

Doom the digital

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#1

On the 16th of October, the last weekend before the second lockdown, my flat mate invited me to the restaurant. The company where she works had showered its employees with countless "consumptiecheques"¹, aimed at giving a boost to consumption, and by extension to the otherwise wavering (market) economy.

While thrilled at the prospect of going out, and of having a delicious dinner paid for, all throughout the meal I had to push, with a smile, the dystopian air I sensed. Indeed, our table, like all the others, was surrounded by plastic sheds, and we ourselves were sitting next to a large window. I could visualize us from the outside, and found the scene identical to this soviet illustration by Gorazd Čelechovský. In what he imagines as a utopia, human society is no longer riddled by manual labour and can devote itself to intellectual tasks and leisure².



ČELECHOVSKÝ, G. 1967A. ETAREA. STUDIE ŽIVOTNÍHO PROSTŘEDÍ MĚSTA [ETAREA. A STUDY OF URBAN LIVING ENVIRONMENT]. PRAGUE: STÁTNÍ KOMISE PRO TECHNIKU & PRAŽSKÝ PROJEKTOVÝ ÚSTAV.

The parallel that overwhelmed me was that of these transparent spaces, made uniform and cold—and yet supposed to sustain leisurely activities and otherwise joyful occupations. It sends shivers through my body that Čelechovský (like so many) considers precisely this body, and all attaining manual and physical labour, a hindrance to get rid of. Etearea, the “utopia” in

¹ <https://affiliation-chequeconsommation.edenred.be/?lang=nl&template=>

² Bassem Saad, *Betraying the profession: Design Labour against Technocracy*. Published online, Tuesday 6 October 2020. <https://failedarchitecture.com/betraying-the-profession-design-labour-against-technocracy/>

question, holds rationality and order as supreme—a machinist “purity” I can only regard as dystopian, and the exact reason our contemporary bodily experiences are carried through with so much pain.

#2

I was beginning to work around the same time as this restaurant outing. All throughout, I started to have the impression that most of the leisure available in our society (and put on hold due to the coronavirus) was aimed at compensating the far too intense and draining nature of work—this same intellectual, supposedly liberating (and liberated) work dreamed by Čelechovský, and a whole chunk of our civilization.

Indeed, this division and hierarchy of work was intensified with the measures relating to the Covid-19. While everyone was advised to stay at home, work from home, shop from home, those workers who dealt manually with labour were deemed “essential” and had to still walk the streets and the shops and, essentially, be less safe than everyone else. Because far from having measures which were in line with this seemingly gratifying title, “essential workers” had to bear continuing business as usual with limited protection and sometimes decreased pay.³

#3

With the dystopian image etched in my perception after the restaurant outing, every urban setting started weighing on me, from the glass and aluminum panels of empty shops and galleries to completely individualized crowds, each (including me) staring at their smartphones or seemingly speaking to themselves, through earphones, airpods and other technological machinery. I was feeling regularly claustrophobic, and the quotidian acquired a suffocating and saturated air that I had never experienced in the city.

#4

The shower of information and speculation of the origins and the behaviour of the Covid-19 virus adds to the complete saturation of our perceptive canals in contemporary Europe. I would specify that this saturation comes not only from our addiction to smartphones and social media platforms, but more broadly to the:

- Increasing specificity and automation of a political system and the correlated administration, something I was overwhelmed by when taking the necessary steps to become an “independent” worker.
- The loss of tangibility with political life becoming increasingly removed from the quotidian and wrapped in abstract technocratic language and

³ FARKAS, A. 28/03/2020. “Il est plus que temps de polémiquer”. Online : Gauche Anticapitaliste. Retrieved on 11/12/2020. https://www.gaucheanticapitaliste.org/il-est-plus-que-temps-de-polemiquer/?fbclid=IwAR1LQIBX3YgK6mbfABuP0WKbpHBAGxXOqkuOsqV2TZQKU5ofQWGIG2DZ_ew

processes—some speak of algorithm-run democracy⁴, and others see salvation in it⁵.

