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LIVING TOGETHER WITH A GREEN DOT BEING TOGETHER ALONE IN TIMES OF HYPER-CONNECTION

Elize de Mul

*Thomas is afraid to face the world
But with a click of a button, he can make the world face him
If you can lead your life without leaving your room
what would it take to step outside?*

*Thomas in Love*¹

In a parallel universe, Thomas has not left his apartment for eight years. His severe case of agoraphobia is one reason for this. The technologies that enable him not only to survive, but also to live his life comfortably without ever having to step outside, are, undoubtedly, another important factor. There is no need to go through the painful struggle of facing the complicated world. Communication takes place on a screen, food is ordered online, even his sexual needs are satisfied using a technological sex-harness that simulates the deed. This harness can also be used with a real person on the other side of his screen; no need to meet each other in person, even not your lover. There is simply no reason to go outside ever again.

Let us get back to the year 2016 and the time-space dimension in which you find yourself reading this essay. A friend has just forwarded an article to me that reminds me of Thomas. Thomas is the protagonist of the movie *Thomas in Love*, which I saw as a teenager. At that time, living your entire life behind a screen and reducing the people around you to a digital representation seemed, to me, a surreal and funny idea.

In 2016 it is one of my own various devices that beep-boops while I am writing, at home. A link: 'Pokémon Go: Is catching a Pikachu on your phone really good for your mental health?'² 'OMG it's happening' reads my friend's message. He is jokingly referring to a running Internet gag (and a slightly exaggerated description of the contemporary human species): people that no longer leave their screen-illuminated safe zone. 'That is', the friend jokingly adds, 'until *Pokémon GO* gave them a new purpose to go outside.' For some reason the idea of people choosing their screens over time spend outdoors with others seems a bit sad. Are technologies alienating us from each other? Are we radically 'alone'?

¹ *Thomas in Love*. Directed by Pierre-Paul Rijnders, 2000. Entre Chien et Loup.
² Smith in International Business Times.

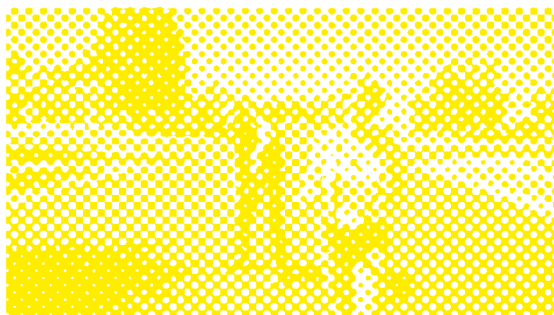
075

101 • 9GAG post (12-08-2016).



Trying to play Pokemon
Go after decades of not
leaving your house

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in a world dominated by screens? It was the father of modern philosophy René Descartes who opened the doors to the modern individual. In *Meditations Métaphysiques* (1641) Descartes defines the 'I' as a thinking substance, something with a (self)-consciousness. Descartes's human is an isolated being, a 'radical individual'.³ Is it true that we are more and more becoming like Thomas, performing a Cartesian 'radical individuality' via our various screens? When *Thomas in love* came out in 2000 it was labelled as 'science fiction', but living like Thomas as proved to be 'science fiction-of-the-next-minute' the very same year. Mitch Maddox legally changed his name to DotComGuy to kick off his project that entailed him not leaving his house for one year. He communicated with people via his computer screen and ordered everything he needed through the Internet – it should not come as a surprise that companies like United Parcel Service, Network Solutions, and online grocer companies sponsored his project. He survived the 365 days of solitude by means of the WWW.

The Google search I did only sixteen years after this ludic project illustrates how fast our technological society is developing. I Googled 'one year with only Internet', but instead I got hits like 'I'm still here. Back online after a year without the Internet.' The idea of living online completely was a bit out-of-worldly in 2000; today the idea of completely *not being connected* seems equally absurd. *Thomas in Love* has become reality, at least partly. Many things can be done without leaving your house.

