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Eat Me, Drink Me, Like Me

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In February of 2017, Shane Patrick Boyle told us all a story. Shane, the affable founder of Zine Fest Houston, tweeted a link to his one hundred thirty-six followers, sharing with them a GoFundMe campaign to cover his medical costs. Shane, a Type 1 diabetic, had recently returned from Texas to Arkansas to care for his mother. In so doing, he'd given up an arrangement he'd made with a local clinic to get regular, affordable insulin. So he asked the public for money: $750, to be exact.

Shane's tweet got minimal engagement. It wasn't enthrallingly written—just a poorly formatted link to the GoFundMe page, along with the relatively anodyne explanation: "I'm raising money for Insulin for Next Month. Click to Donate."

When Shane died of complications from diabetes a few weeks later, the GoFundMe was fifty dollars short. Shane had rationed his insulin, his cousin said on another GoFundMe campaign to cover the funeral costs. Although the original GoFundMe page is gone, Shane's tweet is still up. After three years, it has garnered just 53 likes.

A year later, a woman from Ridge, New York named Doreen Rudolph told another story. Her daughter, Nicole, had just been bumped off of her parents' insurance. Nicole, like Shane, was diabetic and could not afford the cost of insulin. Doreen, like Shane, turned to Twitter. She told her story in exactly 280 characters, the maximum allowed by Twitter, eliminating spaces to make room: "I just bought 2 vials of insulin for my daughter cost me $524. With a discount card.All I could buy.I left the pharmacy and sat in My car and cried. I would never tell her this. I'll tell her I was able to get from work because she knows i don't have $.I have love and worry 24/7."

This tweet was retweeted, liked, and replied to tens of thousands of times. Many people offered to send money through PayPal or Venmo. Commentators dug up an old GoFundMe of Doreen's, set up just a few months after Shane's death, and started donating. The money topped out at nearly $9,000 before Doreen stopped accepting donations. The

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Rudolphs' story was covered as a heartwarming puff piece by Yahoo News and the *Washington Post*. Doreen later started identifying herself online as an insulin advocate, and continues to tweet about affordable insulin access in America.

In the attention economy, as in any economy, there are winners and there are losers. There are those who capture a sufficient market share of our time and our clicks, of our care and our compassion, of our libidos and our longings and our hearts and our funds and our free time and, perhaps above all things, our gaze. And there are those who do not, who commit, by lack of skill or lack of effort or unease with the written word or an inability to be photographed from the right angle, the capital offense of being uninteresting. To the good storytellers, to those who are capable of creating a *personal brand* that goes viral, who render themselves *influencers*, go the spoils of our collective captivation.

I am not merely talking about the extreme cases—the quarter of a million people each year who attempt to pay their necessary medical bills through collective crowdfunding on GoFundMe, or new-media outlets that pay their writers only with "exposure" (as *The Huffington Post* did until 2018), or the professional Instagrammers whose livelihoods are directly correlated to the number of people willing to like the sponsored content they promote in the service of an aspirational mode of being. I am talking, rather, about an increasing number of Americans, particularly millennials, for whom the notion of the personal brand is not merely a creative possibility but, to a greater or lesser degree, an economic reality. For anyone who has ever been on a dating site or a business networking site like LinkedIn, or who has crowdfunded a personal or professional venture, or who has participated in the "gig economy," or even who has had a potential employer Google her or check out her social media—for these people, our ability to self-create is, in 2020 more than ever, directly correlated with our ability to *be* in the world.

It would be all too easy to launch a familiar jeremiad against our digital avatars—against the pressure to create inauthentic, disembodied selves, selves that in turn control elements of our "meatspace." But to do so would make certain assumptions about the Real—that authenticity is necessarily physicalized, linked to our individual and autonomous bodies. A more interesting question is this: When disembodiment and self-creation alike are so integral to our mode of existing socially, what exactly renders either our offline selves or online selves "real" at all?

Digital Personae

Our curated digital bodies are an integral part of our economic reality. Even if we have a stable, "normal" job, our digital footprint—our LinkedIns, our Twitter pages, and other publicly visible digital profiles—advertise us to potential clients and employers alike. If we, as do a third of American workers, make our money in part or full from the gig economy, then those pressures are even more apparent. Both our public personae on places like Twitter and our platform-specific work personae—on websites like TaskRabbit, which allows users to select a housekeeper or handyman from a list of profiles—demand self-creation toward a specific, and not particularly well-remunerated, end.

