliteration: ‘My entire life flashed before my eyes in the worst way possible, my mind refilling itself with all my lame memories, every little thing that had brought me to where I was.’¹⁴⁴

At the end of the novel, the narrator embarks on a project of entire self-obliteration and in doing so, comes to terms with the futility of her aim: she can never rid herself of herself. The project is a six-month internment in her flat where she keeps herself in a constant state of slumber with the help of the powerfully tranquilizing drug Infermiterol and Ping Xi, an artist who is using her for an art project. Throughout, she describes herself in hypnagogic states, demarcating her time through “awakenings” (‘first awakening,’ ‘second awakening’). She describes getting closer and closer to the desired oblivion – ‘I could feel the certainty of reality leeching out of me like calcium from a bone’ – but it is a final state that never comes to fruition.¹⁴⁵ This is made clear when she comes to her final ‘ablution,’ the last pill.¹⁴⁶ Rather than the sleep she had come to expect, she has a profoundly intense experience in which the external world suffocatingly caves in on her. It is in this state that the futility of escaping her past is abundantly clear: ‘my heart quickened at that thought, remembering that I’d had parents once, and that I’d taken the last of the pills, that this was the end of something.’¹⁴⁷ She does not feel nothing; rather she feels everything all at once: ‘I fell past whole galaxies, mercurial waves of light strobing through my body, blinding me over and over, my brain throbbing from the pressure, my eyes leaking as though each teardrop shed a vision of past.’¹⁴⁸ She wakes up, back in the world of others, knowing she is alive.

Before the final scene of the novel, the narrator meets Reva for the last time. Since their last meeting, the narrator has fulfilled the final instalment of her sleep project. The reset she hungered for appears to have been achieved, preceded by a hallucinatory, ethical revelation: ‘The fear felt like desire: suddenly I wanted to go back and be in all the places I’d ever been, every street I’d walked down, every room I’d sat down in. I wanted to see it

¹⁴³ Moshfegh, p. 4.

¹⁴⁴ Moshfegh, p. 40.

¹⁴⁵ Moshfegh, p. 270.

¹⁴⁶ Moshfegh, p. 274.

¹⁴⁷ Moshfegh, p. 274.

¹⁴⁸ Moshfegh, p. 275.

all again.’¹⁴⁹ The answer to her despair, she finds, was there in the trite platitudes she contemptuously eschewed: life, not hell, is other people. So, when Reva arrives, the much-desired other, her presence is almost too much, lurid even. As Reva recites the banalities of her work, the narrator can’t tell ‘if they were aphorisms about sex positions.’ She finds everything about her ‘troublingly pornographic – her matte foundation, her darkly outlined lips, that perfume, the poised stillness of her hands.’¹⁵⁰ The narrator experiences Reva as wholly other and she is overwhelmed and fascinated by her material presence: ‘I watched her mouth move, every little wrinkle in the skin of her lips, the vague dimple on her left cheek, the moon-shaped sadness of her eyes.’¹⁵¹ Even so, their reunion is not exultant – Reva carries with her the hurt of an asymmetric friendship, likely reassessed in light of the narrator’s absence. The narrator senses this and is hurt but in her ethical turn, understands to put Reva’s interests before her own: ‘I had no right to make any demands.’¹⁵² It is in this sense, and also reinscribed in the novel’s final frame, that the narrator perceives Reva with all the vigilance of an insomniac subject: ‘She was beautiful with all her nerves and all her complicated, circuitous feeling and contradictions and fears.’¹⁵³ It is here in this wakeful, ethical state that she can express in trite, cliched, eternally inadequate language ‘I love you,’ and be awake long enough to hear it returned.

By the end of the novel, the loss of Reva does not strike the reader as a surprise. As well as the novel’s provocative periodisation, Reva’s involvement in the disaster has been well foreshadowed. In a tragically ironic scene from earlier in the novel, she tells the narrator: ‘I’m getting a promotion, and they’re transferring me to the Towers Marsh is starting a new crisis consulting firm. Terrorist risks, blah blah.’¹⁵⁴ It is, nonetheless, an arresting ending. The narrator vividly details Reva’s final form which she has documented on video tape – a forensic image of her fall in which she straddles awkwardly and beautifully between life and the death that awaits her: ‘one high-heeled shoe slipping off and hovering up over her, the other stuck on her foot as though it were too small, her blouse untucked, hair flailing, limbs stiff as she plummets down, one arm raised, like a dive into a

¹⁴⁹ Moshfegh, p. 275.

¹⁵⁰ Moshfegh, p. 280.

¹⁵¹ Moshfegh, p. 282.

¹⁵² Moshfegh, p. 282.

¹⁵³ Moshfegh, p. 283.

¹⁵⁴ Moshfegh, p. 203.

summer lake.¹⁵⁵ In recording this video and continually returning to it, the protagonist accepts her inability to change what has occurred but, even so, refuses to relinquish her vigilance over Reva's now absent presence. In this way, the novel closes with none of *Saturday*'s modernist finality. Unlike *Saturday*'s Perowne, the narrator does not seek sleep to quieten her vigilant responsibility and to mask the other's forensic presence. Rather, the video becomes a routine reminder of the visceral, unexpected nature of life itself, watched 'on a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living, or when I need courage, or when I am bored.'¹⁵⁶ In a sense, the ending and its divergence from *Saturday* corresponds to a contemporary youth culture which continues to forge connections, however tenuous, through modern communication technologies and, as Reva did, invest in the city's communal project. In the final chapter, I will consider these communicative technologies in greater detail, recognising that they both induce an atomisation which stymies ethical awareness of others' suffering whilst also presenting the opportunity for new forms of social vigilance and interaction.

¹⁵⁵ Moshfegh, p. 289.

¹⁵⁶ Moshfegh, p. 289.

CHAPTER 5: TRAVERSING THE CITY WITH THE ONEIRIC FLÂNEUR

5.1. The oneiric flâneur in a digital age

The central figure of this final chapter should not be unfamiliar to us now. The oneiric flâneur has emerged in guises both explicit (such as Ishiguro’s wandering Mr Ryder trapped in a nightmarish unknown city) and implicit (such as McEwan’s ethically compromised Perowne who circulates a city dramatizing the political consequences of terrorism). In many ways, the oneiric flâneur is the quintessential figure of banal insomnia: an errant figure who, in socially prescribed modes of flight, attempts to escape the material conditions of their social existence, only for this flight to bring them frightfully and irrevocably in confrontation with the utterly material, non-social burden of being. In Levinas’s ethical framework, such a confrontation supersedes the subjective narcissism of the flâneur who wishes to be, as Baudelaire famously put it, ‘away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world.’¹ This ethical interruption is the rude awakening of the flâneur’s earnest attempt to bend his external environment to his will by fashioning himself into a modern multiplicity (‘to become one flesh with the crowd’²) such that he can escape the singular nightmarish fate of the private individual. Simply put, the ethical confrontation explodes the escapist fantasy of not being what one is.

This thesis has been probing these strategies of flight; what I have called “ends” of banal insomnia, escapist strategies in which one attempts to flee their concrete existence. And therefore, it was perhaps inevitable we would close with a discussion of the digital – an arena in which it has arguably never been simpler to take these flights. Digital machines and networked societies have instituted and, in many ways, necessitated the development of avatar identities in which flânerie is built-in, guiding our surfing, scanning, scrolling, searching selves. The virtual world imposes upon us the burdensome task of exclusively following our own desires and guiding ourselves through a realm of infinite digital possibilities. The flâneur’s crowd has thus been transformed into the 21st century ‘digital swarm,’ philosopher Byung-Chul Han tells us. However, unlike the ideological consensus Han ascribes to Gustav Le Bon’s fin-de-siècle crowd (its unified “voice”), the swarm is

¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. by Jonathan Mayne, trans. by Jonathan Mayne, Art & Letters, 2nd ed (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 9.

² Baudelaire, p. 9.

instead characterised as an amorphous, loose collection of isolated individuals. ‘The digital inhabitants of the Net do not assemble,’ he writes,

They lack the *interiority of assembly* that would bring forth a *we*. They form a *gathering without assembly* – a *crowd without interiority*, without a soul or spirit. Above all, they are isolated, scattered *hikikomori* sitting alone in front of a screen. Electronic media such as radio *assemble* human beings. In contrast, digital media *isolate* them.³

There is something that feels intuitively true about Han’s characterisation of digital alienation. The representative figure Han points to here is “hikikomori,” a Japanese term for an affliction predominantly affecting young men who banish themselves entirely from the outside world of work, school and community, often not leaving their homes or even their rooms for extended periods of time. It is not hard to see how the radical self-sufficiency of the online world relates to the typical internet user and how the hikikomori subject may be an understandable, if extreme, consequence of this realm of overwhelming choice and possibility. The online world promises not only to fulfil all our needs but to optimise that fulfilment by identifying our desires before we experience them and anticipating our thoughts before they are formed.

