

Wrong Life: Recent Critiques of Mediation in Saramago's *Cave*, Houellebecq's *Possibility of an Island*, and Lerner's *10:04*

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ABSTRACT

In this article on the topic of mediation, I look at some recent, powerful works of fiction, supplemented by philosophical and sociological interventions, to explore our contemporary hypermediated or mediatized society. José Saramago, in his novel *A Caverna* (2000), presents an updated allegory of Plato's cave for the Debord-Baudrillard era of spectacle and consumerism. I think the situation Saramago critically depicts has only intensified in the intervening years with further social-technological developments, and I turn to the Adorno-inspired recent work of Byung-Chul Han to explore the contemporary situation of "neoliberal psychopolitics" characterized by the loss of the negative, the reduction of experience, and the increasing spectacle, surveillance, and fine-tuned consumerism of the digital era. In this context, I then turn to Michel Houellebecq's *La possibilité d'une île* (2005) for a dystopian take on our contemporary society involving a further mediation: the genetic mediation of cloning, and the loss of affect and concomitant loss of community that characterize his fictional world – directly extrapolated from our own. Finally, I turn briefly to Ben Lerner's recent *10:04* (2014) to explore his rumination on neoliberal mediations in the context of catastrophic climate change. To my mind, Han, as well as critics like Bernard Stiegler, Roberto Simanowski and Jonathan Crary, effectively (though separately) update Adorno for a digitally-mediated age. In the article I review these recent contributions to see what lessons we can learn from these critics and celebrated novelists in thinking about mediation in our own lives.

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A billion people currently suffer from hunger, populations migrate from the South to the North in search of work, urban zones have been destroyed or lost their “urbanity,” rural regions have been turned into deserts, the younger generation is confronting economic despair, illiteracy grows, there is widespread regression in terms of health, the apparatus of production is being destroyed by speculation, both familial education and public education are being annihilated, and on it goes. This situation has been systematically cultivated by the financialization of the economy, which has initiated a struggle to the death—and a suicidal struggle—against all forms of human collectivity, and in particular against public powers, which have been forced into public impotence. Hence have been ruined and destroyed those states formerly considered sovereign.

(Stiegler, *States* 145)

In a 1965 debate with Arnold Gehlen, Theodor Adorno noted that “today there are uncounted human beings, whose relationship to technology is, if I may use a clinical term, neurotic, that is, they are tied non-reflectively to technology, to all sorts of means to control life because [their] purposes—namely, a fulfillment of their own lives and their own vital needs—is largely denied to them” (qtd. in Freyenhagen 2). When Adorno made this and similar statements in the 60s, he could not imagine how developments in computation and subsequent digital technologies would accelerate and intensify this state of affairs over the next fifty years, but he already had a critical sense of the insidious danger of technological mediation in the late capitalist era. According to Adorno’s rather pessimistic understanding, manufactured desires feeding consumerism were designed to distract citizens even as capitalist expansion and intensification hollowed out the very acknowledgement and pursuit of meaningful life goals and autonomous, dignified existence. The mass media, and especially the culture industry, willingly participated in manipulation and exploitation designed to fit the public to the needs of the expanding capitalist system. The subsequent colonization of all aspects of human life by markets has ensued in the never-ending search for new fields of exploitation and profit (what Klaus

Dörre, following Rosa Luxemburg, refers to as *Landnahme*; Dörre et al. 24)¹ with the result of profound transformations in the human subject itself, its desires and its resistances, its dreams and fears.²

As many critics have shown, the “culture industry” was—and is—certainly not as monolithic as Adorno seemed to think, although of course commercial culture has certainly expanded and extended its domain since the 1960s, especially in the era of the small screen. More broadly, the technological mediation of everyday life, from the TV and refrigerator of Adorno’s post-war era to the development of the personal computers (as early as the mid-70s), through the expansion of the internet and world wide web (in the mid-90s), to the age of the smart phone (starting in the late 90s), and of course the now dominant “social media,” is virtually complete and ubiquitous (Facebook has 2.5 billion monthly users). The rise of new digital mediations has coincided with the neoliberal capitalization of almost all aspects of existence in the era of (digital) globalization (Harvey 2; Sandel 3-15; Brown, *Undoing* 70-73). How much more then can we today speak of the potential domination of the unreflective use of technology and attendant neuroses!

This increase in technological mediation is complemented by considerable obfuscation and ideological manipulation. At every turn, consumers are told of urgent needs being filled and life being enriched with the purchase of the next gadget or app. Users are not of course being simply, ideologically duped into acting against their own self-interests, but neoliberal culture is being structured in such a way as to genuinely provide pleasure and some satisfaction along with the instruments of manipulation, leading to a dangerously “joyful commodity alienation” (Lordon 33). Not all consumers are oblivious to this situation—far from it. But a general inattention to the mechanisms at its base is a very important part and product of the contemporary system. Only now that the fateful ecological consequences of incessant growth and expansion, perpetual technological innovation, and planned commodity obsolescence are becoming completely evident and unignorable are we starting to question seriously the

¹ Likewise following Luxemburg, Wolfgang Streeck also adopts the term as a metaphor for the relentless colonization of the lifeworld by markets (100).

² “Subjects’ lifeworlds, as well as their emotions and aspirations, are incorporated into the production process—and even their desires and appetites become factors of production—they are *landgenommen* (conquered) by the process of capital valorisation in an unprecedented manner” (Dörre et al. 242).

social and economic foundations of our current societies.³ Once again, in the era of triumphant global neoliberal capitalism with its attendant digital, connected (mediatized) culture, Adorno's concerns from the immediate post-war era seem to be not only relevant, but urgent.