But self-creation is also necessary for the accumulation of other kinds of capital: social, say, or purely sexual. The digital avatars we create on Tinder (are we hot enough to swipe right on?), OKCupid (are we hot *and* interesting enough for someone to send us a message, or to have our messages reciprocated?), or Raya (are we hot and interesting *and* prestigiously educated and Instagram-famous enough to be allowed on the exclusive app in the first place?)—these are funhouse mirrors of our "real" selves. They are at once parallel, digital bodies and increasingly the default social conduits to our most intimate physicality. Around forty percent of new couples in 2017 met online, according to one recent study.

Socially and professionally, we create ourselves online. Just as the way we dress our bodies, position our gestures, or cultivate a class-specific accent allows us to occupy not just physical but social space, so too does our creation of a social media personality allow us to project our social selves into the dizzying realms of the disembodied. And the *reach* of these disembodied spaces—our ability to share content not just with a few "in real life" acquaintances but to the whole expanse of our followers—makes these digital-social selves brutally efficient, a way of projecting ourselves into the gaze of everybody we know, all at once.

We cannot dissociate either our economic lives or our social selves from the creeping need for a personal brand. Digital self-creation as a form not just of expanded agency, but of attention-seeking, has become a requirement. We create ourselves not just as works of art, but as objects of commerce. Our digital selves, like our bodies, are vulnerable.

"Miniature Gods"

The irony is that self-creation was traditionally seen as evidence not of man's desperation, but his dignity. In Renaissance philosopher Giovanni

Pico della Mirandola's "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (1486), shortly after creating the universe God tells Adam that creativity, and self-creativity in particular, is integral to what it means to exist in the image of God:

> Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.... We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.

To self-create is a form of self-divinization. Nineteenth-century dandy culture, for example, was said by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, one of its chroniclers, to be for "miniature Gods." The dandy, aloof and nonchalant, is never subject to the affection of others, or to the contingency that comes with being loved. He does not love, for he is emotionally invulnerable. Both d'Aurevilly and his fellow dandy Charles Baudelaire believed dandyism to be about the disconnect between the power to affect others and the power to be (at least seemingly) *unaffected*. In one telling anecdote, Baudelaire compares the dandy to the myth of the Spartan schoolboy concealing a stolen fox from his tutor by hiding it under the boy's tunic. The boy maintains a courageous air of impassivity with his tutor until the fox claws out his innards and kills him. "A dandy may be blasé," Baudelaire assures us, "he may even suffer; but in this case, he will smile like the Spartan boy under the fox's tooth."

The created self of humanist thought, the dandy of nineteenth-century Paris and London: they are selves whose creation is a form of power, not only over themselves, but over their audience, *la foule*. The term literally means "the crowd," but often with the connotation of a slow-moving mass denied any particularity on the part of any of its members. Dandyism is about producing an effect on the masses.

"The most general characteristic of Dandyism," d'Aurevilly writes, "is always to produce the unexpected, that which could not logically be anticipated by those accustomed to the yoke of rules." Dandies make others totally subject to their will. Theirs is the creation of a narcissistic world through the influence upon an audience.

To be a self-creator is, by definition, to stand outside and against the crowd, to transcend humanity to become a kind of mage. As a lesser-known dandy chronicler, the novelist and occultist Joséphin Péladan, put it in his 1892 book *How to Become a Mage*, "You must create your own magic: not as an expression of vanity, but as you would create an original work of art."

Tinder Dandies

The question "How do we make ourselves?" is inseparable from the question "How do we make things that are like us but also not like us?" In dandyism, as in today's digital panopticon, self-creation is inextricably linked with a profound ambiguity about the power and promise of technology, and the ways in which we might become not merely self-fashioning subjects but objects—easily, uncannily, reproducible.

