



Edition IV.
Fates and Choices

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Idil Emiroglu

*edited by
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Fate and Reality: How Photography Affects our Perception

A purpose of the camera's invention.

Imagination and photographic evidence are both complementary and contradicting inputs of historical events, told stories and the outer world's realities. Can photography change the fate of reality by contradicting our imagination ability? Written incidents versus pictorializing the incident's effects can divert the subject of reality's fate. The photographer's decision becomes the crux of canalizing the fate of reality.

Until the invention of the camera, painting was the favored technique used to record visions, landscapes, historical events and people. Even though the sole aim of painting was not to act as a documentation, thanks to the medium, the pre-camera era was pictorialized besides transcribed by writing. According to Vilém Flusser's interpretation, the two biggest inventions of history are, firstly, the invention of linear writing, and secondly, the invention of technical image-making.

With the invention of photography, the purpose of painting—to record information visually—has been replaced by that of the camera device. This replacement of camera could initiate from a still life painter's need of realistic reference or a historical incident's reproduction for the collective consciousness, or the culture, to remember. Starting off from the invention, the camera has limited the artist's, or, in this case, the photographer's subjectivity on the image making. In a scenario such as Francesco Goya's *The Third of May* could be photographed at the time of the event; not painted, the effectiveness, emotional intensity and its influence on history would undoubtedly be different. However, the question whether to improve or worsen these effects are unanswerable with predictions of technical image-making. In any case, painting versus photography raises questions about the artist's subjectivity and recognition.



Figure 1: Goya,
Third of May, 1808

Photographers are now entitled to the decision of capturing what is in front of the camera. Conversely, a painting could have embodied the artist's imagination, a manipulation of the reality one sees and would like to portray. Throughout the history of image-making with a camera, the autonomy of the device versus the photographer's decision making ability has been changed, developed and has birthed different possibilities of the camera's usage. Ever since photography finally became an accepted *art form*, the photographer's autonomy and decision-making on a photograph brought up new possibilities and discussions, such as *abstract photography*.

Photography changed the direction of written history's fate

With the help of photography, the direction of written or spoken history has changed to a more telling and graphic version. Photographers have the potential to make decisions, in order to influence reality's fate. If one decides to record a certain person in a specific situation, that person can become immortal. However, as Jean-Paul Sartre also states, despite the person depicted on the photographic image, existing in a *certain incident*, they may no longer be the unique subject of the history; instead, they become a function of transmitting a true and real experience for the future viewer (Flusser, 1984).

Where a collective history is read by another's verbal or textual description of it, the learner is entitled to use their imagination to picture a historical event's destructiveness, impact or value. However, with the addition of a photograph from the field, the text can lose its impact to the photograph's efficiency in transmitting its true impact. In the case of the Vietnam War, comparing the written history and joining the text with the image of war-affected children, it is inevitable that photography has changed the fate and destiny, not only of written history, but of the collective knowledge about reality and tellings. When a photographic proof monopolizes the power of persuasion the collective knowledge of told history can change drastically to a personal awakening. Witnessing weighs on the scales alongside learned facts.



Figure 2: Nick
Ut, *The Terror of
War*, 1972

“What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.”

(Sontag, 1977)

Photographer’s autonomy

Considering the duality of photographic images, questions arise about the depiction of reality. Can photography’s crucial role of being proof of the real, be a delicate balance? Does it depict full reality objectively, or is the photographer a considerable factor in the *decision-making* of this reality?

Vilem Flusser’s philosophy maintains that the ‘apparatus’ of the camera is a tool that has its own ‘program’, taking precedence over photographer’s autonomy. Indeed, photographers are playing the game of operating a camera, but always strictly within the programmed rules of the apparatus (Flusser, 1984). Throughout the history of photography and the art of photography, this approach has been interrogated, experimented, yet also denied. Even though the photographer’s full autonomy is at great discussion: some photographers employ the camera as an ultimate decision maker, whereas others set their ambitions on manipulating the ‘apparatus’ principles of the camera. Those who refuse to mirror the view in front of the lens could grasp their imaginative visions onto the photographic image; Abstract Photography is one of the convenient practices born from this effort.

Is Abstract Photography an Autonomous Act?

Where many defend that abstraction via camera is not possible—since the camera always records a reality—many practice photography in a contrary way. According

to Diarmuid Costello, abstraction is formed from levels, and he classifies the types and techniques of abstractions depending on these levels. In his case, abstraction – in an alternative description– means “the subject losing information”. This definition contains many explanations for photograph-making being a total act of abstraction. A person’s image occurring in a photographic paper is the first level of abstraction, since that person is losing the real proportional information; thus being detached from their reality, and being fit into a new reality, the photographic object, the first level of abstraction is achieved. Especially when the photograph is in black-and-white, the color information gets lost, which is the second level of abstraction within Costello’s definition. As the intensity of “forms becomes unidentifiable”, the level of abstraction increases, such as in Faux Abstraction to Concrete Abstraction. A further detailed approach and practice of abstract photography, coming into conflict with the de-facto ideas of abstraction via camera, is Gottfried Jäger’s studies on Concrete Abstraction.



Figure 3: Minor White, *Opposed Directions* (1949), a Faux Abstraction example

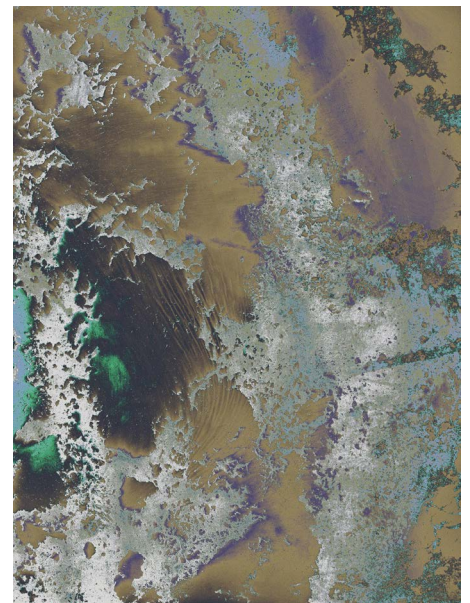


Figure 4: James Welling, *Fluid Dynamics*, G19BC, 2009-2012, a Concrete Abstraction example

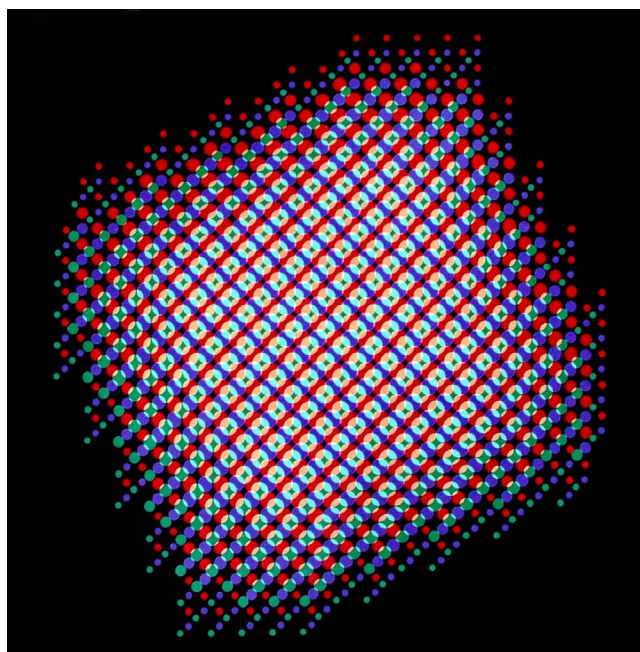


Figure 5: Gottfried Jäger, *Pinhole Structures*, 1967, an example for Concrete Abstraction

At this stage of photography's possibilities, there are many examples that attempt to change the destiny of a reality. Once photography serves as proof of full-on-reality and overwriting verbal history, in other instances, it performs the opposite act. A photographic image can misguide the observer on what happened in front of the lens, within abstraction or within the photographer's interpretations. This dual property of image-making brings up questions on whether the camera is an autonomous device, or if the photographer themselves is the autonomous one in the image making process. Being the question impossible with one satisfying answer, the decision-making could be done by the photographer. If the photographer wants to decide on reality's fate, or not.

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Sabrina Harverson

*edited by
Co-editors in Chief*

The Case Against SSRIs: Rethinking The Narrative

A few weeks ago, I had coffee with a fellow colleague at work, a brief interlude from the tasks of the day. She laughed nervously as she told me she would not be having any more boosters this winter, having had COVID-19 the week before (for the fifth time) and feeling “mostly fine” for it. It was not my place to critique her choice, it was her decision. It is her body after all, she has autonomy right? I have over the past couple of years aimed to remain neutral on individuals’ choices on such a conundrum – wary of the possibility of a heated argument breaking out. It is controversial if you take such a stance. Not having “the vaccine”. This debate on whether we should or shouldn’t be having more COVID-19 vaccines appears not to have waned among medical professionals. The contentious issue follows everyone like a shadow with the rise and fall of COVID-19 cases. These discussions on the COVID-19 vaccine, where you are constantly treading on egg-shells, have made me ponder bigger questions. To what extent do we have a choice in taking a drug or not? Are we subliminally pressured to do so by society? Or worse, are we being pushed to do so by drug companies profiteering under a guise to protect us?

Recently, a great deal of media coverage has been given to the topic of SSRIs, or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. These drugs are most commonly used to treat symptoms of major depressive disorder, and related psychiatric conditions. They are said to work on the basis of increasing “deficient serotonin” that many researchers regard as the cause of depression (Chu and Wadhwa, 2022). Serotonin is a neurotransmitter, meaning that it’s used by the brain to coordinate electrophysiological signalling between various regions. The mental processes modulated by serotonin include mood, perception, anger, and memory – to only name a few (Berger et al, 2009). SSRIs temporarily inhibit the reuptake of serotonin by synapses, which are gaps between individual brain cells; this means that serotonin can float around between neurons for longer. As a result, serotonergic activity increases. If we suppose that depression is caused by a deficit in this type of activity, then it would be sensible to assume that increasing the length of time that serotonin “floats around” in the brain might result in a lessening of those symptoms. Sounds pretty great, right? Your brain is deficient in a certain chemical and, as the story goes, a drug will fix the problem. However, things are never really this simple, in the same way that depression

isn't a simple disorder. But the serotonin narrative, as we shall see, is a very profitable one – which is perhaps why many of us are convinced that SSRIs are an effective way of treating depression.

There have been various commentators on the issue. Ben Goldacre, in his book *Bad Pharma*, highlighted some of the theoretical, ethical, and practical problems with asserting a causal link between low serotonin and depression (Goldacre, 2013 p. 258). One of the major issues with this view, according to Goldacre, is that it has been *deeply* embedded into societal thought, to the point where it has become normative (Goldacre, 2013). Various forms of incentivised messaging have pushed us to think that if someone is depressed, they *should* consider taking medication. Despite this pervasive view, the “serotonin hypothesis” is not as well-supported by scientific evidence as we're led to believe. This becomes more apparent when Goldacre discusses the drug Tianeptine, which was labelled as a selective serotonin reuptake *enhancer*. Thus, it should reduce serotonin levels, (doing the opposite of what SSRIs accomplish), and increase depressive symptoms, though research has revealed it is also a beneficial treatment for depression. (Goldacre, 2013). We have a situation where serotonin inhibitors and enhancers can apparently *both* treat depression. This raises a lot of questions about the real and reliable role of serotonin in generating depressive symptoms. Interestingly, researchers do not think Tianeptine can be labelled as an SSRE anymore, due to its lack of long term effect on the serotonin pathway. Despite this, it is still found to be useful in treating depression (McEwen, 2010) This type of information is clear as mud, it is yet another thing that requires more research. In the case of Tianeptine, that is another story – yet another rabbit hole. Why then are SSRIs still commonly sold as the answer to treating depression if there are so many conflicting messages of what “does” and “doesn't” work?