In this paper I want to look briefly at various extensions of Adorno's concerns with mediation in late capitalist society, particularly as they resonate with the ominous fictional worlds envisioned by several preeminent contemporary novelists: José Saramago, Michel Houellebecq, and Ben Lerner. The challenging visions of these novelists critically engage our contemporary society in ways that recent Adorno-inspired interventions help us to understand. It is my goal to link this recent work in order to help us think critically about our mediated, technological world. My sense is that the contemporary technologically mediated world is dangerously manipulative in ways that are often obscured, and that pose great risk to the individual and community, leading indeed to "wrong" living, as detailed below, and that a more critical vision, suggested by these authors, would be salubrious for the sake of both individual autonomy and collective human freedom.

Following Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their path-breaking analysis of the dialectic of enlightenment, Bernard Stiegler has recently extended the critique of rationality in an era of increased irrational intensification of a hyper-rationalization through technical progress, technology proper, and digital connection and control which is causing "a new kind of barbarism" (*Age 5*; Adorno and Horkheimer xiv). This is the famous ambivalence of prosthesis, of technics: far from humans entering a cybernetic and putatively post-human age where technology supplements every endeavor and facilitates human control (even as it co-evolutionarily changes the human itself), we are now entering an age where humans risk becoming servants and appendages of the machine: our instruments instrumentalize us. And what results is an increased *Verdinglichung* (reification) which Stiegler associates with a *Verdummung*: a new era of *bêtise*.⁴ This does not mean that consumers are just idiots, although in his impatience Steigler can sometimes suggest so, but that critical reason itself begins to erode in the tide of the contemporary

³ On the clash of the current economic system and the environment, see for example Foster et al. 74; Klein 20; to say nothing of Angus, Malm, etc.

⁴ Steigler's concept lies somewhere between Flaubert's original conception of the bourgeois and Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of regression of reason to myth and barbarism. See *States 54*; *Age 9*.

neoliberal Zeitgeist. We become the means and not the end of the system (the prime example being Facebook).⁵ Stiegler speaks (following Derrida) in terms of “pharmacology”—the ambivalence of technological progress, particularly now in our hyper-technological age. Technological means themselves may be neutral, and indeed have obviously served important and emancipatory human ends, but the system which produces, employs and disseminates them determines their larger social effect. And this system is 24/7 neoliberal global surveillance capitalism (Crary; Zuboff).⁶

Likewise, the Adorno-inspired recent work of Byung-Chul Han likewise seeks to explore the contemporary situation of “neoliberal psychopolitics” (*Psychopolitics* 79) characterized by the loss of the negative, the reduction of experience,⁷ and the increasing spectacle, surveillance, and fine-tuned consumerism of the digital era. Han extends Adorno’s fundamental modernist critique of mediation (shared with György Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Horkheimer, and others) while assimilating aspects of the (in)famous conceptualization and critique of the “culture industry.” The cultural-media landscape, if not its industrial nature, has changed greatly since Adorno’s time, but there is still a need to think cultural production and consumption, and thus the media, within a larger social and economic totality. Indeed the very linking of questions of mediation and “mediatization” is, to me, not a misunderstanding or equivocation but precisely a way of thinking of media along the path Adorno cleared. We need to be aware of, and critical of, not only the subjective transformations involved in hyper-mediatization, but also the objective forces at play connecting seemingly unrelated phenomena within the media world

⁵ This was already the case in the culture industry before digitalization. “Audience demands for entertainment are filtered through the commercial requirements of media conglomerates and advertisers. The market research that these firms do is less about determining what audiences want than what is the cheapest, safest, and most profitable way to reach target audiences” (McChesney 75). Advertisers are the customers of the entertainment conglomerates: the audience is what gets sold. McChesney’s book tells the depressing story of how quickly this state of affairs overtook the new digital media and the internet. For a more specific critique about digital mediation, see Golumbia and Zuboff. On Facebook, see Simanowski, *Facebook Society*.

⁶ Needless to say, any resistance to the trends I discuss in this paper will be possible by virtue of the very media tools that are being criticized, so it really is about the *pharmakon* and *critical* use.

⁷ As Walter Benjamin famously wrote, “With this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind” (732). Han, discussing the “information” society, writes, “[n]egativity distinguishes not only experience, but also knowledge [*Erkenntnis*]. A single insight can put all that exists, everything as an entirety, into question and change it. Information lacks such negativity. Likewise, experience [*Erfahrung*] holds consequences that exude transformative power. In this respect, it differs from experiencing [*Erlebnis*], which leaves what exists as it stands” (*Transparency Society* 30).

which reflect very specific political-economic realities. Han is a key analyst of increased technological mediation and its psychological ramifications (e.g., “neurosis”) in our current regime. “Neoliberal psychopolitics is a technology of domination that stabilizes and perpetuates the prevailing system by means of psychological programming and steering” (*Psychopolitics* 79), argues Han, especially through interiorization and optimization, entrepreneurialism, and so forth (self-exploitation misperceived as freedom: e.g., Uber),⁸ with psychological consequences of depression and burnout⁹ (to say nothing of suicide, nihilist rage, and mass murder—as studied by “Bifo” Berardi in *Heroes*).

At risk of equivocating with the term “mediation,” let’s step back and see what Adorno’s claim is here irrespective of subsequent technological developments in late capitalism of the neoliberal era. At one point, Adorno writes, “All social phenomena today are so completely mediated that even the element of mediation is blocked by its totalizing nature” (qtd. in Freyenhagen 36). Obviously “mediated” here refers to exchange society (*Tauschgesellschaft*), to the ubiquity of markets and quantification, competition and exploitation, and not specifically to the technological means of this mediation at a particular stage of development. In his recent, lucid book on Adorno’s practical philosophy, Fabian Freyenhagen glosses this passage: “when everything is mediated economically, then this mediation is no longer clearly visible because (a) market forces are often not seen as social relations (and hence not seen as the social relations of domination which they are); and (b) there is no external standpoint anymore from which the mediation could be detected. In this way, society forms an all-encompassing whole, a totality” (36). Notably, such a society threatens to become an oppressive totality in which there is no alternative to a given state of affairs and attendant worldview.

