Loneliness in Cinema: A Pharmacological Approach

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What is it about loneliness that disturbs and excites? The loner, hovering between autonomy and fatedness; does he[1] deserve sympathy for being alone, or resentment for his foolhardy disregard of 'common sense' and the desire to live with others? In contemporary press loneliness is an 'epidemic' (Khaleeli 2015; Cacioppo 2009); in the Sociological and Health-related literature an affliction, an undesirable state of being (Hawley and Cacioppo 2010; Rocack and Brock 1998). It is exactly this common sense approach that we need to re-examine, with a philosophical disposition and a determination to discern the *horizon* in which loneliness emerges today.

Cinema loves loneliness across genres. There is the loneliness of old age; the disfigured recluse; the teenager; the young person who lives in abeyance, in hope of another life; the sage and the sorcerer. And then there is the loneliness of Qohen Leth in Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* (2013). Qohen says: 'Always alone, never lonely'. But can we trust the words of a madman who refers to himself as 'we'?

In this paper I explore loneliness in an imaginary future world not very different from ours; a world of immediate satisfaction of desires and unbridled pursuit of scientific knowledge. This is the 'real' world Qohen avoids. He is, however, enticed into the virtual world of a young woman called Bainsley, an escort cum hostess of an erotic website. Bainsley promises love and companionship and succeeds in banishing his loneliness for a while. The two even appear to fall in love. As a starting point for my argument I define loneliness as akin to solitude but different, more marked by loss and lack[2] (Costache 2013) and the estrangement from the 'they' (Peters 2013, 27). Rather than considering loneliness as a state, I discuss it as a *process*, an unfolding of becoming which passes through the other, the fellow human being.

Cinema deals with processes, not states. As an unfolding narrative, *The Zero Theorem* subjects loneliness *to* time, effectively producing it *in* time. Very often, a cinematic narrative culminates in a moment or moments of sublime beauty or anamorphosis[3] during which we think we see something unique, uncanny or disturbing. We might ask 'what is it?' and, failing to give a quick satisfactory answer, retrace the steps that led to this event. Cinema doubles the world and sends it back to us, sketching the conditions of possibility of *being* while eschewing definite answers. This *process* may resemble the Heideggerian 'woodpath' (Polt

1999, 25), a foray into *being in the world* with one's gaze fixed on infinity, not on specific answers.

In discussing loneliness as a process I draw on some Heideggerian and some psychoanalytic notions, as they are combined in Bernard Stiegler's work. For Stiegler contemporary capitalism is a culture of the drive which annihilates desire and *singularity* through the supply of formulaic objects of satisfaction. Stiegler further argues that the demise of the super ego and the 'death of God' from modernity onwards have left us in a state of 'apocalypse without God' (2013, 9), often with feelings of loss of the meaning of existence. He proposes that we should rethink both the super-ego and singularity by re-vitalising what he calls the *level of consistence* which comprises of the following: infinity (as opposed to finitude and finite objects), desire and the capacity to desire (as opposed to mere satisfaction of consumer needs), belief and faith (as opposed to disengagement and nihilism), and all the things that 'do not exist' but compose, what he calls, the 'spiritual' and the 'noetic' (see Stiegler 2011, 89-93)[4]. Echoing Heidegger, Stigeler argues that the noetic and the spiritual only come into being *in* and *with* others, and adopts Heidegger's concept of care (sorge and besorgen)[5] as an indispensable aspects of individuation and singularity (Stiegler 2013, 25).

Technology has a special place in Stiegler's work. Critiquing both Freud and Heidegger for not paying sufficient attention to the role of technics, he argues that humans *evolve with* rather than invent technical objects and are therefore essentially prosthetic. The definition of prosthesis is broad and includes not only concrete objects but to all processes of 'addition' by an ongoing process of interiorisation and exteriorisation. Objects are both material and abstract-noetic. In order to highlight the psycho-social character of man's relations to objects and the importance of the socio-cultural milieu, Stiegler draws on Winnicott's notion of the transitional object and space, arguing that the psyche is formed relationally (2013, 71). Stiegler combines Winnicott's object with the notion of pharmakos borrowed from Derrida. The first pharmakon in the mother's holding, which is both curative and destructive, and as very important first relation upon which our relationship with the world is built. (2013, 71). Stiegler argues that in order to rethink singularity, objects, relations, technologies, and life in general, we ought to think pharmacologically. By that he does not mean that life can go either way. Rather, he invites us to consider the *syntagmatic* conditions and the *horizon* in which the precise role of an object, noetic or concrete, is to be determined. The *Zero Theorem*, I argue below, demonstrates the pharmacological nature of loneliness. Loneliness

unfolds, occurs and changes as Qohen moves from isolation to interaction with others. We follow this unfolding in the linear progression of key moments of the cinematic narrative.