Dandyism arose in the milieu of nineteenth-century, industrial Paris, when the city had been newly transformed into a stage by a number of innovations—today we might call them disruptions. There was the gas lamp: As part of his renovations of the city, Baron Haussmann had twenty thousand installed starting in 1853. The lamps rendered the dangerous and labyrinthine streets of the city visible for the first time at night—and thus open for the ubiquity of the new boulevard. Along with the boulevard came its symbiotic twin, the café terrace, with its chairs facing outward onto the street, inviting the *flâneur*, or people-watcher. There was also the rise of the department store as a bourgeois phenomenon, recounted in Émile Zola's 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*. With the department store came the shop windows, the mannequins, and the dazzling panoply of visible and accessible mass-produced goods—which in turn made the original, the homespun, and the bespoke into rare objects of novelistic fetishization.

All this came even as the idea of the "mechanical woman"—the apotheosis of reproducibility—became a common literary and sexual trope. It's telling that, according to an 1858 entry in the diaries of the Goncourt brothers, rumors went around Parisian brothels that prostitutes were being replaced with identical robots. The flip side of the freedom to self-create was the self's unmooring from what we might call *actuality*: from biological impulse, from rootedness, from the vulnerability that comes from being a human being among human beings in an actual, already-created, world.

To be creatively free was to be caught between the Scylla and the Charybdis of modernity. Create oneself too little, and become one of the faceless mass that aimlessly wandered the boulevards of Paris. Create oneself too much and lose sight of one's humanity. The aesthete who loved the artificial too much might well end up like the aesthete in Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *Against Nature*, who isolated himself from the rest of Paris in a hermetically sealed but beautifully decorated estate, before losing his sanity.

So too the age of Tinder. As the digital landscape has replaced the Parisian boulevard as the site of performance, the power balance of self-creation has shifted. There are no longer a few dandy princelings or Renaissance philosophers, self-fashioning themselves against the masses. Instead, as more and more of us have access to the tools of self-creation, we all struggle in the most brutal and Darwinian sense to establish our selfhood in the digital sphere. We struggle to be not simply disembodied but autonomous, free of contingency. Yet our selfhood, our individuality, our sexuality, our livelihoods—all these are not actually self-chosen but rather bestowed *upon* us by the attention of others.

The complete disembodiment of digital self-creation, in cutting us off from our physical and dependent selves, at once gives us total freedom, and—far more than on the rarefied boulevards of Paris's 8th Arrondissement—enslaves us in an economy in which we must compete with one another for the attention that renders our financial and social lives alike possible. We are all dandies and crowd alike.

Sex in the Attention Economy

It is impossible, of course, to dissociate the demand for attention from sex, or at least eroticism. The creation of the self *as an object*, for attention and consumption, is also the creation of the self as an object of *desire*. We contort ourselves for the gaze of others, our total freedom channeled into titillating iterations of other people's fantasies. We perform our chosen identities in order to fit into the slots in other people's hearts.

On the Internet, the saying goes, nobody knows you're a dog. Online disembodiment lends itself to a very particular kind of eroticism. It is not, say, the brutally atavistic vision of sex one finds celebrated by Jordan Peterson and the rest of the reactionary right: fetishizations of blood, of flesh, of a gender binary encoded in the structure of the universe. Rather, it's an eroticism characterized not by actuality but possibility. Everything is possible, and permissible—and you can think of it, and fantasize about it, and titillate yourself with the idea that you just *might* do it, all without leaving your computer chair. It's the eroticism of Rule 34, the Internet's most famous maxim: If you can think of it, there is pornography of it online.

Online, we self-create not to *seduce*, as the dandies of the nineteenth century did, imposing our will on the crowd, but rather to *entice*: to lure, and ultimately to beg, the crowd to come to us. We *need* the love, the attention, the clicks of others.

It's tempting to see our attention economy as purely dystopian. It is nightmarish, after all, to compete with one another via avatars for work, for sex, for companionship, for cash to pay our medical bills. But the rise of the attention economy also reveals a truth that the dandies of the café terrace did not realize: of *course* our selfhood is defined by the attention, and with it the love, of others. Even in the disembodied terrain of the Internet, we are utterly contingent creatures: not just self-makers or, God forbid, influencers, but beings dependent on the attention of others, an attention that, at its core, is not so unlike love. (As Simone Weil famously put it: "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.")