Goldacre attributes widespread SSRI use for depression due to the influence of powerful marketing techniques (Goldacre, p. 259). The serotonin hypothesis, he argues, did not just emerge out of thin air. It has been carefully nurtured by industry leaders to ensure that it remains the status quo. One such example is from an advert for paroxetine (an SSRI) by GlaxoSmithKline. GSK is the 10th largest pharmaceutical company in the world (Fortune, 2022). The advert states: “If you've experienced some symptoms of depression nearly every day, for at least two weeks, a chemical imbalance could be to blame” (Petersen, 2009, p. 102). There are a multitude of other examples like this, and it almost always goes the same way: a reassuring voice narrates scenes of happy families, people engaging in hobbies, and beautiful landscapes. It could all be yours, if only you addressed the chemical demons in your brain. Recently, however, a new meta-analysis of research concerning the role of serotonin in depression has challenged this starry-eyed view.

The paper that hit the headlines was by Professor Joanna Moncrieff and colleagues at UCL stating “Analysis: Depression is probably not caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain - new study” (Moncrieff and Horowitz, 2022). On conducting an extensive review of the current relevant research out there,

the researchers came to several conclusions. Notably, they found that SSRIs are “barely distinguishable” from taking a placebo drug when treating depression and that antidepressants seem to have a generalised emotional numbing effect. The authors, furthermore, point out that they are not sure about the biological mechanisms that cause this numbing effect, but that we should also be sceptical about serotonin as a mechanism for depression. In one particular study they reviewed, participants’ levels of serotonin were artificially lowered, and this did not result in depression. Several other studies were also examined, and they came to the conclusion that any claims to a robust link between low serotonin and depression cannot be backed up by scientific evidence. The paper is essentially a vast review of summaries already out there on SSRIs, serotonin and depression. Has such a sweeping analysis of the research out there put the serotonin hypothesis theory to bed?

Not exactly. The serotonin hypothesis is still highly influential and deeply ingrained in societal thought. (Moncrieff et al. 2022). One example of this can be found in a statement from the Head of Psychiatry at the University of Melbourne, Professor Christopher Davey. In response to Moncrieff and his colleagues at UCL, Davey argues we are not sure how antidepressants really work due to the complexity of the brain and that medicine is “pragmatic”. He compares this conundrum to how we do not fully understand how general anaesthesia works (Davey, 2022). But that is beside the point. General anaesthesia is very much a means to an end, whereas antidepressants are more a cog in the wheel of potentially aiding or overcoming depression. Davey concludes that people with depression deserve “better treatments”. Somehow, continuing to blindly prescribe SSRIs, with no real idea how they really work, does not help people in the grand scheme of things. One of the potential key criticisms of Moncrieff and his colleagues’ paper surrounding this debunking of the serotonin hypothesis, however, could be that they only analysed one subtype of serotonin receptor (5HT1A) despite fourteen having been identified (Moncrieff et al). The other 5HT receptors and their link to depression have not been well-characterised. Bearing this in mind, there is more research to be done in the relationship between serotonin and depression. Still, antidepressant prescriptions in the UK are rising, having nearly doubled in the past decade (Heald et al, 2020). But without researching and offering other therapies, which may be more efficacious, creating a medical system that relies so heavily on SSRIs may do more harm than good.

Why should we solely expect an SSRI to lead people down the right path, just because there is some tenuous evidence out there that certain people feel benefits from taking them? (Davey, 2022). The brain is deeply complex, and it would be foolish to reduce its functionality – which depends so heavily on environmental context – to one specific biological pathway. However, many leading professionals still hold belief that depression can be attributed to faulty chemistry alone, despite mounting evidence to the contrary (Moncrieff et al, 2022). The arrow of causality goes both ways; the environment affects brain functioning, which in turn affects how a person interacts with the environment. Targeting one chemical pathway neglects a whole universe of other factors that

may be involved. It is harmful and dangerous to send out such a message, and it is more likely to result in patients believing they cannot, through their own efforts and lifestyle changes, overcome depression. This type of messaging is also more likely to result in patients being hesitant in ever discontinuing SSRIs, leading to “lifelong dependence” (Moncrieff, 2022). Bearing drug companies in mind, the only person that is going to truly care about evaluating patient SSRI use and discontinuation is the patient themselves in having a conversation with their doctor. But the first step is changing the messages that are sent out to patients surrounding depression. They will not ever consider stopping or gradually reducing their SSRI dose if they believe their depression is caused by chemical abnormalities in their brain. They will instead potentially believe something along the lines of: “that’s just how I am” and “only this drug can regulate me”. Strict biological determinism, turned into a pervasive societal dogma, can make us feel disempowered in the face of sincere challenges.

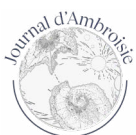
There could be a plethora of reasons as to why someone might be suffering with depression. Poverty, harmful relationships, work stress, grief, and an unhealthy lifestyle have all been linked to the development of depressive disorders. It is not simply because a person is lacking a certain amount of a chemical in their brain – chemical imbalances do not arise out of thin air. It is perhaps only now that people are starting to be alerted to the SSRI conundrum and its potential harms to individuals and society. Drug companies, however, will be disinclined to draw attention to this narrative, because it hurts their profit margins.

Before you come at me with your burning torches, I am not pointing the finger or shaming anyone who takes SSRIs. I think it is important, in light of the UCL paper, to really underline and present the side of SSRIs that certain people want swept under the carpet. The advantages and disadvantages of taking a drug should be laid bare for all to see, but they just aren’t as it’s often a question of money and profits. That is why you have to often do your own digging – valuable detective work for the sake of your own health. We need to talk about Serotonin, and we need to trust evidence above all else.

With thanks to Natalia Zdorovtsova for her advice and guidance on all things antidepressant and neuroscience.

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Further Readings

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Zachary Hale

*edited by
Andrei Andronic*

On Totality and Incompleteness in Man and Machine

4 *Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."*

In raising a tower to the firmament it was Nimrod's hubris that led God* to scatter the people of the Earth and confound their language. Or so it goes in Genesis 11:4: part of an allegory laid down to illustrate the folly of pride and over-glorification of human achievement. I see in this story man's inherent drive toward totality, whether suffused by knowledge or ecstatic in love, as a story of self-realisation. We are born with a longing to identify God with form or concept, and manifest such that we might look into his eyes as equals. Humility, however, is a virtue, and an acceptance of the plurality of man – and by extension knowledge – is the love of God's will.

Relativism of language began with the tower of Babel, and I think this parable captures an incompleteness at the heart of human experience from which knowledge is derived. I want to discuss incompleteness and inconsistency in mathematics, which are themselves neighbours to algorithm and computation, the results of which pervade modern life through our technology. The nature of algorithm reveals itself in the various creative projects undertaken by artificial intelligence, and as computer algorithms generate art, they enter into the realm of the aesthetic and the divine -- that is to say, the profoundly humane. There exists an incompleteness in the logic which underlies algorithmic computation as famously demonstrated almost a century ago (see below), and I find an incompleteness in my own subjective experience of art generated by artificial intelligence. Perhaps just a matter of taste, but it's an intriguing parallel, and we might better understand how the inherent limitations of algorithms manifest in the character of digital art by considering incompleteness in mathematics, algorithm, and computation.

At the foundation of mathematics exist various statements which are

known to be true but cannot be proven as such. These self-evident truths are called axioms. Taking a selection, for example, of some intuitive arithmetic and geometric axioms:

If $A = B$, then $B = A$

Two lines drawn parallel will never meet

Zero is a natural number

Once certain axioms are established, one might then derive statements of mathematical truth by performing consistent mathematical operations to build upon them. New axioms can be added to the system, or taken away, to define the scope of the system being employed. A mathematical statement was proven true if a sequence of propositions could be constructed from the axioms which terminated with the statement in question. Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century David Hilbert and other mathematicians subscribed to a philosophy of mathematics called *formalism* whereby it was posited that mathematical proof could be reduced to the operation of consistent rules on mathematical formulae without the need to consider the meaning of the formulae being manipulated. Intuition was of secondary relevance to the formalists, who regarded mathematical truth as a quality of syntax within a logical system, rather than a discovery of some fundamental aspect of reality. It was Hilbert's dream to lay down a comprehensive set of axioms from which any mathematical statement could be either proven or disproven according to a set of derivation rules, and to prove the consistency of these axioms with one another. The edifice of mathematics would be complete and unassailable – it was not to be.

8 *So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.*

In 1931, young Austrian logician Kurt Godel published an ingenious treatise which contained what came to be known as his *incompleteness theorems*. Godel was probing logical systems of reasoning for completeness and consistency, inspired by the logical paradoxes demonstrated by Bertrand Russell and others. A mathematical set is a collection of objects, and Russell challenged mathematicians to consider the set of all sets that do not contain themselves (labelled R). He then asked whether R contains itself, thus instantiating a paradox. A simpler way to see this is to imagine that in a small town a barber shaves only those men (or women if he's feeling particularly adventurous) who do not shave themselves. Who then shaves the barber? If the barber shaves himself then he breaks his own rule, and if he does not, then by virtue of being a man who does not shave himself, he becomes obliged to shave himself. Drawing on these ideas, Godel's stroke of ingenuity was to

develop a scheme, using natural numbers, to encode any statement of arithmetic with a unique number – called a Gödel number. The statement $1 + 1 = 2$, then, has a unique Gödel number, and the relationship between Gödel numbers specifies whether any given statement would result from the previous statements in a mathematical proof.

With an encoding scheme to hand, he then was able to meticulously build a logical system and insert a paradox of the type given above which was syntactically consistent with the system. Simply put, his statement expresses in logic: “this statement cannot be proven.” If true, then it should be able to be proven (since a consistent mathematics should be able to prove what is true), whereas if false, then it must be true that it can be proven, thus entailing a contradiction either way. The only conclusion is that this problematic statement is true, but can neither be proven nor disproven, thereby shattering the formalist aspiration to completeness. Moreover, Gödel’s incompleteness theorems are equivalent to the “father of modern computer science,” Alan Turing’s, solution to the halting problem, which asks whether it is always possible to know whether a mathematically idealised computer (called a Turing machine) will finish a given computation in a finite time. Turing proved that it was not. This should be no surprise: we now know that there exist some true statements which can be neither proven nor disproven within the confines of a particular logical system, and so a computer faced with the unenviable task of deriving them by algorithmic means will go on calculating forever. The formalists were essentially trying to reduce mathematical truth down to an *algorithm*. For our discussion, we note that modern computers are universal Turing machines and Gödel’s incompleteness lives within them still.

The utility of Gödel’s encoding scheme was that it was *more general* than the system of logic it described. It therefore allowed for meta-mathematical commentary, and for Gödel to construct his paradoxical statement which he knew to be (syntactically) true but had not proved within the logical system. His theorems demonstrate that the generality of a given language allows one to construct and verify true statements which lie beyond other, more specified, languages. I think this point is a profound one, and speaks to the way the mind handles information and abstraction. In his book *The Emperor’s New Mind*, Roger Penrose extends this idea of knowledge without formal proof to argue that our capacity for insight-based approaches to knowledge suggests the mind is not algorithmic in nature. Whilst this is a controversial and complex argument, I think it fair to say that insight – that is to say knowledge without logical proof – is of critical importance to creative endeavour. The artist is guided by an intuition, or by the magnetism of ancient symbols which strike to the depths of the heart. The way in which emotive art communicates directly with its audience testifies to the lack of a need to prove the knowledge it embodies. Conceived in the mind of the artist, great art is self-evident.



Consider now the Library of Babel: an audacious online project which aims to generate every possible one-page sequence of 3200 characters and store them in a catalogue. Every single unique poem, play, thesis, lyric, script, confession of love and story of death exists within these bounds. Every single truth expressible by language has been iterated into life. If you gave enough monkeys with typewriters enough time they would eventually write Shakespeare: the old thought experiment writ large! This was an astonishing find to me, and I began to type in an original scrap of poetry I had conceived of recently, watching nonplussed as it was displayed on screen with cool alacrity. Initially, I was spooked by the library's immensity. I felt suddenly unoriginal given that an algorithm had arranged every combination of letters up to 3200 characters (and what's to say it won't go further) I might conceive of in my lifetime. In a very real way I think that's justified, but on further reflection, I thought that this gargantuan flex of computational muscle is particularly telling in the relationship between humans, computers, and art. Although the algorithm had generated every possible sequence of characters, it had done so indiscriminately, such that for every passage of interpretable genius, there exist countless permutations of the same phrases which are pure gibberish. Although impressive, there is little intelligence in the action of the computer here, and in AI-generated art, I've encountered a sense of artificiality, a hollowness that speaks to a lack of humanity. An *incompleteness* in the creative expression of machines, which might just result from an incompleteness at their mathematical foundation.

This only seems reasonable; for one, the human mind, and the behaviours it produces, are orders of magnitude more complex than artificial attempts at intelligence. This means we are difficult to predict: creativity displays highly chaotic dynamics. Again, we might appeal to Godel by suggesting that in order to conceptualise human creativity in a formal system of logic, we would need a more general language of logical description. For our brains to use their own cognitive products to describe themselves at greater generality seems like an impossibility. Moreover, human self expression is the integrated product of every single second of life experience, and as the artist grows and matures her work becomes the integrated expression of her being. Art, and insight, is as broad as the spectrum of experience and human beings evolved to be generalists across a variety of habitats. It is, in fact, through the lens of inherited evolutionary priors that we are able to perceive and make sense of art at all. In a sense, art is as broad as the entire history of human consciousness. Whilst artificial intelligence is able to faithfully replicate Beethoven's style to complete his tenth symphony within local constraints of style and form, I get the sense that no programme extant today could lay the groundwork for an eleventh symphony. Logical incompleteness, and hence the limits of computation, arise from the magnitude and complexity of our unique evolutionary and personal histories which shape the architecture of our brains.

We might conceive of human creativity as the connection and/or synthesis of two ideas in a network in a novel or powerful way. This connection must span a certain affective “space” between memories, emotional states, or artefacts of life, say. In designing artificial intelligence programmes, we are opting for algorithms with explicit programmatic and implicit mathematical boundaries. Creativity draws on a certain breadth, then, which is antithetical to the nature of algorithm**. Just as in the natural sciences, computation is foremost a tool, rather than means of creative insight in of itself.

Recently, an artificial intelligence programme created a digital piece which won first prize in the Colorado State Fair’s digital art category. *Theatre D’opera Spatial*, the piece submitted, is an ethereal composition with a certain deftness of touch and delicacy of colour. Three figures stand draped in sumptuous robes with backs turned, gazing into a gleaming world beyond, immersed in the dreamscape of a Venetian space opera. I find this piece more convincing than others I have come across, though still characteristic of the technologist’s proclivity for logic as expressed in science fiction, rather than the deep humanity of artistic genius. Critics may fail to credit the technique required to produce a piece of art aided by AI, whereby aside from expertise in programming, a painstaking process of fine tuning and experimentation is often required. This particular composition was the result of over eighty hours of experimentation with text prompts to feed the algorithm, and I think there’s a decent case to be made that the technique of the artist aided by AI deserves the respect given to a master craftsman who knows his tools intimately. Ultimately, the question of whether the idea supersedes the technique in artistic importance has been one of great debate harkening back to the Renaissance. I think that this particular medium deserves respect, but is no substitute for the character and humanity of the great artists. *Theatre D’opera Spatial* is an impressive alliance between man and machine, but is certainly no masterpiece.

Knowledge lives with incompleteness and ambiguity in the garden of the mind while art and spirituality gesture toward the mystery of being. Instances of incompleteness in the logic of formal systems of computation signal the mind’s capacity to think beyond the machine, if not up to its speed, and my experience of artificially generated art likewise comprises a feeling of incompleteness. I hope this semantic and aesthetic parallel has been of interest, as the complement between man and machine in scientific and artistic endeavours is a fascinating story for the future. Whilst projects such as the Library of Babel employ machines to drive towards totality, the story of the tower of Babel suggests that incompleteness is the loving will of God, and is best placed to preserve and ground us in our humanity.



Theatre D'Opera Spatial

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*Disclaimer on the idea of God: Although I wouldn't call myself a Christian, a number of passages from the book of genesis, as well as exegesis of the idea of God by psychologists and psychoanalysts has inspired me. I found psychological explanations of God particularly compelling intellectually and emotionally. God is merely a label for that which moves us beyond our knowing, and that which weeps and loves and yearns within. God is the self and the surrounds, the depth of interplay, and is all that remains at the limits of reason and scientific understanding. We all have a nuanced relationship to God, and many have been wounded by the religious institution. I ask that you indulge in my naive use of the term 'God' here, and allow some degree of separation between belief in God and faith in the experience of God. The metaphysics of God are beyond me, but I believe the bible stories to be distillations of human truth worth considering.

** (It is worth noting, however, that deep learning algorithms often produce surprising, novel, and inspired "ideas" which had not occurred to humans previously. For now, I refer mostly to traditional computer algorithms).

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Sarah Hussain

edited by
Laurine Heerema

The Alchemical Marriage: the reunion of opposites through Goethe's Faust

Introduction

With the sun I rise, with its descent, I die. What am I?

Dissociated, we are many things and, put together, we are one, but chaotic and disordered, because we lack synthesis. A little over two years ago, I was very unrefined – or so I thought, but my thoughts held no relevance over my spiritual development, they were conformed. I have always been mutinous, so when I found myself sailing unfamiliar waters one summer, a desire to prove this was not true about myself ignited; that I was a thinker and had knowledge to engage in conversations that unveiled my substance. The entire ordeal was spiritually charging and freeing. Yet, my hunger for knowledge was never satiated, and I am still bitter-sweetly shackled by prospects of my lacking.

Now, reading *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*: an autobiography centering on the life of Swiss psychiatrist and psychologist Carl Jung, I was introduced to Goethe's version of *Faust* – a drama split into two parts. Mentioning the deep impressions it had left on him, I was intrigued to uncover the charms *Faust* had compelled Jung with, and I had to challenge his perception of the alchemical Faust, because I wondered if my admiration for Jung produced our similarities of thought, or if our similarities produced such admiration. I now aim to embark on this theoretical piece, exploring the spiritual and alchemical journey of life through Goethe's *Faust* and finally, the necessary reunion of opposites.

Alchemy

Alchemy is the coalesced, mediaeval practice of early science and philosophy. It uses the *prima materia* (first material required for the alchemical work) to produce the philosopher's stone – the elixir for transmuting metals into gold – a simultaneous, esoteric metamorphosis of the soul (Holmyard, 2012). This is the ultimate goal of alchemy – the *Magnum Opus*, the great work.

A fundamental aspect of alchemy, as theorised by German Renaissance alchemist, Paracelsus, claims that matter is constituted from three principles: mercury, sulphur and salt (Mahdihassan, 1991). Each principle has its own properties and elements, both physical and spiritual, contributing to the *Magnum Opus*. Sulphur is the combustible fire and air, the ignited soul; mercury is the fluid air and water, the animated mind, and salt is the solid water and earth, the material body.

To achieve the hermetic *Magnum Opus*, an alchemist must follow these stages: nigredo, albedo, citrinitas and rubedo. Simply put, nigredo is the decomposition of alchemical ingredients, the blackening, albedo is the purification, the whitening, citrinitas is the awakening of solar light, the yellowing, and rubedo is the successful conversion of base metals into gold, the reddening. Once this is complete, the alchemist rejoices in a profound individuation of the soul. But declaring the transmutation of metals and the soul a simple task, is reducing the value of the *Magnum Opus* to nil - it is to deny knowledge and reject the reunion of opposites.

Figure 1. The personification of the three principles consummates the marriage between the masculine sun and feminine moon. The red liquid represents the secret fire – the initiator and transmuter of base metals (Novin, 2010).



But what even is the reunion of opposites? In Western thinking, alchemy contains feminine and masculine elements (Edinger & Blackmer, 1994). Sulphur represents the masculine, volatile energy, and can be allegorically depicted as the sun. Similarly, mercury is the feminine, passive energy depicted by the moon. Salt then acts as the material which is chemically separated, purified and refined, all guided by the interaction between the two former principles. Thus this reunion between sulphur and mercury is called the Alchemical marriage between the Red king and the White queen, respectively. It is a metaphorical courtship of polarities, birthing the rebis: the hermaphrodite offspring, the whole and perfect synthesis of opposite qualities.

Faust, Part One

Goethe's drama begins when Mephisto - the devil - makes a wager with God,

promising to lure Faust away from the path of the virtuous. Faust, who has already acquired mastery in theology, science and philosophy, is depressed that he cannot surpass human limitations. Through dubious circumstances, he encounters Mephisto who proposes a deal: if he can provide Faust metaphysical sublimity to the point where he says "Ah, still delay - thou art so fair!" (Goethe, 2017, p. 90), Mephisto will take his soul through death. Despite his scepticism, Faust enters into a blood-pact with the devil.

To begin their ventures, Mephisto aids Faust in the seduction of the naive virgin, Gretchen, using jewellery and the pretence of fateful meetings. Several obstacles hinder Faust and Gretchen's intimate relationship: her mother - whom Faust indirectly kills by giving a sleeping potion for her to prevent her unapproving interference and her brother, who insults Gretchen's now-corrupted integrity after learning she bears Faust's child, and is beaten to death by Faust and Mephisto. Gretchen seeks solace in the church, but eventually loses herself in remorse. Ultimately, she drowns their child and is imprisoned. Unknowingly, Faust abandons her and attends a satanic festival, Walpurgis Night, with Mephisto. He remembers Gretchen through a vision and pleads with Mephisto to rescue her. Faust is plagued with grief when Gretchen rejects the salvation Faust offers, and instead seeks divine redemption.

Faust, Part Two

Waking up surrounded by fairies, Faust returns as a spiritually cleansed man and decides to halt the pursuit of sensual pleasures. Now, in the emperor's court, Mephisto suggests printing paper money to resolve economic matters which appears to be a success. Festivities ensue with Faust travelling to the Realm of the Mothers to summon Helen and Paris of Troy from Greek mythology upon the emperor's request. Faust becomes infatuated with Helen of Troy and fails to seize her.

Back in Faust's old chambers, Mephisto finds that Faust's old pupil, Wagner, has succeeded him, and has created a miniature human: Homunculus. Mephisto, Faust and Homunculus travel to the 'classic' Walpurgis night in Greece shrouded with mythology and antiquity. Faust chases after Helen of Troy, drawn by her idealism. Homunculus, with desires to become wholly human, jumps into the ocean after realising water houses the source of life, and Mephisto mingles with repulsive spirits, satiating sensual desires.

Disguised as a hag, Mephisto takes Helen of Troy and her chorus to a powerful northern lord (Faust) for protection against those who, as Mephisto warns, plot to kill them. Transcending time and space, Faust romances Helen and both flee to the utopian arcadia where they birth a boy child: Euphorion. With great ambition, Euphorion desires to break free from the shackles of human limitation and jumps off a tall cliff. Helen laments and joins her son in death to which yet another venture of Faust's ends in tragedy.

Initiating a new cycle, Mephisto convinces Faust to demand reclamation of some

land as a reward for supporting the emperor in war. Victorious, the emperor rewards Faust with land. Now old, Faust orders Mephisto to remove an elderly couple and their chapel from his land, but he murders them. A guilty Faust is visited by the physical embodiment of Care who blinds him to deter him from his land building project. Outside, Mephisto orders his fiendish servants to dig a grave for Faust but blind, he mistakes this for sounds of construction. Wallowing in pride, Faust lays out his altruistic vision for the future of mankind and says "Ah, still delay - thou art so fair!". Mephisto claims his soul but heavenly beings intervene, taking Faust up to heaven. Gretchen, who has been purged of sin, is given permission by the eternal female, Mater Gloriosa, to guide Faust's soul on a path for purification and redemption.

Faust's Alchemical journey

Goethe summons and investigates metaphysical motifs from human history, permitting Faust to cultivate his own strivings in a hermetic image which is both his own and a collective contribution to mankind. This is relayed in part one and two: the microcosm and macrocosm of man, respectively. Nevertheless, it is imperative to see beyond Faust's character, he is the central figure in a net of polarities. After all, no man's soul contains a singular facet - we are dissociable, both masculine and feminine, both light and dark, though at first, there is androgyny, an emulsion of opposites. But, the soul must be blackened, the parts must be brought to consciousness and purified to marry them for the *Magnum Opus*.

The characters in Faust each represent a facet of his soul. Gretchen and Helen of Troy encompass his feminine qualities. For example, the former is the unadulterated female and the latter, an idealism of beauty and womanhood. The hermaphrodite Homunculus is his faucet for spiritual learning; devoid of human emotion, he cannot deviate from the alchemical journey of life, despite accepting the limitation of man - something Faust could not do. Mephisto is the patriarchal, masculine trickster, who exploits Faust's ignorance, refusing to let him internalise the feminine aspects of his soul and consequently, from dominating his spiritual journey.

At the centre of it all, Faust is the archetypal everyman seeking enlightenment. Yet Mephisto appears and only does so when Faust hits a spiritual cul-de-sac. Offering an idiosyncratic exit from his dilemma, and simultaneously trying to prove his cynicism of man remains just, he blinds Faust by putting Gretchen into the centre of his sexual desires. Throughout the drama, Faust remains in close proximity with Mephisto and is unable to break free from his whispers, obeying his commands, because before his manifestation, Faust experiences an insufficiency. Regardless, this shadow guides Faust to manipulate Gretchen on a path to self-destruction. He returns to his masculine primal instincts, preying on her, rather than creating an equal union; thus, the material product of their union is drowned, returned to the feminine water element. I wonder whether his treatment of Gretchen is a result of misogynistic values that prevent him

from seeing her as something other than a medium to explore his sexual needs. Alchemically, he has failed to recognise his White queen, or mercury, as an ingredient to spiritual transcendence. Prematurely, Faust fails to successfully reconcile her earthly feminine qualities with his masculine qualities. Blindsighted, he is stuck in a narrow reality where self-attainment is driven by rudimentary interpretations of life: to Faust, Gretchen is just a manifestation of his sexual desire – singular attachments like this objectify and dampen one's chance at



Figure 2. Two lions come together to join soul and mind into one body (Delphinias, 2011). Mephisto, Faust's present masculine and untamed flame, merges with the fragile emotions evoked from Gretchen's demise.

spiritual liberation.

Persisting, he struggles once more with Helen of Troy, approaching her with a learned maturity, as seen in the above alchemical depiction, demonstrating Faust's capability to experience subjective admiration. Nevertheless, a glimpse of haste is still seen where he attempts to seize her and I can only interpret this as stubborn ignorance towards the females he encounters. Anyhow, only through entering the realm of the Mothers is he able to access the feminine realm of his alchemical work. He possesses the element of fire and air, alluding to his volatility, but has so far been unable to capture the passive water. There is now a chance for him to recognise the opposite in his soul through Helen, but she is an idealistic projection, existing beyond a realm he can practically access. Though his failure to reconcile opposites is once more evident, he is again able to consummate his physical union with Helen and births a boy child. Initially, Faust's first child was compromised to Water but his second, to Air, which is present in both the masculine and feminine alchemical principles; Faust is closer than before. But as a



Figure 3. The father devours his son (Delphinus, 2011). The latent power dynamic between Mephisto and Faust threatens the plot. Until the end, Faust refuses to acknowledge Mephisto as his unconscious.

result of alchemical immaturity, Euphorion dies.

Through each conquest, Faust becomes more malleable, closer to decomposition. His flame is relatively controlled and begins to respond less overtly to Mephisto's commands. By the end, the guilt of all selfish acts committed to satisfy Faust's insufficiency is overcome by a euphoric reflection of continuous striving. However, I constantly feel that Faust manipulates Mephisto's vice in carrying out his great work, and in the process undermines the power the latter retains over him. Even though Faust's consequent death is interpreted by Mephisto as his victory, in the eyes of God, who in the drama retains all power, it is his loss. Ironically, the father God condones Faust's struggles, but the eternal, divine mother figure promises spiritual cleansing instead. Gretchen, who rejected Faust's salvation (and through this, was able to accept her masculine qualities) guides Faust to his renewal. This ending is underwhelming because it feels like Faust has to start all over again – his worldly efforts are invalidated. Similarly, I find Gretchen's transition rather unworthy because rather than redefining her psyche, she simply reverted to her old ways by rejecting Faust's salvation – almost as if the two were just ships passing by in the night. It seems Goethe's alchemical message put a literal meaning on the nigredo stage, that one's body must also decompose to fully integrate all three principles and birth the rebis.

Conclusion

The alchemical journey creates emulsions in haste or precarious dealings. If you hadn't yet figured it out, the answer to the riddle at the very beginning is "shadow". I do not agree with Jung when he claimed Goethe had "fallen for the cunning devices by which evil is rendered innocuous" (Jung, 1995, p. 80), for I believe Mephisto was not all evil – he was Faust's shadow, a necessity to neutralise his soul and initiate the alchemical journey. In analytical psychology, the shadow of man is

the hidden unconscious and one must dissociate all facets of the soul to marry the Red king with the White queen. The rebis is the balanced integration of polarities so to deny the shadow is to deny the alchemical process. Unsurprisingly, Faust never achieved the spiritual enlightenment he sought in the material world, yet his example is a lesson to accept that man can do so little if he does not recognise the polarities within his soul. Outside time and space, a universe governed by constellations of malleable anarchy exists. It can defy logic and appear hypnotic to beguile our senses. But ultimately, it is an abstraction of our private psyche...each new piece of knowledge furnishes the universe, and for all the knowledge there is to be gained, it lingers like the nostalgia from an old perfume.

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Alitza Nichole Cardona

*edited by
Elizabeth Rose*

Justice and the Magician: the last generation of morality and fear.

This story is not about love, but about loving oneself remotely and holistically through detachment and observation. As I am writing, memories are weaved into a poem. Aware that our minds are taught to recognise the sensation of living, through the metaphors built as a consequence of seeing, I attempt to deliver a written image, drafted from the spaces of interpretation.

I hope you can see that you are not alone in the path to understanding, how can you love and fear humanity at the same time?

In our phones, in our memories and in our walls, we may carry the images that thread the spaces we long for, when reality becomes too loud.

Life, until this moment, has been about sculpting the soul through grief and about threading the pieces with compassion.

So, the people stayed silent, it was the wind yelling desperately as the hurricane came. Although it has a human name, its movement remains phenomenal. Life is in constant flux and chaos seems progressively recognizable and all too familiar. We all are tired of being resilient. The concept was conceived to exploit will, as after change we will never return to an original form.

Is there an original form, or are we just part of the natural condition of perpetual change?

She opened her legs and screamed.
Giving birth was, in a way, letting herself die.
Who will she be tomorrow? When this other feeds from her.

Is it her pleasure to keep reproducing, or his pleasure to keep practicing?

What is it all for? Who will hold us when fear takes our form?

We all wish to be held in the comforting forever that will only return as fleeting, delicate moments we will wish to not lose.

Here **at the crossroads** of good and evil is where the fates test you.

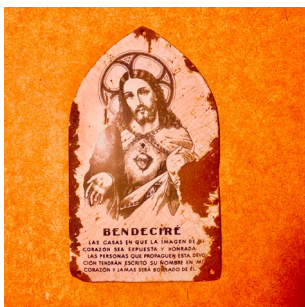
Am I to love myself enough to smile, even when nobody else sees how each beat of my heart makes the tongue of the candle flutter without wind?

Communities are made through grief. Losing precipitates bridges between humans on foundations of fate, death or even a traitor's smile. Maybe, the gaps we seek to fill with light aren't always touched by the sun. Spaces where absence is felt, become the architecture of presence. This is how we create spaces of meaning. I am telling you, I will not always be here waiting for your move, as my memory will become part of the collective sea of stories that eventually will be lost to history's golden knife.

Am I strong enough to greet the virgin Mary's hugs when my mother wouldn't hold me?

You are not alone -

So many of us are found when we are lost.



started to peel the skin that was made of doubts when maturity was showing. I can't explain it, but I also nurtured my organs when rearranging my interior. Sometimes, I believe, the structure of my being is composed of collected songs, laughter and smiles that built me a body when I felt none. Of course, my face became a cascade of illusions lost to mistakes as I told my brain to forget, while I reformulated myself.

Slow, patient, and sweet, I am not like how the honey drips. I am stronger, I am surer.

Mi-él

Alitza Cardona
17.9.2021

Corazón se acostumbró,
a vivir acelerado.
Que se sienta conmigo,
cocina caliente,
pecho en mano.

¡Mira!

Tus manos tocaron ,
lo que no le entregue al sol.
Pero tú persona despertó
Lo que la piel nunca cedió.

¡Mira!

Que no reconozco la miel.
Dulce y paciente,
rozando labios,
endulzando cuerpos
y engañando a sabios.

¡Hasta dice que es mejor mujer!

Yo me miro en el reflejo,
En el que se convirtió tu cuerpo,
Cuando con mi lengua lo pinté.

Se sabe que con las pinturas
se roza el pincel.

Pero esta vez,
solo necesité de mi encanto.

Sabe Dios como le rezo,
Por encontrarte,
¡Divino destino!
Cuando entre mis grietas
el azafrán despierte,
Lo que nunca has conocido.

In the desert, filled only with emotions, I found myself a servant of humanity. While my heart beats, time surrenders the rest of me. Hoping one day somebodies become a body.



Artist: Jose Vega, Puerto Rico.

Title: La Emperatriz (2022)

Pastel Drawing on tinted paper, 27cm x 35cm

In Spanish we have different words to describe the degree of love we have for you, but not that many to describe fear. Fate brought me here, to you, maybe to give you an angle on life. I feel like disruptions are an opportunity to contemplate how you can exist in two places at once. The unknown could be a potential place,

and in it you'll perform to the extent you can, persistent in the unknowable, until you can claim that place as known, the borders of the mystery space receding ever across the horizon. As we enter the known, knowing what we do, we become easily recognizable to others.

Curious how coming from an island I became one.

They all have seen parts of me that feel like a woman. My breast, the curves of my skin, my smile, the way my hair becomes tangled with the wind and lost in their clothes. Feeling as a woman can also be forgotten when the culture of what a woman means becomes unrecognizable in the forms we manifest throughout a convoluted life.

They have felt me woman enough to desire me but have not recognized the familiar culture within me to love me with compassion.

History keeps forgetting those who are deemed to reconfigure themselves upon unforeseeable change within the known spaces of representation, familiarization, and associations.

The act of reshaping values asks for some form of surrender.

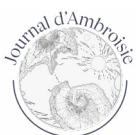
Formulating new bodies of culture may not only feed from the tangible bodies that only value what they can consume and incorporate in their ways of being.

When people become places, you get to walk in a sea of their morals, traverse past sites describable only by verbs that may take other directions that your body wouldn't dare to. You think you are from another nature? I am just saying that, as you observe, we are each and all a different sameness as those whose roots thrive on another soil or in another sea.

Are we the last generation without fear of the unknown?

Or do we guess we are well informed?

Fate will show you in an inevitable moment what memories should be forged. Without consequence of an image and without that which sadness may have torn. We, the beloved children of technology, could seek to feel beyond the significance of meanings, representations and constructed associations as a feed unfolds. Because history still aims to be built from the voices that won't dare to question wrongs.





Elizabeth Rose

*edited by
Andrei Andronic*

Paper fates: How the passports we hold affect our movements, migrations and lives.

At the Serbian-Bulgarian border, a woman is taken to the side. We catch only fragments of conversation, and we do not speak Bulgarian. The woman cries as her passport is taken away for further inspection. The 2am friendly chatter of strangers, travelling together by coach, falls silent. We all wait. Minutes pass before her passport is returned and she is “welcomed” to Bulgaria.