The opening scene is a close up of a galaxy, the image of its central vortex as we know it from popular images. As the camera pulls back, we see a bald head superseded upon the image, almost floating above it. Then the camera zooms out again and the frame rotates by one hundred and eighty degrees, correcting the perspective and revealing a man sitting naked in front of a computer. End of distortion: man and universe are not one; superimposed, but separated.

Qohen Leth lives alone, in a derelict half-burned church. It is easy to surmise that this is symbolic of modern man living on the ruins of religion, after the death of God. Qohen is anxious. He is waiting for a phone call[6] that will reveal to him the meaning of life. He does not want to go to work in case he misses his phone call: 'another day, another day', he mumbles. From this early scene we become aware of a gap between *being in the world* and interpellation, the basic 'thou shall be' which grafts the child onto the desire of the parent and, by extension, to the entire world (Lacan 1992). At the same time, Qohen's loneliness is characterized by a reticence 'a lack of acquaintance with the world' as Heidegger would have it (2001, 187), while Qohen is fervently wanting to know (*eidenai*), being consumed by concern (2001, 216).

Who is the caller, we might ask? Following Heidegger, we could propose 'the indefinite' (2001, 325). The where or whom of the call is indifferent; what matters is the randomness of being, where one gets called into the calling, and simply has to respond, and, potentially, to get disclosed. The call gives us the potentiality of being-to-understanding (2001, 326). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, apart from its symbolic function, a phone call from an unknown caller is a disembodied voice. A disembodied voice often stands as an emissary of the Thing (das Ding) or *object a*, the primordial lost object of desire we can only ever encounter obliquely, in ordinary objects, if at all (see Dollar 1996). But how does one is supposed to encounter such an object in isolation?

Qohen does not want to interact with the world. He lives in anxiety, an exacerbated form of concern (sorge). He experiences anxiety while waiting at home and when he is away from home. He does not seem to belong either 'at home' – the derelict church was just a cheap purchase, he says – nor among others – the film establishes his awkwardness in the presence of acquaintances. Is Qohen's anxiety, and, for that matter, his loneliness, an attempt to deny

the everyday and the inauthentic[7]? Terry Gilliam seems to reinforce this interpretation by rendering the everyday ludicrous and alienating: loud colours, plastic objects, robotic movements, an excessive amount of billboards in the streets, salespeople on screens tracking pedestrians, reminding them that they can acquire whatever they want. We get a distinct impression of the artificiality of Qohen's world. In that context, anxiety may indicate the peril of absorption in the 'they' – or the reluctance to give in to it.

It is not easy to dismiss Qohen as a madman at odds with the world nor to accept him as a totally 'sane' person. In that sense, his loneliness is already *pharmacological,* both a symptom of an affliction the nature of which remains undisclosed, and the mark of distinction in a world bereft of singularity. Compared to the automatized milieu, this loner is perhaps committed to the noetic and the spiritual. However, according to Stiegler's pharmacological account we should not be looking for opposites but for *difference*. In that sense, isolation and loneliness might not be simple opposites of an alienating and impoverished reality. Qohen's loneliness and the real world might be *asymptotic*, two planes that could never meet, just like himself and the universe in the opening scene. The narrative fleshes out this disparity in terms of time. In cinema we do not always know at which point we join a narrative; whether we start, for instance, from the beginning or from the end. Cinema often produces clarity in *retrospect*, as well as surprise at the unexpected, the *anelpiston* (Stiegler 2013) which may dash our expectations and hopes.

Qohen works for Mancom, a data company, and calls himself an 'entities cruncher', as opposed to a 'number cruncher'. He is a diligent and productive employee. Two incidents highlight his loneliness when he is with others. First, his 'friendship' with Mr Jobby, floor manager and burnt out genius, who does not even care to spell Qohen's name properly. Mr Jobby invites Qohen to his party, a gathering with loud music, in which guests dance to the rhythm of their own electronic devices and hardly pay attention to one another. This generalised lack of attention is, according to Stiegler, a symptom of our time and evidence of *proletarianization*, that is, entrapment in artificial audio-visual perception and loss of the capacity to relate to one another on a more profound level (2013, 70). While attention is the 'holding' of objects, *inattention* is lack of engagement with distinct objects, underlying a culture of cursory identifications and lack of care. Stiegler seems to consider the advent of the authentic self as extremely problematic in contemporary capitalism. Attention, he notes,

'is *attentive* to the extent that it is anticipatory [*en attende*], which is to say, in the language of phenomenology, pro-tended [*pro-tendure*] and pro-tained [*pro-tenue*] … a relationship to the future where attention is constituted' (2014, 64). Lack of attention obliterates memory and flattens time into a hyper-synchronized present. It is the perfect companion to loneliness.

