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Senior Projects Spring 2020

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Spring 2020

## "No Place" in CyberSpace

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*Bard College*

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“No Place” in CyberSpace



Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Scarlett Sinay

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2020

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<sup>1</sup> Image designed by Nicolás Vargas. Originally posted to their account @blackpowerbottomtext, on Instagram.

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## Table of Contents

Preface.....	3
Introduction: Unlikely Origins.....	4
CHAPTER	
1. Cyber-Omelas.....	13
2. “This is our turf:” Androcentrism Goes Digital.....	34
3. Manosphere of Earth.....	53
Works Cited.....	75

## Preface

It is nearly impossible to envision a version of the world wherein the internet had yet to penetrate every aspect of day to day life, at least for a zoomer<sup>2</sup> like me.

I grew up curiously looming over my millennial<sup>3</sup> sister's shoulder as she delicately balanced swatting me away while addictively perusing Myspace on the clunky family iMac which for whatever reason was kept in my, a five year old's, room.

Now that I have entered adulthood, no longer hindered by fear-driven parental internet restrictions, I spend an average of three hours and 42 minutes on my iPhone. I soon expect this number to spike due to recent, pandemic related events.

In these times I feel encouraged to express my gratitude toward the internet. Social media allows me to feel connected with others also living under simultaneously state-mandated and self-induced isolation, so as to prevent the further spreading of a fatal virus.

So, if I may, I shall take this opportunity to directly and genuinely thank the techno-boosters<sup>4</sup> who invented the internet...

*Thank you.*

But in good faith, and for the sake of academic relevance, I must add that you -- not created, per se, but contributed to the rise of a certain kind of unsavory figure: A breed of straight man existing primarily in the world you created, for the outside world has proven unsatisfactory.

What I'm trying to say is, incels love your work. This is not a judgment call, or even a call-out, it is simply fact.

What is an 'incel', you ask?

Allow me to explain.

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<sup>2</sup> Someone born after 1995. Not to be confused with 'Millennial.'

<sup>3</sup> Someone born between 1981 and 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Barbrook and Cameron, *The Californian Ideology*, 1995.

## Unlikely Origins

On November 9th, 2017, those wishing to visit the Reddit forum “r/incels” were met with a dead end:



### **This community has been banned**

This subreddit was banned due to a violation of our [content policy](#), specifically, our sitewide rules regarding violent content.

Banned 1 day ago.

[BACK TO REDDIT](#)

The subreddit titled “/r/Incels” had accrued around 40,000 members by the time of its banning, citing a policy released on October 25th of the same year, which stated:

“Going forward, we will take action against any content that encourages, glorifies, incites, or calls for violence or physical harm against an individual or a group of people; likewise, we will also take action against content that glorifies or encourages the abuse of animals... We understand that enforcing this policy may often require subjective judgment, so all of the usual caveats apply with regard to content that is newsworthy, artistic, educational, satirical, etc, as mentioned in the policy. Context is key..."Communities focused on this content and users who post such content will be banned from the site... As of Nov. 7, r/Incels has been banned for violating this policy.”

The New York Times credited an online petition calling on Reddit to ban the incel subreddit for its prompt removal<sup>5</sup> in the wake of the Isla Vista shootings of 2014. Apparently, some members of the incel subreddit had referred to Elliot Rodger, the 22 year old behind the gun, as “Saint Elliot.” His name became recognized, deified, and ascribed the title of martyr by some members, perhaps as an edgy joke, nonetheless disturbing curious onlookers to the point of taking action. The 22 year old became the eye of a media storm following the attacks, carried out proximate to the University of California in Santa Barbara, wherein 14 young people were injured and six lost their lives.

The American public wanted to understand Rodgers’ motive. Once the great media powers caught wind of the nearly seven minute long video posted to Youtube titled “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution,” as well as his 140 page manifesto, or, “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,” it quickly unraveled. Media outlets fervently tried to piece together a retrospective analysis of Rodger through the strategic digging up of his prolific online postings- and it led innocent civilians merely trying to understand, especially those unfamiliar with the less

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<sup>5</sup> Hauser, Christine. "Reddit Bans 'Incel' Group for Inciting Violence Against Women." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), November 9, 2017. Accessed February 11, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/technology/incels-reddit-banned.html?campaignId=7JFJX>.

standard and savory corners of the internet, down the rabbit hole of the subterranean online world known as the manosphere.

The Isla Vista Massacre garnered massive amounts of attention for many reasons, the first being the events that actually transpired. Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown reported that Rodger drove to ten separate locations to carry out his violence, methods including stabbing, shooting, and running over victims with his car, a black BMW his mother had gifted him to help “improve his stature.”<sup>6</sup> CNN published ‘Five revelations from the ‘twisted world’ of a ‘kissless virgin,’<sup>7</sup> using Rodger’s own terminology to close-read his manifesto, which he emailed to his parents, and a therapist, the day of his murderous rampage. The piece gives us a highlight reel of Rodger’s thought process and world-view, in which he placed the blame of his issues upon the “cruelness of women.” The subtext here is that women, in their refusal to sleep with Rodger, or any man, behave cruelly. Crucially, their cruelty is derived from their inability to recognize that they should have *no* choice as to who they hold sexual attraction towards. The first of Alan Duke’s revelations shall be included here, as they give us seminal understandings of incel culture and the making of the ‘involuntarily celibate’ line of thinking.

The first of these revelations describes a young man whose upbringing landed him and his family on the fringes of Hollywood elite society. Elliot’s father, Peter Rodger, was a director, albeit commercials comprised most of his work. Elliot’s stepmother was sometimes featured in French reality TV and acted in a few movies. Of a Star Wars premiere invitation these light

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<sup>6</sup> Nagourney, Adam, Michael Cieply, Alan Feuer, and Ian Lovett. "Before Brief, Deadly Spree, Trouble Since Age 8." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), June 1, 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/02/us/elliott-rodger-killings-in-california-followed-years-of-withdrawal.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Duke, Alan. "Five revelations from the 'twisted world' of a 'kissless virgin.'" CNN.com. Last modified May 27, 2014. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2014/05/25/justice/california-shooting-revelations/index.html>.



connections to the film industry granted him, he expressed rage over his family's second tier status in the industry. In general, Elliot Rodger's manifesto is riddled with feelings of exclusion, being on the social fringes but never actively involved in the upper tiers of a given community. Rodger attended a private Katy Perry concert the night prior to his violence. Of the experience, he wrote,

“I couldn't help but feel a bitter form of envy at all of the rich kids at the concert. They grew up in lavish mansions, indulged in excessive opulence, and will never have to worry about anything in their pleasurable, hedonistic lives. I would take great pleasure in watching all of those rich families burn alive. Looking at all of them really drilled in my mind the importance of wealth.... Wealth is one of the most important defining factors of self-worth and superiority. I hated and envied all of those kids for being born into wealth, while I had to struggle to find a way to claim wealth for myself. I had to be ruthless, and do whatever it takes to attain such wealth. After all, it was my only hope of ever being worthy of getting a girlfriend and living the life of gratification that I desire.”

Rodger became obsessed with winning the lottery, as described in his vlog and manifesto. He conflated wealth and success with self-worth, worth in general, and conventional attractiveness. He lamented how unlikely it would be to strike it rich like Mark Zuckerberg by inventing something like Facebook, so the only sensible option for Rodger, clearly, was to put all of his hopes on the lottery, since the genetic lottery, in his mind, had failed him. Any observer of the situation who looks at Elliot's photo would realize he was, in fact, conventionally attractive. And yet he catalogued feelings of 'worthlessness' when confronted with a kissing couple in a food court during July, 2011, something that angered him to the point of assaulting the couple with his iced tea after following them to their car.

In July of 2012, Rodger splashed two “hot blonde girls” with his Starbucks latte, at a bus stop in Isla Vista, when they did not return his smile.

“How dare those girls snub me in such a fashion! How dare they insult me so! I raged to myself repeatedly. They deserved the punishment I gave them. It was such a pity that my latte wasn't hot enough to burn them. Those girls deserved to be dumped in boiling water for the crime of not giving me the attention and adoration I so rightfully deserve!”

In February of 2013 Rodger dropped out of all of his classes at Santa Barbara Community College, blaming “all of those beautiful girls I could never have.” He did not want to see them, let alone have to hear their voices, and so he decided to remove himself from the equation completely. These anecdotes go on and on, and a comprehensive list of the precursors and preparations of Rodger prior to the Isla Vista massacre, including an instance where he filled a super-soaker gun with orange juice and shot it at a ‘popular’ group of college kids, can be found on CNN.com under the title “Timeline to 'Retribution: Isla Vista attacks planned over years.”

What one realizes when scrolling through Rodger’s repeated expressions of hatred for his peers is that he believed he acted out sensibly. He had uploaded videos entitled “Why do girls hate me so much?” online, reposting them on his ‘day of retribution,’ proving that he was merely acting out in response to perceived hatred as opposed to creating a climate of hatred for himself.

*“I am a drop-dead gorgeous, fabulous, stylish, exotic gem among thousands of rocks.”*

*“Not getting any sex is what will shape the very foundation of my miserable youth.”*

-Elliot Rodger

Rodger felt hatred for both men and women who he perceived as ‘the enemy.’ It is stated that his plan incorporated an inciting phase wherein he would stab his two male roommates to death. He carried this plan out, killing both of his roommates who he degradingly referred to as “the biggest nerds he had ever seen,” as well as a visiting friend. The three young men he killed were 19 and 20 years old and died of multiple stab wounds according to the sheriff’s office. He wanted to kill his roommates because they were ‘nerds,’ and he wanted to kill sorority girls and frat guys because they were beautiful and popular. Everyone, it seems, was an enemy to Rodger, perhaps everyone but himself. Within the pages of his manifesto he stated that he would destroy “those beautiful girls I’ve desired so much in my life, but can never have because they despise and loathe me,” as well as their male counterparts who had consistent luck with these beautiful, desirable women, his perfect type being described as blonde, thin, and white. To Rodger his ‘day of retribution’ was necessary as a means of not only exacting revenge upon his enemies, but in pursuit of a global balance of power; the conventionally attractive and sexually active had caused him suffering by existing and excluding him, therefore he was given no choice but to “make

them suffer.” After killing his roommates, he killed two women outside a sorority house and then drove his BMW to a deli where he shot a man to death. He then shot himself.

The media posthumously attempted to concoct a narrative that would explain such behavior exhibited by a man in his early ‘20s. It could be argued that Rodger foresaw this, as he left quite a comprehensive internet trail describing his outlook on life and detailed accounts of various experiences and social interactions that led to his nihilistic attitudes and need to carry out violence upon his peers. But neither his parents ‘traumatic’ divorce, nor his ‘traumatic’ first experience viewing pornography, nor the bullying he endured tell the entire story of Rodger’s being. His described “withdrawn nature” to the public had an explanation; he expressed it himself online. When discussing Elliot Rodger, or Alex Minassian, or non-violent, arguably benign incel culture at large, one must discuss internet forums whose expressed purpose for existing are lodged in misogynistic pride.

Alex Minassian killed 10 people on April 24, 2018. He did so by driving a van through a busy Toronto sidewalk. Just before the attack, he wrote:

“Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger.”<sup>8</sup>

on Facebook. Now obviously associated with internet-fueled misogyny, and websites such as 4chan, Reddit, and PUAhate.com, to name just a few, the term ‘incel’ was actually coined in the late 1990s by a Canadian woman named Alana, whose last name goes unrevealed in articles

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<sup>8</sup> Feldman, Brian. "Posts Indicate Suspect in Toronto Attack Was Radicalized on 4chan." *New York Magazine*, April 24, 2018. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/04/suspect-in-toronto-posts-about-incel-rebellion.html>.

written about her. Alana is now in her late '40s, and as of 2016 worked as a management consultant and artist living in the same city that Minassian terrorized in 2018. Back in 1997, she posted in a local Usenet group, around the time she volunteered for a non-for-profit internet provider based in Ottawa, after graduating from Carleton University, where she had access to the internet for the first time. The post read: "If you have had life-long difficulty starting dating or forming relationships, you might like to check out my new web page," followed by a link to a personal site that she had titled "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project." Of the term 'incel,' Alana recalled its appeal:

"The concept of being a lonely virgin is not a nice identity...Finding a more friendly term helped people say, 'Hey, I belong to a group. I'm not alone.' And by belonging to a group, people can help each other."<sup>9</sup>

In an interview with Peter Baker of *Elle Magazine*, Alana revealed that, while at Carleton, she was "supposed to be doing statistical programming," but instead read "about sexuality...quietly."<sup>10</sup> Alana's exposure to online communities housing powerful coming out stories empowered her to realize that she was bisexual, and began dating a woman for 6 months. This relationship represented Alana's first, and she experienced it at 24 years old. Of her 'involuntary celibacy,' "she felt like she'd passed through adolescence without learning the unspoken rules of a complex game that everyone else understood intuitively."<sup>11</sup> When Alana's first relationship ended, she felt encouraged to reflect upon the prior decade, which she spent as a single woman who had yet to understand herself in terms of her sexuality, and had gone what is

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<sup>9</sup> Zimmer, Ben. "How 'Incel' Got Hijacked." politico.com. Last modified May 8, 2019. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/05/08/intel-involuntary-celibate-movement-218324>.

<sup>10</sup> Baker, Peter. "The Woman Who Accidentally Started The Incel Movement." *Elle*, March 1, 2016. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.elle.com/culture/news/a34512/woman-who-started-incel-movement/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

conventionally regarded as a long time before experiencing sex or romance for the first time. This prompted her to “create a movement that was open to anybody and everybody,” which took the form of her Involuntarily Celibate Project, keeping up a mailing list inhabiting personal anecdotes and stories from those who signed up. Alana sought to create a sense of community, albeit geographically distant, that could perhaps offer some solace to those who may have trouble landing dates, or talking to people in general, and had experienced issues with these social circumstances for some time.

After a few years, Alana passed off the content of the community she had created to the hands of someone she had not met, who created a new website inspired by the Involuntarily Celibacy Project. It was not until 2014, when Elliot Rodger’s face, name, and identity as an ‘incel’ made its way across international headlines that Alana had to confront the fact that the term she had coined for the sake of unity and community had been hijacked by the manosphere.

## Cyber-Omelas

*The idea that the Internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor is marred by what I call cyber-utopianism: a naive belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to admit its downside.*  
-Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*

The turn of the millennia brought about widespread and synchronous feelings of hope and concern. Some experiencing more of the latter clutched their belongings dearly as the clock struck twelve on New Year's Eve, expecting a technologically induced doomsday to transpire affecting banks, transportation, and powerplants because computers *might* interpret the year 2000 as the long passed 1900. Paranoia surrounding 'Y2K' eventually passed as no discernable issues arose; the acronym now cutely refers to the shiny, synthetic aesthetic of the moment encapsulated by an image that shall not be included here because apparently high quality images of Steve Jobs can only be accessed through Getty Images, a company charging an \$800 registration fee for access to their library. However, I'm sure a mere description will suffice: Steve Jobs, dressed as himself, holds up a copy of Britney Spears' debut album *..Baby One More Time* in CD form at a Worldwide Developers Conference. His only guest on stage is a white, square shaped desktop computer with a blue background vaguely resembling a wave crashing onto itself. Looming behind him is a massive projection of the album cover:



If we could appoint images as official time-capsules of a given year, this one would be my pick, given that Getty Images allows it.

While Jobs and Britney imagistically represents Y2K specifically, as well as the music video for her next massive hit *Oops!... I Did It Again* which literally takes place in space, the temporal trajectory of the aesthetic can be aptly summarized by the astronaut-inspired Moon Boot; a type of ‘après- ski’ footwear that reached peak popularity in the years following the Apollo 11 moon landing. It wasn’t until the early 2000s that Moon Boots resurfaced as a trend,<sup>13</sup> perfectly embodying the latex retrofuturism of an era that brought about another successful venture into unknown territory: cyberspace. Those awaiting the third wave of a Moon Boot

<sup>12</sup> North American cover art for *...Baby One More Time*, released on January 12, 1999, through Jive Records. The album sold over 25 million copies worldwide, making it one of the best-selling albums of all time.

<sup>13</sup> La Ferla, Ruth. "Moon Boots Back on Earth." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), October 17, 2004. Accessed April 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/fashion/moon-boots-back-on-earth.html>.



takeover may be out of luck until the passing of another pivotal achievement in the realm of technological exploration, but should find comfort in the absolute fact that for every possible interest, no matter how niche, there exists a space online dedicated to preserving it through archive and discussion. The ‘Y2K Aesthetic Institute,’ one of social media platform Facebook’s millions of “groups,” does just that, their description confirming a communal commitment to “the research of a time when the future was tight leather pants, silver eyeshadow, shiny clothing, oakleys, gradients, and blobby electronics!” Rules found on the Institute’s “about” page warn new members against posting images of Mac OS9 Wallpapers, stills from Eiffel 65’s hit single “Blue (Da Ba Dee),” or the long discontinued Motorola V70 cell phone, as these items “have been completely scanned for every bit of y2k aesthetic” in them. The ‘Y2K Aesthetic Institute’ has over 15,000 members, and offers an easily accessible portal into a period wherein trends in fashion and technology were as glittering and bright as the perceived future lying ahead; the Y2K bug crisis never materialized, and faith in the internet ran strong. Meanwhile, the dotcom bubble kept on swelling; its inevitable burst, the market bust to follow and the “war on terror” lay close on the horizon.

As many noted, however, humanity’s landmark venture into cyberspace came with a price. When Robert D. Putnam wrote his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, it is hard to imagine that he could have conceived of a Facebook group such as the ‘Y2K Aesthetic Institute.’ Published in 2000, the piece of nonfiction outlines the decline of social capital, a sexy term for mutually beneficial interactions between people, throughout the United States since the 1950s. Putnam illustrates bowling as a microcosm for American society; while the number of individual bowlers across the country had increased since

1980, bowling *leagues* disappeared at an alarming rate, indicating a general loss of human connection that was once maintained by participation in group activities and civic engagement.<sup>14</sup>

Those passionate about the revival of social capital may be relieved to hear that more than 400 million people belong to Facebook groups that, according to Facebook, “they find meaningful.”

Despite the positive impacts of these digital networking groups, the service received criticism from the left following Donald Trump’s presidential victory in 2016, as many claimed the company had not done its part in preventing the spread of ‘fake news,’<sup>15</sup> or, in more honest terms, had not properly censored editorial and personal content shared by those making up Trump’s loyal base of voters. One year after the election, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg guiltily churned out 6,000 words promising that the site would prioritize their ‘group’ feature over ‘feeds’, which had proven to be hotbeds of fiery political uproar and detrimental enthusiasm. Three years after the election, Facebook shelled out an estimated \$10 million on a Super Bowl advertisement promoting the service which one may assume the entire world was already aware of, and yet, Facebook groups have accrued 300 million more members since 2017. Sometimes, all people need is a push, and social capital may be regained-- although these numbers leave one to desire updated statistics with respect to bowling leagues, most of which may have moved online by now.

Facebook allows users to join up to 6,000 groups. Why someone would do such a thing confounds me. However, what this makes abundantly clear is Facebook’s genuine desire for people to engage with each other through this nifty feature as much as possible, whether for the

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<sup>14</sup> Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York City, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Rodriguez, Salvador. "Mark Zuckerberg shifted Facebook's focus to groups after the 2016 election, and it's changed how people use the site." *cnbc.com*. Last modified February 16, 2020. Accessed April 5, 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/16/zuckerbergs-focus-on-facebook-groups-increases-facebook-engagement.html>.

sake of preserving human connection in the digital age as advertised in their commercials, or as a clever mode of blinding their usership to each other's dissenting opinions and postings.

Facebook's historically fraught relationship to the content it houses sheds some light on the complicated relationship between social media and connectivity.

In 2013, the University of Michigan conducted a study finding that while Facebook may help people feel more connected to each other, it does not necessarily make them happier.<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon may explain why incels, who probably spend more time on the internet than anyone else, do not necessarily feel happier as a result of their connection to one another. The University of Michigan's research was cited in an article published in the Guardian in July of 2014 titled 'Loneliness: a silent plague that is hurting young people most.'<sup>17</sup> Just three months later, the same daily British newspaper published another dismally titled article, 'The age of loneliness is killing us,' by George Monbiot. He begins the piece by questioning the Hobbesian claim that in the state of nature, before developing a concept of and fear of authority following the industrial revolution, humans engaged in a constant battle of "every man against every man;" How could this be true? Before the introduction of various modern conveniences to our lives (such as medicine, or the in-home elliptical), we constantly relied on each other, for everything. Monbiot essentially romanticizes the purely survival oriented days our ancestors were lucky enough to experience, without acknowledging the unfortunate reality that many still live every day hoping to survive despite their lack of resources. He goes on to provide a litany of fear-inducing statistics, a particularly striking one being that "social isolation is as potent a cause of early death

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<sup>16</sup> Kross E, Verduyn P, Demiralp E, Park J, Lee DS, Lin N, et al. (2013) Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults. PLoS ONE 8(8): e69841. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0069841

<sup>17</sup> Gil, Natalie. "Loneliness: a silent plague that is hurting young people most." *The Guardian* (London, United Kingdom), July 20, 2014. Accessed April 5, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jul/20/loneliness-britains-silent-plague-hurts-young-people-most>.

as smoking 15 cigarettes a day,”<sup>18</sup> but notably does not cite any particular reasons why we, being those of us lucky enough to consider our social isolation<sup>19</sup> an issue or afford a pack of cigarettes, are so very lonely and unhappy.

Monbiot never directly mentions the internet, but in his profiling of the ‘epidemic’ of loneliness he cites research carried out at the University of Milan stating that while television may help to ‘drive competitive aspiration,’ those who consume more television than others derive less satisfaction from a given level of income than those who choose to cast their eyes elsewhere. Is it unfounded to assume that social media may have a similar effect? Monbiot cites *Dragon’s Den*, the British version of *Shark Tank*, as a show that may encapsulate the phenomenon the Milan researchers unearthed; that being a connection between the consumption of mass media and a dissatisfaction with one’s own, unproduced and realistic lifestyle.

Then what of Instagram influencers like Dan Bilzerian, the strongly bearded yacht-hopping playboy racking up 31 million followers as of April of 2020, who claims he made his ‘millions’ by playing poker incredibly well? It would come across as naive, in today’s net-driven world, to think that social media as an enterprise does not contribute to growing levels of dissatisfaction among its users, some of whom obsess and fawn over the various wealthy and beautiful people they follow, others observing the hedonistic charade of the 1% funded by sponsorship deals with multi-million dollar corporations and understandably scoffing at the materialistic stupidity of it all. Do the Kardashians inspire their adoring fans to create their own lines of makeup and become famous enough to land multiple city-themed spin offs of a reality

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<sup>18</sup> Monbiot, George. "The age of loneliness is killing us." *The Guardian* (London, United Kingdom), October 14, 2014. Accessed April 5, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/age-of-loneliness-killing-us>.

<sup>19</sup> Unrelated to state-mandated social distancing measures taking place throughout 2020, as the article I cite here was written in 2014.

show, or simply consume their products and productions as a mode of displaying affection?

Those who disproportionately despise the Kardashians despite the existence of many other rich entrepreneurs that do worse things than flaunt the impeccable work of their plastic surgeons on their Instagram feeds may in fact despise more than a family of Los Angeles raised girls with nasally voices who advertise cyborgian beauty standards. Perhaps their frustration amalgamates as a result of an overexposure to the disparities between the ‘followers’ and ‘followed’ that social media projects in HD. Elliot Rodger himself directly expressed frustration and envy toward Hollywood-driven beauty standards, and the absurd wealth filling the pockets of those in charge of producing the media forming his own standards of conventional attractiveness. Many others share his frustrations, though not his murderous rage.

Social media cynicism aside, the early days of the internet brought about a few theories that may come across as laughable in retrospect; the World Wide Web, if used correctly, could provide a solution to the world’s maladies. Discussing net-optimism is important in the context of the manosphere, as members and their activity both reify some of the utopian beliefs behind it, as well as prove the cyberutopian ideology utterly, and tragically incorrect.

Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron’s *The Californian Ideology*, also by thinkers residing across the pond, serves as an early and still-relevant critique of cyber-utopianism and culture that gave rise to it. Published in *Mute* magazine in 1995, the piece describes their current-day setting as “the long predicted convergence of the media, computing and telecommunications into hypermedia.” Barbrook and Cameron open the essay by portraying their contemporary setting as a crucial juncture; capitalism is on the verge of irreversibly altering our way of life by way of wringing out every possible use of humankind and its creativity. In coded

terms, the proliferation of information by the internet and its rapid takeover of American households and industry will climatically alter the way we interact with each other -- which came true. Quite like the anticlimactic reveal of the eponymous character's true identity in *The Wizard of Oz*, Barbrook and Cameron unforgivingly open the curtains upon the "loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA have succeeded in defining a heterogeneous orthodoxy for the coming information age" responsible for spreading the myth of the Californian Ideology. They list the ingredients making up this vein of techno-utopianism as one part "the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco" and one part "the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley," the two parts connected by an absolute faith in the ability of new information technologies to emancipate themselves and hypothetically others throughout the United States.

Barbrook and Cameron highlight that those belonging to the new school of Californian thought passionately advocate for an 'impeccable libertarianism,' wherein information technologies, as they emerge, may also bring forth a neo-Jeffersonian democracy "where all individuals will be able to express themselves freely within cyberspace."<sup>20</sup> Here lies the utopian aspect inherent within the Californian Ideology, but, as its designators point out, the ideal landscape of the internet portrayed by 'techno-boosters' belonging to all walks of life perhaps subconsciously reproduces "some of the most atavistic features of American society," relying on a "wilful blindness towards the other." To Barbrook and Cameron, the "computer nerds, slacker students, innovative capitalists, social activists, trendy academics, futuristic bureaucrats and opportunistic politicians" whole-heartedly pushing the powers of emerging technologies deny the

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<sup>20</sup> Mitch Kapor, 'Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?'

entirely valid possibility that their utopia may more realistically manifest as an Omelas, the fictional setting wherein Ursula K. Le Guin's 1973 short story takes place.

In *Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*, the narrator depicts a utopia wherein everything is perfect and society runs seamlessly. Blessed with an idyllic landscape, the citizens of Omelas gleefully live their lives, and conflict never surfaces. The only problem plaguing Omelas is the starving, diseased, miserable and unwashed child kept in a subterranean dwelling below the perfect city, locked in perpetual misery by the other citizens, for if the child were released, Omelas would cease to be "perfect." Who exactly represents this tragic child in the case of rising technologies is not static; just as those perceived as possessing the most privilege in real life can quickly become dethroned and scorned depending on what internet users choose to do about them on any given day. This phenomenon of 'cancellation'<sup>21</sup> can have positive and negative effects, only contributing to its complexity. Someone having endured long term abuse at someone else's hands can release their information into the ether(net), thereby keeping others safe from their reign of terror. On the other side of the equation, completely innocent people's lives can be destroyed in a matter of minutes using these same methods. The promise of the internet's emancipatory nature has not manifested as simply as its inventors predicted.

*The Californian Ideology* as described strives for net-utopia, but as the essay outlines this dream could only ever amount to a reverie. Tragically ironic is the fact that the strongest supporters of Silicon Valley's social-justice passion project are comprised of yuppies and hippies alike, who seem to have forgotten their origins as the New Age liberals of the Bay Area who fought for civil rights, women's liberation, and sought answers to the poverty and environmental

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<sup>21</sup> Cancel culture refers to the "popular practice of withdrawing support for (canceling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive," according to dictionary.com

degradation plaguing the nation and world. The rest of Barbrook and Cameron's essay features small chapters titled "Ronald Reagan v. the Hippies," "The Rise of the Virtual Class," and "The Myth of the 'Free Market,'" to name a few. These chapters coalesce political and cultural shifts dating from Governor Reagan's inciting attack from the "straight" world of bureaucrats on the counter-cultural hippies of Berkeley in 1969, to a call for a contemporary "Rebirth of the Modern," encouraging internet users to forge their own self-identity online, simultaneously sampling the more savory elements of the Californian Ideology and its technological reverberations, and rejecting its neoliberal origins and undertones just as a masterful electronic musician would.

The neoliberally fueled uber culture we reside within is described by Monbiot as producing "a world governed by competition" wherein "those who fall behind become defined as self-defined as losers," as many did due to rising levels of neoliberally induced economic disparity. While a cutting label and vogueish buzzword nowadays, 'neoliberalism' did not always make its way into the average conversation concerning the Clintons and their legacy. The neoliberal influence currently affecting nations such as the United Kingdom and the United States became unearthed during the 1970s, an era which saw a swift disappearance of Keynesian economic policy under the Carter administration. Neoliberalism was then cemented by the concurrent rule of Thatcher and Reagan, a special bond between Iron and Teflon whose putty constituted anti-Communism and a love of the 'free market.' As George Monbiot puts it,

"Neoliberalism was not conceived as a self-serving racket, but it rapidly became one. Economic growth has been markedly slower in the neoliberal era (since 1980 in Britain and the US) than it was in the preceding decades; but not for the very rich. Inequality in the distribution of both income and wealth, after 60 years of decline, rose rapidly in this



era, due to the smashing of trade unions, tax reductions, rising rents, privatisation and deregulation.”<sup>22</sup>

*The Californian Ideology* fails to mention the term once, despite Barbrook retrospectively referring to his collaborative piece as a “critique of dotcom neoliberalism.”<sup>23</sup> This may be, in part, because the neoliberal tradition is the invisible ideology many of us have lived under for decades without necessarily knowing it. Neoliberal politics give way to a toxic culture of competition, as is commonly associated with the Reagan era, although the bootstrap-mentality is as American as apple pie, and bipartisan in nature.<sup>24</sup> Monbiot also quotes Chris Hedges, who wrote that “fascist movements build their base not from the politically active but the politically inactive, the ‘losers’ who feel, often correctly, they have no voice or role to play in the political establishment.” Whether or not Donald Trump’s use of flamboyant vocabulary during his campaign mirrors fascist rhetoric, it cannot be denied that he appealed enormously to the politically dis-enfranchised.

Monbiot’s reading of Hedges equates fascism to neoliberalism which Barbrook equates with cyber-utopianism, whose founders aligned themselves with neo-Jeffersonian libertarianism. To limit the muddling of political jargon and categorization, all terms critiqued and described within this context represent complicated modes of describing ideologies whose mythologies

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<sup>22</sup> “Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems.” *The Guardian* (London, United Kingdom), April 15, 2016. Accessed March 31, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>.

<sup>23</sup> Barbrook 2007, *Imaginary Futures: Other Works*

<sup>24</sup> Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Florida voted for Reagan twice, and then for Obama twice three decades later, and then for Donald Trump in 2016. For more information on this topic, visit:

Bolton, John. “The Reagan Democrats have returned to the Republicans- handing the party unprecedented power.” *The Telegraph* (London, United Kingdom), November 9, 2016. Accessed April 11, 2020.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/09/the-reagan-democrats-have-returned-to-the-republicans---handing/>.

benefit their proprietors more than their beneficiaries. These ‘beneficiaries’ feel understandably slighted when their liquid gold trickles down to them too slowly, if at all, in many cases causing outbreaks of collective rage expressed in virtual spheres and social media forums. In terms of Silicon Valley idealism, