

Maria Grajdian

Cyberspaces of Loneliness
Love, Masculinity, Japan

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Entangled Identities

It was at the beginning of January 2018 that my attention was accidentally drawn to a short-story, "Concession Stand Girl", posted online as a response to another short-story, "Cat Person", published previously in *The New Yorker*, and followed by huge ovations. Both short-stories dealt with the same plot – a 20-year old female student is approached by a 34-year old man at the cinema shop where she works part-time, and then their interaction unfolds – seen from the woman's (the original one, "Cat Person"), respectively from the man's perspective (the response, "Concession Stand Girl").

I shall not go too deeply into the qualitative details of the two short-stories. Much more I was struck by the crudeness of the plot, the blunt mediocrity of the characters and the manner in which their mutual development evolves purely on a virtual level, initially, without a direct face-to-face discussion. The plot consists of a random chain of interactions between two strangers; the speed at which they get involved into sexual activity is, in my probably very crude vision, astonishing. The characters have no depth, no personal thoughts moving beyond the very immediate reality, no dreams and apparently hardly any past to speak of. Not very familiar with US-American standards of life, apart from Hollywood movies and my own observations during two 2-week trips to Ann Arbor, Oklahoma and New York, I did what I usually do when I feel confronted with situations which seem important, yet I feel I myself cannot grasp the clear dimensions of the facts:

anthropologizing, de-anthropologizing, re-anthropologizing, culminating in over-anthropologizing ... that is, I started thinking about what makes us human, and about what exactly had created this effect of “surreal inhumanity” in the stories and the lifestyles they depicted.

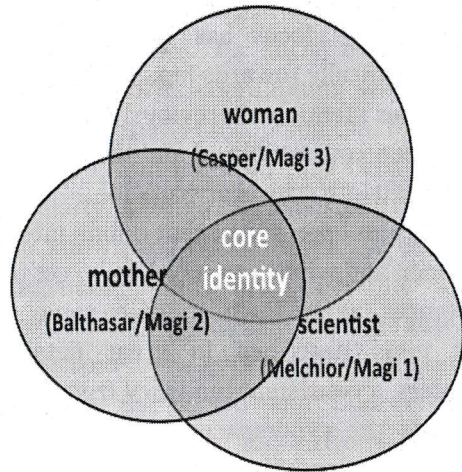
Rather than looking at the embedding of the individual within its respective social system of reference, the anthropological perspective strives to take into account the individual as a system of reference in itself – and its relations to its environment as a departure point in the assessment of historical tides. As such, because it refers to the fundamental individual and its coordination within the immediate or mediated environment, the anthropological focus resides in the forthcoming analysis both on the individual behavior and on its social intertwining, particularly in terms of establishing one-to-one meaningful interactions – also known as “relationships”. It was not so much the sociocultural background, I intuited, but rather a type of human perception and processing of reality and then the externalization of the results which came across to me as disturbing, haunting, dysfunctional – in the two short-stories, “Cat Person” and “Concession Stand Girl”. The parallel movement of alienation and extreme immediate intimacy, increasingly visible in dating practices all over the world, but most prominently experienced in affluent, post-industrialized, service-based societies (USA, Japan, Australia, Canada, European Union) emerges from two major sources: on the one hand, the illusionary benefits of instant gratification; on the other hand, the delusional waves of continuous self-validation by means of external attention – futile and superficial, but constant. Eventually, the virtual reality becomes the reality itself for those indulging into it. The very fabric of human existence is embedded within a profound sense of belonging, and the more we distance ourselves from it, the more the illusion of strength and invincibility within the walls we had surrounded ourselves with, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, takes over our necessities. Role-models of fiercely independent individuals, incredibly, irresistibly charismatic in their

untouchable beauty are widely promoted by mainstream media, via characters carefully constructed, thus fully obliterating the loneliness and isolation, the slow inner death which such a lifestyle involves.

The ideas outlined in this volume are the result of a three-year empiric-phenomenological fieldwork (summer 2013-summer 2016) in the slippery domain of virtual inter-gender interactions as well as in-depth literature research on new media, gender/masculinity studies and entertainment industry; during the evaluation phase (summer 2016-summer 2019), the focus has shifted from an international perspective more specifically towards Japan. Triggerred by the lecture of those two short-stories mentioned previously, the data gathered during the fieldwork has been contextualized and theoretically evaluated, and eventually transformed into critical articulation.

Nowadays, it is an open secret that online interactions represent the main way for men and women to socialize, to get to know each other and, if circumstances allow it, to pursue some sort of romantic relationship. As it is described in great detail throughout the forthcoming chapters, a consistent tendency from real-life inter-human interactions towards the cyberspaces which provide the illusion of safety through anonymity and disengagement is painfully observable in the last ten to fifteen years in all affluent societies of late modernity – and generously proliferating worldwide. While it takes into account the various mechanisms which have been contributing to this phenomenon, the current book brings in the latter half into the spotlight the role played by fluctuating paradigms in constructing and representing masculinity, in a dramatic combination of domestic developments in Japan with international influences no longer sanctioned or filtered by official policies. It takes under the microscope the dialectical interplay of power, (cultural) consumption and state-driven reproduction politics, and suggests some possible measures towards a more social-friendly future of the digital universe and of the challenges masculinity is facing currently, in a global perspective.