The second incident concerns Qohen's encounter with Mancom's doctors and the role of science[8]. Qohen pleads with the doctors to let him work from home: 'We are dying', he says. One of the doctors assures Qohen that he is physically fine, adding that his problem is existential, since he works in the ontological research division, on the transfinite project. Apart from being a good joke, the line hints at the separation of body and mind and the narrow 'scientific' definition of truth and knowledge which disregard understanding *being* in any other way. Deprived of an existential-ontological dimension, scientific research is primarily characterized by operationality and usage. It is as if the process detracts the being of the (re)searcher from the equation – not to mention the 'benefit for all mankind'. Science turns into an obsessive pursuit of knowledge, a manifestation of the death drive (Žižek, 1997, 37). Indeed, Qohen work on the *zero theorem* is one such project, an incredibly complicated series of equations which, once solved, will prove that the universe, the world and everything amount to nothing. The visual representation of Qohen's work is interesting: a three-dimensional computer simulation model with building blocks stuck upon one another in massive formations. Chunks of an equation has to be inserted in a precise space in order to form a larger sequence. Every time a chunk is inserted in the wrong place a large section of the edifice collapses. Qohen works feverishly, and shows signs of extreme fatigue. Bemused by his lack of success but always edging closer to one hundred per cent success, he complains: 'The entities will not stay crunched!', that is, the world will not be fixed and immobilized. The Sisyphean task of self-destruction, the work of the de-constructor, stumbles on the infinity of combinations, the slim margin of difference that resists annihilation. Inability to control the world causes melancholy (Stiegler 2013, 43). Melancholy accentuates loneliness.

This is the context in which Terry Gilliam places Qohen's interaction with Bainsley. Bainsley appears at Qohen's doorstep out of the blue. They had met briefly at Mr Jobby's party. At first she tries to arouse him sexually, playing a game of mock care, pretending to have hurt her finger and asking him to kiss it better. 'What do you feel?' she asks. 'Nothing' he replies. *Nothing* belies the loss of the feeling of existence (Striegler 2013). Once they get to know one another, Bainsley and Qohen talk more. He tells her about the phone call he is expecting,

adding that it was a man who called but the conversation was cut short. She dismisses it as a cold call: 'You could have ended up with a timeshare in Majorca!' she says. Bainsley does not get it. She reduces his ontological problem to an ontic one and more or less exhibits the same lack of attention as the rest of their environment.

Bainsley introduces Qohen to the pleasures of the virtual, transporting them to the artificial beach, where the sun never sets. But in this safe environment his virtual self falters and he nearly drown in the artificial sea. Saved by her he whispers almost with longing: 'Can anyone die here?'. Why does the desire to die arise in the middle of the artificial paradise, when 'the two' are supposed to dispel the mirage of loneliness? Qohen takes Bainsley into his own dream-world; a flight over the swirling galaxy. Bainsley is rather concerned and not too thrilled: 'Is that what you have in your head?', she asks. But what is one supposed to have in one's head?

A sexual relationship offers a dubious way out of the problem of loneliness when it proposes a superimposition of two lacks, like two algebraic minuses cancelling each other out. Lacan's maxim 'a sexual relationship does not exist' (Fink 1997) hints at the phantasmatic nature of such an operation and the fact that it works by missing the point, the irreducible *difference* of 'man' and 'woman', the asymptotic trajectories of two very different entities[9]. The dream of a mystical union, the total symbiosis and perfect jouissance symbolized by the secluded beach, incurs the disappearance of the subject (Verhaeghe 1999: 53). In that sense, a sexual relationship, like loneliness, is pharmacological, dual.

Qohen becomes very attached to Bainsley. When Bainsley disappears from his life, as abruptly as she appeared, he repeatedly tries to enter her website, with increasing frustration as access is denied. He becomes withdrawn and, once again, anxious. Do we see loneliness clearly at this point? A raw memory of 'what does not exist' resonating, as *a second loss,* with the originary human condition of the loss-lack of the primordial object? Psychoanalysis certainly privileges this narrative, which always harks back to the love for/of the mother and the desire to re-enter *paradise lost*. 'But this is 'it'', one may object. The love relationship between Qohen and Bainsley is not 'true' love. Even more so, loneliness evokes what 'does not exist' or recedes from the subject. Yet, irrespective of its conclusion, and more important for my argument, Qohen's affair with Bainsley is a long trajectory, or what Stiegler calls the *long circuit* of desire, as supposed to the short circuit of the drive (2013, 35). The pain or

pleasure one risks in the process concerns desire. The drive is indifferent to either. It is the trajectory itself which harnesses the death drive to life.

Catastrophe, the end of the world, is not triggered by the zero theorem but by truth. Bob, the Management's[10] son who helps Qohen with the project, reveals to him that he was assigned the zero theorem not because he was a genius but because he was ordinary and persistent. As for Bainsely, she was sent by the Management to prevent a possible mental break down. Qohen awakes to insignificance, falsehood and nothingness. When Bainsley turns up to apologise, declaring her love and pleading with him to follow her to a new life, he turns her down saying: 'Too late'.

To forgo companionship and love, to choose loneliness under these circumstances, is perhaps foolish in terms of common sense but ethical in Lacanian psychoanalytic sense. The ethical choice is the choice of what one does not want. Cinematically when Qohen emerges as a singular being in its tremendous isolation is a sublime moment. But, more important, *something else,* shines through the act.

First, another, different loss: when Qohen rejects Bainsley and the chance to live happily ever after, he loses his loneliness *as pathological attachment to the world*, that is, as lingering, unfulfilled expectation for things to come. In that sense, what appears in front of our eyes, beyond the popular concept for love as antidote to loneliness, is the solitude of being. Stiegler says that those who live pharmacologically are affected by the Thing (2013, 70) but does not explain what that means in practical terms. I propose that it approximates the meaning of sublimation of the drive as defined by Copjec: as a change of *the function of the object* (2002, 39). To see an object differently in the present case means to see loneliness differently. In that case, loneliness is no longer a state of privation; it approximates solitude, uniqueness arising while experiencing individuation and in-finitude (see Heidegger 1995, 6).

Second, the rejection of love in favour of loneliness is a response to a specific situation and by extension to a question, as opposed to a 'call'. Stiegler writes: 'The being that we are and that we become *is called into question and poses its questions* in a thousand ways – which are all masks of the Thing that lies behind all transitional objects, those of the child as well as those who overturn an epoch in order to install a new one' (2013, 121 emphasis added). A question is indeed asked and answered by Qohen in this scene – 'come with me' / 'too late' – which brings waiting for a call to an end; the call is being transformed into a question and an answer, being *in* and *with* the other, not in isolation.

A final issue, the question of authenticity, is also relevant to loneliness. Stiegler situates the *authentic self* between Winnicott, Lacan and Heidegger. But how can we get a better perspective of their convergence when it comes to loneliness? According to Stiegler we can only individuate or disindividuate *with* the others, our milieu. Dis-individuation is what Winnicott calls the false self. Stiegler notes: 'Does the false self-presuppose a true self that would be 'authentic'; and 'proper'? Clearly not: it is a *transitional* self, a relation woven between inside and outside, and that must be thought on the basis of a pharmacology of the soul' (2013, 70-71, emphasis added). In Heidegger authenticity is a property of the Dasein. The Dasein may fall or forgets its authenticity in everyday life but every Dasein has an inner voice calling it to authenticity, to self-fulfilment, and *hearing* constitutes the primary and authentic openness of Dasein. Elsewhere Heidegger defines authenticity as one's relation to *being* than to oneself: 'Dasein is authentic if it belongs to the truth of being in such a way that priority over beings is granted to being' (Heidegger cited in Inwood 1999, 25-25).

How does authenticity emerge in the Lacanian context? Lacanian psychoanalysis does not use the world 'authentic' nor the terms 'relational' but an authentic experience may be close to the definition of the ethical choice as going *against one's own good* (Lacan 1992), that is, the commonly perceived good of the average person. Such a choice confers the possibility of authenticity as fidelity to the Thing (loneliness and solitude). In that context, loneliness is a paradox: not a given or prior state of being, and, at the same time, an effective red thread of becoming. In *The Zero Theorem* we grasp it by looking backwards, in retrospect, apprehending it as Qohen's *level of consistence*. This unique level is being produced in the progressive forward movement of the narrative while inhabiting and summing up moments at which history catches up with the subject.

A process of becoming never ends. It is a spiral, like the core of galaxy. In the final scene of the film Qohen breaks out of his house, after smashing the interior, including the computer screen, several surveillance cameras and a statue of Jesus. He finds himself in Mancom, in the big room where the mainframe computer is housed. Cracks begin to appear in the computer's outer layer and part of the structure explodes. A hole in the roof reveals the galaxy in the night sky. Qohen climbs on the roof with a content and serene expression in his face. He lingers for a moment and then lets himself fall into to the vortex backwards. He ends up in the artificial beach, alone. He looks content. He reaches for the sun, which is an oversized luminous ball, and plays with it. Adam in paradise or a human being stranded, alone, in an artificial universe?