Living Together With a Green Dot

There is irony in me receiving this Pokémon article from this particular friend, because we only met *once* in real life. After we met in the real world we continued to communicate daily, mainly via *Facebook Messenger*. He is one of my various 'digital' friends; those who live far away but are still very much part of my everyday life. Via our screens we have breakfast together or share a beer. We are digital roommates; we work, party, watch a movie, or talk when we cannot sleep. People who are reduced to a green dot reassure us that we are connected, or to two green checks marks comfortably tell us that friendly eyes have read our texts, which were boldly sent into the world.

Sixteen years ago the idea of living like Thomas seemed absurd, but in our contemporary society large parts of our communication with others takes place on a screen. Our relationship with others is altered due to this digital mediation of contact. (Techno) psychologist Sherry Turkle wrote the book *Alone Together*, on her website she states: 'we shape our buildings, Winston Churchill argued, then they shape us. The same is true of our digital technologies. Technology has become the architect of our intimacies.'⁴ Only 16 years after *Thomas in Love* we now speak of living 'onlife' lives, real world and virtual world interwoven to a great extent.

I recall a time when chatting with a friend while lying in bed. We were sharing videos and joking around. It felt as if we were having a sleepover and I decided to leave his laptop on and Facebook open to simulate an actual sleepover. I woke up that night, to find a reassuring green dot on the screen. He was still *there*. For some reason this actually felt nice and comforting. Completely silly of course, because the being-there or not-being-there of the dot would have changed nothing in the real situation of my friend sleeping in his bed kilometres away and not being able to communicate with me in either scenario. I fully *realised* that, even at that very moment, still – or maybe because of this – I was fascinated with the way the green dot made me *feel*. Connected, although I was not, really.

Am I, this human subject – lying in bed alone, comforted by a green dot on a screen – a symptom of an on-going alienation started by the technologies we use? Or is this incident an example of a new form of being 'together alone'?

Our Image in the Mirror of the Machine

The Cartesian 'radical individual' makes an appearance in various contemporary analyses of the way new media are changing us, for example in the work of Sherry Turkle. She is one of the leading researchers in the field of 'cyberanthropology'. According to Turkle our use of

³ Descartes 1641.

⁴ See www.alonetogetherbook.com.

technologies not only changes who we are but also the way we look at ourselves: 'We come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine'.⁵ In her book *The Second Self* she describes the computer as a 'second self', a machine that is part of our very being. At the time of writing, 1984, computers were still mainly used for one-on-one interactions between computer and user. In the 90s, this changed as the Internet made a public entrance and the 'global network' started expanding at a fast pace. Millions of people started gathering in virtual spaces, communicating with each other as their screens gave access to 'spaces that [change] the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities.'⁶

In *Life on the Screen*, published in 1995, Turkle somewhat worrying observes how reality starts to lose from virtual reality on a frequent basis. Then, in 2011, in her book *Alone Together* she speaks quite negatively about the digital society that has formed in the decade in between the books. The title refers to one of the paradoxes of our contemporary technological society. Surfing virtual seas via our screens, Turkle observes, we seem to be by ourselves. We interact with others whilst being separated by the screens of our laptops, smartphones, and tablets that give us access to digital spaces. At the same time, in physical space, something else is happening. Here, we are bodily together in the same space, for example when sharing a carriage of a train, but mentally we are immersed in the virtual spaces presented by aforementioned screens. She states that as such we are 'alone together', both in virtual and real space.

Although Turkle points out some interesting aspects of our contemporary mediated relationships, there is a problem with this particular observation. New media, as my contact with friends around the world underlines, make the *relational* character of our being explicit, maybe more than ever. Turkle's point – us being alone even when physically around others – echoes Descartes's radical individual, yet maybe, in this time of hyperconnectivity, it is time to focus on relationality instead.

Esse est Percipi

In *Connected or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* Steven Shaviro analyses our contemporary 'network society'. In this society, being connected is the fundament for everything. Heidegger's 'abolition of distance' has taken a more extreme form than the philosopher could foresee. New media have created a radical availability of the world and everything and everyone in it: 'Proximity is no longer determined by geographical location and by face-to-face meetings.'⁷ We are radically connected; there is no escaping the network,⁸ even if you actively avoid network devices like computers and smartphones. Electronic media form the framework from which we derive our references and meanings. The network seems to be located on the very core of our new episteme, we are entwined with it.

Various philosophers have pointed out how amazingly precise Gottfried Leibniz anticipated the ontology of the network in his book *Monadology*. The term 'monadology' is derived from the Greek *monas*, which, refers to a certain type of loneliness, 'a solitude in which each being pursues its appetites in isolation from all other beings, which also are solitary.'⁹ Monads are physical substances without an awareness of an outside world. All they see are projections of their own ideas, or as Leibniz puts it: 'monads have no windows'. But, despite the notion of extreme solitude, Leibniz still speaks of 'monads' in plural form.

For a network to exist more than one being must exist; otherwise, nothing is there to be networked. But how can monads coordinate or agree on anything at all, given their isolated nature? [...] Leibniz tells us that each monad represents within itself the entire universe. [...] Each monad represents the universe in concentrated form, making within itself a *mundus concentratus*. Each microcosm contains the macrocosm. As such, the monad reflects the universe in a living mirror, making it a *miroir actif indivisible*, whose appetites drive it to represent everything to itself--everything, that is, mediated by its

5 Turkle 1999: 643.

6 Turkle 1999: 643.

7 Shaviro 2003: 131.

8 Talking about 'the network' is a little misleading. In reality there

are many networks that are related and connected to each other in a complicated way. I will follow Shaviro here and use the term 'network' to refer to this complex reality.

9 Heim 1993: 96.

mental activity. Since each unit represents everything, each unit contains all the other units, containing them as represented. No direct physical contact passes between the wilful mental units. Monads never meet face-to-face.¹⁰

This brings the image of Thomas to mind, sitting home alone as the world passes by on his screen. Shaviro's remark that our brain, in a sense, is a replica of the network is in line with Leibniz's notion. We always carry the network with us and see ourselves reflected in it. It is simultaneously close at hand and far away. We all sit in front of our screens and instead of looking through them we look at them, staring at a reflection of ourselves. Slavoj Žižek describes our immersion in cyberspace in a similar way:

Does our immersion into cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to a Leibnizean monad, which, although 'without windows' that would directly open up to external reality, mirrors in itself the entire universe? Are we not more and more monads with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only the visual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever in the global network?¹¹

Both underline the paradoxical character of Heim's monads – similar to Turkle's observation; we are simultaneously connected and alone. It is this seclusion that makes Deleuze state that Leibnizian monads are not so much *in-the-world* (in a Heideggerian sense) but instead *for-the-world*. We exist *for* the network.¹² We make ourselves visible for the network and everyone part of it. An 'over-the-top performative exhibitionism' has taken a hold of society, as my social media timeline is proving every minute of the day: images of faces, of food being eaten, of places being visited, and selfies.¹³ 'If I do not take steps to make myself visible, the chances are that I will just disappear. [...] I must continue my performance, even if nobody is watching it.'¹⁴ It reminds of me, lying in bed alone, staring at a green dot – a semblance of life – and my friend, continuing his performance even in his sleep. 'The *cogito* of virtual reality reads: I am connected, therefore I exist.'¹⁵ Instead of being radical and isolated individuals, we are hyper-connected.

So, where does this leave the young woman, lying in bed by herself, comforted by a green dot on the screen? Is this an example of an on-going alienation? Were my friend and I tragically 'together alone' at that moment? That is: although connected by the network, actually all on our own? I would like to propose that instead, this is an example of the wondrous new form of being together, brought about by the communication technologies of our era. Instead of us being alone together, I would say we were *together alone*. By ourselves, but although physically separated at the same time very much connected, intimately entwined within the network we are all part of. And it felt kind of nice.

10 Heim 1993: 98.
11 Žižek 2003: 52.
12 Shaviro 2003: 29.

13 Shaviro 2003: 79.
14 Shaviro 2003: 80.
15 Shaviro 2003: 85.

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