It is therefore unsurprising that the issue of ethics and social relations has been a prime concern of recent technology studies. Whilst digital technology has undoubtedly led to an atrophy of traditional forms of sociality as Han describes, it is important to remember that digital social networks require user engagement and have therefore instituted new forms of sociality. In *Ethical Programs* (2015), James Brown identifies in the ‘network society’ a manifestation of the predicament of ‘hospitality,’ namely ‘the problem of others arriving whether we have invited them or not.’⁴ Technology provides its users with a kind of perpetual openness, often without their knowledge. Our personal computers can function, explore and engage in networks even without our physical interaction – an alert smartphone stays in a constant state of activity, connecting and disconnecting from digital networks all from one’s pocket. The question therefore of whether we are the disgruntled hosts or the uninvited guests is not straightforward. Rather, unintended interactions in networked

³ Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. by Erik Butler, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), p. 11.

⁴ James J. Brown, *Ethical Programs: Hospitality and the Rhetorics of Software*, *Digital Humanities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), p. 2.

communities have the curious trait of foregrounding the relation first – the encounter with another – before establishing a subjective relationship.

Framed in a way, this question of ethical interaction is not unique to digital communities. Avital Ronell's 1989 classic *The Telephone Book* dramatizes this ambiguous interpersonal encounter in the form of answering a phone call:

And yet, you're saying yes, almost automatically, suddenly, sometimes irreversibly. Your picking it up means the call has come through. It means more: you're its beneficiary, risking to meet its demand to pay a debt. You don't know who's calling or what you are going to be called upon to do, and still you are lending your ear, giving something up, receiving an order.⁵

As Ronell demonstrates, the telephone user says "yes" before even knowing what the command is, demonstrating their eternal exposure to the caller, their constant state of being prepared and ready to serve the needs of another. The technology in this sense does not facilitate an easy two-way communication between the interlocutors but rather functions as an 'instrument of ... destinal alarm,' reminding the user of their archaic vulnerability and servitude to the call of another.⁶ 'No matter how you cut it,' she writes, 'on either side of the line, there is no such thing as a free call. Hence the interrogative inflection of a yes that finds itself accepting charges.'⁷ Intriguingly, Levinas too provides a description of the ethical relation with the aid of technology: the doorbell. The intrusion of the other into one's subjective totality emerges in the form of a doorbell ringing. In its signification of another's presence, the 'strident ringing of the bell' manifests as a 'break in my universe.'⁸

Levinas is quick in his example to demonstrate how the appearance of the radically Other is soon 'reabsorbed into signification' and reconciled in the 'constitution of a new order' through discourse. One answers the doorbell and converses with its ringer, thereby resolving the disturbance: 'Everything is understood, justified, pardoned.'⁹ Returning to the 21st century, this is where the unique ethical question of novel digital technologies lies: how is one to respond to the swarm? Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker express this

⁵ Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology--Schizophrenia--Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 2.

⁶ Ronell, p. 9.

⁷ Ronell, p. 5.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, *Studies in Continental Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 68.

⁹ Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 68.

dilemma in terms of the swarm's 'facelessness': 'A swarm attacks from all directions, and intermittently but consistently – it has no "front," no battle line, no central point of vulnerability. It is dispersed, distributed, and yet in constant communication. In short, it is a faceless foe.'¹⁰ There is something perpetually irresolvable about the swarm, an impossibility of reconciliation and the institution of a new, concrete order.

In *The Telephone Book*, Ronell describes the telephone as a technology 'unsure of its identity,' seeing in it a paradoxical object whose 'singularity' is constantly put at odds with the fact that it 'presupposes the existence of another telephone.' Thus, '[t]o be what it is, it has to be pluralized, multiplied, engaged by another line, high strung and heading for you.'¹¹ This ethical premise – the requirement of the other – may remain implicit in one's use of the telephone, however it is unavoidably and overwhelmingly evident on the surface of digital network technologies: 'Friends, foes, selves – there are faces everywhere.'¹² This (sleepless) network society thus presents its own dangers and potentially accommodating spaces for an ethical project. On the one hand, the network society presents an exemplary objectification of the other in which real lives are distilled into standardized pieces of data. On the other hand, it presents an ethical opportunity specifically through the fact it cannot reconcile those 'faceless others' into an 'new order.' Thacker and Galloway see this as the potential for network science to consider the question of 'Being' without lapsing into the category of 'life' which can be easily recuperated into a rational order: 'a concept of "being" is arrived at by a privative definition of life.'¹³ As the network society is predicated not simply on the individual other subject (as in Levinas and Ronell) but instead on a "multitude," the living element of the network transcends being attributed simply to another subjectivity. It alludes, rather, to the 'almost confrontational factuality of the *being* of life ... the impersonal "horror" of the 'there is.'¹⁴

However, this openness and over-saturation of our attention does not always lead to transcendental proximity in the face of the Other but instead numbness and fatigue. Crary describes how our proxy devices – devices bestowed with the power to act on our behalf – turn on us with demands of their own, soliciting near constant levels of attention. Far from

¹⁰ Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, Electronic Mediations, v. 21 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 66.

¹¹ Ronell, p. 3.

¹² Galloway and Thacker, p. 65.

¹³ Galloway and Thacker, p. 118.

¹⁴ Galloway and Thacker, p. 117.

ethical vigilance, they induce in us fatigue and mindless interaction. Crary describes the modern-day technology user as in constant “sleep mode”, a state which ‘supersedes an on/off logic so that nothing is ever fundamentally “off” and there is never an actual state of rest.’¹⁵ This indolent banal insomnia gives rise to a thoughtless automatism: ‘Through habits, users become their machines; they stream, update, capture, upload, share, grind, link, verify, map, save, trash, and troll.’¹⁶

Such ‘distracted’ use may not be wholly useless in our attempt to access a sense of the digital network’s “being.” In *Updating to Remain the Same* (2016), Wendy Chun examines our habituated technology-immersed lives, seeing a profitable focus on stasis, looking at what remains and ‘how things linger’ in our social mediascape. Chun recognises that our habits are never entirely solitary – they are always acquired in relation with others. As such, they maintain an inextricable link to social environments: ‘they trouble the boundary between self and other; they embed society in bodily reactions; they move between the voluntary and involuntary.’ She therefore asks, in the neoliberal era where there is supposedly no society, ‘[a]re habits what endure as society within collectives in which there is no society.’¹⁷ Theorising habit in the digital world, Chun speculates about its potential unifying power in reflecting a kind of technological ‘everyday’: ‘its enduring ephemerality, its visible invisibility, its exposing empowerment, its networked individuation.’¹⁸ Habit points to a site of possibility, revealing a subject in a pre-reflective state whose acts compress action and telos in an ‘unreflective spontaneity, beneath personality and consciousness.’¹⁹ Such an adaptation to our technologies therefore reveals an ontological possibility – as explored in chapter 2, it holds the promise that we may be able to master and “see through” them. In this chapter, I seek to explore this same possibility through the flâneur’s habituation to the urban environment.

As such, this chapter will examine the ethical dimensions of modern communication technologies and digital networks in relation to Teju Cole’s 2011 novel *Open City*. Despite

¹⁵ Crary, 24/7, p. 13.

¹⁶ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, New Media, First MIT Press new paperback edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The MIT Press, 2017), p. 1.

¹⁷ Chun, p. 8.

¹⁸ Chun, p. 15.

¹⁹ Chun, p. 9.

Cole's well-established interest in communication technologies,²⁰ *Open City* presents a curiously anachronistic vision of 21st century New York, one which lacks mobile phones, social media interaction and with only primitive use of the internet. Cole's protagonist, Julius, is an updated flâneur who roams the city in fugue-like drifts, and his interactions with the city's wide and varied inhabitants make up the majority of action in the novel. Whilst many have received Cole's novel as an exemplary model of cosmopolitan sociality, I argue that it instead challenges 21st century cosmopolitan narratives, as well as their undiscerning critics, revealing them as multicultural sentimentality novels, written and read to serve the egoist economy of its readers. As such I hope to present a more sinister reading of this fugueur figure – a term I steal from Pieter Vermeulen's analysis of Julius's flânerie.²¹

Given technology's ambivalent ethical status, its absence from the text will foreground my analysis. On the one hand, I argue that this narrative omission haunts the novel, revealing an invisible system of classificatory networks, unrecognisable to its participants. On the other hand, following Caren Irr, I consider how Julius's flâneur role doubles into what she refers to as a "router-narrator", a narrator who employs a networking logic of data collection and transmission into his urban interactions. Julius's narrative can therefore be read as an interface technology. Alexander Galloway notes the paradoxical nature of these liminal technologies:

As technology, the more a diatropic device erases the traces of its own functioning (in actually delivering the thing represented beyond), the more it succeeds in its functional mandate; yet this very achievement undercuts the ultimate goal: the more intuitive a device becomes, the more it risks falling out of media altogether, becoming as naturalized as air or as common as dirt. To succeed, then, is at best self-deception and at worst self-annihilation. One must work hard to cast the unglow of work. Operability engenders inoperability.²²

The interface thus has its own ontological predicates, resting uneasily between visibility and invisibility. In this vein, I will consider Julius's fugue-flânerie as a constant and disquieted attempt to maintain such an uneasy dialectical balance. On the one hand, it rests on Julius's

²⁰ Cole was an early and avid user of Twitter, employing it to publish his short story 'Hafiz,' an essay on the 'White Savior Industrial Complex' and a critique of US drone strikes by subverting classic opening lines of modernist fiction in 'Seven Short Stories About Drones.' As of July 2014, his Twitter account has been inactive.