Obviously this worldview was not, and still is not, *totally* total, since its critique is possible, even if a solution to the problem is far from clear.¹⁰ And while we today can opt in or out of various devices and platforms we are nonetheless inexorably caught up in innumerable mediations that compromise

⁸ “Under neoliberalism, the technology of power takes on a subtle form. It does not lay hold of individuals directly. Instead, it ensures that individuals act on themselves so that power relations are interiorized—and then interpreted as freedom” (Han, *Psychopolitics* 28).

⁹ See also Han, *Burnout Society* 46-47.

¹⁰ In my negative interpretation of the contemporary mediated world I follow Adorno’s sense that “only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth” (“Meaning” 99).

authentic existence.¹¹ Along these lines, Freyenhagen isolates in Adorno (glossing the conclusion to *Minima Moralia* aphorism #18, “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im Falschen” [42], influentially translated by Jephcott as, “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly” [39]), what he dubs “The No Right Living Thesis,” which has the following elements: “The antinomical nature of private life: we are faced with conflicts which are practical antinomies in the sense that neither side can give an adequate ground for (morally) right living” (56). For instance, we communicate through complex networks of interconnection, and are thus unintentionally but necessarily guilty participants in adverse ecological, economic, and political processes. There is no way *not* to contribute to ecological degradation (verging on catastrophe) and economic exploitation, no matter what we do in our daily lives (for example, engage in “ethical consumerism”). One’s individual choices become both impossible to validate in principle (for example the dilemma of private charity) encompassed as they are in larger systemic social conditions; thus emerges “wrong life,” through increased mediation (systemic, not technological). In addition “we are prone to being caught up in ideologies” about these situations, that is, prone “to hold a set of beliefs, attitudes, and preferences which are false or distorted in ways that benefit the established social order (and the dominant social group within it) at the expense of the satisfaction of people’s real interests” (60). Moreover we unwittingly serve the self-perpetuation of the unjust system—“we have to buy into the social system at least to the extent of surviving, and by doing so, we maintain it, however unintended this may be” (61). As a result (again, in Freyenhagen’s words) “the life of the individual is so deformed and distorted that it cannot be truthfully said that living is taking place” (62): or, “Life does not live” (Ferdinand Kürnberger’s expression, quoted by Adorno as the epigraph for *Minima Moralia* [19]).

So, individuals increasingly lack autonomy and become more thoroughly integrated as “appendages of the machine” (Freyenhagen 78, after Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 13). Freyenhagen observes that “Adorno turns Adam Smith on his head: instead of making possible a prosperous and moral society,

¹¹ “Neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*” (Brown, *Undoing* 31). I know the word “authentic” here is problematic, and is merely meant to mean something like autonomous or free. For a more deterministic, Spinozist account of human nature that I do not share, see Lordon 49-104.

capitalism's invisible hand mechanisms enable a radically evil society that depletes natural and human resources to sustain itself" (64). This situation is reaching a catastrophic crisis point; first of all ecologically, as we are depleting the world's stock of resources and bio-diversity¹² and as climate change intensifies; and economically,¹³ as resources gather within the grasp of the 2,000 some-odd billionaires and their hired agents, while 2 billion people live in impoverishment and daily food insecurity (Rieff 176),¹⁴ and the global middle classes in between are gradually squeezed out of their portion in their diminishing democratic ability to influence the system.¹⁵ Again, "mediation" and "machine" here in Adorno do not refer to specific technological developments, although they certainly refer to an era of technological society enabled by the Industrial Revolutions of the long nineteenth century and consolidated through the colonial era into the familiar (state-managed, social-democratic) capitalist system of the post-war era that Adorno was criticizing.

Adorno was particularly concerned with "the individual's abolition by integration" (*Negative Dialectics* 262) in hypermediated exchange society. This is in fact quite a complex issue. Our contemporary cultures are marked by an apparent radical individualism—brought about by the breakdown of communities and families, the diffusion of social institutions like work, and the retreat into generally consumerist and subsequently digital cocoons. Neoliberal "individualization" is a key process by which deepening dependency and vulnerability (precarity, neoliberal entrepreneurialization or "responsibilization" [Brown, *In* 38]), aided and abetted by social media—and despite utopian claims of connection and community (see Simanowski, *Death Algorithm* 12; *Facebook Society*)—is "disguised as and redubbed the progress of autonomy" (Bauman

¹² "Environmental degradation and the unfair pillaging of irreplaceable natural resources are leading to the collective suicide of humankind" (Santos 31).

¹³ On the current crisis of neoliberal capitalism, irrespective of the natural environment, see Streeck 15, 35. See also the discussion in Fraser and Jaeggi 13-60.

¹⁴ "Digital technology has become a machinery for producing billionaires rather than lives of dignity for the billions," writes O'Shea (261). Her book tries to map out concrete ways in which community can be reconsolidated and resistance to the current regime effected. Hopelessly optimistic?—indeed, but doubtless necessary.

¹⁵ "Surveillance capitalism is a rogue force driven by novel economic imperatives that disregard social norms and nullify the elemental rights associated with individual autonomy that are essential to the very possibility of a democratic society" (Zuboff 14-15).

and Lyon 112).¹⁶ Han, under the sign of Adorno, has charted the myriad ways in which the interiorization of technological mediation paradoxically accompanies a voiding of interiority, the impoverishment of experience, and the exhaustion or “burnout” of the subject as seat of potential critique and liberation. Stiegler too speaks of “massive processes of disindividuation” and “divestiture by technics” (*States* 60), especially digital technology whereby we become part of a (digital) swarm—not only dis-individualized but also entirely lacking in any meaningful sense of community (Han, *In* 10-11). Adorno would certainly have appreciated this profoundly ambivalent process of individualization-disindividuation in contemporary digital society.