- The visual saturation of space, from multiplied street signs to luminous and now animated advertisements, occupying streets, avenues, bus and metro stations, and all other transportation nodes—not to mention human-inhabited areas that are constantly illuminated⁶.
- The auditory saturation of the urban realm, from vehicles and crowds to ever-increasing police sirens.

I am certainly not the first to point out the suffocating nature of urbanity (after all, this has been in public and bourgeois vision of the ideal living since the industrial revolution⁷), nor to be disturbed by the layered alienations of contemporary life, and particularly that induced by the digital world. But I do have the lingering worry that the measures taken through the Covid-19 pandemic are the last straw in instituting a control society, one that has as many heads as members⁸, a power form no longer crystallized in the ruling family, or the bourgeoisie, but in the very digital system absorbing (and sometimes suffocating) a growing chunk of our lived experience⁹. I think for example of the opaque tracing systems for those contaminated by the Covid-19. At least in Belgium, several tracing platforms were deployed throughout the pandemic. We are indeed getting traced, but it is much too complicated to get tested safely and efficiently, should we deem it necessary, if the data of our proximity to the virus did not reach the tracing platforms. Testing is a derivative of the tracking, not of our agency over our health and bodies.

In other words, it does feel like the specificity of our time is the narrowing grip of the system's mesh (and hence of dominant power). With the measures of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the absurdity of many, our entire social fabric must

⁴ For more, see for example LOBE, A. 2019-12-27. "Predictive Politics: When Algorithms Will Run Our Democracy". Online: *Suddeutsche Zeitung*. Retrieved from *World Crunch* on 11/12/2020.

<https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/predictive-politics-when-algorithms-will-run-our-democracy>

⁵ Though perhaps traditionalist, I read in the thirst of transmitting our life matters to artificial intelligence a profound fear and despise of humans and by extension, life. See for example the *Lebanocracia* platform, bypassing direct action, potential conflict and diluting political aspirations in a purely statistical, by generating an algorithm-oriented 'democracy'. Of the critiques that could be formulated is that the digital literacy on which such a system relies is high, and definitely not common amongst all classes in Lebanon, the focus of the platform. See for reference <https://lebanocracia.org/> and <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1195962/une-plate-forme-numerique-de-revendications.html>

⁶ Belgium is one country where observing the sky is very difficult because of luminous pollution.

Bennie, J., Davies, T., Duffy, J. *et al.* Contrasting trends in light pollution across Europe based on satellite observed night time lights. *Sci Rep* **4**, 3789 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep03789>

⁷ See for example this reading list by ANGELO, H. Online: *Places Journal*. Retrieved on 09/11/2020.

<https://placesjournal.org/reading-list/nature-in-the-city/?cn-reloaded=1>

⁸ See DELEUZE, G.'s work on control societies. For example this conference: DELEUZE, G. "Qu'est-ce que l'acte de la creation?". 17/03/1987. Online: published on YouTube 15/10/2013. Retrieved 18/11/2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ybvji_Pk7M&t=521s

⁹ See for example the work by Jennifer Gabrys who aims at rendering digital the perceptual aspect of the relationship of humans to their environment. <https://www.jennifergabrys.net/program-earth/>

now be altered. You can't really meet friends anymore, not without risking transmission of a potentially deadly virus (but also potentially asymptomatic). The digital is always an option, but I have yet to derive a fire to organize politically from my screens. I am compelled to find our times dystopian when the Belgian authorities (would like to) know where each resident travelled¹⁰, what coffee shop or restaurant they went to, and who they've seen¹¹—for public safety purposes, we are told. And this system wouldn't summon such a sense of dystopian doom if there was any proven benevolence on the behalf of the system—but it is the police that got further funding during the pandemic, not the care providers, healers and therapists that can advise the rest of us on how to improve our immune systems and overall health, sometimes through activities as simple as foraging and belly breathing. And as early as the month of March, medical professionals had to launch crowd-fundings¹².

