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THE PROBLEM OF LEISURE: A MODERN HISTORY OF WORK AND IDLENESS

by

LEA SANCHEZ

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of

New York

2021

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature
in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Problem of Leisure: a Modern History of Work and Idleness

by

Lea Sanchez

Advisor: Bettina Lerner

As our leisure time has increased in the twenty-first century, paradoxically, so too have social and cultural expectations about the nature and value of work. In this thesis, I argue that work in the modern world has taken on new shapes – the project of identity formation, image maintenance, and receptiveness to advertising – and how these new forms of work are fundamentally intertwined with leisure. I first aim to establish a timeline of Western attitudes to work, beginning with the works of Max Weber, Jon D. Wisman, and Matthew E. Davis. Then, through the lens of the 1970s punk movement, I show how these attitudes have progressed from aspiration to dejection and resentment. Through texts by Lewis Hyde and Jenny Odell, I present idleness as distinct not only from work, but from its capitalist counterpart, leisure, and argue for an adoption of idleness as a means of self- and cultural preservation.

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In 1961, Tuli Kupferberg's *1001 Ways to Live Without Working* was published in New York.¹ Its cover features an illustration of a man with the book's subtitle, "A Standard of Laziness," printed across his forehead. As its title suggests, the book presents a list of ways to avoid work; some are humorous, some absurd, some more sobering. The very first entry in the book reads simply: "Die."

Kupferberg would go on to found the avant-rock band the Fugs, a highly influential group in the underground music scene of the 1960s. The band became known for their controversial lyrics, which embodied the spirit of the era's countercultural movement. In an FBI file concerned with another iconic mid-century band, the Doors, a 1969 letter written to North Carolina senator Sam Ervin called the Fugs "the filthiest and most vulgar thing the human mind could possibly conceive," and suggested that Ervin listen to the record "without any ladies within earshot."²

Before forming the Fugs, both Kupferberg and fellow founding member Ed Sanders had established themselves in the New York poetry scene. The influence of poetry on their work can be seen in their musical renditions of the William Blake poems "Ah! Sunflower" and "How Sweet I Roam'd from Field to Field." The Fugs' decision to turn to Blake for lyrical content is not surprising given the many similarities between the Romantic sentiment and that of the sixties counterculture. Both were concerned with the increase in mechanization and its discontents, particularly its effects on the human individual. A thread of this idea runs through "How Sweet I Roam'd from Field to Field:"

How sweet I roam'd from field to field

¹ Schneider, Martin. "1001 Ways to Live Without Working,' Tuli Kupferberg's Prescient Pre-Hippie Book of Mindfuckery." *Dangerous Minds*, 4 Oct. 2016, dangerousminds.net/comments/1001_ways_to_live_without_working_tuli_kupferbergs_prescient_pre-hippie_boe.

² Leopold, Jason. "Inside the FBI's File on The Fugs: The 'Most Vulgar Thing the Human Mind Could Possibly Conceive.'" *VICE*, www.vice.com/en/article/bj7x85/fbi-foia-the-fugs-the-doors-v24n8.

And tasted all the summer's pride
'Till I the prince of love beheld
Who in the sunny beams did glide!

He shew'd me lilies for my hair
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair
Where all his golden pleasures grow

With sweet May dews my wings were wet
And Phoebus fir'd my vocal rage;
He caught me in his silken net
And shut me in his golden cage

He loves to sit and hear me sing
Then, laughing, sports and plays with me
Then stretches out my golden wing
And mocks my loss of liberty³

Here Blake uses the metaphor of a caged bird to illustrate a romance that leaves one of its participants feeling trapped. The “bird” in this poem is drawn to the alluring “prince of love” and what he offers, but is swiftly let down when it finds itself caged and treated as a plaything. To the

³ Blake, William. "How Sweet I Roam'd from Field to Field." *Poetry Foundation*, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43684/song-how-sweet-i-roamd-from-field-to-field>.

captor, the bird's "loss of liberty" is something amusing, while to the bird it is anything but, and it wistfully recalls its days of sweet, carefree roaming.

After a deeper reading, however, Blake's short tale of the nostalgic caged bird can apply to another idea, one that was especially pertinent to Kupferberg and his contemporaries: idleness. The bird, in its idleness, was free to do what it was made for: flying from field to field, singing its simple songs, and coexisting blissfully with the natural world. But in captivity, the bird's behavior is perverted into a kind of performance for the benefit of its captor. The youthful, carefree bird can just as easily represent a young person swept away from their "sweet roaming" — a phrase which calls to mind another, the Italian *dolce far niente*, or sweet doing nothing — and kept inside a kind of cage, one not made from metal bars but from the societal concept of the workforce.

Here it becomes necessary to establish some definitions. If the metaphor of the captive bird is used to inform our understanding of the idleness versus work dichotomy, then the term work represents what is passed down the economic hierarchy, the tasks assigned by those who "own" to those who do not. Bertrand Russell, in his essay *In Praise of Idleness*, defines it simply: "Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so." ⁴ Russell acknowledges the first kind of work as "unpleasant and ill paid;" this type of work is usually physically demanding, and it is the most common, but also the least desired by those delegating the work. The second type of work, Russell writes, is "pleasant and highly paid." He continues:

The second kind is capable of indefinite extension: there are not only those who give orders but those who give advice as to what orders should be given. Usually two opposite kinds of advice are given simultaneously by two different bodies of

⁴ Russell, Bertrand. "In Praise of Idleness." *Harper's Magazine*, Oct. 1932, harpers.org/archive/1932/10/in-praise-of-idleness/.

men; this is called politics. The skill required for this kind of work is not knowledge of the subjects as to which advice is given, but knowledge of the art of persuasive speaking and writing, *i.e.* of advertising.

What Russell is describing here is a well-known phenomenon: the fact that those in positions of power often work less compared to those who fall beneath them in the hierarchy. Despite this, they still manage to be regarded as embodiments of hard work and dedication, and their privileges are therefore considered deserved. It is not necessarily always the case that these people do not work at all — advertising oneself is a kind of work, after all — rather, that the fruits of their labor are theirs to keep, whereas those to whom the less desirable tasks are assigned receive a smaller share of the benefit from their own work. To borrow Russell's terms, workers who fall into the "first" category do not benefit proportionally from the extent of their efforts: their payoff is less relative to the work. Those in the "second" category, however, receive not only the bulk of the surplus from others' work, but also their own, which alone is already greater than what the first worker is able to obtain.

In the most enviable position, however, is the third group, which Russell describes as follows:

These are men who, through ownership of land, are able to make others pay for the privilege of being allowed to exist and to work. These landowners are idle, and I might, therefore, be expected to praise them. Unfortunately, their idleness is rendered possible only by the industry of others; indeed their desire for comfortable idleness is historically the source of the whole gospel of work. The last thing they have ever wished is that others should follow their example.

This category represents the highest level of capitalist society. Their position is used to motivate workers under the assumption that work is the ticket to a place among them, that with the right combination of political, financial, and personal decisions, their class status is easily surmountable. As Ronald Wright states in *A Short History of Progress*: “The poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.”⁵ With this mindset, class distinctions are less like obstacles to climb, and more like steps in the walk towards the grand front door of an ever-expanding mansion. For this reason, the idleness of the wealthiest in society is not questioned; if it were, there would be no point in hoping — and working — to join their ranks. “Don't forget that most men with nothing would rather protect the possibility of becoming rich than face the reality of being poor,” says Pennsylvania delegate John Dickinson in the musical film *1776*.⁶

Beyond the hierarchy that Russell describes lies creative work, which is may sometimes be undertaken for one's own enjoyment and is separate from their employment or source of income. Lewis Hyde, in his 1983 book *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, uses the term *labor* to describe creative work:

Labor, on the other hand, sets its own pace. We may get paid for it, but it's harder to quantify... Writing a poem, raising a child, developing a new calculus, resolving a neurosis, invention in all forms — these are labors... There is no technology, no time-saving device that can alter the rhythms of creative labor. When the worth of

⁵ Wright, Ronald. *A Short History of Progress*. United Kingdom, House of Anansi Press Incorporated, 2004, 124.

⁶ This scene was removed from the film at the request of then-President Nixon; it was restored on the DVD version. See Von Tunzelmann, Alex. “1776: Spinning the Congressional Record.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 Aug. 2010, www.theguardian.com/film/2010/aug/12/1776-congress-musical-jefferson-reel-history.

labor is expressed in terms of exchange value, therefore, creativity is automatically devalued every time there is an advance in the technology of work.⁷

Hyde uses the word “labor” to represent the process of creation: the mental visualization of an end product and the concentrated effort taken to realize it. He makes clear that this creative process applies not only to artistic mediums, but to any form of creation. According to Hyde, the process of creation does not adhere to the rules of economic labor, and therefore, increases in the productivity of economic work do not apply to creative labor. When these productivity increases occur, creative labor is effectively left behind in the dash for more profits. However, the practitioners of creative labor are never completely outside the confines of the economic machine, and with the rise of the internet, a growing number of creative individuals have found themselves caught up in the production of “content” that mirrors the traditional economic model described thus far. This kind of economic influence reshapes creative labor into economic work.

If, as Hyde argues, creative work cannot be measured in terms of economic exchange value, then it becomes necessary to remove creative labor from an economic context, and to re-evaluate productivity not in terms of monetary value but of fulfillment of the creative vision. As I will argue, idleness is a distinctive state, separate from the capitalist idea of leisure, and different from the existentially-charged notion of ennui that is so often a symptom of disillusionment with the capitalist system. Through the lens of the punk movement of the 1970s, and then through contemporary writings dealing with the intersection of technology and productivity, I will analyze what distinguishes idleness from similar states, and argue for the necessity of idleness as a means of self- and cultural preservation.

⁷ Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. Vintage Books (NY), 2008.

What, then, is idleness? As I define it, idleness is a state of autonomy: a deliberate form of nonaction and rest, though not always in a literal physical sense. However, the modern notion of idleness is a complicated one. Often conflated with laziness, its association with moral failing is deeply ingrained in the way we in the Western world think about ourselves and others. Platitudes warn against falling for its temptations, lest we become like those we have been trained to look down upon, those whose disinterest in hard work is a sign of their distaste for societal duty and self-improvement.

And yet, it is difficult to imagine the long-admired sculptors of Ancient Greece bent over a plow, or the directors of our favorite films clocking in for a night shift. Idleness seems to be the ideal state for a creative mind, and when it is interrupted by a necessity for work, any creative output is undeniably affected. When we think of Franz Kafka, leaving his day-job at the insurance office to return home and write, it becomes impossible to detach the bureaucratic hellscape of his literature from the everyday reality of his employment. And perhaps those age-old truisms aren't as old or as true as we once thought: the phrase "idle hands are the devil's playthings" can be traced back to the Bible, but only to a 1971 version that replaced the word "worthless" with "idle."⁸ At the heart of this apparent interchangeability lies one of our most deeply held moral dichotomies: work is good, and idleness is bad.

Max Weber's seminal 1919 work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* charts the development of the Puritan work ethic and its permeation into the American consciousness. Weber points to Protestant (specifically Calvinist and Puritan) belief systems as the root of modern capitalist ideals — and by extension, underlying attitudes towards work and idleness. Weber's approach is more concerned with the direct social and cultural influence of religion than with the

⁸ *The Living Bible*. Tyndale House; Distributed by Doubleday, 1971, *Bible Gateway*, [www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs 16:27&version=TLB](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs%2016:27&version=TLB).

material needs of its practitioners. In modern America especially, capitalism has become as much of a culture as an economic system, and nowhere is this more evident than in American attitudes towards work, which is where Weber's analysis is most applicable, despite its age and the shortcomings pointed out by critics.

Weber identifies the ascetic nature of Protestantism as one of the seeds from which the modern capitalist ethos was able to grow. Self-denial and discipline are characteristics of Christian thought as a whole, but are seen especially prominently in Calvinist and Puritan Protestantism, in which "the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfil his duty in worldly affairs."⁹ In his introduction to the text, Anthony Giddens notes the distinction Weber makes between the Catholic and Protestant relationship to the material:

This projects religious behaviour into the day-to-day world, and stands in contrast to the Catholic ideal of the monastic life, whose object is to transcend the demands of mundane existence. Moreover, the moral responsibility of the Protestant is cumulative: the cycle of sin, repentance and forgiveness, renewed throughout the life of the Catholic, is absent in Protestantism. ¹⁰

According to this analysis, Catholics behave according to a cyclical view of the human lifetime wherein moral transgression, or "sin," can be constantly offset, first by an awareness of the sin committed, then by forgiveness. Protestants have a similar take on this inevitability of sin, but the difference lies in the ability to be forgiven. Weber's Protestants do not seek forgiveness so much as practice a kind of continual self-flagellation, a system in which the process of repentance is

⁹ Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons, Routledge, 2005, *Taylor & Francis e-Library*, is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/SOC571E/um/_Routledge_Classics__Max_Weber-The_Protestant_Ethic_and_the_Spirit_of_Capitalism__Routledge_Classics_-Routledge__2001_.pdf. Pg. xii

¹⁰ Ibid

never complete, but must be built up overtime to compensate for a state of sinfulness inherent in the human being.

It should be noted that Weber's apparent misinterpretation of Catholicism has been called into question. Giddens writes, "Critics have pointed out that Weber apparently did not study Catholicism in any detail, although his argument is based on the notion that there were basic differences between it and Protestantism in respect of economically relevant values."¹¹ Weber's argument is therefore best understood not through a theological lens, but a sociological one. While the association he makes between certain religious groups and economic activity may be "based upon unsatisfactory empirical materials," as Giddens describes it, the key to his argument lies in analyzing the relationship between religiosity and cultural development, such as in this passage from the fifth chapter, where he looks at the writings of Richard Baxter on Puritan ethics:

The real moral objection is to relaxation in the security of possession, the enjoyment of wealth with the consequence of idleness and the temptations of the flesh, above all of distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life. In fact, it is only because possession involves this danger of relaxation that it is objectionable at all. For the saints' everlasting rest is in the next world; on earth man must, to be certain of his state of grace, "do the works of him who sent him, as long as it is yet day". Not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God, according to the definite manifestations of His will. ¹²

According to Weber, Protestantism does not object to the generation of wealth in and of itself; he uses this point to explain the robust economic involvement of Protestants despite their ascetic tendencies. Work may create wealth as its byproduct, but the wealth is not the point. Instead, it is

¹¹ Ibid, xxii

¹² Ibid, 104

work that is the goal: it keeps “the danger of relaxation” at bay, and ensures that those with the necessary discipline are rewarded in the next life. In this life, however, the comfortable circumstances that accumulated wealth provides should be seen as a distraction from duty rather than an aspiration.

Puritan Protestantism and its ascetic lifestyle may no longer be the prevailing influence on the Western world, but it has left its mark. As Weber bleakly puts it:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter’s view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the “saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.” But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.¹³

Weber’s use of the term “calling” is easily adapted to the modern world. Whether we work to get into heaven or a country club, work itself is still the axis upon which all else in our earthly lives turns. Weber’s observation that the expectations of the economic machine are inescapable is still true today, more than a century on. Even when it seems we have found a way around it, the path inevitably leads to the same trap. A glaring example is the blossoming gig economy, in which practitioners of various skills independently parcel out their time to work for customers. Amazon

¹³ Ibid, 123

founder Jeff Bezos has summarized the gig economy as “humans as a service.”¹⁴ Indeed, critics of the gig economy note the deliberate ways in which it has blurred the borders between work and free time, and as a result, between humanity and convenience.

Just as the Puritans had an idea of paradise waiting for them on the other side, American workers have traditionally had the promise of economic reward to look forward to at the end of their careers. But, much like a skeptic growing suspicious of faith without evidence, disillusionment among workers has become increasingly common overtime. In “Degraded Work, Declining Community, Rising Inequality, and the Transformation of the Protestant Ethic in America: 1870–1930,” Jon D. Wisman and Matthew E. Davis attribute the changing attitudes around work to “degradation in the quality of work due to industrialization, the decline of community with urbanization, and a dramatic increase in inequality.”¹⁵ These factors meant that moral reward for hard work was no longer sufficient incentive — in fact, it had ceased to be incentive at all. Instead, “social respect and social standing came increasingly to be sought through consumption, which became a proxy for hard work, entailing a weakening of asceticism.” As consumption became a stand-in for the fulfillment that was once achieved through work, the leisure time required to enjoy that consumption became more desirable: “freedom from labor” became “the ultimate achievement.”¹⁶ Work, on the other hand, became merely a means to an end, a sort of gateway into the world of consumer luxury and leisure.

¹⁴ Prassl, Jeremias. *Humans as a Service: The Promise and Perils of Work in the Gig Economy*. United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 3

¹⁵ Wisman, Jon D., and Matthew E. Davis. “Degraded Work, Declining Community, Rising Inequality, and the Transformation of the Protestant Ethic in America: 1870-1930.” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 72, no. 5, 2013, pp. 1075–1105., doi:10.1111/ajes.12038.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 1076

Wisman and Davis base their argument in Thorstein Veblen's theory of human behavior, which "views humans as strongly motivated by the need for social approval." According to Wisman and Davis,

The quality of work was degraded and increasingly unavailable for observation as craft industries and independent farming declined and ever-more workers entered into industrial occupations where the worker's skill and diligence were not clearly visible. A critical source for social and self-respect was thereby weakened. As this industrialization led to greater urbanization, communities within which the actual performance of work might be observed also declined, making it more difficult for others to know how hard or well someone worked. Thus, combined with the degraded quality of work, rising industrial urbanization made it more difficult to find social certification in community. Consequently, individuals increasingly began to seek social certification through consumption, which could serve as an observable consequence, or gauge, of hard work, since presumably, harder work permits greater consumption.¹⁷

While the rise of mechanization in the Industrial Revolution led to increased productivity, it also decreased morale for workers themselves. As more and more tasks could be completed with the aid of a machine, the skill and intelligence of each individual worker became less integral to the quality of what was produced. The high volume of workers in the industrial setting also meant that recognition and reward for exceptional performance became nearly impossible, as any one individual could easily be lost amongst a crowd of hundreds completing the same task. On a larger scale, urbanization led to the fragmentation of tight-knit communities, where social reward could

¹⁷ Ibid, 1077

be granted through friends and neighbors. Since these factors made recognition and praise more difficult to achieve, consumption became symbolic, a signifier that the consumer had rightfully earned their luxuries.

But reliance on consumption for social reward would be complicated by the growing income inequality of the following years. Wisman and Davis note that “inequality progressively increased between the Civil War and World War I, and then exploded during the 1920s.”¹⁸ Productivity and surplus value from labor were exponentially rising, but wage rates did not keep up. Income inequality was on the rise, despite general economic prosperity in the decade prior to the financial crisis of 1929:

The share of total income received by the richest 5 percent of the population increased from 24.3 percent in 1919 to 33.5 percent in 1929. By 1928 the richest 10 percent received 46 percent of total income. The disposable income of the top 1 percent of taxpayers rose 63 percent. Between 1919 and 1929, the share of income taken by the top one-hundredth of 1 percent soared from about 1.7 to 5 percent... Whereas there were about 7,000 millionaires in 1921 or 1922, by 1929 there were about 30,000. The real prosperity of the 1920s was reserved for those residing in the top of the income scale.¹⁹

As income for the wealthy began to skyrocket, their position became all the more attractive, and demand for social signifiers of wealth increased as well. What followed was a surge in consumption that “resulted in reduced saving, greater indebtedness, and possibly more work hours for households.”²⁰ Paradoxically, these sacrifices made in the name of vertical mobility decreased

¹⁸ Ibid, 1091

¹⁹ Ibid, 1092

²⁰ Ibid, 1094-5

its possibility; reduced saving and increased debt left people caught in a cycle of perpetual dependence, and increased work hours meant less leisure time. Wisman and Davis refer again to Veblen in describing “the various ways in which people struggled to exhibit leisure status, that is, to be viewed as above work” and how “the leisure class stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability.”²¹ For those struggling to maintain status in a time of rapidly increasing inequality, though, the image of financial and social esteem was just that: an image.

As true vertical mobility became less likely, maintaining the image of social status grew more important, and consumption increasingly became intertwined with identity. Wisman and Davis write:

Also stimulating consumption is the fact that if identity is less given by inherited status (class membership, community, ethnicity, religion, and even gender), then individuals feel more responsible for their lives and self-identity. There is a greater sense of individuality, and self-identity becomes a project. Consumption acts as a signaling device for identity, a means to define one’s self and to project this definition to others. Maintaining if not improving this identity is a never-ending project.²²

The unfortunate consequence of consumption as a determinant of identity is a lack of intrinsic self-image. If an individual’s identity is discovered and maintained through what is available on the market, then that identity is perpetually unstable, shifting and adapting constantly to external changes. What is stylish and desirable one year is dated the next, and changes to the economy that impact an individual’s financial resources can make these appearances extremely difficult to

²¹ Ibid, 1081

²² Ibid, 1090

maintain, as we have seen. This creates a kind of dependency, in which people look to advertising for instructions on how to present themselves, and ultimately how to view themselves as well.

Cultivating an image of leisure is anything but leisurely. This is why leisure in the capitalist sense is distinct from idleness: leisure is a highly constructed state, a backdrop for advertisements and an ideal that stimulates the emotions and motivates purchases in its name. Those who wish to achieve leisure know they must, having been indoctrinated with the now-clichéd phrase, “work for it.” As for those who already exist in the leisure class Wisman and Davis describe, their status requires constant maintenance through the acquisition of new conveniences and luxuries, as well as an awareness of the goings-on of those parallel to them. They exist like mannequins posed in a window for passing shoppers who can only hope to one day look as they do.

This is intentional. Disillusionment is profitable, and the less fulfilled a population, the more money they will spend to fill the void. It is easy to market to the unhappy, who in their desperation will take whatever appears to satisfy — and the more temporary that satisfaction, the better. If a person never knows fulfillment, is never given the time and resources to explore what fulfillment might mean to them, then its definition is easy to manufacture. Happiness that can be bought and sold in small portions is hardly happiness at all, and yet, it is this exact system that is the closest thing to idleness most are afforded today. It is for this reason that idle time is so often experienced as boredom: a kind of hunger pang that calls for binges of online shopping or social media usage, that is never rejuvenating or enjoyable, only increasingly anxiety-inducing.

Themes of shallow pleasure and existential restlessness under capitalism abound in art, but are perhaps most succinctly and effectively expressed in the punk music of the 1970s. Much of the music of this movement centers around political, anti-establishment sentiments, much like the preceding work of the Fugs. As the generation raised in the prosperous postwar period, with many

of them coming from working class backgrounds, the artists of this period expressed their disillusionment through song. One of the most anthemic examples is Richard Hell and the Voidoids' "Blank Generation," first recorded in 1975 and released in its final version on the 1977 album of the same name:

I was saying "let me out of here" before I was even born

It's such a gamble when you get a face

It's fascinating to observe what the mirror does, but

When I dine, it's for the wall that I set a place

I belong to the Blank Generation, and

I can take it or leave it each time, well

I belong to the ... generation, but

I can take it or leave it each time²³

Hell's lyrics speak to a sense of tedium, angst, and loneliness against a backdrop of overdriven guitars and a danceable drum beat. He describes a desperate urge for escape, even before being born, and the "gamble" of coming into the world with no control over the circumstances or what might happen next. By comparing birth – "getting a face" – to a game of chance, Hell notes how some are given a better start than others: a subtle jab at the idea of vertical mobility and its central tenet, equal opportunity. His prior cry of "let me out of here" enforces the sense that he has given up on trying to improve his circumstances; they were decided for him before he was born. These opening lines convey a loss of hope that new beginnings are possible at all, as if the narrator has

²³ Hell, Richard. "Blank Generation." *Blank Generation*. Sire Records, 1977. Transcript of lyrics.

been born many times before and knows, with jaded precision, what to expect. Hell has spoken about the song's reception and cultural significance:

I wanted to write a “generation” song, y’know, “My Generation” for what people like me were feeling. Although, I knew it was unlikely that a lot of people were going to rally around the concept of being nothing... When I get letters, people often say, ‘I’m blank, too.’ And I don’t know what they’re referring to. I don’t know whether people are deriving the same import, whether it corresponds to how I felt when I was writing it. If people are saying that song is about being numb... I dunno.

You can be in a stunned state and express it as anger and pain.²⁴

“Blank Generation” speaks to the uneasiness of those coming of age in this period. Dubbed “The Golden Age of Capitalism,” this era saw the birth of McDonald’s, the permeation of television, increased purchasing power, and high economic growth.²⁵ While the average consumer could enjoy unprecedented access to such technologies and luxuries, the refuge taken in mass-produced convenience was only a temporary comfort, and would eventually fade into the sentiment on which Hell was able to hone in. The song resonates because of its ability to communicate this feeling of “blankness,” of ennui in the face of what should have been excitement. What had been the ultimate dream of leisure to the industrial workers of the 1920s had now manifested in a depressing, empty reality.

“Blank Generation” takes inspiration from a 1959 track by Bob McFadden and Rod McKuen entitled “Beat Generation,” which parodies the eponymous literary movement and the

²⁴ Love, Damien, and Richard Hell. “The Making Of... Richard Hell & The Voidoids' Blank Generation.” *UNCUT*, 11 Nov. 2019, www.uncut.co.uk/features/the-making-of-richard-hell-the-voidoids-blank-generation-22461/.

²⁵ “Post-war reconstruction and development in the Golden Age of Capitalism”, Ch. 2 in *World Economic and Social Survey 2017*. United Nations (2017)

resulting caricature of the Beatnik, a popular media trope of the era. McFadden and McKuen's lyrics focus especially the Beatniks' apathy and disdain for work:

Some people say I'm lazy and my life's a wreck
But that stuff doesn't faze me, I get unemployment checks
I run around in sandals, I never, ever shave
And that's the way I wanna be when someone digs my grave
...I once knew a man who worked from nine to five
Just to pay his monthly bills was why he stayed alive
So keep your country cottage, your house and lawn so green
I just want a one-room pad where I can make the scene²⁶

Like the Richard Hell song it inspired, "Beat Generation" portrays an aimless narrator with a careless outlook on the society around them. The idea of working for a living holds no appeal, and the man "who worked from nine to five," living just to pay the bills, is a subject of pity rather than a model citizen. McFadden and McKuen's character is not bothered by their reputation for laziness, and shows no interest in changing. "I belong to the Beat Generation," McFadden sings, "I don't let anything trouble my mind."²⁷ While McFadden and McKuen's "Beat Generation" is a lighthearted and humorous interpretation of youth culture, Richard Hell's view is more sombre; "I can take it or leave it each time" seems to communicate ennui rather than enjoyment.

Apart from "Blank Generation," the theme of ennui appears elsewhere in punk music; a notable example is Iggy Pop's "I'm Bored" from the 1979 album *New Values*. Already an established figure in the punk scene at the time of the record's release, Iggy Pop had cemented his

²⁶ McFadden, Bob and Rod McKuen. "Beat Generation." *Songs Our Mummy Taught Us*. Brunswick, 1959. Transcript of lyrics.

²⁷ Ibid

status as “Punk’s Founding Father,” but was still lacking in commercial success and recovering from the tumultuous early years of his career.²⁸ “I’m Bored” presents an alternative look at the disappointment of excess:

I bore myself to sleep at night
I bore myself in broad daylight
'Cause I'm bored
Just another slimy bore
I'm free to bore my well-bought friends
And spend my cash until the end
'Cause I'm bored
I'm bored
I'm the chairman of the board²⁹

The repetitive nature of lyrics reinforces the theme of ceaseless tedium, as Pop describes his boredom as an all-day event. However, here boredom is self-inflicted: “bore” is used as a transitive verb, and the singer himself is its object. His “well-bought friends” are not exempt, either, but their boredom is justified by the money spent on their attention. With an ironic bravado, he uses his boredom as an excuse to spend his cash “until the end” – presumably his boredom will not be solved then, either. The song ends with these first lines repeated, with “I’m bored” replaced with “I’m sick.”³⁰ Also worth noting is the use of boredom as a kind of innuendo: “I bore myself in broad daylight” presents the act of boring oneself as something subversive, shocking when done in the open.

²⁸ Deming, Mark. "New Values – Iggy Pop". AllMusic. Archived from the original on February 23, 2015

²⁹ Pop, Iggy. “I’m Bored.” *New Values*. Arista, 1979. Transcript of lyrics.

³⁰ Ibid

Figures of the punk movement like Iggy Pop and Richard Hell operated on principles similar to the Beat Generation before them. In “Richard Hell, ‘Genesis : Grasp’, and the Blank Generation: From Poetry to Punk in New York's Lower East Side,” Daniel Kane writes:

As his favorite poetry magazine was "shoddy," so Hell would go on to project himself in the bands the Neon Boys, Television, the Heartbreakers, and Richard Hell & the Voidoids, through what would soon be known as punk style — torn T-shirts, spiky hair, and so on. For a brief moment, this "look" — at least before it was co-opted by English punk and incorporated into high and ready-to-wear fashion via Zandra Rhodes and others — stood as a clear sign of the bearer's resistance to the economies of capital. Looking this way wasn't going to get one a job, even as the look simultaneously served as a coterie signal linking one with like-minded disaffiliates.³¹

As Kane notes, even aesthetic decisions, such as modes of dress, represented punk's distaste for authority and tradition, especially where work and commodity were concerned. Clothes were often secondhand, and if they were not already so, damaged on purpose, as a way to not only spend less money, but to openly embrace the lack of it. Eventually this style would be co-opted into the mainstream, as designers and advertisers recognized punk's appeal to the highly prized youth demographic. The newly commodified and whitewashed version of punk style that emerged years later, however, neglected to consider the emotional and intellectual roots of the punk movement: dissent against established norms, and refusal to participate in a lifestyle focused on work and profit.

³¹ Kane, Daniel. “Richard Hell, ‘Genesis : Grasp’, and the Blank Generation: From Poetry to Punk in New York's Lower East Side.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2011, pp. 330–369. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41261837.

Punk, however, is a subculture based primarily in music, and this is where its sentiments are best expressed. Returning to Kane:

The D.I.Y. aesthetic, replete with its own anti-establishment "look," was at the core of the punk value system. As John Holmstrom, editor of New York's *Punk* magazine put it in an editorial arguing for his definition of the word, a punk "was 'a beginner, an inexperienced hand.' Punk rock — any kid can pick up a guitar and become a rock'n'roll star, despite or because of his lack of ability, talent, intelligence, limitations and/or potential."³²

The driving force of punk rock was the inexperience of its artists; most simply picked up their instruments without prior musical training. The motivation for writing and playing music was driven by "frustration, hostility, a lot of nerve, and a need for ego fulfillment," as John Holmstrom puts it³³, rather than desire for commercial success. Unlike the highly polished — and often manufactured — acts of the popular music industry, punk was largely unmarketable; the discordance of the music, the harsh lyrical content, and the disheveled physical appearance of the musicians all served to drive away mainstream audiences, record labels, and radio stations. Contrast this with the formation of identity through consumption that defined pre-Depression America; identity in the punk movement came from shared aggression and the shared outlet of music. Of course, personal style was still important — as Kane acknowledges, punk's distinct aesthetic manifested itself as "coterie signal" — but its expression was born of a desire for independence, a move away from neatly arranged socio-economic molds.

³² Ibid, 340

³³ Harron, Mary. "Punk Is Just Another Word for Nothin' Left to Lose." *The Village Voice*, 28 Mar. 1977, www.villagevoice.com/2020/11/03/punk-is-just-another-word-for-nothin-left-to-lose/.

Across the Atlantic, the thriving American punk scene of would become highly influential to English audiences, but the difference in class systems between the United States and Britain impacted how punk developed in each nation. In a 1977 article published in the *Village Voice*, Mary Harron describes the difference between the punk bands of America and the Britain:

American bands take themselves less seriously, but then they can afford to. The U.S.A. is still a rich country where to be young, white, and on your own is to be privileged. The British New Wave bands emerged from a country which is riddled with class hatred and economically stagnant. Unemployment in Britain has hit teenagers harder than any other group... This isn't suburban boredom — it's desperation. You can see why Richard Hell's song "(I Belong to) The Blank Generation" was seized as a new teenage anthem.³⁴

The effect of this difference in class awareness can be seen when comparing the lyrical content of American and British punk music. American punk lyrics generally focused on mental or emotional states — à la "Blank Generation" — while British bands focused more on material reality. Harron uses the Sex Pistols as an example, calling attention to their songs "No Future" ("God, save the queen/ She's not human being/ There is no future in England's dreaming") and "Anarchy in the U.K." ("Anarchy for the U.K. it's coming sometime and maybe/ I give a wrong time, stop a traffic line/ Your future dream is a shopping scheme").³⁵ Despite the different class dynamics of American and British audiences, however, the anger they sought to relieve through music was directed at the same overarching force. Growing awareness of the inequity of the class system, whether sugarcoated by middle class luxuries or not, had lasting impact on the worldview of young

³⁴ Harron, "Punk"

³⁵ Sex Pistols. *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*, 1977.

people across the Western world, and music became the best outlet for these growing frustrations. Harron is critical of the apparent pose taken on by the middle-class participants of the New York punk scene — “[The British punks] are working-class kids who know that they’ve been fucked over all their lives, and they resent it when the middle classes ape their style” — but does not acknowledge the shared enemy: the banality of existence under a societal hierarchy that mandates work and productivity without concern for individual fulfillment.

As punk music evolved in the following years, various subgenres emerged. Among them was post-punk, which was characterized by a more subdued, sonically complex sound than its precursor. A notable example is the output of British band Gang of Four, whose debut album, *Entertainment!* couples the jagged and rhythm-driven sounds of post-punk with Marxist-tinged lyrics. The album’s second track, “Natural’s Not in It,” draws on the theme of commodification of human nature:

The problem of leisure
What to do for pleasure
Ideal love, a new purchase
A market of the senses
Dream of the perfect life
Economic circumstances
The body is good business
Sell out, maintain the interest³⁶

Here Gang of Four are directly targeting the kind of consumerism defined by Wisman and Davis in their analysis of early twentieth-century economic development. Rather than an aspiration,

³⁶ Gill, Andy and Jon King. “Natural’s Not in It.” *Entertainment!*. EMI, 1979. Transcript of lyrics.

leisure is a problem; in a world with evidently limitless options of how to spend one's free time and money, the decision becomes a burden. The fact that many of those options have been specifically manufactured to act as stand-ins for emotional and physical fulfillment only adds to the problem. As the title suggests, consumerism and commodification are not in line with natural order, but rather exist as social constructs in service to the pursuit of money. Vocalist Jon King sings the phrases "ideal love" and "a new purchase" in the same line, a reference to modern capitalism's conflation of the two. He mentions "a market of the senses" and the "dream of the perfect life" it seems to promise. The verse closes with the line "This heaven gives me migraine" — also repeated at the song's close — a condemnation of the consumerist leisure that on the surface looks like paradise, but really provides no lasting or meaningful joy.

King has acknowledged his interest in Situationism at the time of recording the album.³⁷ Even its title, *Entertainment!*, can be taken as a reference to Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. The kind of entertainment outlined in "Natural's Not in It" is simply a cheap reproduction of the real thing: the song's bridge is a shouted refrain of "Repackaged sex [keeps] your interest."³⁸ The migraine-inducing "heaven" King describes is reminiscent of the "immense accumulation of spectacles" that defines Debord's theory, and "ideal love" and the "dream of the perfect life" might be examples of what Debord meant when he wrote that "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation."³⁹ This is not to say, however, that ideal loves and perfect lives were once universally attainable goals but are now extinct as a result of capitalism; rather, these things were mostly unrealistic to begin with, but capitalism through advertising has convinced the majority of the population that they can be obtained by purchasing gaudy lookalikes.

³⁷Murray, Robin, and Jon King. "Gang Of Four Track By Track." *Clash Magazine*, 2009, www.clashmusic.com/features/gang-of-four-track-by-track.

³⁸ Gill, Andy and Jon King. "Natural's Not in It." *Entertainment!*. EMI, 1979. Transcript of lyrics.

³⁹ Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Radical America Etc., 1970.

The band would continue to explore similar themes in releases to follow. 1981's *Solid Gold* opens with a spoken word piece simply titled "Paralysed:"

Blinkered, paralysed

Flat on my back

They say our world is built on endeavor

That every man is for himself

Wealth is for the one that wants it

Paradise, if you can earn it

History is the reason

I'm washed up...

My ambitions come to nothing

What I wanted now just seems a waste of time

I can't make out what has gone wrong

I was good at what I did

The crows come home to roost

And I'm the dupe⁴⁰

With its deadpan delivery, "Paralysed" dissects the most elemental aspects of the capitalist ethic: the importance of work to the foundation of society ("They say our world is built on endeavor"), and the fundamental independence of each individual in their quest for growth ("That every man is for himself"). Happiness, relaxation, and other pleasantries that are commonly considered to be the "good things in life," represented here by the word paradise, are earned, not deserved, and can only be acquired through consistent effort. The lines "History is the reason/ I'm washed up" point

⁴⁰Gill, Andy and Jon King. "Paralysed." *Solid Gold*. EMI, 1981. Transcript of lyrics

to a sense of powerlessness over one's circumstances, and reveal more directly the Marxist bent of the lyrics. Andy Gill here turns to historical determinism to explain the narrator's current position, with an emphasis on the material evidenced by the use of the words "work" and "wealth" in the preceding lines. This also calls to mind "Blank Generation" and Richard Hell's plea to "let me out of here," or Tuli Kupferberg's answer of "Die" to the question of how to live without working: a bleak continuum of history that the individual is powerless to change.

Also worth noting is the significance of the word "paralysed" to this reading of the lyrics. Paralysis is a state of inaction, but one that is forced upon the subject. To be paralyzed is not only to be unmoving, but to be incapable of movement at all. Here, history has culminated in the narrator's state of paralysis, in their lack of autonomy and inability to alter the course of their lives. The narrator is left in a kind of stupor, overpowered as they are by external forces ("Blinkered... flat on my back"), and unable to act on their dissatisfaction with the circumstances. Unlike an autonomous idleness, the state Gang of Four describe here is oppressive.

Arguably the most poignant lyrics in "Paralysed" are those in the third verse: "My ambitions come to nothing/ What I wanted now just seems a waste of time." Perhaps these failed ambitions were to succeed financially and reach a higher rung of the economic ladder, or perhaps what Andy Gill is alluding to is the need to abandon personal projects and passions for the sake of earning a living. Often what one would like to do with their life is not possible under their economic circumstances, and many choose to take on jobs and follow career paths that bring them no joy, but can sustain them financially. In either case, the use of the phrase "waste of time" presents a compelling dichotomy; idleness is often framed as a poor use of one's time, but here, Gang of Four subvert that idea. The real waste of time in "Paralysed" is capitalism's appropriation of it. Gill presents these lyrics with the resignation of one who has overexerted themselves on the

promise of realizing a false hope, only to find themselves “washed up.” The song closes with the narrator’s realization that they have been fooled (“I’m the dupe”), and that perhaps following society’s prescription for success was not rewarding after all.

The track “We Live as We Dream, Alone” from 1982’s *Songs of the Free* takes a more personal and emotional approach to critique of capitalism. The song’s title is borrowed from a line in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: “...No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone...”⁴¹ In this song, Gang of Four look at existential loneliness and how it is exacerbated by societal conditions:

Everybody is in too many pieces
No-man's-land surrounds our desires
To crack the shell we mix with others
Some lie in the arms of lovers⁴²

The first lines are a call back to Conrad and the “no-man’s-land” that stands between people as they try to form connections with others. True mutual understanding may not be possible, but can, at best, be temporarily replicated. As the song progresses, however, the lyrics once again take a political turn; King sings of the need for money and a job, something to distract from the troubles of a life “in too many pieces.” He continues:

The city is the place to be
With no money you go crazy
I need an occupation!

⁴¹Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Project Gutenberg, 2015.

⁴²Gill, Andy and Jon King. “We Live as We Dream, Alone.” *Songs of the Free*. EMI, 1982. Transcript of lyrics

You have to pay for satisfaction
...Man and woman need to work
It helps us define ourselves
We were not born in isolation
But sometimes it seems that way
...We live as we dream, alone
The space between our work and its product
Some fall into fatalism
As if it started this way⁴³

With a twinge of irony, King parrots capitalist logic: if people throw themselves into work, their loneliness will not bother them. But in a more hopeful tone, he counters the idea that we have always been isolated, or must always be. This is yet another reference to determinism in Gang of Four's discography, but with a slightly different take; "fatalism" here can be said to represent the idea of social Darwinism, often used to support capitalist ideology with its assumption that the richest members of society are the ones fittest for survival.⁴⁴ King then acknowledges the "space between our work and its product," alluding to another common theme of the band's work: Marx's theory of alienation.

Of the different forms of alienation Marx describes, Gang of Four's lyrics often illustrate alienation from oneself. Marx describes this phenomenon as alienation from "the species-being."⁴⁵ Paul Santilli summarizes Marx's idea of the species-being as the "consciousness of being in a practical-organic relationship with the totality of nature," with the human being as "the one who

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Hofstadter, Richard, and Eric Foner. *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Beacon Press, 1992.

⁴⁵ Santilli, Paul. "Marx on Species-Being and Social Essence." *Studies in Soviet Thought*, vol. 13, no. 1/2, 1973, pp. 76–88. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20098547.

produces himself objectively and who is conscious of doing so, both in the activity itself and in the works produced.”⁴⁶ According to Marx, human beings have an innate desire to interact with the world around them through the realization of ideas. Humans are distinct from other animals in their ability to conceptualize the end goal of their actions, and key to the realization of this end goal is the knowledge that the self is responsible. Because of this sense of responsibility, human beings thrive when work is fulfilling and the end result has a positive effect that can be directly observed. Where capitalism is detrimental to the species-being is in its appropriation of human effort, with the bulk of the benefit of work going towards the top of the economic hierarchy, while the workers themselves often live in comparatively poor conditions. Additionally, as the lyrics to “Paralysed” illustrate, capitalist society is structured in such a way as to limit one’s options; often what is most rewarding spiritually is not financially sufficient. Marx’s theory applies not only to the economic landscape of his lifetime, but has proven to be fairly predictive as well. In the decades following Marx’s writing, mass production had degraded — to borrow Wisman and Davis’ term — the nature of work and its product: “Everyone worked at the same speed to produce the same number of units and everyone worked the same number of hours.”⁴⁷ This kind of uniformity removes the sense of personal responsibility and achievement that work should promote.

Marx’s theory of alienation continues to resonate, and the complaints of empty consumerism found in Gang of Four’s work are still being echoed today as well. The twenty-first century has seen some of the most rapid developments in technology at the personal level, and with these developments has come a new kind of alienation: alienation from leisure. Gang of Four wondered “What to do for pleasure?” in 1979; today, that question still awaits an answer. In her

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Wisman and Davis, 1084

2019 book *How to Do Nothing*, Jenny Odell describes prevailing mood of a generation plagued by constant demands for productivity and attention:

Nothing is harder to do than nothing. In a world where our value is determined by our productivity, many of us find our every last minute captured, optimized, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily. We submit our free time to numerical evaluation, interact with algorithmic versions of each other, and build and maintain personal brands. For some, there may be a kind of engineer's satisfaction in the streamlining and networking of our entire lived experience. And yet a certain nervous feeling, of being overstimulated and unable to sustain a train of thought, lingers. Though it can be hard to grasp before it disappears behind the screen of distraction, this feeling is in fact urgent. We still recognize that much of what gives one's life meaning stems from accidents, interruptions, and serendipitous encounters: the "off time" that a mechanistic view of experience seeks to eliminate.⁴⁸

What Odell details here is not unlike the feeling of being overworked. Technological and sociopolitical developments since the publication of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* have allowed for less work and more free time amongst the general population; relatively greater attention is paid to the notion of the work-life balance, and many jobs have become less physically demanding thanks to automation. The development of the personal computer and smart phone has fulfilled the promise of a connected world, but the ubiquity of these devices has proven to be as much of a problem as a technological wonder. With the birth of the constant news cycle and the incredible ease with which it can be accessed has come the "certain

⁴⁸ Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Melville House, 2019, p. ix

nervous feeling” that Odell describes: the feeling of a world too much with us, to borrow from Wordsworth. The constant stream of information, not just about world events, but even our social circles, has left little room for uninterrupted idle time. Even in what appears to be idleness our senses and spirits are in overdrive.

Gang of Four’s “At Home He’s a Tourist,” while written decades before the invention of the smart phone, fits in well with the scene Odell portrays: “At home he feels like a tourist/ He fills his head with culture/ He gives himself an ulcer.”⁴⁹ The experience Odell describes is not dissimilar to that of the song’s subject: a feeling of strangeness, like that of a tourist, despite technology’s promise to make the world and people around us familiar; the constant use of media as distraction; and lastly, the anxiety these things provoke. What has changed in the timespan between Gang of Four’s and Odell’s work is not in the psychology of the human being, but in the ability of corporate platforms to exploit the workings of the mind for their own benefit. As Odell shows, the capitalist system utilizes our most widely adopted technologies to carve out a direct path into our collective conscious. When work on the assembly line ceased to be alluring, the work had to be redefined to keep the population involved in it; personal technology is now the tool for that adjustment.

Odell maintains that these technologies encourage “a capitalist perception of time, place, self, and community,” and she critiques “the way that corporate platforms buy and sell our attention, as well as... designs and uses of technology that enshrine a narrow definition of productivity and ignore the local, the carnal, and the poetic... the effects of current social media on expression—including the right not to express oneself—and its deliberately addictive features.”⁵⁰ As information has become more abundant, so too has advertising. As online personas

⁴⁹ Gill, Andy and Jon King. “At Home He’s a Tourist.” *Entertainment!*. EMI, 1979. Transcript of lyrics.

⁵⁰ Odell, xii

have become more ubiquitous, so too has anxiety over keeping up appearances. Each of these binaries point to the problem Odell identifies: an increasing overlap between our work and our free time, an ever-widening gap between free time and time that is truly free.

Demands for productivity and attention that wear on the human spirit are contrary to our tendency towards distraction and boundaryless thought. In her book *The Plenitude of Distraction*, Marina Van Zuylen explores the value of distraction and idleness. In a talk at Harvard University, Van Zuylen explains the inspiration for her book:

So, I decided to write this book after I taught a class on promoting good idleness. Many of the students in this class confessed to me that they were on Adderall, and they were on Ritalin, and they let me on to the fact that their pills made them feel overly focused, helping them maybe get better results on their papers and their exams, but robbing them of the pleasures and intellectual enrichments of delayed gratification. They told me that they missed the open time that they thought should be associated with novels and poetry.⁵¹

Van Zuylen recognized the urgency of the situation, brought to her attention by her students. Their difficulty in appreciating works of art outside of their immediate value in the classroom was a disturbing indication of the problem recognized by Charles Darwin more than a century prior:

...For many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry... My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive... The loss of these tastes is a

⁵¹Kelsey, Robin, et al. "On Distraction." *The Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University*, Nov. 2019.

loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.⁵²

Darwin's key observation here is the likening of his mind to "a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts:" a mind working in this fashion streamlines input of information, eliminating nuance as it does so, and leaving behind only what is nonspecific enough to become a general observation — cutting down the trees to better see the forest. This method of cognition is not unlike the rapid-fire production of an Industrial Revolution-era assembly line, but what is lost in the process is far more valuable than what is produced. Darwin mourns the loss of his taste for art, and determines it to be harmful to his overall intelligence. Indeed, the ability to derive universalities out of several disparate facts is an impressive facet of the human mind, but this ability is only one part of a whole, and certainly not the one that makes us most human. We can find replications of this ability across the technological sphere, from the "Popular Passages" feature of Google Books that Van Zuylen mentions, to the algorithmic deduction of our online habits into personalized advertising profiles. Darwin's lamentation here is a mental version of the one expressed in a letter to Henry Ford, written by the wife of an assembly line worker: "The chain system you have is a slave driver! My God! Mr. Ford. My husband has come home & thrown himself down & won't eat his supper—so done out! Can't it be remedied?"⁵³

Indeed, much of Odell's and Van Zuylen's prose throughout their respective texts calls to mind this line from Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*:

Weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible. When he dies, he is hard and insensitive. When a tree is growing, it's tender and pliant. But when it's dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are

⁵² Zuylen, Marina Van. *The Plenitude of Distraction*. Sequence Press, 2017.

⁵³ Wisman and Davis, 1085

death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being. Because what has hardened will never win.⁵⁴

Indeed, much of these arguments revolves around the idea that a culture rooted in productivity and constant attention is fundamentally at odds with nature and unfit for human health (an idea similar to the sentiment behind Gang of Four's "Natural's Not in It"). Contrast *Stalker's* take on softness with the common use of the phrase "hard work:" even at the end of a long career built on the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears, a mind hardened by work will not be able to freely enjoy its rest. The effects of productivity-obsession are already being felt by relatively young working people; there is a sense of guilt attached to every decision to turn away from the computer screen, to put down the phone, as if even a second spent out of focus is a condemnation to uselessness. Just as Marx makes the argument that workers are alienated from their work, so too is the modern person alienated from idleness; it is difficult, if not impossible, to derive meaningful enjoyment or benefit from idle time as it increasingly becomes an extension of time spent generating capital.

Odell's prescription for these issues is a refusal to participate in the "attention economy:" resistance in the form of "doing nothing."⁵⁵ She elaborates: "I want this not only for artists and writers, but for any person who perceives life to be more than an instrument and therefore something that cannot be optimized. A simple refusal motivates my argument: refusal to believe that the present time and place, and the people who are here with us, are somehow not enough." As work and productivity have evolved with changing technologies, so too have the problems associated with them. The work of Weber's Puritans is undoubtedly different from the work of the modern person; however, the guiding principle is not entirely dissimilar. In the modern context, this principle is manifested in our need to be always available – not in terms of manual labor, but

⁵⁴ Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Stalker*. Janus Films, 1979.

⁵⁵ Odell, xi

of attention and receptiveness to new messaging. We must be anxious, lonely, and “afraid of missing out,” as this is what elicits the desire to purchase. As the Puritans were trained to be vessels for God through their work, we are being trained to become vessels for advertising through the placement of our attention. Odell’s stance is rooted in a refusal to be used as an instrument of profit for an unseen force, to be defined by this evolved form of work. Her idea of “doing nothing,” or idleness, can be described as a state of freedom from participation in the “market of the senses” that Gang of Four aptly describes, whether that entails literal work or merely sitting as an audience member in the theater of advertising.

Odell’s idea of refusal is not necessarily centered on total lack of action, or even distraction, but rather, a kind of attention. She elaborates:

I propose that rerouting and deepening one’s attention to place will likely lead to awareness of one’s participation in history and in a more-than-human community. From either a social or ecological perspective, the ultimate goal of “doing nothing” is to wrest our focus from the attention economy and replant it in the public, physical realm.⁵⁶

When our attention is moved from the self-flagellation of constant work and the overbearing attention economy towards our own interests and passions, we help not just ourselves, but the world around us. Paradoxically, the fierce individualism of capitalism is really focused outwards: servitude to society masquerading as self-improvement. The kind of individualism Odell argues for is the reverse: individualism as a path to the betterment of society. Individually flourishing parts contribute to a healthy and operational whole, where the freedom of each mind to explore

⁵⁶ Ibid, xii

what it finds most fulfilling creates a society of fulfilled humans, rather than a hyper-efficient economic machine.

Additionally, time spent in idleness, that state in which thoughts are free to flow, will naturally lead to action. Odell makes clear her stance: “The fact that the “nothing” that I propose is only nothing from the point of view of capitalist productivity explains the irony that a book called *How to Do Nothing* is in some ways also a plan of action.”⁵⁷ The purpose of her argument is not “to return to work refreshed and ready to be more productive, but rather to question what we currently perceive as productive.”⁵⁸ An example of action based in idleness is the Situationist *dérive*, or drifting, in which “one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.”⁵⁹ Unlike the kind of strolling done by the *flâneur*, the *dérive* is purposeful in that its goal is to better understand the surrounding landscape. It is a redirection of attention away from the “spectacle” and towards lived reality and physical surroundings. While certainly unproductive in capitalist terms – the act of walking and observing requires no monetary transactions – activities such as the *dérive* are grounded in awareness and interaction, tools which chip away at the walls of distraction, anxiety, and disconnectedness that hold up the attention economy.

In *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Lewis Hyde focuses his criticism of capitalist productivity on the harm it does to art, or, more generally, what he calls “our gifts.” Hyde’s central argument is based on a view of creativity as a kind of gift shared between

⁵⁷ Ibid, xi

⁵⁸ Ibid, xii

⁵⁹ Debord, Guy and Ken Knabb (ed. and trans.). ‘Theory of the *dérive*.’ Situationist International Online.

members of a community, or on a larger scale, society. He contends that a movement away from the commodification of these gifts will be for the benefit of all:

The more we allow such commodity art to define and control our gifts, the less gifted we will become, as individuals and as a society. The true commerce of art is a gift exchange, and where that commerce can proceed on its own terms we shall be heirs to the fruits of gift exchange: in this case, to a creative spirit whose fertility is not exhausted in use, to the sense of plenitude which is the mark of all erotic exchange, to a storehouse of works that can serve as agents of transformation, and to a sense of an inhabitable world—an awareness, that is, of our solidarity with whatever we take to be the source of our gifts, be it the community or the race, nature, or the gods.⁶⁰

Hyde argues that to commodify the arts is to immediately strip them of their intrinsic worth. Producing art with its profitability in mind negatively impacts its quality, and demands for productivity only hinder it. Hyde's gift exchange is communal rather than economic, and engenders the same kind of awareness that Odell describes: a relationship with the natural world, both human and otherwise, and a deeper connection to the self that leads to fulfillment.

Odell uses the metaphor of "Old Survivor," the last old-growth redwood in Oakland, California, to illustrate the kind of refusal for which she is advocating:

Old Survivor's somewhat legendary status has to do not only with its age and unlikely survival, but its mysterious location. Even those who grew up hiking in the East Bay Hills can have a hard time finding it. When you do spot Old Survivor, you still can't get that close, because it sits on a steep rocky slope whose ascent

⁶⁰ Hyde, 205-206

would require a serious scramble. That's one reason it survived logging; the other reason has to do with its twisted shape and its height: ninety-three feet, a runt compared to other old-growth redwoods. In other words, Old Survivor survived largely by appearing useless to loggers as a timber tree.⁶¹

The key to survival in a world where all resources are subject to endless exploitation is to become unexploitable, to allow oneself to be useless. Singing poorly, taking meandering walks with no destination, drawing pictures with no intent to show them: these are the kinds of acts that a society bent on optimizing productivity would deem unproductive. Hyde quotes Allen Ginsberg's take on "that phase of the work in which the artist lays evaluation aside so that the gift may come forward:"

The cure for [embarrassment] is to write things down which you will not publish and which you won't show people. To write secretly... so you can actually be free to say anything you want... It means abandoning being a poet, abandoning your careerism, abandoning even the idea of writing any poetry, really abandoning, giving up as hopeless — abandoning the possibility of really expressing yourself to the nations of the world. Abandoning the idea of being a prophet with honor and dignity, and abandoning the glory of poetry and just settling down in the muck of your own mind ... You really have to make a resolution just to write for yourself... in the sense of not writing to impress yourself, but just writing what your self is saying.⁶²

Modern capitalism has convinced us that our interests must be commodifiable, that if our talent and skill is not immediately apparent, it is better to give up. Alternatively, if we do show aptitude, then we must take immediate steps to profit from it. Here, Ginsberg argues against this kind of

⁶¹ Odell, xv

⁶² Hyde, 188

self-exploitation. The creative spirit flourishes when it is unencumbered, when the constraints of expectation are removed, and this removal happens through embrace of the candid, the unmarketable, the unpolished. Ginsberg advocates for the same kind of “uselessness” Odell attributes to the centuries-old tree; usefulness is a relative concept, and as *Old Survivor* shows, what is useless to the perpetuation of the commodity may be the salvation of the resource.

Odell and Hyde both present ideas that relate to the sentiment of the punk movement: that “any kid can pick up a guitar and become a rock’n’roll star, despite or because of his lack of ability, talent, intelligence, limitations and/or potential;” that enjoyment of creative effort does not depend upon the commodification of the final product; that getting lost in the process is as rewarding as the end result. Perhaps enjoyment in creativity matters more than finesse; consider Walt Whitman’s “barbaric yawp,” the manifestation of a primordial feeling, unembarrassed and unhindered. These kinds of self-expression are important, even if – perhaps especially if – they are deemed useless to the capitalist system.

We can picture again the metaphorical bird in the William Blake poem: once free to do as it pleased, then captured and caged. In a world where we have been primed to want more, to chase after an image of what we might be if we attain it, there is power in seeing past the façade and recognizing the cage that waits on the other side. The kind of deliberate idleness we need today cannot be bought or sold: it exists outside the realm of commodity, but this is where its value lies. We can avoid the cage and a life reduced to performance, if we allow ourselves the pleasure of sweetly roaming – from interest to interest, art form to art form – we can preserve ourselves and each other.

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