Now, in the last few decades we see “the elaboration, the modeling of one’s personal and social identity, has been reorganized to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems” in an intensification Adorno did not imagine (Crary 9). The ensuing “24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world but is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness” (9). Not only do the utopias of the world wide web and subsequent digital social media fail in many ways to deliver their promises about enhanced personal/individual experience, but claims of community and connection (“the social network”)¹⁷ also can ring hollow.¹⁸ So recent digital developments can be seen as a further

¹⁶ For example, “Surveillance capitalism, disguised as a drive for personal efficiency, becomes equated with self-actualization” (105), writes O’Shea about the Apple Watch and interiorization. Or Han on the smartphone: “The smartphone promises more freedom, but it radiates fatal compulsion—the compulsion to communicate. Now an almost obsessive, compulsive relationship to digital devices prevails. *Here, too, freedom is switching over into compulsion and constraint*” (*In* 34).

¹⁷ The so-called “new social media” “produce social structures for individuals, substituting voluntary for obligatory forms of social relations, and *networks of users for communities of citizens*” (Streeck 41). It is, in fact, quite difficult NOT to subscribe to *Facebook*, which is, for example, the platform to enter many other apps. Moreover, “the electronic infrastructures of individualized social life are privately owned by huge, overwhelmingly America corporations [which] while . . . dressed up as collective goods freely available to all . . . are in reality highly profitable tools of social control rented out to, among others, vendors of consumer goods and services” (41n69). Finally, “product differentiation . . . made possible by new production technology as well as new methods of advertisement, especially in the new, allegedly ‘social’ media, produces a kind of social integration that allows for a combined sense of individual singularity and collective identity in a community of customers, united in the consumption of continuously upgraded individualized commodities” (45).

¹⁸ Moreover, thanks to our computers and other digital tools, “we know more and more about the world, while being less and less able to do anything about it. The resulting sense of helplessness, rather than giving us pause to reconsider our assumptions, seems to be driving us deeper into paranoia and social

turn of the screw in the process of mediation that Adorno diagnosed in the immediate post-war era. By the term “mediation,” then, I am referring backward to its use in a Hegelian-Marxist tradition (Lukács, Adorno), prevalent in much of the “Marxish” criticism I am referencing in this paper, but gesturing forward to something more properly called “mediatization,” as a particular technological development of postwar capitalist society (indeed of the last thirty years). The argument is that the ubiquitous technological media that dominate contemporary life serve as a further dimension of the mediation of human being—of personal identity and meaningful community. I am thus not concerned here with real problems of surveillance (e.g., Facebook—Cambridge Analytica; NSA PRISM), nor with the extreme exploitation of tailored algorithms for facilitated commodity promotion (e.g., Facebook, Google), nor even really with the ecological consequences of digitally-perfected commodity consumption (Amazon), but rather with the ways in which the autonomous subject—itself an ambivalent product of the bourgeois capitalist era, according to Adorno—is *mediated* or “*mediatized*,”¹⁹ in its very self-understanding and innermost desires, by categories and functions of Facebook (and Twitter, Instagram, etc.) with attendant emphases on visuality, superficiality, speed, immediate gratification, competition for “likes” and self-promotion, and so forth,²⁰ with consequences of bubble formation and thus misperception of reality, loss of negativity and thus compromise of critical intelligence, as well as desublimation, leading either to uncritical affirmation and acceptance (integration) or to distortion, alienation (disaffection, “neurosis”) but, much more insidiously than in the reification characteristic of modernity (again, according to Lukács, Adorno, and the Marxist tradition), attended by an intensification of pleasure and diversion, and thus by compulsion and even addiction. We might say, a new human being is being created in the current

disintegration: more surveillance, more distrust, an ever-greater insistence on the power of images and computation to rectify a situation that is produced by our unquestioning belief in their authority” (Bridle 186).

¹⁹ “Mediatization,” in contrast to mediation, is a more specific concept in media theory focused on the role of communications media in the processes of identity, interaction, and political and other agency. That is, while mediation describes the role of an essential intervening or “mediating” factor in the relation of two subjects, or of a subject to an object or process, and is developed extensively as a concept in Marxist theory, “mediatization” emphasizes the role of modern communications media in this basic social process. For a discussion of the differences between the terms, see Couldry. For an in-depth discussion of the issue of contemporary mediatization as “colonization,” see Couldry and Meijas.

²⁰ See for example Simanowski, *Facebook Society* 161; *Waste* 71; *Data Love* 57.

media climate with the technological tools of the social media, smart phones, and innumerable apps and gadgets, but that far from being a “natural” development, this process is being very specifically engineered by Mark Zuckerberg, Sergey Brin, Jeff Bezos, et al. for reasons the rest of us have every reason to suspect and criticize. Of course these men are not comic book villains or evil geniuses; they are, indeed, simply very successful businessmen. But they are at the helm of a vast techno-economic machine that is ruling our lives in unprecedented ways, and our very *selves* may be at stake. Now, media critics like Stiegler, Han, or Simanowski are vitally engaged in critically tracking these contemporary developments, with varying degrees of optimism or hope about potential resistance or emancipation. What then can we literary scholars and critics add to the endeavor? It seems to me that we must explore our primary materials—novels, plays, poems and films—in search of engagement and redress, and address our students and peers in hopes of awakening critical consciousness in the conviction that literature has something productive to teach us in this, as in other respects. Precisely because it is the quintessential literary form that emerged from modern inquiries into the relationship between the individual and society, and psychological explorations of interiority, mood, affect, and lived personal experience, the novel continues (despite diminished notice in many sectors of the contemporary mediascape) to be an enduring, vital medium for critically engaging the nexus of technology and human life. While it is possible that almost any good novel from the contemporary climate would reveal some important aspects of our contemporary life, I have chosen three texts by preeminent writers within their national contexts: Lerner in the States, Houellebecq in France, Saramago in Portugal (but subsequently, with the Nobel, more internationally), to reflect a growing critical consciousness of the problems of contemporary mediation in both Europe and America. These three novels, admittedly rather more in their content than in their form, challenge the contemporary “wrong life” I have been describing by depicting it in its oppression and ubiquity, and then hint at solutions or possible escapes.

José Saramago’s *The Cave* (2000) presents a compelling cautionary story of mediation, spectacle, consumerism, and surveillance that begins to address some of the pressing social and cultural concerns I discuss in this paper. *The Cave* is a simple tale of artisanal (ecologically-sustainable) rural communal culture against an ascendant consumerist, neoliberal capitalist, urban, controlled order. Saramago quite simply suggests, with a reprise of Plato’s

allegory of the cave, that we contemporaries are living in a false mediated world of manipulation and injustice (thus caught up in “wrong life”—as Adorno would say) but are so bamboozled by our consumer hedonism (and attendant ideologies) that we are losing the very sense of our subjection—and getting very close to losing any ground for resistance. Despite the comic, ironic tone of the novel, so typical of Saramago, the story is quite serious, and pessimistic indeed.

Cipriano Algor, an ageing potter who typifies an earlier era of rural, artisanal labor, lives with his married daughter, Marta, and son-in-law Marçal Gacho (the latter only for a few days every month) in rural calm. He had been surviving by making ceramic tableware, but is made obsolete by the modern development of the so-called Centre, a sort of mall-cum-gated community/apartment complex in the center of “the City” that is growing in its reach and influence. Although Saramago’s sensibility remains very Portuguese (or Iberian), the novel is notably not set in any specific country or region, serving as a parable with more general applicability than most of his earlier novels. When the Centre cancels its exclusive contract for Algor’s pottery, he finds himself without work or purpose. Gradually he and his daughter are compelled to join the son-in-law and move into the Centre. As usual in Saramago there is a matter-of-fact romance involved (the neighbor Isaura Madruga) and a significant dog (Achado or “Found”),²¹ but the main point of the story is that modernization, social pressure, and integration are all pushing the Algors towards acceptance of the consumerist-surveillance-spectacle offered by the Centre as the model of contemporary living. Saramago subtly develops a sense of community and value around Cipriano that he contrasts to the advertisements about and practices of the commercial Centre. Ineluctably the Algors are pushed towards the Centre but we, and they, have the sense that the new order is false and oppressive—destructive precisely of the simple rural family values we see developed slowly over the first half of the novel as the father-daughter potter pair switch from making tableware to creating a batch of small, clay, humanoid figurines they hope (in vain) to sell to the Centre.

²¹ On dogs and Saramago, see Salzani and Vanhoutte 193-210. The dog, indeed, serves as facilitator of community in many of Saramago’s works and can also be seen as a rare positive aspect in Houellebecq’s as well (see below).

Those values are not so much explicitly spelled out as gently exemplified in the first half of the novel. Class solidarity (Saramago 11; 22),²² helping strangers (15; 26), thinking oneself into others' situations (23; 35), and simple kindness (107; 131), as well as "respect for mere human decency" (31; "por respeito às conveniências simplesmente humanas" [44]) are contrasted with the easy and convenient (7; 17) life of the Centre, in fact governed by market principles, entirely commodified, and subject to surveillance and control.²³ When Marçal first takes his family on a visit, Saramago comically enumerates the attractions of the Centre, "the perfect distributor of material and spiritual goods" (244; 292):

a carousel of horses, a carousel of space rockets, a centre for toddlers, a centre for the Third Age, a tunnel of love, a suspension bridge, a ghost train, an astrologer's tent, a betting shop, a rifle range, a golf course, a luxury hospital, another slightly less luxurious hospital, a bowling alley, a billiard hall, a battery of table football games, a giant map, a secret door, another door with a notice on it saying experience natural sensations, rain, wind, and snow on demand, a wall of china, a taj mahal, an Egyptian pyramid, a temple of karnak, a real aqueduct that works twenty-four hours a day, a mafra monastery, a clerics' tower, a fjord, a summer sky with fluffy white clouds, a lake, a real palm tree, the skeleton of a tyrannosaurus, another one apparently alive, a himalayas complete with everest, an amazon river complete with indians, a stone raft, a corcovado christ, a Trojan horse, an electric chair, a firing squad, an angel playing a trumpet, a communications satellite, a comet, a galaxy, a large dwarf, a small giant, a list of prodigies so long that not even eighty years of leisure time would be enough to take them all in, even if you had been born in the Centre and had never left it for the outside world. (259; 308)

²² Citations are to the Vintage edition, translated by Margaret Jull Costa, followed by the Caminho original edition.

²³ "The organization of the Centre had been conceived and set up according to a model of strict compartmentalization of its various activities and functions, which, although they were not and could not be entirely separate, were only able to communicate with each other via particular channels that were often hard to disentangle and identify" (26; 39).

In short, it seems to be something between Disneyland and Dubai, a paradise of hedonism and spectacle. But, at the same time, there are security guards, detectors, video cameras, and other devices of surveillance (231; 277): so, controlled and policed leisure and what Wolfgang Streeck calls “obligatory hedonistic consumption” (45). And we see the scorched earth of the periphery outside of the Agricultural and Industrial belts serving the City—a matter of ecological and cultural control. Clearly, extrapolating from his experiences in Portugal and elsewhere in the 1990s, Saramago is describing the contemporary spectacular-consumerist-hedonist urban commodity culture of late capitalism, to which we, at this later date, can add Amazon (mid 90s), YouTube (2005), and Facebook (2006) to get our contemporary capital-digital paradise.²⁴ The mediations may have grown more intense, as Stiegler, Han and others discuss, but the fundamental message remains: we are on a crash course towards catastrophe and everyone is so caught up in hedonist trivialities, even as economic and ecological precarity press closer and closer, that possibilities of redress are diminishing daily.