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The viability of a passport always has high stakes. Given that for the most part, we are not at liberty to choose the passport(s) we hold, and certainly not the places where that passport will be arbitrarily deemed (in)sufficient, the stakes and significance we confer to what is essentially some paper seems bizarre at best, and intentionally cruel (and often racist) at worst. In their capacity to prove identity or citizenship, passports are now needed in the UK not simply to cross international borders, but in order to rent or buy a home, enrol in higher education, or begin any new job. Second only to perhaps that thing we call currency, the power we bestow through these pads of paper is immense: passports determine our identity, mobility, employability, our very legality – and through these – our fate.

On the basis of where we are chanced to be born, and who we are fated to be born to, the path of our lives is dictated, and we have so little choice in the matter. In this article, I aim to discuss the role that both fate and choices play when it comes to securing, holding and using a passport. I raise many criticisms against what I perceive to be an unjust and discriminatory form of social and border control but, unfortunately, I cannot (yet) claim to know enough about the intensely complicated nature of mass movement management to offer truly meaningful alternative solutions – but I’m learning.

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While we wait in the gathering grey dusk, I open my own passport to the front page and read:

“Her Britannic Majesty’s
 Secretary of State
 Requests and requires in the
 Name of Her Majesty
 All those whom it may concern
 To allow the bearer to pass freely
 Without let or hindrance
 And to afford the bearer
 Such assistance and protection
 As may be necessary”

At the time I reflected on the sheer luck that I (and anyone born with the right to a British passport) have been fated to access such enormous privilege through such a declaration: to be afforded (in theory) such automatic protection, privilege and freedom to cross borders with little fear of refusal.

It is an even more bizarre privilege to reflect on now, given that the woman upon whose authority my passport rested and rests, no longer walks this earth. The fact that the validity of British passports registered under the authority of the late Queen Elizabeth II of England are in no way affected by the fact that she is no longer alive, speaks to exactly how bizarre and unfair the allocation of different passports, and their attendant powers, really is. What seems most unfair is that “powerful” or “good” passports only exist in a world in which they are countered by “weak” or “bad” passports – there is no powerful *and* weak, there is only more powerful *because* another is made weak. Unfortunately, “powerful” passports retain their value only because they are an exclusive entity, but given that we have no choice in where we are born, our first citizenship, and the passport we are thus entitled to, such arbitrary allocation and the long lasting effects seem archaic and unjust. Especially as the distribution of strong versus weak passports, correlates very closely to the divide between developed nations in the Global North versus developing States in the Global South – an allocation that both reflects the effects of colonialism and, in doing so, perpetuates them.

The strength of a passport is determined by a set of “simple” factors. Namely, the number of countries that a passport’s holders can travel to visa-free, visa-required, or with visas needed on arrival. Other contributing factors include whether the issuing country allows dual citizenship and how much tax they levy on overseas workers. The factors that determine when and whether visas are required for holders of specific passports, however, are far from simple, and often fail to account for the human holding the passport, or their humanity. That is to say, it is typically countries experiencing war/conflict or genocide and (subsequent) environmental or economic crisis that issue the weakest passports – and on the basis of insufficient visas or passport strength, it is these nations’ citizens who are most limited in their international mobility – despite being those most in need of

international assistance, welcome and asylum. There are also those, who afraid of persecution, tracking or torture, choose to destroy their passports before they travel to safety too, as well as those who set out on long journeys to refuge, and lose their passports along the way, for example in the tumultuous Aegean sea. For all of these people, passport-less or in possession of a weak passport, and with no recourse to visa access, there are no “legal” means to enter most other countries. And yet upon entry, often by any means possible, for example, in a dinghy, or under a van, these refugees, migrants and asylum seekers are berated and vilified for not entering the country by legal routes – for *anyone* without a passport, and for many without a visa, there is no legal route into Britain.

Even for many of the Ukrainian refugees that the UK government encouraged to come to the UK, and welcomed through their “Homes for Ukraine” scheme, the issuing of visas – non negotiable prerequisites to entry – took days, and in cases weeks, that is before the UK stopped accepting visa applications from Ukraine entirely. If this is the fastest and most compassionate response a government in the “developed” Global North can offer, we need to do better. Especially as the UK government and people’s response to the plight of Ukrainian refugees showed the potential – though limited through insufficient development, attention and compassion – to open our borders, homes and resources in a way which is essential but previously unseen for refugees and asylum seekers fleeing conflict or persecution in Sudan, Eritrea, Iran or Afghanistan (among other places). We know we have the money for these systems to be further developed, we can see it in the budget for the Rwanda deal, now we need to see the motivation and long term commitment to creating sustainable and safe routes for refugees and forced migrants, *regardless* of passport or visa status.

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Travelling, as I was, from Serbia to Bulgaria, east across Europe, I was all too conscious of the fact that, enabled by my passport, I was journeying in the opposite direction to so many of the contested border crossings that are made by those fleeing from conflict, away from the Aegean towards Western Europe – by those for whom a viable passport, visa and safe routes for refuge would make a world of difference.

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There is also the factor of passport acquisition to consider. Even in countries with long, and often frustrating, bureaucratic passport provision procedures like France, citizens can be sure of the fact that they will *eventually* receive a passport. This is not a universal privilege. Unfortunately, corruption and prejudice continue to permeate governments world wide, and access to passports can still very much depend on arbitrarily decided bribes, and the socio-political climate of the issuing country. For LGBTQIA+ individuals in many countries, as well as those of marginalised ethnic or religious groups, acquiring a passport in the first place can be dangerous if not impossible. We do not choose our sexuality, our gender, our ethnicity, or our country of birth. If we should choose to try and leave, why should the ground we were fated to be born on, so limit the choices, the

potential, we have to move, or to escape.

It is necessary to distinguish nationality, and holding the passport of a nation. Although we have no choice where we are born and thus which passports we are eligible to hold, our parents will make the decision of birth location for us, if they are able, often on the basis of familial or cultural roots, and in these decisions the potential for future international mobility may not factor. We can, however, absolutely choose to love and engage with the culture we are in this way fated to be born into and, if later we choose to apply for a different nation's passport, this need not detract from our choice to honour and engage with our first culture and home.

In an ideal world, we would never need to be tactical or politically prudent in our applications for new, stronger passports, because they wouldn't exist as hierarchical items. Rather, I hope (- naively I'm sure, but what is naive one century can be common sense the next, so I *do* hope -) passports might be merely documents of identification, used to monitor the ebb and flow of people migrating and travelling freely according to their wants, whims and needs. For the fact is inescapable, the number of people who will be forced to migrate from the land of their birth will only increase from now on, the Climate Crisis renders this an inescapable truth. Though of course we still have plenty of opportunities to react proactively to limit the damage we do and minimise these numbers, they will still rise as Global temperatures do. I concede that eradicating borders, or border regulation entirely, is probably a little utopian (for now), but it is *essential* that we are also proactive in our responses to transnational mobility and migration. We need to make transnational mobility and visa-free asylum a right, not a privilege afforded to a few, based on where they chanced to be born, the passport they hold. This is a choice we *can* make.

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As the shaken woman regained her composure, passport tight in hand, and the hushed concerto of conversations among strangers began to crescendo again, a flock of birds was flying aimlessly, high above border control in the grey-white sinking light of the day. As if in poetic defiance. It brought to mind Garland's oh-so-famous lines from the Wizard of Oz, "birds fly over the rainbow, why, then, oh, why can't I?" These birds followed no pattern, this was no choreographed performance for our pleasure, theirs was a fluid, improvised and truly *free* dance over and above the border: borderless.



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Big thanks to all my friends who talked to me about their own experience with getting and holding the passports of various States!!

[Why Do People Need Passports to Travel Out of the Country? \(passport-photo-online\)](#)

[‘In the name of Her Majesty’: Here’s how UK passports will change after Queen Elizabeth II’s death | Euronews](#)

[How to turn your weak passport into a strong passport \(with examples\) - Visa Traveler](#)

[28 Major Pros & Cons Of Open Borders vs. Closed Borders - E&C \(environmental-conscience.com\)](#)

[Differential treatment \(Clause 11\) - Refugee Council](#)

[These are the world’s most powerful passports for 2020 | London Evening Standard | Evening Standard](#)

[how is a passport strength determined? \(unfoldanswers.com\)](#)

[Britain fails to set up refugee route as thousands flee Ukraine | The Independent](#)

Recommended Reading

Bregman, Rutger. *Utopia for Realists*. 2014.

Lalwani, Nikita. *You People*. 2020

Voices from the Jungle, 2016



Emma Gabor

edited by
Dorottya Ágoston

To Live or Die, Today: A Radical Inquiry into Human Existence

This essay is an attempt at understanding human existence; it contains triggers and delicate subjects. You are therefore cautioned to read at your own responsibility. This article's purpose is intellectual growth. It by no means wills to upset; rather, to prudently provoke the reader for purposes of self-reflection. Indeed, from time to time, throughout the article, I will attempt to break the fourth wall, turning towards the reader through great, existential questions.

The courage or the fall? Like many members of Generation Z, I too have been battling with mental health issues. From anxiety to suicidal thoughts, I am also lost in this sea of stray souls, trying to navigate the chaos that is our era. In early childhood, death seemed like a radical concept. It was either that, or life. Suicide was scary, forbidden, *final*, other. For a long time – that is, for the majority of my life – human existence appeared to be black and white, the eternal debate between living or dying, between courage or – what exactly? weakness? fear? cowardice? – it all seemed set in stone, final.

However, since then, the discussion about the ideas of life and death has become more layered. As you grow, as you mature into a young adult, you realise the many deceitful masks society places on terms, on ideas, on thoughts. Most things you have to figure out for yourself, despite the excessive availability of knowledge. Indeed, it is when I overcame my ardent desire to “give up” and to end my life (something I rarely talk about, as someone who is supposed to be an “epitome of strength”, so bear with me), that I understood just how delicate the string between life and death is. Today, I can safely say that in my mind, both have the same source, the same essence. Life and death are, fundamentally, two sides of the same coin.

What are humans most afraid of? What stands behind every one of our fears? The absolute terror of death. Not only do we not understand where we come from, our *origins*, but we most certainly do not understand where we go when we die. None of us *really* know where we go when we go. This lack of certainty, of knowledge, of control, is at the essence of all our moments and everything we choose to do, or not to do. Therefore, I do not believe we are as obliged to separate the two – life and death, that is – as society makes us believe. In fact, I'd much rather coin a term that resembles: “leath” or “dife”, if it didn't sound too

nonsensical. In my perception of this strange, unexplainable world, the battle between life and death is constant. It's a spectrum. Every second of every day, we choose to live and some to die. It isn't a periodic question, it isn't one you play in your head over and over at specific moments in time, like the unconsciousness of our breathing – although oftentimes, these feelings might strengthen with the arising of certain difficulties or philosophical inquiries – but it is a query based on seconds. Mathematically speaking – if I may resort to this scary field for a moment – every millisecond represents a choice, our choice to live, to be human. How easy is it to end a life? When you think about it like that, the crux of your existence becomes much more *magical*, doesn't it?

I want the reader to look at this radical inquiry as an experiment. After all, I, like you, will only know the "truth" when our time comes. On this wise, is every death a choice? When someone is sick, when someone is killed in an accident: is that fate, a coincidence, is it a decision? Is it made subconsciously, or by higher powers?

We rarely talk about the raw delicacy of life. We struggle, daily. Most of us look at the glass half empty, but to see what we have been given, what a gift we are sustaining on a constant, mathematically valid, inexplicably complex way, amazement is bound to occur. Indeed, according to the internet, scientists, and the famous Mel Robbins San Francisco Ted talk, the odds of you being alive are one in 400 trillion. And to double check, Dr. Ali Binazir did the maths, claiming that the probability of you being alive is: "2.5 million people getting together – about the population of San Diego – each to play a game of dice with trillion-sided dice [...] and they all come up with the exact same number." (Binazir, 2011) And so it is this constant battle, moment by moment, that keeps us alive. A battle in which we are always given the choice of defeat, of leave, of ceasefire. Aren't we then inherently brave? Isn't courage the key to our existence? Or is it something else? Something which we cannot grasp. Every second of every day, we are choosing to survive. In this way, the essence of our being, the crux of our existence is made of a dual entity, one that is perfectly balanced in light and dark, in hope and in ending.