²¹ Vermeulen, 'Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37.1 (2013), 40 <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.37.1.40>>.

²² Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), p. 25.

performative ability to flee his social existence and thus revel anonymously in the urban environment. On the other hand, it relies on his legible re-inscription back into the social world through his high-status position as an educated, cultured doctor. This dialectical balance requires that his social fugue flights always fail in order to bolster his social identity.

5.2. Julius: *Open City*'s cosmopolitan fugueur

Published in 2011, Cole's migration novel *Open City* follows Julius, a Nigerian doctor working in New York City. When we meet Julius, he is living alone, playing out the final days of his relationship with his estranged partner Nadège from across the phone. Apart from these short-lived conversations, Julius's solitary existence is intruded only by his patients, occasional visits to an old mentor and chance public encounters. Inspired by isolation and his intensely regulated days in the office, Julius has taken to 'aimless wandering,' as he calls it, through the city.²³ Compulsively walking the city, Julius strikes the figure of a modern day flâneur. Julius's impulsive movements and the eclectic mix of the people he meets determines the novel's texture and pace. The plot meanders as he does, picking up and dropping characters as he goes. The demographic is broad: Julius meets people from Japan, Rwanda, Belgium, Nigeria, Germany, from a detainee at an immigration centre to a college professor.

The formal split of the novel into two parts lends credence to a conventional reading of *Open City*: that it explores and synthesises the multiplicity and contradictory nature of contemporary New York City through Julius's urban wanderings. Early on, however, Cole hints that the lucidity of any coherent rendering of the cosmopolitan city will be gained at a high price. The subtitles of the two parts, 'Death is a perfection of the eye' and 'I have searched myself,' collaborate to indicate that a certain fatality attends a dialectical project which seeks to articulate the modern metropolis as merely a crystallisation of the sensory experience of the urban inhabitant.²⁴ The former reads like a Nietzschean aphorism; a warning against an approach which treats singular perception as the gateway to conceptual and visual wholeness. Connected to this, the latter posits the circularity of such conceptual

²³ Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 3.

²⁴ Cole, p. 1; p. 147.

definition and in this case, self-definition. ‘To search oneself’ institutes a tightly sealed circularity in which the limits of one’s personhood will already be configured beforehand and immanent to the self which is searching.

Cole’s complex and problematic portrait of the contemporary flâneur is thus an articulation of this foregrounding bind. To consider Julius’s unusual flânerie, I take up Pieter Vermeulen’s identification of Julius as a “fugueur”, a ‘dark counterpart of the cosmopolitan flâneur’ whose urban travels are characterised by impulsive, hypnagogic, fugue-driven movement.²⁵ Whilst Vermeulen places the fugueur in opposition to its predecessor, I instead read this figure as a contemporary manifestation of the flâneur. Contrary to Vermeulen’s assertion that the fugueur ‘indicate[s] the limits of the cosmopolitan imagination,’ I contend that the fugueur generates a cosmopolitan imagination by presenting a dialectical consolidation of the individual and the city through his careful alternation of sleeping and waking states.²⁶ By appealing to sleep’s inherent unknowability, Julius retrospectively inscribes his fugue-walks with social commentary and symbolic meaning, thereby transforming the existential limit of sleep into a formal limitation of the narrative. This becomes paradigmatic for the rest of his narrative in which his aloof, somnolescent experiences are transformed by retrospective commentary, thereby circumscribing and incorporating perceived cultural difference into the narrative.

On the one hand, this synthetic approach appears to satisfy a modern demand for cultural knowledge exchange from world literature. A quick glance at reviews sees *Open City* cast as an educational tool, from its synthesising impulse, ‘it brings together thoughts and beliefs, and blurs borders,’²⁷ to its ability to effectively mirror contemporary society, ‘an exhilarating post-melting-pot novel ... capturing new realities where identity is a fluid mix of inheritance, memory and fiction.’²⁸ In opposition to these responses, I argue that the novel instead centralises representational failure as a challenge to simplistic cosmopolitan narratives which promise multicultural unity simply through exposure to cultural difference. The fugueur denies any opportunity to establish an ethical relationship with others by foreclosing any possible interaction with alterity. Instead, any interaction with difference is

²⁵ Vermeulen, p. 42.

²⁶ Vermeulen, p. 42.

²⁷ Miguel Syjuco, ‘These Crowded Streets’, *The New York Times* (New York, 25 February 2011) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

²⁸ Max Liu, ‘Open City, By Teju Cole’, *The Independent*, 31 July 2011 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/open-city-by-teju-cole-2329001.html>> [accessed 4 March 2020].

merely nominal and thus becomes incorporated to support the project of the fugueur's subjectivity. By formalising and compartmentalising sleep and wakefulness as symbolic categories, the fugueur sustains an enclosed symbolic economy which cannot permit the opacity and impenetrability of difference.

Ultimately, I present the fugueur as a modern disposition which attempts to evade a Levinasian ethical responsibility to the Other. Unlike Levinas's insomniac, the fugueur escapes this ethical compulsion through its localisation and compartmentalisation of sleep and wakefulness. As I will later show, the fugueur is a necessarily split subject who can experience sleep and waking simultaneously as inhabiting different realms of the self (such as a physical exhaustion coupled with an overactive imagination). Like banal insomnia, sleep or wakefulness is never absolute but always partially experienced or temporarily deferred. Thus, the subject can maintain a psychical insulation from alterity through a bad faith which substitutes the absolute limit of alterity with the merely conceptual limitation of sleep.

This analysis does not focus on the narrative form of the novel at the expense of its more explicit thematic concerns but is rather inspired into action by them. At the end of *Open City*, the reader is confronted with an ethical gut punch when Moji, the sister of Julius's childhood friend, reveals that Julius raped her when both were teenagers in Nigeria. Julius himself has forgotten this incident and remains silent both during and in the aftermath of Moji's recounting. The shock and ethical challenge of this revelation emerges specifically from this question of narration: the established narrative pattern simply accommodates this revelation as yet another depiction of trauma in a narrative dedicated to investigating historical injustices which undergird the present-day. Julius's distant, observational narration is neither punctured nor altered by this revelation of his own violent behaviour, remaining flat, descriptive and in the end, unmoved. The reader's complicity as Julius's companion forces her to retrospectively reassess the narrative up to that point. Rebecca Clark makes this point arguing that 'Moji's rape temporally and ethically alters the text' in such a way that a reinterpretation emerges as an ethical imperative: 'A second read of the novel makes it impossible, for instance, to read Julius's coolly statistical conjecture about his white Belgian grandmother's likely, but unspoken rape during World War II the same way

the second time around.’²⁹ Clark is right that any re-reading will necessarily be coloured by this revelation, however equally true is that the reader will have always read it for the first time and thus will always have, at one point, shared a complicity in Julius’s narrative.

Cole’s novel thus intervenes in its own reception by placing this trap door and requiring the reader to return to the narrative, and piece together preceding sinister elements which may have been missed or laxly ignored on first read. By anticipating its own surface categorization – and marketisation – as a pedagogical cosmopolitan novel, *Open City* subverts any critique which simplistically tries to attach a straightforward political message onto it. In Miguel Syjuco’s *New York Times* review, he struggles to reconcile this revelation with the more pious aims of cosmopolitan fiction. Concluding that *Open City* ‘does precisely what literature should do: it brings together thoughts and beliefs and blurs borders,’ he necessarily casts Moji’s revelation as an avoidable narrative blunder and not an instructive hurdle to how we read the novel: ‘In any other story, such a twist would send tremors across the pages, yet here, set against the novel’s grand scope, it feels unnecessary, either a misstep by a young author or an overstep by a persuasive editor.’³⁰

Alternatively, I argue that this revelation is pivotal to any reading of *Open City* precisely because it renders the preceding narrative incoherent and opaque. Cole’s narrative requests an insomniac vigilance from his readers, not complicity or unquestioning loyalty. In this regard, I draw attention to the recurring motif of the ‘blind spot’. At the end of the novel, Julius outlines the contradiction of the blind spot, its simultaneous opacity and facilitation of sight:

what are we to do when the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic: the mind is opaque to itself and it’s hard to tell where, precisely these areas of opacity are. Ophthalmic science describes an area at the back of the bulb of the eye, the optic disk, where the million or so ganglia of the optic nerve exit the eye. It is precisely there, where too many neurons associated with vision are clustered, that the vision goes dead.³¹

The blind spot serves as a visual rendering of our impossible relation to alterity. The blind spot is not caused by an external force (‘a portion of the visual field is occluded, although

²⁹ Rebecca Clark, ““Visible Only in Speech”: Peripatetic Parasitism, or, Becoming Bedbugs in *Open City*”, *Narrative*, 26.2 (2018), 181–200 (p. 183) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2018.0007>>.

³⁰ Syjuco.

³¹ Cole, p. 239.

there is nothing out there in the world that is doing the occluding'³²) but instead represents the site of opacity which makes vision itself possible. Cole's impossible task is therefore to try to confront the blind spot and opacity itself as the only way to forge an ethical relation.

5.3. Julius as router-narrator

Cole's novel begins with his protagonist answering a call. There's a perceptible reluctance to his opening lines as he starts in medias res: 'And so when I began to go on walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city.'³³ The opening indicates a foregrounding hesitation followed by a willed impulse to start – "And so"; "I began"; "to set out". This indolent syntactic phrasing immediately presents an unsuccessful clearing of ground.