For us today, potential impending catastrophes include the ecological consequences of consumer capitalism, to say nothing of the threats of misguided xenophobic, nationalist populisms arising in response to the continued privatizations and deregulations of neoliberalism. Saramago is more concerned with spiritual than ecological consequences here, though. He seems to be talking about what Herbert Marcuse once famously dubbed “repressive desublimation” (a concept which Stiegler has found reason to revive, with modifications, in its interrelation with the so-called “performance principle” so dominant today in our precarious entrepreneurial society; see *Lost Spirit* 54).²⁵ Our easy access to commodities, our lack of social and subsequently psychological restraints,²⁶ and our hedonistic excesses lead only to

²⁴ Digital “consumerist capitalism has taken control of the transindividuation process through a hegemonic monopolization of the retentional supports and systems that condition all psychic and collective individuation” (Stiegler, *States* 63).

²⁵ Wendy Brown has also recently resuscitated Marcuse’s concept to try to understand contemporary racist, misogynist, and trollish political culture, especially in America (*In* 165). See Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* 56-83; *Eros* 78-105.

²⁶ Stiegler, borrowing from Peter Sloterdijk, talks in this respect of “disinhibition” in contemporary society (Sloterdijk 57-65; Stiegler, *Age* 238-45): “The disruption now underway, as a new stage of the organization of disinhibition and an extremization of those tendencies characteristic of the Anthropocene, is at the same time being extended to the entire planet, via digital networks functioning

dissatisfaction, anomie, and emptiness—and thus to opioids, gun violence, trolling, and so forth.²⁷ Saramago clearly believes here that a more basic “fulfillment of their own lives and their own vital needs” (Adorno, qtd. in Freyenhagen 2) is being denied to people in the obfuscations and diversions of contemporary consumerist culture.

Although he warns (somewhat ironically) against a merely nostalgic or romantic positing of pre-modern values against this new world—“Let us jettison any feelings of nostalgia which will only hinder and hold us back, Cipriano had said with unusual vehemence, progress moves implacably forwards, and we have no option but to keep pace with it, and woe to those who, fearful of future upheavals, are left sitting by the roadside weeping for a past that was no better than the present” (159; 193)—Saramago clearly wants to suggest that certain communal values and moral instincts (from an unquestionably brutal and unjust past) are deeply at risk in the brave new world of late capitalism and its notion of progress.²⁸

The cave (*a caverna*) of the title refers to a scene near the end of the novel when an excavation underneath the Centre reveals a cave (*uma gruta*) into which Cipriano Algor sneaks one night in order to find out for himself what the authorities have been keeping secret. There he finds the mummified corpses of three men and three women chained facing a wall in a set up very much like that described in Plato’s *Republic* book seven [514a-518c] (Saramago 280; 332). This revelation had been foreshadowed in a dream of Cipriano earlier in the novel (160; 194) when he dreamed himself to be attached to a bench in his kiln and forced to stare at a wall while shadows and voices came from behind. At the end of the narrative, when his daughter asks him what he and Marçal saw in the excavated cave, he explains, concluding: “they are us” (282; 334). They

at two thirds light speed. Among its effects is the breakdown of inherited territorial immunities—in the United States and everywhere else—heritages, cultures, and social structures originally emerging from their origin [provenance], and not from this advance. All this does nothing but prepare the way for an immense counter-reaction, as it triggers a chain reaction of incalculable consequences” (*Age* 124).

²⁷ Of course this is complicated. It is not just a matter of having everything, thus desublimation, but equally a matter of NOT having all the things that are out there and available for the few who can afford but are blatantly denied the *hoi polloi*, so also resentment, anger, feeling left behind, etc. So, as originally, the concept of repressive desublimation is problematic and limited, but still compelling as far as it goes. See Stiegler, *Lost Spirit*, 42-82 for a detailed discussion.

²⁸ As Adorno writes, “As little as humanity *tel quel* progresses by the advertising slogan of the ever new and improved, so little can there be an idea of progress without the idea of humanity” (“Progress” 145).

are characters who are caught in a mere simulacrum of the good life—but living a false and empty, manipulative and exploitative existence, as appendages of the machine, so to speak: living dead. The novel ends as the Algor group gathers together in his van to escape from the city and this grim fate to a completely unknown future.

There is another cave [*uma cova*] in the novel though, described earlier when the Centre has cancelled the contract for the Algors' pottery and had Cipriano come pick up all the unsold pieces. Not knowing what to do with all of this earthenware, Cipriano decides to store it all in a natural cave by the river, an "ideal hollow" (Saramago 130; "a cova ideal" [158]). There he carefully unloads all of the unused pottery, "stored away until the day when they are needed again" (146-47; "que fique assim, ocultas, resguardadas, até ao dia em que novamente venham a ser precisas" [178]). This way the "Cave" of the title becomes ambiguous. While it clearly refers to the cave of the famous allegory borrowed to suggest mistaken values, false consciousness, and wrong living, it also has a positive dimension as the storage place for a once and future bounty based on the values and qualities of the past. Saramago, in 2000, seems to hold on to the hope that such values and qualities might be revived.

While I am somewhat reluctant to bring in the controversial (yet much celebrated) Michel Houellebecq to the current discussion, given his very different philosophical outlook, his scandalous sexism and Islamophobia, and so forth, I do think it interesting that in his futurist imagination of a post-human world from 2005, *La possibilité d'une île*, Houellebecq continues his diagnosis of the atomization of contemporary society by extrapolating a complete loss of affect and loss of (human) community leading to the extreme isolation of his characters in islands connected digitally but worlds apart, in the midst of scorched earth, ecological disaster, and a veritable apocalypse of the human. Houellebecq is again in this novel a key witness to the complex process of individualization/disindividuation that I identified above in Han and Stiegler. Communities are falling apart and individuals are left to fend for themselves even as their moral and imaginative resources are leached out and they are left with almost nothing of substance to support them in their isolation. What results are desperate attempts at connection or community in sex, consumption, and cults; or hopeless, disaffected isolation and despair (and, effectively, suicide). Though his depiction of contemporary France, with its media stars and sex cults, has nothing whatsoever to do with the world of Saramago's artisan, his future

scenario, minus the hedonism—which exhausts itself in the meantime through extreme desublimation—can be seen as a sort of possible ending for this world of isolation, consumerism, and surveillance. Eventually the rich simply leave the human race behind, after achieving immortality through cloning, and retreat to gated islands to pursue their own isolated (and refined) pleasures as the rest of the world burns and starves (all in all, a plausible scenario given the growing gap between the supernational billionaires and the rest of us). Houellebecq, a pessimistic misanthrope, seems at times to suggest “Good Riddance!” at the loss of the human, but he nonetheless identifies the deep human need for community and connection as central to understanding the catastrophe of the current social-economic system, though he certainly ridicules feeble quasi-religious attempts within the contemporary world to regain a sense of community against the pull of hedonist consumerist capitalism.²⁹ A good example of his take on the current world is this description of Esther, Daniel 1’s last love:

In Esther’s generation, these debates [around the question of which economic regime one should wish for] themselves had disappeared; capitalism was for her a natural habitat, in which she moved with the grace that characterized all the actions in her life; to strike in protest of planned redundancies would have seemed to her as absurd as striking against the weather getting colder, or the invasion of North Africa by crickets. The idea of any form of collective demand was generally foreign to her; it had always seemed obvious to her that, on the financial level as for all the essential questions of life, everyone had to look after themselves, and sail their own ships without relying on help from anyone else. (Houellebecq, *Possibility* 133)³⁰

²⁹ Real religion, notably Islam, is another matter, treated (problematically) in his subsequent book, *La soumission*, with typical cynicism and humor.

³⁰ “Dans la génération d’Esther, ces débats eux-mêmes [autour de la question du régime économique souhaitable] avaient disparu; le capitalisme était pour elle un milieu naturel où elle se mouvait avec l’aisance qui la caractérisait dans tous les actes de sa vie; une manifestation contre un plan de licenciements lui aurait paru aussi absurde qu’une manifestation contre le rafraîchissement du temps, ou l’invasion de l’Afrique du Nord par les criquets pèlerins. Toute idée de revendication collective lui était plus généralement étrangère, il lui paraissait évident depuis toujours que sur le plan financier comme pour toutes les questions essentielles de la vie chacun devait se défendre seul, et mener sa propre barque sans compter sur l’aide de personne” (Houellebecq, *Possibilité* 179-80).

Perfectly interiorized neoliberal capitalism, then, with subsequent loss of sympathy and any meaningful notion of community, is the image of youth for Houellebecq. Avoiding for the purposes of the current discussion the blatant misogyny of Houellebecq in this, as in his other novels, I simply take the contemporary sections of *La possibilité d'une île* to depict a hyper-individualized, consumerist society which Houellebecq's protagonist seems to master without for a moment believing in it.

In his cynical depiction of the "good life" of late capitalism, Houellebecq certainly finds no meaning or value whatsoever, though he depicts it with verve and humor. An example of the world of Daniel 1, the rising comedian, in something like contemporary France:

During the first phases of my rise to fortune and glory, I had occasionally tasted the joys of consumption, by which our epoch shows itself so superior to those that preceded it. You could quibble forever over whether men were more or less happy in past centuries. You could comment on the disappearance of religions, the difficulty of feeling love, discuss the disadvantages and advantages of both; you could mention the appearance of democracy, the loss of our sense of the sacred, the crumbling of social ties. I myself had done such things, in a lot of sketches, though in a humorous way. You could even question scientific and technological progress, and be under the impression, for example, that the improvement of medical techniques had been at the cost of increasing social control and an overall decrease in *joie de vivre*. But it remains the case that, on the level of consumption, the preeminence of the twentieth century was indisputable: nothing, in any other civilization, in any other epoch, could compare itself to the mobile perfection of a contemporary shopping center functioning at full tilt. I had thus consumed, with joy, shoes most notably; then, gradually, I had grown weary, and I had understood that my life, without this daily input of basic,

renewable pleasures, was going to stop being simple.
(Houellebecq, *Possibility* 21)³¹

Apparently by this time Amazon.com had not yet fully taken off in France! All the consumerist choices of this pinnacle of civilization (similar to Saramago's Centre) without the effort of mobility, delay, or the threat of crowds of others. In any case, his dissatisfaction with shoes naturally leads Daniel to buy a Bentley Continental GT, and only later, after various sexual crises and a downturn in his career, does he turn to the religious-sexual cult; but cynically, without belief or much hope of belief.

As in Saramago, the dog, here "Fox," is the only vestige of meaningful relations with an other (besides the sad, early relationship with the ageing Isabelle), though he fails to make the protagonist Daniel more "human" and sensitive to others, unlike Found or any of the other dogs in Saramago. In the end of the book Daniel 25 has abandoned his enclave, and thus his immortality, and forever lost Fox, in a vain search for Marie 23 or any sort of connection, finding his isolation and immortality to be oppressive and, literally, a fate worse than death. Thus Houellebecq condemns the atomization of contemporary society, even as he casts doubt on practically all forms of communion open to us within our late-capitalist human world.

Saramago's book from 2000 and Houellebecq's from 2005 predate many of the intensified mediations—notably, mediatizations—I have referred to in the introduction, though its diagnosis and warning remain valid. For a more up-to-date assessment of our current world, we can finally turn to a very different sort of novel, equally celebrated and widely read, and obviously relevant to my

³¹ "Lors des premières phases de mon ascension vers la gloire et la fortune, j'avais occasionnellement goûté aux joies de la consommation, par lesquelles notre époque se montre si supérieure à celles qui l'ont précédée. On pouvait ergoter à l'infini pour savoir si les homes étaient ou non plus heureux dans les siècles passés; on pouvait commenter la disparition des cultes, la difficulté du sentiment amoureux, discuter leur inconvénients, leurs avantages; évoquer l'apparition de la démocratie, la perte du sens du sacré, l'effritement du lien social. Je ne m'en étais d'ailleurs pas privé, dans bien des sketches, quoique sur un mode humoristique. On pouvait même remettre en cause le progrès scientifique et technologique, avoir l'impression par exemple que l'amélioration des techniques médicales se payait par un contrôle social accru et une diminution globale de la joie de vivre. Reste que, sur le plan de la consommation, la précellence du XX^e siècle était indiscutable: rien, dans aucune autre civilisation, à aucune autre époque, ne pouvait se comparer à la perfection mobile d'un centre commercial contemporain fonctionnant à plein régime. J'avais ainsi consommé, avec joie, des chaussures principalement; puis peu à peu je m'étais lassé, et j'avais compris que ma vie, sans ce soutien quotidien de plaisirs à la fois élémentaires et renouvelés, allait cesser d'être simple" (Houellebecq, *Possibilité* 32-33).