#5

The saturation and *ras-le-bol* I experienced against the urban quotidian was amplified by beginning my professional life in the design field. After being promised accomplishment and satisfaction throughout studies which push students at *producing* meaningful, useful, and beautiful designs, I was confronted with the hierarchical dynamics of the workplace. On top of insufficient pay, most co-workers stayed overtime, communicated much too little, and directions for work rained down on me, a newbie, from highly positioned individuals. What made matters worse is that hierarchy was not clear: indeed, where I found myself, no one went by director or “chief of operation”—to be cool and avant-garde, in this office, hierarchy was overlooked and ignored. Yet, acting as if it weren't there only amplified it, because I was the one getting paid less than a living wage and still expected to perform beautifully, not the person raining down directions; hierarchy weighed as a proper elephant in the room.

I was not introduced to “colleagues”, projects were only half presented to me, I was made to feel bad for not being available constantly and give 150% of what I could give (although a part-time position was the starting agreement). Giving more than one could was actually rewarded in the pay system, or so it seemed to me. And worst of all was that the labour I was allocated was so regardless of my specific skills or my ambitions, and how these could potentially serve the

¹⁰ For example, the app of the Brussels region, Coronalert, is a byproduct of the trace & track strategy.

¹¹ See the contact tracing center: https://www.brussel.be/hoewerkt-contactopvolging?_ga=2.249286791.1815907549.1607713432-760862972.1607713432 and its application to restaurant customers, for example: <https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/societe/registre-de-coordonnees-dans-les-etablissements-horeca-en-pratique-la-situation-est-difficilement-gerable-1233460.aspx>

¹² See the call for donations launched by a large university hospital in Brussels, Chu Saint-Pierre. <https://www.stpierre-bru.be/fr/nos-actualites/coronavirus-appel-urgent-aux-dons>

company's aims. Even from an exploitative capitalist point of view, the work dynamic did not make sense to me.

And all throughout, I was confronted with the alienating nature of my work. Although I am now making it a point to gravitate towards labour increasingly anchored in the real (or the physical and manual), the persisting digital nature of design work has me (and my eyes) itching in front of the screen, looking for satisfaction and, not finding it, estimating that "at least I'm lucky to have a job. It's paid like shit, but here I am."

The shock was great, and perhaps more so because throughout our studies, we really are promised creative, fulfilling and rewarding careers. Only in the last year of my masters did I get a glimpse of the juridical system and how complicated it was to navigate. And yet, each question about taxes and related administration that I addressed to tutors was overlooked and silenced—as if I was tapping on a taboo, or a theme that these tutors could not, or did not want to, discuss. I still insist: why are students not taught basic accounting skills?

And so, it seemed that my whole seven years of studying had failed at giving me the necessary tools to navigate the workplace, and not be fooled (or overwhelmed) repeatedly by dynamics, procedures, and systems. Which left me wondering: is this a failure of the educational system, or does it find it convenient to shape motivated youth that are then crushed in the capitalistic workplace?

What added to the overall doom was the disrespect I was faced with in these new workplaces. While the quotidian is also saturated with slogans advocating for inclusivity, against any form of discrimination (ageism being one), I was astounded to feel that one needed to be over 40 years old, and accumulate titles and mundane lines on their CV, plus a couple of degrees and a PhD, before one's voice was worth listening to.

#6

And yet, as we settle into lockdown once more, I gain a renewed reassurance. Being removed from the quotidian in the safety of my home is the very consequence of the dystopian reality I tried to spell out in this article. Paradoxically, it makes me feel nothing short of safe in a routine that I choose and that reminds me of the long and introspective boredom of my childhood—a quotidian which was borderline claustrophobic, but which persists in my remembrance with the warmth of abundant sunshine. With this familiarity under the skin, I indeed do feel safe in my home, and I indeed do find satisfaction in curating my digital spaces. So perhaps I am, indeed, lucky. Sometimes loved ones invite me for delicious meals, and other times I can reflect on the dystopian quotidian of urbanity, political systems, and labour in De Wereld Morgen.