The dialectics of the human being involves three fundamental levels, as identified by psychoanalysis and largely adapted by the *Neon Genesis Evangelion* franchise in Japan (explicitly detailed in episode 13 of the original TV anime series, 1995-1996: the Magi-System Super-Computer designed by dr. Akagi Naoko upon her own identity): the female actor appears as a layered combination of motherhood, (sexual) femininity and social citizen.



Dr. Akagi Naoko's Magi-System Super-Computer (my own design)

This can be transposed, more largely, for the male element: fatherhood, (sexual) masculinity and social citizen. They are interrelated, and they are the foundation of the Judeo-Christian Western modernity, with its values of respect, responsibility, loyalty, resulting in that sense of competitiveness, progress and efficiency which have been constituting the major drives – and triggers – of recent history (Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution*, 1965). Jean-Paul Sartre's "L'homme est libre" (*L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, 1970) existential paradigm sees individual freedom and individual liberation as well as empowerment as absolute values above the stability and sustainability of the "system", while capitalist dynamics pushes

scientific-technological development forward based on the illusions of freedom and equality. However, as Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, 1955) repeatedly points out, freedom for its own sake is conducive to loneliness in isolation, and in the fundamental distinction between loneliness and solitude the acceptance of one's own transience is found: a complex juxtaposition of self-love and self-esteem, comprised of honest self-evaluation, self-respect and self-compassion.

For decades, scholars have been mentioning the dangers of praising individual achievements and honors over the immediate (family) or mediate (community) embedding, highlighting the unpredictable effects urbanization and industrialization, the two main components of modernization, have had on the perception and processing of the individual itself and of its surroundings. In *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (1992), Anthony Giddens sees the necessity of love as a self-confident engine of individuality within the stream of constant change and progress which is the world as a mechanical – and recently, virtual – entity. In various books (*Postmodern Ethics* 1993, *Liquid Modernity* 2000, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* 2001, *The Individualized Society* 2001, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* 2003), Zygmunt Bauman extensively analyzes the deep and mostly negative impact of urban isolation and the impossibility to return to a highly idealized past of pastoral family harmony and communal support and understanding. In fact, premodern communities, in their desperate efforts to survive and thrive in a lawless, chaotic context, would often apply brutal methods to ensure their own protection as a community, whereas the individual more often than not was crushed under the prioritization of the group to which it belonged. Current times experience the rise of the completely isolated individual, the "self-sufficient individual", gradually inescapably wired in the virtual world with a life mostly controlled by digital devices which replace the contact with other human beings. Research shows, though, that daily

consistent connection and closeness between human beings are fundamentally important for the biological, emotional and mental survival. The illusion of connectedness through virtually mediated communication results from the multitude of options the individual is facing continuously, while everyone is an option to several others: individual spark and depth are irreconcilably lost in the apparently safe space of cyber-anonymity.

In his seminal work from 1996 *The Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel Castells analyzes in great detail the possible repercussions of an increasingly digitalized world, as much as these were visible, or at least, predictable by mid-1990s. It is, from current perspective of late 2010s, a highly optimistic vision, in which the ability of the citizens to employ self-awareness in dealing with daily devices which are supposed to enhance their lives, not to control them, is very much over-estimated. Over-estimated is, as well, the ability of national governments to take – and keep – hold of over-national corporations in their insatiable greed for unlimited growth and profit. Mocking traditional culture in its incapacity to offer emotional solace and mental reinvigoration to the over-worked and under-paid neo-Marxist citizen, Terry Eagleton, whose definition of the perfect consumer has haunted the social reality for the past 15 years (“[someone] who is prudently restrained in the office and wildly anarchic in the shopping mall”, Eagleton 2003:28) suggests creative solutions consisting of a more balanced attitude towards the satisfaction of the needs and the drives of what might be regarded as a new form of proletariat in the digital era: when instant, unfiltered access to information has become possible for large portions of the population, education in its classical understanding must open channels through which the individual citizen gains insight into the various choices he/she has beyond the limitations of class, gender, race/ethnicity, as well as into the advantages and disadvantages those very choices contain.

With his by now typical mixture of Lacanian jargon and Marxist transgressions, Slavoj Žižek (1998) derides technological artefacts, which allow emotional-mental immersion into a world of unknown opportunities and probabilities while simultaneously keeping them at distance from the possible fulfillment through neatly crafted networks of desire and postponement, available in the advertisement industry and mainstream media representations of happiness, love, leisure, entertainment, sexuality. This sets him aside from Jean-François Lyotard (1979) and his more theoretical approach to the modernity’s crisis of knowledge and education in the mediation of values to the next generation; his request to reform the educational curriculum according to the classical structures enhanced by the historical realities of a world haunted by two major wars and numerous smaller wars, is, unfortunately, still valid 40 years after its public release. The mechanization of the society and the impossibility to return to a idyllic world of green contentment was a topic of reflection for Jean Baudrillard (1983), with the individual human being at the very core of the “system”, and an inseparable part of it in sustaining its existence, with fundamental values such as hard-work, persistence, modesty and humility at the core of the *Gemeinschaft* project, as Meinhard Miegel puts it (2007), proposing less reliance on technology and more faith in the real humans of “here and now”.