discussion: Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014). In this autobiographical novel, "a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them" (194), Lerner explores concerns about paternity and about writing upon a backdrop of impending ecological disaster in contemporary New York. Again, the book could hardly be more different from Saramago, but it adds the ubiquitous technological mediations of smartphones and the internet—*Wikipedia*, Facebook, YouTube, Amazon, Google—to a critical diagnosis of a civilization deep within the cave staring at simulacra even while the time bomb of ecological disaster, abetted by the consumer capitalism on display in the book, ticks down. The most recent and relevant of the novels discussed here, *10:04* also most fully explores the interior psychological—neurotic—consequences of the mediations I have been criticizing; the ironic cerebrality of the narrator clearly functions as a defense against the insidious forces of contemporary mediation.

In various ways the story exemplifies the "wrong life" of contemporary America while ironically commenting on it. At one point early in the novel, stocking up for a coming storm (Superstorm Sandy, 2012), the narrator looks at a package of coffee and speculates about commodity fetishism: "It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura—the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close" (Lerner 19). While such passages can be overly clever, and despite their irony can certainly be accused of hypocrisy, the book clearly seeks to indict a whole way of life that is both woefully inauthentic and catastrophically costly.³²

Throughout the book, the otherwise rather sociable narrator feels an urge for community, for something missing from the atomized, consumer society of contemporary New York. He has intimations of this in his activities in Zucotti Park during the Occupy Wall Street days (2011), though this is heavily ironized by the narrator's typically over-acute self-consciousness, for instance when he

³² "Capital flows like a river across national frontiers, and causes flooding and proliferation, desiccation and drought, and not only in the metaphorical sense. The total effect is like that of a world-wide natural disaster, man-made though unplanned. Yet the whole thing unfolds with the help of precise technologies and calculated strategies of profit maximization, rational in the particular but irrational overall" (Safrański 7).

hosts an Occupy participant and begins to feel a paternal sense of care (rather than a properly political sense of solidarity):

So that is how it works, I said to myself, as if I'd caught an ideological mechanism in flagrante delicto: you let a young man committed to anticapitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent and, while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of a bourgeois household. . . . Your gesture of briefly placing a tiny part of the domestic—your bathroom—into the commons leads you to redescribe the possibility of collective politics as the private drama of the family. . . . What you need to do is harness the self-love you are hypostasizing as offspring, as the next generation of you, and let it branch out horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and co-construct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit. (Lerner 47)

Clearly this narrator will not be leading the way in forging such a subject or community, but he acutely feels its lack and its necessity.

Later, this urge is described in terms of art, his most likely contribution to the cause. While experiencing a sense of the “urban sublime,” the narrator feels an “intuition of community” (Lerner 108) which is linked in his mind with Walt Whitman:

“whenever I looked at lower Manhattan from Whitman’s side of the river I resolved to become one of those artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body” (108-09).

This flicker resonates with Jonathan Crary’s liminal experience on the threshold of sleep, where despite his solitude he can imagine a sort of dream community: “in the context of our own present, sleep can stand for the durability of the social, and that sleep might be analogous to other thresholds at which society could

defend or protect itself” (24). Later Cray explains this counter-intuitive analogy: “Located somewhere on the border between the social and the natural, sleep ensures the presence in the world of the phasic and cyclical patterns essential to life and incompatible with capitalism” (127). He continues, “[t]he restorative inertness of sleep counters the deathliness of all the accumulation, financialization, and waste that have devastated anything once held in common. Now there is actually only one dream, superseding all others: it is of a shared world whose fate is not terminal, a world without billionaires, which has a future other than barbarism or the post-human, and in which history can take on other forms than reified nightmares of catastrophe” (128). The very irrecoverability of sleep for the purposes of profit and exploitation hints at the possibility of a communal life that is itself free of these, despite sleep itself being rather isolating and individualizing. Sleep and dreams disclose a glimmer of the post-capitalist collective.

These three recent novels offer three appeals to a community that might give meaning to contemporary over-mediated life and form the basis of a resistance to the socio-economic system which causes such malaise even while destroying the planet and our collective future. Saramago’s community is the simplest, based in the family. Houellebecq’s seems to rest on some hope against hope in love as forming a bond that could be the basis of some kind of solidarity and meaning beyond *eros*. Lerner aches for a community that can resist the status quo and genuinely embody different values than those of plutocratic authoritarian (neo-)liberalism and the society of the digital spectacle.

Whether figured in a ceramic jug, or a dog, or Lerner’s own self-conscious novel, all three works share this dream of an alternative to “the reified nightmares of catastrophe” that Adorno, too, harbored in his famous vision in “Sur l’Eau” (*Minima Moralia* #100): “Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars” (156). He continues,

A mankind which no longer knows want will begin to have the inkling of the delusory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to reproduce want on a large scale. Enjoyment itself would be affected, just as its present framework is inseparable from

operating, planning, having one's way, subjugating. *Rien faire comme une bête*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, 'being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfillment. (156-57)

A beautiful image, though not communal. Adorno, like Ben Lerner or Michel Houellebecq for that matter, will still need his own private, autonomous space whatever the lineaments of the community to come. None of these works, fictional or critical, dare to envision fully what that community might look like, but they all negatively help us get a sense of its necessity.

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