And so Julius begins his flânerie. Julius's walks are curious: they most often occur in fluctuating states of consciousness; not fully awake, nor asleep but instead trance-like, dazed and unintentional. This posture of dramatic passivity to his environment sees him move through the city as if under its spell: 'These walks, a counterpoint to my busy days at the hospital steadily lengthened, taking me farther and farther afield each time, so that I often found myself at quite a distance from home late at night.'³⁴ At the same time, these walks are also intellectual endeavours which are subsequently mined and interpreted by the protagonist for hidden truths about the city and his own personhood. In one wandering instance, Julius describes being overwhelmed listening to Mahler: 'I sat on one of the hard benches near the listening stations and sank into reverie, and followed Mahler through drunkenness, longing, bombast, youth (with its fading) and beauty (with its fading).'35 He then describes Mahler's music lingering over his activities the following day: 'there was some new intensity in even the most ordinary things all around the hospital: the gleam on the glass doors at the entrance of the Milstein building, the examination tables and gurneys on the ground floor ... every detail had become significant.'³⁶ Julius simultaneously treats his walks as a passive submission to his external environment - a natural instinctual urge –

³² Frank H. Durgin, Srimant P. Tripathy, and Dennis M. Levi, 'On the Filling in of the Visual Blind Spot: Some Rules of Thumb', *Perception*, 24.7 (1995), 827–40 <<https://doi.org/10.1068/p240827>>.

³³ Cole, p. 3.

³⁴ Cole, p. 3.

³⁵ Cole, p. 17.

³⁶ Cole, pp. 17–18.

whilst also subsequently using them as sites of meditations equally subject to interpretation as his sober, fully-conscious experiences. Mirroring this neat dialectical unity, Julius implements a returning, recuperative narrative which always returns the outside world to himself and in turn re-inscribes himself in the city – as he notes, ‘New York worked itself into my life at walking pace.’³⁷

Julius’s embeddedness in New York City has led Caren Irr to characterise him as a ‘router-narrator’. ‘Embedded in a distinctive social logic’, the ‘narrator as router is distributed across the system rather than looking inward or backward ... borrow[ing] the organizational logic of digital-media systems.’³⁸ Embodying this organisational logic, Julius uses his experiences within the city as raw material or, to more clearly align with the Irr’s metaphor, data. After a prolonged and disorientating walk, he describes measuring and sorting the city:

Each neighbourhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight: the bright lights and shuttered shops, the housing projects and luxury hotels, the fire escapes and city parks. My futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city, and only then did my hectic mind finally show some pity and still itself, only then did dreamless sleep arrive.³⁹

The city is therefore subjected to rigorous task of organization and reorganization. The unrelenting nature of this categorisation mirrors the sleepless activity of the network society: ‘Routers serve as translation machines that encode, decode and recode.’⁴⁰

As well as coding (and recoding) his own experiences of the city, Julius surveys the city for other stories and his narrative becomes a repository for the tales of the city’s inhabitants. Galloway’s analysis of computer coding is a helpful analogy for Cole’s narration: ‘not only does computer code operate through the definitions of states and state changes, but computers themselves are those special machines that nominalize the world,

³⁷ Cole, p. 3.

³⁸ Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, Literature Now (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 28.

³⁹ Cole, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Irr, p. 28.

that define and model its behaviour using variables and functions.’⁴¹ Julius outlines his own listening – and thus recording – principles from the outset. Within the first few pages, Julius cites Augustine, stating ‘the weight and inner life of sentences were best experienced out loud.’ Inspired by this, Julius decides to read a book aloud to himself: ‘So I read aloud with myself as my audience, and gave voice to another’s words.’⁴² This action is juxtaposed with another listening exercise which occurs just moments before. Listening to the radio, Julius pronounces:

I liked the murmur of the announcers, the sounds of those voices speaking calmly from thousands of miles away. I turned the computer’s speakers low and looked outside, nestled in the comfort provided by those voices and it wasn’t difficult at all to draw the comparison between myself, in my sparse apartment, and the radio host in his or her booth.⁴³

Here, Cole establishes a discursive movement which will undergird Julius’s relationships with others for the rest of the novel. Julius’s decision to read aloud to himself, giving voice to another’s words, pre-empts the way in which Julius’s narrative moves outward (voraciously compiling voices, stories and sites) and returns in on itself in a moment of self-affirmation. He mimics this in his move to turn down the radio voices below any distinctiveness, thus deciding not to hear the other voice but instead reimagine the noise as his own. One way of articulating the distinction between these two examples is to understand how Julius’s voice acts as the medium of language and therefore, the interface between the written words and their expression. In computing terms, the interface between the code (written) and its execution (spoken). In the first example, Julius brings to the fore his narrative as an interface – he foregrounds his capacity to speak by reading the book aloud, thereby referring to the communicative function of his narrative voice. As he remarks, ‘a book suggests conversation: one person is speaking to another.’⁴⁴ Conversely, in the second example, he does not affirm the ostensible interface of that discussion, which would be the speakers transmuting the voice of another. Instead, both the voice and speakers are turned down low, and Julius enjoys the voices in a self-gratifying manner, imagining theirs as his own.

⁴¹ Alexander Galloway, ‘If the Cinema Is an Ontology, the Computer Is an Ethic’, in *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, ed. by Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury, Theory Now (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2015), p. 183.

⁴² Cole, p. 5; p. 5-6.

⁴³ Cole, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁴ Cole, p. 5.

This move to subsume other voices within his own gets more explicit dramatization. At one point, Julius remembers joining his girlfriend to an immigration detention centre in Queens to visit undocumented immigrants and when there, he meets Saidu, a young Liberian. Julius listens attentively to Saidu's story recounting it faithfully into his narrative. Saidu tells Julius about his perilous escape from Liberia travelling from Guinea to Mali to Morocco to Spain and Portugal. Here, Julius's ethical orientation towards the other is substituted for a narrative turn inwards. Julius becomes voyeuristically engrossed in Saidu's story and is startled when interrupted by a knock on the Plexiglas dividing them: 'so absorbed in Saidu's story that I started.'⁴⁵ Even so, he questions the veracity of the tale: 'I wondered, naturally, as Saidu told this story, whether I believed him or not, whether it was not more likely that he had been a soldier.'⁴⁶ Either way, the truth of Saidu's story does not really seem to matter to Julius. As he leaves the centre, he muses shamelessly on the egoistic purchase of having listened to Saidu's story:

I told the story to Nadege on our way back into Manhattan that day. Perhaps she fell in love with the idea of myself that I presented in that story. I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself.⁴⁷

The framed plexi-glass separating the two men thus doubles up: firstly, as an inverted mirror, allowing Julius to use Saidu's own story of suffering in the service of his identity production and secondly, entrapping Saidu as a two-dimensional frozen image – neither to be revisited by Julius nor the narrative. Whilst this example is stark, it is emblematic of a narrative in which Julius – aware of his power to affirm the identities of those he encounters – wilfully and at times, cruelly decides to withdraw from further interaction if they appear to serve no egoistic purpose to him.

This interaction is a cautionary tale. Here, the interface (the plexi-glass, though momentarily forgotten) is centralised, reminding the reader of Julius's privileged autonomous position as narrator. Julius can explicitly state, quite astonishingly, that he fell in love with the idea of himself as a 'compassionate African' because the logic of the narration has been delineated for us to see. The prominence of the plexi-glass divide suggests narrative transparency – the more visible the interface is, the more transparent. In

⁴⁵ Cole, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Cole, p. 67.

⁴⁷ Cole, p. 70.

turn, this should in a negative fashion send out a warning to the reader: be careful of what you cannot see. When recalling conversations with his old university mentor Professor Saito, Julius meditates on the art of listening: ‘I learned the art of listening from him, and the ability to trace out a story from what was omitted.’⁴⁸ In another instance, he states ‘that’s how power is, the one who has the power controls the portrayal.’⁴⁹ These serve as cautions that we must cultivate a discerning ear. As we read, it becomes difficult to distinguish between Julius’s narrative voice and the stories and voices he accumulates. Julius’s free indirect discourse and lack of punctuative signals for speech force his readers to read closely, carefully delineating which speech belongs to which person. Julius, we soon find out, is the conduit for all the speech in the text: all voices must go through him.

5.4. Julius’s synthesising impulse

Julius’s expansive narrative voice therefore appears to endow him with the capacity to express the multiplicity of New York. For this reason, Irr’s characterisation of Julius as a “router-narrator” entails a political function: with ‘politically charged characters, settings, conflicts, and styles of narration ... this fiction directly addresses questions of collective identity and power, appropriate means of collective action, and the struggle to articulate ideals and goals that orient action.’⁵⁰ Irr’s premise is that the political novel operates dialectically by establishing actual and ideal worlds and then identifying progressive solutions in the ‘building blocks of twenty-first century ideologies’ which bridge the gap between the two. It is therefore utopian in character: ‘[g]eopolitical fiction creates a vivid world waiting to be mapped and explored.’⁵¹ Irr sees in contemporary African-migration fiction a new literary figure. Positioning these cosmopolitan subjects in contrast to their late 20th century forebears (who remain ‘unincorporated and alien’), these modern protagonists present new fluctuating worlds of hybridity, a specifically modern mix of assimilation and difference which is echoed by their own inquisitive movements in both physical and digital communities.⁵²

⁴⁸ Cole, p. 9.