Where is our freedom? *Are we free?* Or is liberty just an illusion? Our freedom lies in our power to choose between these two forces, the highest that exist. The existence of death is defined by that of life and vice versa: the ouroboros is a pertinent reflection of this thought, alluding to a constant death and rebirth, of existence. In this way, it would be foolish to assume that we can end our suffering, for death would bring about another life, that of death itself. Are we just stuck, then, in an infinite cycle of life and death? Is this what the illusion of freedom means? And what happens when we die? Do we find *life* in death?

What, then, is suicide? Is it an escape, an illusion, one that will lead nowhere, only back to the source? What about life? Life leads into itself, the source and eventually, into death, which is also this essence. And what could be the ultimate expression of these two powers?

The context in which I first thought of this dichotomy was upon hearing the term “*petite mort*”, the origin of which goes back to the sixteenth century. In simple words, yes, it is an orgasm, or the “loss of your consciousness for a momentary period of time”. I must have been thirteen, fourteen, and it was literature class. We were probably reading French poetry (pray, what else? – pun intended). I thought to myself: why is it a death? A few years down the line, here I am, a young adult; de facto, I’ll leave the reader the liberty to imagine why a twenty-something year old is intellectually invested in this phenomena. An orgasm is indeed a small death, and to casually poke the bear a little (you, dear reader, are the bear), the passion of Christ, as proof of his mortality, alludes to him being able to experience such a small death. Fascinating precedent, is it not?

To further posit a criterion, or a whimsical tale of love, I hope to illustrate the absurd verity of this strange assumption. I also hope that it will amuse you. So let us quote the beloved William Shakespeare; I’d like to point to one element in the famous *Romeo and Juliet*, that may be of interest to our subject today: Juliet says “O happy dagger! This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die” (Shakespeare, 2015). While we may appreciate this exclamation as that of a broken heart, let us observe the specific words used. Indeed, Juliet plunges a phallic object into her sheath; the Latin word for sheath is none other than the female genitalia. This plunging ostensibly brings about her death, or in other words, her “*petite mort*”. There, I rest my case.

Have you ever felt so high after a “petite mort”, that you thought anything was possible? That you just wanted to do things, to create? My premise is that sexuality provides the ultimate creative energy and that therefore, it is the truest expression of the duality discussed in this article: the power of creation, the endowment of life.

And so we arrive at one possible answer out of many to our endless questions: sexuality. Sexuality as is literally and abstractly, conceives the dual ideas of life and death: life is made, for love is made (both metaphorically and literally) and death is also made with the ending, the high of a small death. Creating life (a child) is one thing, but the act of making love, of forming a union with another proliferates the choice of life, culminating in a small death. And yet this small death leads not to an ultimate and final ending, but in fact, to the possibility of more. The cycle may begin again and love can be made, ending in a denouement, pushing forth a new beginning. Is sexuality, then, the ultimate expression of human nature, of humanity? Is the empyrean “sin” what makes humans human? In this way, is religion actually trying to rid us of our humanity? Scandalous thought, is it not? With this in mind, I will poke the bear no further.

I will let the reader fall into a sea of complex, mind bending inquiries, and I will move on to a conclusion, out of the misty landscape of death, towards clarity, and life.

When I say “life”, I think of sunshine, nature, people laughing, and wine (what else?). After years of battling myself and my incessantly alive and chaotic mind,

I have come to the following conclusions: life is a game, if you let it be one. This by no means alludes to not taking responsibility or being careless, but rather, to a certain (healthy) nonchalance that allows you to enjoy it, moment by moment. Life is wholly an experience. I'm not saying you try everything once, but I sort of am (within certain "reasonable" boundaries of course). What do you have to really lose? Pain and discomfort are temporary, and there are things that your insides are screaming for you to go and pursue; a certain career, a love, a place, a feeling. Go chase them, *tempus fugit*. Life is also infinite, limited by human existence; while our time as humans has an end date, life (and death) do not, whereby a moment can seem like eternity, and life can become *magical*. You just have to allow it to become *timeless*.

One thinks about their past, their darker moments with peculiar nostalgia. I recall precise, hopeless times when I wanted to go, and I am struck by the depth of how much pain I could feel without actually deciding to do it. I don't know what made me stay. Perhaps it was the wild woman inside, as beautifully narrated by Pinkola Estés (in *Women who Run with the Wolves*), or it was God, giving me hope. Perhaps it was the universe, coaxing me towards the light. But having been there, having stared the imminent choice of death vs. life in the face, I come to the humble conclusion that I want to live. It is painful, often unbearable, occasionally horrifying (I loathe reading the news), but it is somehow, in the midst of it all, worth it. Now, I do not wish to torment the reader with dark thoughts. This was an attempt at understanding and putting on paper an infinitely small probe of the abysmal complexity of human existence. Which is why I'd like to briefly and friskily remind you of Romeo and Juliet; a death can sometimes be a double entendre. It can be something much more *palpable, touchable, pleasurable*, such as a "*petite mort*". I chose it, I would choose it again, and I urge the reader to continue choosing it too.

Go, live, breathe in, and breathe out. Life is a gift, and so are you.

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Gábor A. Papp

*edited by
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Summer Romances in the Age of Dating Apps: *How sweet desires are tarnished by the masses*

If there is one sort of marathon we have all tried to run, it is the marathon for a summer romance which is not surprising. The notion of it became part of our collective, and in some sense even a part of our yearly goals. So we all recognise it as a staple of our lives, but I wonder, who is to blame for that? Not that it is a bad thing-- after all, we are creatures with certain social, physical and above all, emotional needs. The answer is rather complex. Our social norms went through an incredible change due to technology and the normalisation of capitalistic/materialistic values. But coming back to this pertinent question, the mainstream film industry could be a good place to start.

Hollywood, and lately, the streaming giants like Netflix, have been pouring out cheesy and quite unrealistic teen dramas for decades. Selling this idea that finding Mr. or Mrs. Right during a holiday vacation, in a summer school or wherever, is going to be the turning point in your life from where it can only get better. This is not revolutionary, as summer has always been the season of love and adventure, where you get lost in the night, which, especially in summer, has its own rules. So now that there is an increased demand for partners, where is the supply?

As humans, we have limited senses, intelligence and abilities. That is why we created machines to travel faster, see better, or to navigate in a foreign land. Why would it be any different with finding relationships? Dating apps sell you exactly this, the illusion of infinite possibilities, potential partners who sometimes - to be frank - are way out of your league, especially if you buy that gold or diamond (or whatever new precious metal they discover) subscription package. The problem is that in most cases they seem to have the opposite results.

Hearts on a discount

Loads of abruptly made matches with complete strangers you saw two pictures of and read a 2-line bio. Dozens of conversations without depth or actual consequence. All those cancelled dates because "there are another 100 matches anyway". Does it sound familiar?

Dating apps are the perfect example of capitalism expanding into our social norms by the commercialization of love, and turning relationships into another product of mass consumption – use it, abuse it and lose it. Rather than experiencing appreciation and attention we are becoming products on this new market and people who scroll too much – increasingly all of us – have to face dire consequences, or at least disappointment. Indeed, we have never been able to select partners from such a gigantic pool of options. On Tinder for instance, a user is presented with 140 partner options a day on average (Smith, 2018). Instead of establishing more relationships, the demand for online dating brought an increased number of singles in our society. As it turns out, according to the study *A Rejection Mind-Set: Choice Overload in Online Dating* (Pronk, 2019) the abundance of choice we have in online dating-- which is also the source of its popularity-- is one of the main factors behind the feeling of loneliness and eventually, burnout. Drowning in matches without a single breath of fresh air, going through the same conversations to get to “know” each other, such a repetitiveness eventually leads to the point where you say: “I don’t care anymore”. In return, this indifference of the vast majority eventually hinders the willingness of the originally enthusiastic minority. Not to mention the fact that most users are strangers to one another, which also creates a less civil dating environment, resulting even in slurs and sexual harassment (Anderson, Vogels & Turner, 2020). After a while, the bar gets so low that if you find someone who is actually capable of holding a conversation or has the basic manners of dating, you have the sudden urge to build them a monument while fantasising about your future relationship already.

As pointed out by Peterson (2021), these dating apps predominantly reward a very small fraction of users. While women tend to be much pickier about their mating partner, men date with all sorts of women, regardless of their social standing, generally seeking short-term sexual gratification. This choosiness is not only understandable but even necessary. After all, women invest nine months into a pregnancy while a man’s initial contribution to it is only a few minutes. So generally speaking, men value beauty, and women place more importance on social status and access to financial resources. That said, these preferences can vary in different circumstances. For instance, when women are looking for a life partner or for a sperm donor (Bokek-Cohen, 2022), or when they are higher on the Dark Triad traits (Burtaverde, 2021). And also when it comes to LGBTQ+ people (Kostic and Scofield, 2022). As I like to say: “Love is an adventure wrapped up in mystery”.

What we know for sure is that while women tend to swipe right on only five to ten percent of profiles they come across, men do this with sixty to seventy five percent of them. Unfortunately, these matches rarely progress anywhere. As a study in Norway showed, fifty percent of Tinder users have only ever been on one face-to-face date (Grøntvedt et al., 2020).

Despite all these tools to help us find a partner or a hook-up, researchers are alarmed by the declines in all forms of partnered sexual activity around the world. A recent study found that

between 2009 and 2018, the proportion of adolescents and young adults reporting no sexual activity, either alone or with partners, rose from 28.8 percent to 44.2 percent among young men and from 49.5 percent in 2009 to 74 percent among young women (Herbenick, Debby, et al, 2022).

Although the study did not probe the reasons for that – there isn't one single answer, rather a myriad of factors that contribute to this trend – the researchers highlighted the increased social media and videogame usage among young people, the surge in "rough sex", which includes choking and strangling for those between 18 and 29 years, less alcohol consumption, the environmental influence on people's hormones, and last but not least, overall changes in human intimacy.

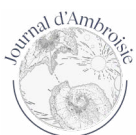
Solution?

As for the problem deriving from the abundance of choices on dating apps, there are two solutions. Firstly, the system should be altered to act like a pyramid, by gradually decreasing the number of people you can chat with - matches / open chats (limit to 5) / active open chats (limit to 3) / (system should delete those chats with whom you did not manage to get a date after 3 days of talking) / once you had a date - both parties could rate it anonymously and say if they want to meet again or not. After 3 dates the match is deleted automatically. Although one might argue that, especially if the root of the problem is that we are relying on a machine or a company, turning to more automation might not be the solution we need. Unfortunately reestablishing the dominant human factor in the equation won't be easy. As a recent book pointed out, one of the most significant outcomes of online dating has been the "privatisation of intimacy". Which means that the practices of seeking out and forming a relationship, whether it is romantic or just sexual, now occurs wholly separated from our everyday social contexts like school, work, neighbourhood or friends, through the internet (Bergström, 2021).

For better or worse, it seems that online dating won't go away. All we can do is to adapt, and understand these new norms of intimacy while trying to stay humane with one another as much as possible.