Often praised as the guru of the 1968-movement with his slogan “make love, not war”, Herbert Marcuse famously stated in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) that “one can have discipline and order, or freedom and chaos, but not both” (1964:38). Hierarchical structures, as in Western premodernity, and still currently observable in Asian societies, ensure a sense of continuity and stability both vertically through strict regulations of loyalty upwards and responsibility downwards, and horizontally through unchallengeable structures among peers. Social mobility is impossible, as well as material or immaterial transfer; the entire system functions like a pyramid: the

more numerous the lower levels and the more impenetrable the communication flows between levels, the stronger and more reliable the higher levels – and more selective.

Recent decades, though, have seen challenging alternatives to these classical structures transcending social and gender boundaries, which emerged in the Asian country most aligned to Western standards and lifestyles: Japan. In the past few years, resulting from four decades of sociocultural-ideological accumulation, the *otaku*¹ and *shōjo*² have attempted to offer masculinity and femininity solutions to the exhausted Western paradigms, as two symptomatic social phenomena of numbing comfort and consumerism, only to experience a slow fade-out due to their lack of historical sustainability. As Simon

¹The *otaku* phenomenon is regarded as emblematic for the so-called crisis of masculinity in late-modern, highly industrialized nations, which has emerged in Japan and has been continuously spreading worldwide. In modern Japanese slang, an *otaku* describes an obsessive fan of different forms of subcultural models and fashions. For further details, see chapter 3 “Encounters (... and the silent dialectics of despair)”.

²Literally, *shōjo* means “young unmarried woman”; as concept and social phenomenon, the *shōjo* has emerged since late 1960s in Japan in the historical context of female empowerment as a consumerist appearance, and has become popular in the West as “girl power made in Japan” since mid-1990s (Ôtsuka 1991:26). While individualism and aggressiveness seem the main characteristics of the phenomenon in the West, the ambivalent *shōjo* figure undermines the generality of cultural and discursive minimal pairs such as male-female, Western-Japanese, innovation-tradition, mass-elite and individual-collective. However, the concept of *shōjo* in its strict significance as “girl”, a delimited social group, emerged at the dawn of the 20th century in Japan; a range of *shōjo* magazines aiming mostly at educational goals via comic strips were published as early as 1902 *Shōjo-kai* [Girls' world], 1906 *Shōjo sekai* [Girls' world] and 1908 *Shōjo no tomo* [Girls' friend]. As WWII progressed, magazines containing comics, and especially those referring to *shōjo* readership, perhaps regarded as frivolous, began to disappear. In the postwar era, the *shōjo* concept underwent an abrupt revitalization followed by a spectacular re-semanticization process in domestic subcultures, in the course of which it was loaded with the current meaning of “liberated, empowered young unmarried woman.” The *shōjo* was originally represented in anime and manga works and subsequently migrated to other fields of (popular) culture(s) (see Schodt 1986:32). In this book, I refer exclusively to the postwar semantic sphere of the *shōjo*, unless otherwise noted.

Sinek observes in his highly acclaimed (and financially successful) books, *Start With Why* (2011) and *Leaders Eat Last* (2014), and backed by similar publications by Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal (*Stealing Fire*, 2017) and by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin (*Extreme Ownership*, 2017), a decisive return to the classical, though uncomfortable, values of humility and hard-work might provide the solution for a world simultaneously free and accommodating.

This book is an attempt to finding the path to such a world.

The current volume is the product of those days and weeks of quest for significance and depth, occurring at the very core of ongoing encounters with peoples and pieces of information, which could not and did not fall into the places of my previous education. The initial lack of comprehension was gradually replaced by a deep sense of curiosity, and slowly things started to make sense, as I was able to fill-in the particular details of my own experiences over the past 5-6 years. In the three chapters of this book, I deal with one major phenomenon occurring currently worldwide – online dating/socializing – which affects to a great degree the inter-gender relations, with large sections of the population attempting with various degrees of success to adapt to shifting paradigms of self, other and connectedness. In observing the phenomenon, I take an anthropological stance, consisting of fieldwork (interviews, participatory observation, collection of qualitative and quantitative data), with its two major approaches, phenomenological experience and empirical inquiry. The analysis of the fieldwork results is pursued hermeneutically, nuanced by literature research.

The first chapter (“Cyberfields ... and the seductive dynamics of hope”) focuses on online dating practices and discourses as revealed and experienced during an intensive, and empathetic, handling of the phenomenon, both as subject and as object of the endeavor. From a methodological perspective, it is the result of fieldwork spanning three years in the area of online human interactions on various social network sites and apps, followed by three years of processing the data