If loneliness was just the opposite of being with others everything would have been easy and straightforward. In this paper I have examined loneliness *pharmacologically* as plane of consistence, approximating the Thing and the authentic self but also only ever arising as a process, through the other, both the person and the technological milieu. It is this openness of loneliness that disturbs and compels us to ask 'what is it?'. This is an ontological question that safeguards singularity. Whether loneliness is good or bad in everyday life is beside the point. To reduce it to such a concrete, ontic question is to deny singularity.

Pharmacologically loneliness evokes difference, not opposition. The failure of the superimposition of lack upon lack to 'cure' loneliness always opens up to its multiplicity: (not) being-with someone (narcissistic desire), loss of an object of desire (ontological and irreversible), loss of the feeling of existence (symptomatic of culture or illness). These are the gaps opened by the film. Loneliness is not just a modern malady but the litmus test of our culture: of how prepared we are to see it for what it really is. Science, the science of loneliness included, does not address loneliness as privation, frustration, individualization, solitude or authenticity, turning a blind eye to the irreducibility of science to philosophy and of everyday life to the noetic. *Irreducibility* is not incompatibility, it is difference.

A pharmacological approach also reveals loneliness as *a failure of the holding environment*, or, better, the difficulty of translating the pharmakon into a viable relational quality. The beach and the vortex are aspects of the same coin: falling into the vortex, infinite falling, infinite death and jouissance, meets infinite environment of death and jouissance, that is, a desire for holding minus the object. The tragedy or irony of the virtual is that is sums up the human condition and is not at all a new problem. In that sense, the film is an excursion in the woods, touching upon existence and *consistence* while re-enacting the Adamic condition in mirror- reverse: reaching paradise alone at the end of the world.

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Films

Gilliam, Terry. 2013. *The Zero Theorem*.

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[1] I am using 'he' in the context of the film I discuss below.

[2] Solitude is a prerequisite of loneliness and relates to alterity, which appear as 'a gap within itself' (Costache 2013, 137).

[3] According to Lacan the best example of sublime beauty in Antigone in Sophocles' play; she is the human being that stands alone outside the Law. Antigone represents something we do not ordinarily encounter, comparable to a visual distortion, an anamorphosis (1992, 272), as in Holbein's *Ambassadors*. Sublime beauty and anamorphosis fascinate and disturb as they evoke the death drive.

[4] Stiegler's level of consistence chimes with the Heideggerian being in the word, the Deleuzian plane of consistence or immanence which mediates between (chaotic) events and structured thinking (Parr 2011, 204-6); the more cohesive aspects of the Lacanian Symbolic order (Other), and the Freudian super-ego as human propensity for higher accomplishments and abstract thought.

[5] Sorge (care), besorgen(concern) and fursorge (solicitude) are interrelated concepts. Sorge, 'care', is the anxiety or worry arising out of apprehensions concerning the future and refers to both external cause an inner state. Besorgen means: (a) 'to get or acquire; (b) 'to attend to, take care of something; (c) 'to be concerned about something. Fürsorge is 'actively caring for someone who needs help'. Sorge pertains to Dasein, Besorgen to its activities in the world, and Fürsorge to its being with others. All three modes have *'concern'* as their kind of being. *Care* and *concern* are related to *authenticity* in the following manner: concern is guided not by knowledge or explicit rules, but by its informal know-how. Authenticity favours helping others to stand on their own two feet over reducing them to dependency. Moreover, care, rather than the persistence and self-awareness of an I or ego, or the continuity and coherence of experiences, makes Dasein a unified, autonomous self. (1999, 35-37). Stiegler does not elaborate how faithfully we need to adhere to Heidegger's definition and rather draws on care as a *relational* priority with emphasis on becoming.

[6] 'Waiting for Godot' is also evoked at this point.

[7] Polt writes: 'Heidegger consistently points at the difference between this everyday state of oblivion and a state in which we genuinely face up to our condition. He calls this the difference between *inauthenticity* and *authenticity* (Polt 1999, 5). The Zero Theorem is an examination of this conditions and the inevitable 'tragedy' of having to go through the other in order for us to see if this indeed a search for authenticity or not.

[8] For Science in Heidegger see Inwood (1999).

[9] For a succinct presentation of sexual difference in Lacan see Fink 1997, 104-121.

[10] 'Management' is the generic name Mr Jobby uses for the director and owner of Mancom.