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Hannah Kloft

*edited by
Elizabeth Rose*

The Fault in our Charts

The moment I opened Seventeen magazine as an impressionable, acne-riddled 13-year-old and discovered I was a “Leo”, I was as ravenous as a lion for a sense of self. There, written on the glossy pages and similarly aligned in the stars, was my fate! I was in the extroverted, confident, life-of-the-party main-character category, apparently. Although a bit dramatic, irrational, and not so great with money, Leos sounded to me like real-life rockstars. I was instantly hooked. At middle school I felt like I needed to speak up to fulfill my August 16th destiny, and that any moment of desired solidarity was simply a lapse in my own personality. Known for my craving to socialize and desire to lead, I became the captain of every sport I played in and was the student body president of my high school. Now, I know what you’re thinking: *“Such a classic Leo, bragging about her accomplishments. Cringe!”*. I’m not sure if high school achievements are even braggable as a 25-year-old, and while I’m not afraid to admit that I do love the spotlight when I can get it, I’m simply bringing these examples up as context for the question of the effect of astrological signs – or other character-categorizing systems – that identify us as falling into specific and distinct character groups. How much do these systems get spot on, and how much of our personalities have actually, conversely, been shaped by these character defining categories, especially if we embrace them during such a formative period of our development?

Had I not been told that I was supposed to be outgoing and luxury-seeking, would I still have pushed myself to attend events when my social battery was on empty, or justify my impulse purchases on the fact that I had no control over my decisions? It’s hard to say. On the one hand, I believe our given zodiac signs have the potential to reaffirm our own personalities, desires, and goals which may have been formed before we even knew what a Libra was. But on the other hand, these detailed, seemingly binding, and intricate descriptions of who we are *supposed* to be could have also had an effect on how we grew into ourselves, and in some cases, our future and the futures of those around us – determining rather than describing our fates. Recently, Jennifer Lopez (also a Leo) allegedly fired some of her backup dancers after she discovered they were Virgos. Other stories range from people refusing to date Geminis, not getting in an Uber if the driver is a Scorpio, or mothers even waiting to give birth to ensure their newborn

arrived in a satisfactory time in space. Regardless if you believe that zodiac signs are 100% real or absolute nonsense, the impact they have on how people view themselves and other people cannot be overlooked.

As younger generations become less keen on traditional religion, a desire to make connections and minimize anxieties about the future still remains. Humans are hardwired to be worried about tomorrow, a month from now, years ahead— it's what allowed us to evolve into proactive, protected animals with maybe even *too* much time to ponder. But if you have something that helps guide your future, whether that be mainstream astrology, spooky tarot card readings, or elaborate Meyers Briggs tests, it helps us feel that some part of our destiny is out of our hands. What a relief. A common American Catholic phrase is "Let go and let God", and similarly among other religions, belief systems rely on this same absence of choice— the faith in some higher power that is creating our futures for us, something that was planned all along. From the weight we attribute to our Pottermore test results, and our recurring participation in BuzzFeed's "which colander matches your personality" tests, it is clear our generation is craving answers to our futures, explanations for our selves, and how to best navigate the challenges we face.

Challenges, in fact, may be the only established thing we know about our future. From the moment we first read our horoscopes, we were also told that the world ahead is predicted to be filled with frightening environmental and social disasters. It's no wonder we've found solace in a belief that tells you who to be friends with, how to spend your weekend, or advice on an upcoming decision. It's a light in our seemingly dark tunnel, a refuge to the everyday mundane of an often overwhelming world. However, this is not a new phenomenon, as astrological calendars date back as far as the first century BC, where the [Aztec Zodiac](#) was called *Tonalpohualli*, meaning "counting of the days", and had twenty signs (I'm a seductive attention-loving snake—go figure!). About four centuries later, in ancient China, the [Chinese Zodiac](#) became the foundation for a calendar which is made up of twelve different animals and remains very much celebrated today. It's clear that during times of uncertainty about the future or one's self, humans pursue answers in as many ways as outcomes are available. Did the Ox of the Chinese Zodiac know he was stubborn and relentlessly adhere to this prophecy? Could a child raised in the city of Tenochtitlan, or modern day Mexico City, rebel against her birth sign of *Xochiti* (flower), and grow spikes around her personality like a cactus defending itself in the desert 2000 years ago?



While brands have recently capitalized on an astrology-loving customer base due to its comforting and personalized feel, the history of astrology tells us that this is not a modern occurrence. Humans not only love to have their future written in the stars but I argue that we have allowed this belief to shape and determine the personalities of generations of people, due to the cultural salience and trust in such foretellings. Just as a placebo more often than not works in the same way medicine can, the effects are no less real. While it may not be harmful per se, the beliefs we adhere to can shape how we view ourselves and interact with our communities. It may not be fair to cross someone off of the RSVP list because of a mere title such as Taurus, but did that same stubborn “bull” become who they are because a magazine told their 12-year-old self they should be? I’m no future teller, nor personality expert, but I can assure my dear friend who wears a crab on her chest every day also reaffirms her lovable, dependable, Cancer traits in doing so. While astrological signs may not be as concrete as the asteroids shooting above our heads at night, or as constructed as the constellations, the impacts on our fates and choices are clear. My hope is that everyone sees the best in their readings (and themselves) and they do not let an astrological sign, or any category for that matter, define them, or the people we share our existence with.

More to read about fates and choices: *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig



Ysabel Cacho

edited by
Andrei Andronic

Are You Still Afraid of the Dark?

There comes a time when we're meant to outgrow the childish fear of the dark (or at least make it through one episode of the Nickelodeon show *Are You Afraid of the Dark*.) Only our overactive imagination creates monsters out of the shadows until the flick of a light switch reveals something else entirely harmless. After all, it's not really the dark that we're afraid of, but what's waiting for us in the dark. But it turns out that instead of outgrowing our fear of the dark, we now call it a different name: "what if."

Similar to our childhood, when faced with uncertainty, the mix of suspense and an overactive imagination can create shapes and scenarios in our heads. As adults, we may not form fearsome monsters but different scenarios as we try to imagine all possible outcomes of a situation. Sometimes in this instance, the childhood solution of switching on a light to confront the dark, unfortunately, is simply not enough.

It would have made more sense to start the essay with a line or two from Robert Frost's iconic poem, "The Road Not Taken," rather than an allegory of a childhood fear of the dark. Many people are familiar with the verse "two roads diverged in a yellow wood," which prompts the speaker to stop and consider the paths before him. The speaker takes "the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference" (Frost, 1915). This line (and indeed the whole poem) has often been misinterpreted as an inspirational quote to follow our path, the road less taken.

Well, the joke's on us—literally. Frost wrote the poem as a joke for his friend, Edward Thomas, and didn't realize people would take it so seriously. When one goes back to re-read the poem (not simply the last two lines), it's clear that the two roads are, in fact, the same, and therein lies the uncertainty.

We're faced with our forks in the road daily—whether in a literal sense or not. Some decisions are easy to make, while others are shrouded in a cloud of darkness, which results in different methods to either move forward or stay still.

Research shows that anxiety is a response to a potential threat that has yet to happen. The possibility of danger usually manifests in the form of worrying. The thought of not knowing what will happen or when it will occur sends us into an endless spiral of “what ifs,” especially regarding a significant shift in our personal or professional life. In contrast, fear is the response to a defined threat, expressed in the fight or flight response (Carleton, Norton, and Asmundson, 2007).

Like most working people in 2020, I was also faced with a barrage of “what ifs” about my life, living and working in New York City. I was expected to climb that infamous career ladder and work towards a more managerial role. But after six years of hustling, burning out, and working overtime in New York, I wanted to climb out, not up. (I was in a seemingly perpetual state of burnout. But unfortunately, out there are only so many times you can use “burnout” as an excuse for taking time off from work.) I was thinking bigger than career moves. I was thinking of a more physical move that could pivot me into a new and more balanced life in Spain.

My lofty dreams of moving to Europe had more questions than answers and more “what ifs” than solidified plans. While I worried about starting from scratch, I was more afraid of the regrets I would have if I didn’t take the plunge. So, I ventured into the unknown— I moved to a city where I didn’t know anybody and went back to school as all of my friends back in New York got glamorous promotions. A year later, I have yet to find the light switch to prove this wasn’t just a crazy, quarter-life crisis pivot.

A few weeks ago, as I was trying to figure out the next chapter of my life after graduation, I ended up in a bookstore. I came across Mel Brooks’ latest memoir, *All About Me!: In My Remarkable Life in Show Business*, the actor-producer-director-writer recounts his early days trying to make it in the entertainment industry. I landed on a page where he challenged F. Scott Fitzgerald, who once declared that there are no second acts in life. “Well, I’ve been lucky enough to prove him wrong,” wrote Brooks. “I’ve had a great second act and I’m enjoying a pretty good third act too. If I were a Shakespearean play, I’d be rooting for five acts! (Brooks, 2021)” While this may not have been the light switch meant to light the rest of my way, it certainly added some illumination.

Sometimes, slight illumination can lead our way or refocus our objective. Author Sheela Subramanian thinks the “what ifs” in decision-making are usually framed in negative scenarios (Elliot, Subramanian, and Kupp, 2022). “What ifs” are the new monsters under our beds that keep us up at night, safely tucked under the sheets. This framing can hinder people from thinking of positive outcomes. In the dark, we wonder whether the figure in the corner is either a hungry demon or a jacket draped over a chair. Perceptions such as “What if I’m wrong? What if I fail? What if this blows up in my face?” dictate our reality. But *what if*, said Subramanian, we assumed the best-case scenario rather than the worst?

Like our childhood, fumbling in the dark before finding the light is normal. Sometimes it’s easy to find our way out of it, but most of the time, we’re left scrambling with our arms outstretched. If anything, at least it shows that we’re



not afraid of trying to find a more precise way out despite bumping into furniture along the way.

To answer the essay's title, I think it's safe to say yes, I'm still afraid of the dark. But I'm also more fearful that I'll regret not trying. Nothing productive ever comes from wondering "what if." So, while I am still army crawling my way out of this wild uncertainty, the notion that I'm doing something about it lights my way.

The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;
 Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
 Though as for that the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same,
 And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh, I marked the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way
 I doubted if I should ever come back.
 I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference.

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Zsófi Lazar

*edited by
Elizabeth Rose*

The Masters of *our* Fate: Does the Male Gaze choose for us?

“You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.” The pertinence of Margaret Atwood’s words, for most women, is undeniable. The “male gaze” is a term, first introduced by the English art critic John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* in 1972 as part of his analysis of the treatment of women as objects in advertising and nudes in European painting (Bahadur, 2020). However, it was formally coined by feminist theorist and film critic Laura Mulvey, and describes viewing the world and women through a male, heterosexual lens (Abraham, 2019). It showcases women as sexual objects that exist for male viewing pleasure, and is a key idea for understanding the female self – as everything that women do are defined through male conceptions, fed to us from an early age. A typical example is the idea of a manic pixie dream girl, or a “cool girl”; archetypes established purely for male desire, without any substance behind them, which are reinforced every day.

Despite the modern basis of such an idea, a proto-typical form of the male gaze has been perpetrated throughout history, present in discussions on social, cultural and political topics. For instance, Enlightenment political thought, such as the work of Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, established the idea of women as the fundamental opposites of men, and thus reinforced the idea of male superiority and rationality, while undermining movements that pushed for women’s rights and suffrage. The reactionary movement from proto-feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft created milestone works such as the *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, nevertheless it also brought about harmful stereotypes on “femininity”, rejecting the “weakness” and “silliness” of the “weaker sex”. Women attempted to show that they too could be “masculine” and encompass traits associated with this masculinity such as logic, rationality and strength. However, they achieved this through rejecting male ideas of femininity, regularly condemning other more “feminine” women that they did not identify with. This can roughly be transposed in modernity onto the “pick-me” girl; one who rejects the idea of femininity entirely, hangs out solely with the guys, and who consistently puts other women down to ingratiate themselves with said men.