⁴⁹ Cole, p. 119.

⁵⁰ Irr, p. 3.

⁵¹ Irr, p. 22.

⁵² Irr, p. 1.

In *Open City*'s opening paragraph, Julius' narrative immediately introduces his immersed urban mobility by demonstrating this synthesising ability. Here, he travels with slick economy through New York pinpoints, introducing his own idiosyncratic mental map:

And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city. The path that drops down from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and crosses Morningside Park is only fifteen minutes from Central Park. In the other direction, going west, it is some ten minutes to Sakura Park, and walking northward from there brings you toward Harlem, along the Hudson, through traffic makes the river on the other side of the trees inaudible.⁵³

Julius's unique ambulatory practice is replicated on a formal level as both serve to amalgamate and consolidate disparate elements. Just as Julius' trodden paths draw together and synthesise urban coordinates, his narrative progresses associatively, similarly establishing imaginative linking routes: 'Not long before this aimless wandering began, I had fallen into the habit of watching bird migrations from my apartment, and I wonder now if the two are connected.'⁵⁴ As becomes commonplace in Julius' narrative, these associations, however tentatively articulated, are instructive: Julius' compulsive *flânerie* is tied to his desire for a clear bird's-eye perspective, an elevated viewpoint which masters the city in its totality.

Julius's voracious narrative eye is accompanied by an abundant wealth of knowledge which ranges from ancient philosophy to contemporary cinema. Julius's narration is remarkable not simply in its breadth but, again, in its synthesising impulse. An example of this occurs early in the novel when Julius, out on one of his walks, encounters a runner who has just finished a marathon. After initially pitying him for returning from the race alone, Julius's thoughts move with surprising concision from the imaginative ('I imagined his limping form receding as I pressed ahead'⁵⁵) to the autobiographical ('I had bad lungs as a child and have never been a runner'⁵⁶) to the historical ('The first man who ever ran a marathon had died instantly'⁵⁷). Encapsulated in this concise paragraph, he concludes 'And so, turning around to look at my erstwhile companion, and thinking of Phidippides'

⁵³ Cole, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Cole, pp. 3–4.

⁵⁵ Cole, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Cole, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Cole, p. 15.

collapse, I saw the situation more clearly. It was I, no less solitary than he but having made the lesser use of the morning, who was to be pitied.’⁵⁸

Of course, we have now come to associate this encyclopaedic knowledge which moves through tangents and associative jumps less with the erudite public intellectual than with online information banks, most prominently Wikipedia, and the iconic blue hyperlink. In many ways, Julius’s narration mirrors the organisational logic of 21st century technologies, simulating a journey through the city akin to online surfing. Seen this way, Julius’s initial geographical mapping with its personalised directions ventriloquises mobile mapping aids. Similarly, when Julius listens to classical music on the radio, the narration suggests a webpage sonically reproduced. Listening to the radio, Julius grows annoyed by the intrusion of commercials which interrupt like pesky, irrelevant online pop-ups: ‘Beethoven followed by ski jackets, Wagner after artisanal cheese.’⁵⁹ Given its isomorphic relationship to digital communication technologies, it is curious that Julius’ narration and movements progress generally unaided by them. In fact, Julius’ communication tools are oddly anachronistic: long distance landline phone calls, unscheduled drop-ins to friends’ homes and chance meetings with old acquaintances.

In her article ‘Virtual Flânerie: Teju Cole and the Algorithmic Logic of Racial Ascription’, Maria Bose urges us not to interpret Cole’s ‘antiquarian’ style as a dismissal of modern technologies but instead as analogous with the “technological unconsciousness”: ‘the role computing has come to play in ‘tracking-and-tracing’ consumers so as to ‘hypercoordinate and microcoordinate’ them with the products and information to which they are ostensibly best suited.’⁶⁰ Bose thus describes a correlation between Julius’ distant, indifferent and reductive observations with computer technologies which systematically collect individuals’ data, thereby transcribing these individuals as knowable, quantifiable and measurable data entities. In their indexical form, individuals are managed by pervasive sociotechnical systems which, in accordance with their taxonomic groupings, determine the trajectories of their users. Bose thus exposes how the multicultural landscape that Julius surveys is determined not by the free movement of its inhabitants but by an invisible classificatory digital architecture which sorts its users into racialised identity categories. The

⁵⁸ Cole, p. 16.

⁵⁹ Cole, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Maria Bose, ‘Virtual Flânerie Teju Cole and the Algorithmic Logic of Racial Ascription’, *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 7.1 (2019), 1-29 (p. 6) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.772>>.

crucial rub of this pervasive hyperspace, however, is that its appeal lies in its claim that it dispels the very identity classifications which it actually codifies: ‘Cole exposes an economic truth lying at the heart of internet companies’ enduring appeals to leave the flesh behind: that the Internet does not simply invite its users to become disembodied like data but rather promises that they might become disembodied—de-raced, de-gendered, de-nationalized—like money, free to cross national borders with total impunity.’⁶¹ As becomes clear, Julius’ casual, detached narrative does not deviate from these classifying systems but instead recreates the organisational logic of digital communication networks under the caveat of coincidental encounters and stream-of-consciousness interpretations.

Julius’ hypervisibility is replicated in the reception of the novel. Bose demonstrates how our internet presences become raw material to be mined by data technologies, and a similar activity is at work in the supposed “productivity” of the novel. *Open City* attains its commercial significance through Julius’ status as a perceptive interpreter of multicultural New York. Critical reception for the novel reveals, at times implicitly and at other times more explicitly, a translational gratitude to the unique and privileged insight Cole’s protagonist provides. As a mixed-race affluent immigrant doctor, Julius’ privileged insight sees him cast as a ‘flâneur for our times ... a resourceful and cosmopolitan outsider,’⁶² ‘the perpetual other’⁶³ or, as Claire Messud puts it, the ‘secret sharer,’⁶⁴ a phrase suggesting a covert operation of crossing racial lines to inform a predominantly white audience of his findings. Elsewhere, Irr imagines Julius’ dialectical movements as a Hegelian quest for historical consciousness, writing that router-narrators ‘repurpose urban scenes, multiplying, layering, and dissolving them until they reach toward a new kind of global consciousness focused on the creative potential of the cosmopolitan African-origin subject.’⁶⁵

These characterizations contribute to a common understanding that for subjects like Julius, investigation into one’s identity and the celebration of multicultural diversity comes as a natural vocation not just for the individual herself but society more generally by providing a link between cultures, histories and peoples. Under a forgiving eye, this response

⁶¹ Bose, p. 21.

⁶² P Mishra, ‘Open City’, *Financial Times*, 22 July 2011 <<https://www.ft.com/content/8fc671da-b129-11e0-a43e-00144feab49a>> [accessed 4 March 2020].

⁶³ Syjuco.

⁶⁴ Claire Messud, ‘The Secret Sharer’, *The New York Review of Books*, 14 June 2011 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/07/14/secret-sharer/>> [accessed 11 November 2022].

⁶⁵ Irr, p. 28.

may seem to align with a celebration of ‘cultural hybridity’ as proposed by theorists such as Homi Bhabha who sees such a pursuit as potentially opening ‘the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*.’⁶⁶ And yet, especially given the ethical suspicions placed on Julius, these responses paint a more troubling picture of racial fetishization. One senses in these responses that Julius is a consoling figure; his liminality and, in particular, his biraciality providing ‘fleshy confirmation that racial equality has arrived and is part of the nation’s providential destiny.’⁶⁷

Julius’s racial makeup is not important simply because it exposes the unforgivably reductive celebrations of his social value but also because it doubles up as a recognition that he cannot escape his identity and his visibility, that he will always return and affirm himself his social self and, in that sense, the multiracial cosmopolitanism of the city. The reason that Julius functions so well as the novel’s interlocuter is not because of his education, extensive knowledge or sophisticated narrative voice, but because his hybrid identity predetermines his narrative value: he performs the dialectic all by himself. This is part of the logic of his fugueurism – Julius’s sleeping states offer exemplary experiential data to be mined because even when he is asleep or in a fugue drift (seemingly free of his cultural tags), he still returns to himself as a socially encoded mixed-race individual, and in this sense, epistemologically valuable. By simply taking Julius in these reductive terms, these critics have resisted the opportunity to think the other, finding an orientation outside of themselves. To quote Lily Saint, ‘Cole’s novel helps us to see that what often lies behind that utopian desire to feel connected, somehow, to others near and far is a marked unwillingness to project ourselves into the lives of others.’⁶⁸

Just as a weak, self-serving cosmopolitanism operates outside of the novel, Julius too replicates its reductive logic within his narrative. Given that he is celebrated for his ability to build bridges and connect across different social groups, it is noteworthy that Julius’ interactions with other people in the novel often fall flat, characterized by indifference, snobbishness and at times, outright hostility. Saint notes this in her analysis writing that

⁶⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 38.

⁶⁷ Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 9.

⁶⁸ Lily Saint, ‘From a Distance: Teju Cole, World Literature, and the Limits of Connection’, *Novel*, 51.2 (2018), 322–38 (p. 328) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-6846174>>.

‘Julius’s interactions with people most often seem to produce in him a certain callousness, even opportunistic irresponsibility’ whereas ‘[a]rtistic or mimetic forms for accessing otherness function as Julius’ preferred relational modality, so that he can keep less-mediated others at a distance.’⁶⁹ At times, Julius’ hostility towards others is comically ironic. At one point, Julius visits the post office to send Farouq, an acquaintance he met in Brussels, a copy of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism* (2006), a work which advocates cosmopolitan encounters as a form of ethics to aid mutual identification across cultural boundaries.⁷⁰ Whilst there, the African-American postal worker attempts to engage Julius in an intercultural exchange (‘We need to seed a balm, a new creed from within. From our ancestors. For our children. For our future’), Julius leaves ‘mak[ing] a mental note to avoid that particular post office in the future.’⁷¹

As Saint notes, Julius’s interactions with cultural products tend to produce more successful reflections, for instance: ‘As I contemplated the silent world before me, I thought of the many romantic ideas attached to blindness. Ideas of unusual sensitivity and genius were evoked by the names of Milton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Borges, Ray Charles; to lose physical sight, it is thought, is to gain second sight.’⁷² Julius, no doubt, sees himself among these figures in his contemplative fugues in which he forgoes his own cognitive maps and rational decision-making to drift along, gaining a second sight and a deeper understanding of the city and the world. However, Julius is far more comfortable with the abstract – and dead – figures he cites here than he is with the living characters he encounters in the street. To quote Saint again, ‘Cole’s novel helps us to see that what often lies behind that utopian desire to feel connected, somehow, to others near and far is a marked *unwillingness* to project ourselves into the lives of others.’⁷³

During one of many contemplative moments in the novel, Julius asks, ‘Why show torture? Was it not enough to be told, in imprecise detail, that bad things happened?’⁷⁴ He ponders this question while at the cinema watching *The Last King of Scotland*, a 2006 film

⁶⁹ Saint, p. 328.

⁷⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Philosophy (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

⁷¹ Cole, p. 187; p. 188.

⁷² Cole, p. 37.

⁷³ Saint, p. 328.

⁷⁴ Cole, p. 31.

dramatizing Idi Amin's oppressive dictatorship of Uganda in the 1970s.⁷⁵ The question doubles inadvertently as a challenge to his own narrative; Julius, it seems, is far more comfortable in the role of historical archivist, diligently recording past injustices than committing himself to the impossible task of representing them. At the end of the novel however, Julius' ambivalence to this question recurs in modified form. Upon hearing Moji's revelation that Julius sexually assaulted her while both were teenagers, the question could instead be posed: Do we need to be told that bad things happen at all?

Through Julius' ambivalent narrative which simultaneously attempts to record – or code – the traumatic experiences of others whilst also fleeing any potential intimacy with other people, Cole questions the relationship between the often conflated ethical and educational aims of literature. The shock of Moji's final disclosure severs the relationship between the two, not simply by demonstrating Julius' hypocrisy but also through its opacity – all is recorded in reported speech and the attack is never formalised in the narrative. As such, Cole's novel provides a critique of the simplistic translational function ascribed to literature, particularly world literature, which may be superficially seen to “build bridges” and aid intercultural understanding. In *Open City*, this manifests in Julius's appeal to an intellectual mastery over New York City, an excavation project in which Julius literally pens the city, annotating the cityscape with details of historical violence and trauma. This shares much in common with his day job as a psychiatrist. Julius's alienated observations recreate a diagnostic relationship in which historical trauma is subject to a process of taxonomical organisation.

In this way, Cole's sleepless fugueur stands in stark contrast to Levinas' ethical insomniac. If, as Levinas argued, sleep allows one to forget their responsibility to the Other by providing an escape from the experience of insomnia (the disintegration of the subject), Julius's sleepwalking instead compartmentalises sleep itself, facilitating a sleepless existence in which neither sleep nor insomnia are ever experienced fully but always partially. This insulates the fugueur from an insomniac encounter with alterity, fallaciously evoking the subject's non-being in support of their own subjectivity. In other words, Cole's fugueur performs a kind of passivity or vulnerability which sees him nominally lost within the city in a hypnagogic state, however this is accompanied with a commentary which subsequently encodes this alienation with a social meaning. The absolute limit of insomnia that Levinas

⁷⁵ *The Last King of Scotland*, dir. by Kevin MacDonald (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006).

articulates as an inescapable opaque experience of one's non-being, is replaced by a formal limitation; that being Julius's fugues which can be self-analysed and reincorporated into the narrative.

5.5. Julius's forensic encounters

Alternatively, the novel does point to moments which suggest an affective ethical encounter is possible, however Julius's aversion to engage directly with the suffering of others means that these interactions are momentary, ephemeral and unwelcome. At one point at a photography exhibition, he is struck by the inconceivable suffering of the people close by. Upon looking at a photograph featuring Goebbels and Hitler, he notices a Hasidic Jewish couple viewing the picture alongside him. His anguish comes specifically from his inability to relate to their suffering:

I had no reasonable access to what being there, in that gallery, might mean for them; the undiluted hatred I felt for the subjects of the photo was, in the couple, transmuted into what? What was stronger than hate? I did not know and could not ask. I needed to move away, immediately, needed to rest my eye elsewhere and be absent from this silent encounter into which I had inadvertently barged. The young couple stood close to each other, not speaking. I couldn't bear to look at them, or what they were looking at, any longer.⁷⁶

In an orientation uncommon in the novel, Julius turns away from the artwork (the representation) towards an other, two others. In uncharacteristically flustered language, claiming that he had no 'reasonable access' to be there, Julius situates his disturbed state specifically in his inability to formalize it. The couple too are silent, thus offering no conceptual consolation for him. Rather, he is the intrusion, the guilty party, 'inadvertently barging' into this encounter, responding to the face of the Other. Julius's inability to look at the couple, to hold the same space as them, mirrors reviewer Syjuco's difficulty in assimilating Moji's assault into his experience of *Open City*. As Julius explicitly outlines, he cannot justify – and thus incorporate into the narrative – his own presence in their suffering. He therefore flees, seeking sleep as refuge from this intimate call of responsibility to the Other.

⁷⁶ Cole, p. 154.

In contrast, a patient of Julius's whom we encounter earlier in the novel demonstrates the personal risks which accompany a firm commitment to ethical responsibility. V, an assistant professor, is plagued by her research into the atrocities committed against the Native American people. She is one of Julius's 'rare patient[s] whose problems were not relegated to the back of [his] mind' as soon as he leaves work, however one senses this may be due to curiosity as opposed to any overwhelming sense of concern.⁷⁷ The strength of this ethical responsibility dominates V's existence to the point where she can neither extricate herself from the past's grip on her life, nor relate to her fellow New Yorkers' ignorance of it: 'There are almost Native Americans in New York City, and very few in all of the Northeast. It isn't right that people are not terrified by this because this is a terrifying thing that happened to a vast population. And it's not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it's still with me.'⁷⁸

Later on, when calling his workplace from abroad, Julius is startling in his callous response to her attempt to reach out:

I also called the hospital in New York to approve and renew some prescriptions.... I gave the necessary permissions to the head nurse, who told me that V. wanted to know I could be reached. I can't be reached, I said, have her call Dr. Kim, the resident covering for me. Then, feeling the vigor of ticking some things off my list, I also called Human Resources to check up on some paperwork having to do with my vacation time.⁷⁹

Julius's statement that he can't be reached is emblematic of his ethical distancing and imposed isolation from the emotions and humanity of those around him. V.'s suffering is side-lined by professional accomplishment ('ticking some things of my list') and leisure time ('vacation time'). We later discover V's death by suicide when Julius reads her obituary in the paper. As Julius reflects, the obituary stated 'that V. wrote of atrocity without flinching. They might have said, without flinching visibly, for it had all affected her far more deeply than anyone's ability to guess.'⁸⁰ While V.'s intimacy with her ethical responsibility had fatal consequences, Julius refuses any intimacy at all. Even his day job as a psychiatrist does not burden him with excessive concern for others: 'I usually no longer spent much time

⁷⁷ Cole, p. 44.

⁷⁸ Cole, p. 27.

⁷⁹ Cole, p. 102.

⁸⁰ Cole, p. 165.

thinking about patients, usually not until the next appointment and often, when I was on rounds.’⁸¹

The cumulative discordance between Julius’ actions and his cosmopolitan insights begins to puncture the narrative, demonstrating the superficiality of cosmopolitan exposure to difference and challenging the reader’s own intention in indulging in stories about the suffering of others. Just a mere few pages after news of V’s suicide, it is hard not to balk at Julius’ insight: ‘sometimes it is hard to shake the feeling that, all jokes aside, there really is an epidemic of sorrow sweeping our world, the full brunt of which is being borne, for now, by only a luckless few.’⁸² Whilst Julius positions himself as a storyteller, immersed within the city, amongst its people and surrounded by its stories, we come to recognise that he does not connect with people as much as he hoards them, compiling his own library of other people’s tragedies and secrets. As Julius collects, he attempts to keep a finger on the elusive network systems that are vital for his own sense of self.

As a flâneur-fugueur, Julius enjoys excavating the city, pulling back layers of urban concrete to reveal the stories hidden underneath. Unlike V., whose experience of the past is only too real and too present, Julius revels in exhuming the city. Julius’s exhumation manifests as an almost frivolous and trivial activity in which he reveals the city’s inert underbelly and morbidly plays with historic tragedies, compiling an ever-greater list of factual anecdotes. Describing the tumultuous, often violent, transformations of New York City, he writes: ‘The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten.’⁸³ So too with his narrative in which stories, people and tragedies pile inertly atop one another, crushed by the weight of incoming stories. Julius’s quick summary of his trip to Brussels attests to this:

Instinctively saving a baby, a little happiness; spending time with Rwandans, the ones who survived, a little sadness; the idea of our final anonymity, a little more sadness; sexual desire fulfilled without complication, a little more happiness: and it went on like that, as thought succeeded thought. How petty it seemed to me the human condition, that we were subject to this constant struggle to modulate the internal environment, this endless being tossed about

⁸¹ Cole, p. 44.

⁸² Cole, p. 208.

⁸³ Cole, p. 59.

like a cloud. Predictably the mind noted that judgment, too, and assigned it its place: a little sadness.⁸⁴

Events, emotions and people are all subsumed into his list and reduced to quantifiable, dead, standardized pieces of data. The logic of Julius's cognitive machine is most explicit here when he describes the human condition as simply a modulation of his internal environment. In his unrelenting consumption of the raw data around him, we find that his existence is simply an organisational process – a base system of process and effect. Julius's narrative is therefore not one of ethical recognition but ghoulish entertainment. Far from risking his own subjective integrity, Julius makes his narrative intentions clear by writing '[g]enerations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories.'⁸⁵ Julius's project is not one of self-transformation or risk but instead one of self-affirmation. Julius is the needle, a sharp rigid point searching and returning in a circular movement back to himself, inscribing himself as both route and router.

5.6. Julius's past and Moji's disclosure

As already stated by Syjuco in his *Open City* review, Moji's revelation at the end of the novel is an explicit example of the utopian narrative's inability to successfully resolve or neutralise its contradictions. Over halfway through the novel, Julius meets Moji by chance in a grocery store. Before formally introducing her, he describes 'the sudden reencounter in the present of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa'. He continues, describing 'an acquaintance whom memory now made convenient to think of as a friend, so what seemed to have vanished entirely existed once again.'⁸⁶ Moji emerges in the narrative as an unformulizable Other, an external presence and textual difficulty which must be incorporated, and therefore neutralized, by the narrative.

Later, at the end of the novel, Moji's presence and the irresolvable challenge she poses to Julius's narrative brings the ideological limits of *Open City's* multicultural

⁸⁴ Cole, p. 146.

⁸⁵ Cole, p. 56.

⁸⁶ Cole, p. 156.

perspective fully to the surface. Julius' narrative proves incapable of containing her revelation. Just a page before the disclosure, Julius attempts to provide a pre-emptive justification for this narrative bombshell. He writes,

We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good. When we don't, neither we nor our imagined audience is troubled, because we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves, and because we have through our other decisions, merited their sympathy.⁸⁷

In this way, Julius' explicitly delineates his own narrative model ('we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves') and through his allusion to his imagined audience, implicates the reader in this totalising logic. He concludes, '[f]rom my point of view' (which is, of course, the only perspective we get), 'I am satisfied that I have hewed close to the good.'⁸⁸ However, Julius is unable to resolve his narrative authority (his totalising perceptual capacity) with Moji's revelation. It emerges as an intellectual aporia as he is stumped by the incongruity of his own experience and Moji's: 'She had said it as if, with all her being, she was certain of its accuracy.'⁸⁹ The narrative thus comes face to face with its blind spot, unable to neutralise it. This contradiction has always been there as Moji reminds us: '[t]hings don't go away just because you choose to forget them.'⁹⁰ She ends asking, 'will you say something now? Will you say something?'⁹¹ Moji's demand for recognition heralds an ethical fracture of time to which Julius responds with silence. He thus seeks escape by imagining himself in the position of others: 'Anyone who had come out onto the porch at that moment could not have imagined that we were doing anything other than enjoying the play of light on the river.'⁹² In this imaginative escape, Julius attempts to re-write the accusatory encounter which is playing out before him. Once again, Julius evades intimacy with the proximate other before him in order to return to his idealised subjective self.

Like his previous description of New York as a "palimpsest": 'written, erased, rewritten,' Julius cannot resolve this narrative aporia but hopelessly attempts to overwrite it.⁹³ Julius thus recalls Camus' double story involving Nietzsche and Scaevola, a Roman hero

⁸⁷ Cole, p. 243.

⁸⁸ Cole, p. 243.

⁸⁹ Cole, p. 244.

⁹⁰ Cole, p. 245.

⁹¹ Cole, p. 245.

⁹² Cole, p. 246.

⁹³ Cole, p. 59.

from the sixth century B.C.E.. The initial story tells of Scaevola's fearless act, burning his hand in fire rather than giving away his accomplices. Camus then relates schoolboy Nietzsche's response to hearing this tale which was to replicate the action by holding a hot coal, thus scarring him for life. After some lines, Julius returns to the story with another rewrite: 'It wasn't until several days after that, looking up the story elsewhere, I saw that Nietzsche's contempt for pain had been expressed not with a coal but with several lit matchsticks that he had placed in the center of his palm and that, as they began to burn his hand, an alarmed school yard prefect had knocked to the ground.'⁹⁴ Here Cole demonstrates in microcosmic form the irresolvability of the utopian narrative. The layered repetition of the story (Scaevola – Nietzsche – Camus – Julius) ultimately cannot travel unscathed; it finds no resolution, scuppered finally by the unavoidable external presence of the prefect.

In the end, Julius' narrative is shown to collapse under the most fundamental of ethical responsibilities: acknowledgement of the Other. Upon leaving the apartment, Julius greets a sleeping city: 'The city was still asleep. In the diner, I had seen one man with a tattoo that covered most of his arm resting his head on his knuckles, When I came out, I saw another man, Dominican or Puerto Rican, in a parked car, who was either asleep or staring blankly at the GPS device in front of him.'⁹⁵ Walking through this 'littered, sleeping barrio,' Julius sees the conceptual relic of his own fugueur practice, sleep, strewn across the city.⁹⁶ Rather than facilitating a dialectical relationship between him and the city, the city is instead rendered opaque in its somnolence. Now rid of his privileged perceptual practice, Julius is like the couple he sees: 'silent, bewildered, taking in the bad dream of a Saturday morning.'⁹⁷

In the novel's final pages, Julius once again finds himself alone and aloft having accidentally exited a concert performance through an emergency exit and now standing perilously on fire escape steps, four stories up. Outside in the dark, cold and rain, Julius is exposed to the elements: 'It was a situation of unimprovable comedy.'⁹⁸ Caught in a blind spot in an ironic reversal of fortune, Julius confronts the indifference of the city: 'my entire being was caught up in a blind spot ... My hands held metal, my eyes starlight, and it was as

⁹⁴ Cole, p. 246.

⁹⁵ Cole, p. 241.

⁹⁶ Cole, p. 242.

⁹⁷ Cole, p. 242.

⁹⁸ Cole, p. 255.

though I had come so close to something that it had fallen out of focus, or fallen so far away from it that it had faded away.’⁹⁹ In this final declaration of his perceptual fallibility, Julius’s status as a utopian figure is irrevocably undermined as he recognises the inadequacy of his narrative to materially change his present circumstances or indeed the circumstances of the others who inhabit the city with him. Looking out across the cruelly indifferent city, he does not find recognition nor affirmation but simply finds himself, as he has always been, isolated and alone.

Open City therefore re-enacts the ethical pattern which has been rehearsed in the other novels discussed in this thesis: the ethical burden is placed on the readers of the novels when the protagonists are shown to be ethically deficient. It is the reader’s duty to remain vigilant to the errant others who inhabit the text, for these are the very figures the novel’s protagonist loses sight of. In the erudite, highly knowledgeable prose of Julius, one finds an ethical core missing. It mirrors the deficiency of the internet and our expansive communicative technologies which, though vast, are not sufficient to account for our duty of care to others. Rather, vigilance requires the unending work of critique – looking beyond oneself and one’s comforts to account for the needs of others. *Open City*, in this respect, requires a reader who acknowledges the ethical cues of the text and cannot simply read Julius’s rendering in good faith. It asks one to look beyond the surface of the text and to not be seduced by Julius’s aesthetically and perhaps politically attractive flânerie which tells a simplistic story of multicultural insight. The reader, in this way, is compelled to be a *better* observer of the city than Julius for the stakes of his oversights are grave.

⁹⁹ Cole, p. 257.

CONCLUSION

In Gabriel García Márquez's classic novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Buendía family is famously afflicted by a plague of insomnia. It is one of the many supernatural events which besiege Macondo in its century of existence, the fictional 'city of mirrors (or mirages)' condemned to be eternally forgotten by the simultaneous end of the Buendía bloodline and the closure of the novel.¹ The plague hits the family early in the novel and early in their habitation of the newly founded city and acts as a premonition of the fate which will ultimately visit the family and the city. Whilst some optimistically embrace this affliction for its potential productivity ("That way we can get more out of life."), the Buendías are warned at its advent, 'the most fearsome part of the sickness of insomnia was not the impossibility of sleeping, for the body did not feel any fatigue, but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory.'² As the plague entrenches itself in the city, the inhabitants, sure enough, start to forget. The forgetting comes on gradually. First, names of quotidian objects are lost to a collective amnesia. Then sign systems are instituted to map the objects of the home and workplace. Finally, the townspeople forget the identity of their neighbours and closest kin: 'the insomniacs began to live in a world built on the uncertain alternative of the cards, where a father was remembered faintly as the dark man who had arrived at the beginning of April and a mother was remembered only as the dark woman who wore a gold ring on her left hand.'³

This episode in Márquez's novel illustrates the dynamic that this thesis has been exploring – our persistent duty to others which emerges in often painful, intransigent and hostile forms when the cultural vocabulary which frames our daily experience starts to fray or proves inadequate. For the inhabitants of Macondo, the loss of memory and their collective language does not lead to silence but rather to scenes of contentless saying. As Márquez notes, deep into the plague, townspeople would still congregate 'to converse endless, to tell over and over for hours on end the same jokes, to complicate to the limits of exasperation the story about the capon.'⁴ The story of the capon is emblematic of the futile recursion of these discussions: a narrator asks if the listeners wish to hear a story about the

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (London: Picador, 1978), p. 336.

² García Márquez, p. 43.

³ García Márquez, p. 46.

⁴ García Márquez, p. 44.

capon. If the listener answers yes, the narrator will respond that he had not asked them to say yes but if they want to hear the story. If the listener answers no, the narrator will respond that he had not asked them to say no but if they want to hear the story. If they remain silent, the narrator will respond that he did not ask them to remain silent but if they want to hear the story. On and on this would go ‘in a vicious circle that lasted entire nights.’⁵ Exemplified in these frustrating and fruitless forms, this orientation towards others and community in the absence of any common language depicts a Levinasian insomnia, a sleepless obligation to the Other. In the absence of individualistic escape through sleep, the Macondo people speak endlessly to each other, even as the figures they orient themselves toward become more and more obscure. The insomniac plague is just one of the many tragedies to befall the fictional and short-lived town of Macondo. Macondo’s aspirations to be a utopian state are blighted by unexpected intrusions from the outside world which bring a host of disasters to the townspeople and, by way of Márquez’s magical realism, stretch the realms of possibility. Through Macondo’s early affliction by the insomnia plague, they quickly learn the importance of vigilance – a keen eye to that which you cannot see coming.

In the final years of this doctoral project, my mind kept wandering back to Márquez’s insomniac plague as the Covid-19 pandemic spread across the country and the world – our own plague spread by physical proximity. In many ways it is incomparable to the plight of Macondo in which the plague was merely one of many unexpected and relentless tragedies. The privilege of wealthy Western states, on the other hand, was to be able to look upon Covid-19 as an exceptional imposition on our agency as modern subjects and an unwelcome intrusion to our relatively stable, predictable lives (this formulation, of course, obscures the many people who live in these Western states whose precarious lives are characterised by unpredictability and insecurity). Covid-19 nonetheless intersected with many of the themes of this thesis: generational responsibility, distracted reception, the forensic image of others’ suffering and (the prohibition of) *flânerie*. Proximity to others was curbed by lockdown measures, faces covered with masks and nearly all interactions beyond the household took place through video technologies. Sleep took on a new guise in the face of this new reality. For some, it meant an unexpected break to proceedings as usual: an enforcement of rest for those who could no longer carry on with their unsustainably busy work schedules. For others, of course, rest was indefinitely deferred as frontline workers faced exhausting

⁵ García Márquez, p. 45.

workloads in the face of this global health crisis. Covid-19 therefore introduced a profound clarity to the inherent sociality of insomnia I introduced at the start of this thesis. As Crary rightfully points out, in sleep ‘we abandon ourselves to the care of others’ and this was no more apparent than the broadcasted images of sleep-deprived healthcare workers.

In chapter two, I sought to convey how insomniac art can pierce through the narratives of finitude which have come to characterise modernity. I put this in explicitly generational terms, recognising that inherent to these critiques are staid and fixed notions of the past, present and future. For Fukuyama and Baudrillard, the past remains fixed as, respectively, a realm of governmental trial and error or a site of pre-capitalist nostalgia. The future, in turn, is deemed a relentless recycling of the “now.” This generational impasse was key to my discussion of Ishiguro and Emin’s artworks which refuse this cynical and intractable account of the past and the future. The stubborn materiality of their artworks refuses to be subsumed by any determinate narrative and in their creation of works which refuse to foreclose the alterity of the past and future, they continually draw attention to the eternal possibility that our future – for better and worse – will be radically different to today. Their complementary ethical project, I suggested, is one of generational responsibility, shielding the future generations from the cynical inertia of their forebears and providing a sense of the future as an always indeterminate, unpredictable realm. The issue of generational responsibility and the obscurity of the future found particular resonance in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic in which our social duty was put in explicitly intergenerational terms: how do our actions affect older vulnerable populations and how will current emergency measures affect our future generations? Lockdowns too inhibited physical proximity to others upon which our sensible ethical orientation is founded. This publicly sanctioned atomization therefore facilitated various means of escape into the self – behaviours of banal insomnia – which provided the perfect means to, as David Foster Wallace would put it, avoid the ‘psychic costs of being around other human beings.’⁶ And yet, the pandemic simultaneously revealed an outpouring of ethical behaviour, anonymous actions of care and support from one isolated stranger to another isolated stranger. In these acts, people gave and supported often with no expectation of reply or gratitude: an asymmetric compulsion to help the suffering other.

⁶ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, p. 22.

The persistence of ethical action within our sleepless culture has been the main driver of this thesis. Through my term banal insomnia, I have sought to convey both the evasive strategies we use to avoid our duties to others, as well as how this duty reveals itself in strange, unexpected scenes which are nonetheless couched in our exhausted, cynical culture. I've referred to these as the "ends" of sleep – scenes which unveil relationships founded upon vigilant concern for the sleeping other. As the pandemic revealed, such scenes can take on unexpected and often contradictory forms. As such, key to this thesis has been the following question: what social organisations, settings or aesthetic configurations are conducive for us to recognise our duty and commitments to others? This question is asked with some trepidation. In these insomniac scenes of orientation towards others, one must confront a radical unpredictability which threatens to overturn the comfort and stability of modern life. This is the possibility explored in chapter 4 which attempted to link what I call forensic scenes and figures to Rancière's concept of dissensus, unstable situations which destabilize the known and assumed political order. McEwan's *Saturday* presents the ambivalence and peril of such a situation in which the reordering of the sensible can contain disturbing threats of violence and uncontained disorder. Vigilance in these scenes is not the consequence of logical thought but rather jolted into being through the palpable danger of such unpredictability.

Vigilance and responsibility are themes that unite the artworks discussed in this thesis. All critique the seeming impenetrability of our cynical culture and attempt to illuminate an alternative sociality founded on care for the other and at times, a profound and seemingly unachievable disregard for the self. This is the depth of the Levinasian obligation – 'the duty to give to the other even the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulders.'⁷ The peril of turning towards the other is a terrifying prospect which shakes the foundation of our civilised, predictable Western lives. Though it would be a stretch to suggest that all the artists considered in this project would subscribe to the same level of self-sacrifice as Levinas, they are all alike in their dismissal of modern convenience. Each proposes an aesthetic engagement which requires a certain level of effort, contradicting modernity's valorisation of ease. Whilst there is much to say about the escapist strategies that are practiced to bypass such ethical effort, a concurrent aim of mine has been to explore

⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, p. 55.

how each of the artworks inspire an insomniac vigilance in its readers or viewers which they can neither shortcut nor evade.

As noted, Covid-19 brought radically new and collective ways to think about our social obligations and our duty of care for others, manifesting in what previously would have been unthinkable impositions on our freedoms as modern subjects. In our arguably post-Covid-19 society, we wake to new horrors and sufferings every day, informed by the same technologies which aid our indolent and somnolescent escapes from the outside world. As demonstrated by Teju Cole in both his fiction and non-fiction works, the very technologies that exhaust and distract us are also the ones that connect us and invoke our insomniac duty, even if they simultaneously and paradoxically facilitate our evasion of it. Similar to Moji's revelation at the end of *Open City*, this ethical escape is never total or final. Our ethical duty re-emerges in moments of insomniac clarity in which the call of the Other strikes us viscerally and inescapably.

I began this thesis considering the recent celebration of and activism for sleep as missing a vital component: the necessity of the wakeful subject who keeps vigil over their sleeping fellows. Through this thesis, I have sought to contribute to this contemporary, though one-sided, interest in sleep by examining the persistence of our insomniac duty of care for others and how it continues in elusive and momentary forms within our culture of rampant consumption, exhaustion and individualism. The literary case studies in this thesis are populated with characters who continuously face, negotiate, fulfil, fail or ignore their responsibilities to others. Banal insomnia is this everyday grappling – a sleepless, evasive and often cynical relation to the needs of others, nevertheless punctured by moments of overwhelming ethical clarity.

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