But seduction and enticement may ultimately be two sides of the same coin. To demand attention, to influence, in both the d'Aurevillean and Kardashian senses, is at once to exercise power and, whether we realize it or not, to realize our own vulnerability. We are social creatures, whether in our physical bodies or our digital ones; we hunger for and need and fashion ourselves not as self-enclosed selves but as characters in need of spectators. Even in the "freest" of spaces, unmoored from our bodies and from other traditional markers of human contingency, we are not autonomous selves. The Internet that was supposed to liberate us all from accidents of time and place and birth has ultimately, in its collapse into emotional Darwinism, revealed the truth about human dependency, which is less about our bodies or our blood than that we are all responsible to one another for everything. Being disembodied has made us no less human.

Poet and self-described sex worker Rachel Rabbit White—among the most #2020 voices of 2020—has written and spoken extensively on her vision of sexuality as an extension of the culture of Internet capitalism. In a recent interview with The Cut, White treats eroticism as part of the transactional nature of online culture, in which we are all, in the bedroom as at our computer screens, performing identities in exchange for pleasure. "Sex can be a vehicle for self-expression," she adds, "and it can be a theater; sex doesn't have to be serious, and sex can be anything."

And yet, she cautions, "pleasure is not everything," and "our sexuality and sexiness is not all that there is." At first reading, this appears to be a relatively conservative position: that there is, and indeed should be, plenty of life outside the boundaries of erotic desire. But for White, sexual pleasure—which is, for her, all but synonymous with sex—is not everything precisely because it is easily divorced from the rest of life.

White assumes that our sexual selves and our transactional selves are necessarily one and the same. "Plenty of women do the work of sex

work without trading sex for money or capital," White says. "The work of sexual entertaining, as well as the many emotional labors of sex work. Every woman is expected or pressured in heterosexuality to do the labor that sex workers do, but not every woman is a sex worker." Autonomous, self-aware individuals can either be on the clock or off, but sex, even pleasurable sex, is always sex work.

White is reducing our sexual selves—which is to say, our *most* social selves, the selves that exist to produce more selves, to relate to one another and to promulgate the species—to a persona we can put on or take off. Sex, and the vulnerability and dependency and bodily messiness that come with it, the *life* implicit within it, is reduced to something we merely perform, we merely *do*, an accidental rather than an essential predicate of our being.

White's conception of sex is strikingly similar to the dandies' conception of performance. Both rest on the same fundamental idea that we are autonomous, powerful beings whose relationship with other, implicitly less powerful, beings we can control through the addition and removal of the qualities we choose. We can clock in and clock out of our social personae, contort our biological realities into what our wills would fashion. The way we interact with one another is indelibly wedded to our choices.

Dependent, not Free

But the attention economy in its current, seemingly dystopian form presents us with another, drastically different, vision of the human condition. In revealing our lack of control over own identities, our dependence on others as fundamentally social creatures, the online attention economy challenges us to accept relationality as an even more fundamental part of who we are than are our own physical bodies. We are dependent on others even behind a keyboard. When we relate to one another, whether in corporeal sex or through a screen darkly, we are forced to contend with a *givenness* of the human condition—a givenness that does not refer purely to our physical makeup, nor to our gender, nor to our racial or ethnic or economic background, nor to any other atavistic vision of the self, but rather to our need for other people. That our current digital economy is an attention economy is telling not simply because "likes" now mean clicks, but because what we traffic in, as social creatures, is fundamentally that which attention is at its core: We traffic in love. We cannot, as the dandies or White would have it, willingly choose, commodify, and compartmentalize our relation to one another.

In Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market," sexuality, commerce, and destruction are inextricably linked to one another. A young woman goes to a fair, consumes forbidden fruits, and in turn, in her possessed perversion, becomes something to *be* consumed. "Eat me," she demands of her devastated sister, "drink me, love me."

The frenetic *eat me*, *drink me*, *like me* of online economics is in fact the truest revelation of our authentic selves—as beings who need other beings, even when we can eat powdered Soylent instead of food and upload our consciousness to the Cloud. Sex, performance, and all other forms of willed relationship: these are not actions we can perform, but elements of our being, all downstream from our need for love.

Seen in this way, today's online attention economy is not evil, as such, but merely tragic, a reflection of the inevitable reality that in all our lives we are dependent on others, and of our hubristic inability to acknowledge this in a more salutary way. Creative freedom and digital technology alike may allow us to transcend our *physical* bodies, but they do not allow us to transcend the truer actuality of human relations. We can create ourselves, but we cannot create ourselves independently of our hunger for love.

Our bodies, it turns out, are red herrings. We may yet become robots. But we will never be free.