However, this version of the “male gaze”, and the female selves that it has inspired did not exist as we know it today; it is a distortion, insofar as our understanding stems predominantly from renaissance thinking. It is framed primarily in societal, sexual terms that most people would not have been constantly subject to, before the internet and artistic reference points that globalisation has facilitated. Instead, the male gaze was primarily supported by popularised artistic endeavour, the realm of which was almost fully exclusive to men. Prime examples can be seen in the works of artists such as Sandro Botticelli, in his *Birth of Venus*, as well as artists like Gustav Klimt in the *fin-de-siècle* period, in which young girls were prominent subjects of artwork. Both periods portrayed the ideals of womanhood according to the aesthetic and masculine standards; the first as the opposite of men, with soft, curvy bodies, and the latter in likening their flatness to the male build. However, these ideals were only seen by those with the capacity to contribute to these discussions. Therefore, ironically, the modern “male gaze” is more potent; wherein everyone sees male ideals, when women also have the most opportunity to represent themselves artistically. This comes across in everyday internalisation – social media makes it incredibly easy to project an image of yourself that is desirable, pleasing and conforming to the male gaze. The dangers of women criticising or comparing other women to themselves also increase with this; “trying too hard” becomes an insult, wearing revealing clothing makes you promiscuous and female competition is encouraged through viewership. Simultaneously, a woman must constantly be perfectly consumable, even at home or on errands – this stems from a need to measure up to others, or an internalised idea of what women should be like. In this way, the woman is an object of fascination, becoming objectified and an item for commodification through the male gaze.

In contrast, queer artists and people who live in open rejection of this idea, elevating the female gaze, or a rejection of any binaries in their conception of perception are being increasingly able to create art free of legal or personal repercussions. For instance, in 2019, the Hayward Gallery in London presented *Kiss My Genders*, a collection of more than thirty queer, trans, nonbinary, and intersex artists whose works explore gender. The exhibition includes famous names such as Peter Hujar, Juliana Huxtable, and Zoe Leonard – their work united through taking back the gaze, rewriting the script through the lens of marginalised people in how they are perceived by others and themselves. Similarly, Anne McNay curated two parallel shows on this topic in 2018, asserting that “the female gaze is more than just the opposite of the male gaze”. (Jansen, 2018) Going off of the writings of radical French feminist Hélène Cixous, McNay says that “[w]oman must paint herself, must paint women and bring women to [painting](#), from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.” Under this flag, *Threesome: an exhibition of three women painters*, aimed to broaden the discussion of the “female gaze” and interrogate whether women see women differently, and how their sexuality affects their gaze on the female subject, through the works of queer painters Sarah Jane Moon, Roxana Halls and Sadie Lee. This deconstruction additionally crosses the boundaries that queer people have traditionally also existed outside of. The idea of gay men as “effeminate” and untrustworthy in social and political history has similarly been emphasised due to their non-normative “masculinity” and the objectification

of and attraction to women being linked to this masculinity. Nonbinary and transgender individuals are additionally seen as “threatening” to heterosexual men, as they seem to infringe on traditional “male” dominion without fitting into the dichotomy of male and female that perpetuates the male gaze. However, through redefining the “male gaze”, traditional gender boundaries can also be broken down and reinvented.

On social media, on billboards, in magazines, the male gaze is ever-constant in modern day society. Female choices are often dictated by male ideas or concepts that they don’t realise they are engaging in, reaching back hundreds of years. Renaissance and Enlightenment men played a key role in constructing the feminine ideal through the eyes of the masculine, and the female self is still valued through this gaze. However, through deconstructing why these actions are problematic for themselves and others, women and queer people can break down male, heteronormative barriers, to let them become whatever they want to be.

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Draco, Causes We Care About



Anja Radonjic

*edited by
Elizabeth Rose*

Of the proud and the prideful : Belgrade Prides as a moment of socio-political reflection for the Western Balkans

A few Octobers ago, while I was still in Sixth Form in the UK, one of my best friends came out to me. We had just turned seventeen, and moved away from the small towns and the associated social expectations. In the moments between the hugs and tears, and “I love yous”, I realised the world shifted – I had a person in my life whose simple existence is despised by unnamed strangers, by dogmas, by political opportunists. None of the people I knew back in Montenegro – not a distant family member, neighbour, classmate, or acquaintance – was an openly gay person.

Across the Western Balkans, we pride ourselves on upholding *traditions*, we are consumed by our own complicated, intertwined and unique histories. In the years after the Balkan civil wars of the 1990s, each Balkan state made progress (or at least is working on it) in the realm of equal rights, administration of justice and social reforms, all relative to the country’s political motivations to either improve their relations with the EU, or with Russia/and China. While laws and institutions might become more inclusive, the changing of minds and hearts takes decades, especially if those same minds and hearts are tethered by patriarchal structures and growing theoretical control. Because of the intangibility of these two forces within the Balkan society, the LGBTQIA+ community across the Western Balkans has had their existence and experience denied, threatened and, essentially, erased. Facilitation of Pride and contestation that often follows is fundamental for the future of Western Balkan society and identity. In this way, Pride serves as a reminder of the undeniable existence of queer people (despite the efforts of many far-right individuals and religious extremists to insist otherwise). But the local and state level reactions to its organisation also serves as a moment of truth – we come to realise whether social norms and expectations can change, whether we are willing to change, for every brother, sister, daughter and son that treads carefully during the parade. Such a moment for societal self-reflection and revelation came on the 17th of September this year, when Belgrade’s EuroPride was scheduled to take place.

The roads less taken

Security concerns surrounding pride and ban on gathering is unfortunately a common pattern in the history of Serbia's Pride parades. In 2001, what was meant to be the first Pride in the Western Balkans, turned into a bloody showdown between the police and anti-pride protesters. It took another nine years before Pride was organised in Belgrade, and the outcry against it was similar; a mere thousand Pride participants were shielded from six thousand anti-Pride protesters, and around 200 police officers and civilians injured. Pride was then banned until 2014. Since 2014, each year Pride has been held (until the pandemic) under the close supervision of the police.

I would be unfair, and careless, if I said the LGBTQIA+ community has received no support, and that it solely relies on police protection. The conversations surrounding the experiences and needs of the queer community have been changing in Serbia, and for the most part, for the better. Over the years, Serbia's Pride associations have gathered more allies and supporters (who, through association, have also been targeted online). The use of social media platforms like Twitter to demonstrate support has proved to be a double-edged sword – it has become easier to gather support, and easier to share videos of any violations of gay rights (for example, video evidence has resulted in the first hate crime conviction in Serbia, in 2018). But, unfortunately, it has also been a platform for Dveri, a far-right group, that works tirelessly to “defend” their families and traditional Serbian values- with the same vigour and zeal of Don Quixote, who fought the imaginary dangers posed by the windmills . They are predominantly Serbian Orthodox Christian followers, who taunt and threaten anyone associated with Pride. It is because of wide-spread video sharing, that this years' Europride in Belgrade was preceded by a large-scale anti-Pride protest march.

Two marches, two Serbian peoples

Perhaps this Europride would have happened without much attention, if it weren't for the public attacks of Archbishop Profirije, the leader of Serbian Orthodox Church, on the dangers of queer lifestyle to the traditional values in Serbia, their sins that supposedly endanger the very nature of Serbian peoples. In one of his addresses, with great zealous rage, he declared: “if I had weapons, I would kill them (gay people).” The Serbian Orthodox Church has a long record in both Serbia and Montenegro for referring to the LGBTQIA+ community as “human faeces”, “the diseased”, “foreign fabrications”, which naturally encourages the far-right groups to act in a violent manner, enabling them to do so with no accountability. No one has been persecuted for these statements. The recurrent scrutiny and negation of Pride has elicited statements from internationally recognised Serbian public figures, such as actor Viktor Savic, singers Ana Nikolic and Aca Lukas, leaders from political movements like Bosko Obradovic from Dveri (all of whom have a great public presence). On the 27th of August, the concerns for Serbia and Serbian values were expressed in a widespread anti-Pride protest, which thousands attended. The “protectors of families and children” marched with religious flags, crosses, and pictures of Vladimir Putin, and Draza Mihailovic (leader of the Chetnik faction during the Second World War). It is incredibly ironic to see banners with phrases like “keep your hands away from our children” being held by members of the SOC accused of pedophilia. President Aleksandar

Vucic used the anti-Pride march, alongside the growing tensions with Kosovo that week, as an excuse to “cancel or indefinitely delay” Pride. Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, first openly gay PM for Serbia and the region, also conceded that cancelling Pride is better, over safety concerns for those who might march.

The EuroPride would probably have remained cancelled, had it not attracted the attention of the international community. More than 20 embassies, including that of the U.S, UK, and France, issued a joint statement urging for the EuroPride to go ahead as planned. Eleven hours before the event, President Vucic lifted the ban: a shorter route, heavy police monitoring, and 64 arrests marked the 17th of September. Videos are currently circulating on Twitter with anti-Pride protestors taunting the Pride participants, allies and community members alike; in one, a young woman got kicked from the back by a cowardly young man, yelling “this is my hood, this is my turf”.

Unfortunately, this is the reality Serbians find themselves in. Although the degrees of tensions vary in other Western Balkans states, there are similarities to be drawn from Pride marches held in Montenegro, and in Bosnia (also candidates for the European Union, like Serbia). The main aggravators and catalysts for violence seem to be the speeches and addresses of religious leaders, and consequently, leaders of far-right groups that use their words as a guiding dogma for their violent deeds. I would say this is nothing new; it’s almost a universal context for anti-gay protests. However, I think it’s the lack of ordinary citizens’ interest, whether indifference or fear, to stand with the LGBTQIA+ community, in their respective country in the Western Balkans. You can often hear phrases like “ I have nothing against them, but why do they need to march?” ; “ I have nothing against them, but do it in your own four walls.” This is still anti-gay rhetoric, whether those speaking wish to cause the queer community harm or not. Indifference is erasure; indifference is harmful. I think one of the characteristics that Western Balkan people like to pride themselves in, is their hospitality, and “wearing their hearts on their sleeves”. The Balkan paradox is the incessant chatter of opinions (on anything and everything), while the truest emotions and questions remain buried deep within; asking questions would mean not having answers, and those who do not have answers are not eligible for opinions. Instead, we pretend, and nod along knowledgeably. No one asks why do we need Pride. No one asks a gay person in the Balkans how they want to structure their life. It is not about, or it should not be about, the country’s political and economic affiliation with the European Union, or with Russia. It is about elemental decency. It is about humanity, respect towards another human being, and ultimately, loving all the people in your local community.

Bravery is a deeply admirable trait that so many display by living their truths in the Western Balkans. But I hope one day, no one has to be brave. I hope allies, political and judicial institutions, and further education on the topic, ensures queer people have a dignified life, and are free to live it to the fullest.

Relevant Resources

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/14/belgrade-serbia-cancelled-europride-exposes-ongoing-lgbtq-struggles>

<https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/16/serbian-interior-ministry-upholds-ban-on-europride-march-despite-new-route-proposal>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/17/serbian-police-arrest-dozens-as-belgrade-europride-marchers-defy-ban>

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220918-europride-march-in-belgrade-marred-by-arrests-and-skirmishes-during-the-event>

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/29/thousands-of-orthodox-serbians-march-against-europride>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/serbia-opposition-rights-groups-condemn-europride-cancelation-decision-rcna45054>

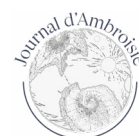
Relevant Twitter Accounts (in Serbian/Croatian)

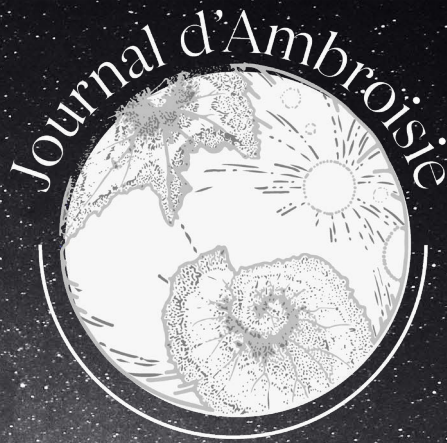
@mosimisemac - Montenegrin PR, Political Commentator, Mportal editor

Stevan Filipovic, @SejtanovRadnik - Professor at Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Pride participant

Bosko Obradovic, @BoskoObradovic - Leader of Dveri, useful to read his tweets for the rhetoric that gets deployed in order to undermine the need for Pride

Unfortunately, 99% of tweets are in Serbian, so makes it difficult to use as references etc. :(





Edition II. *Waves and Paths*

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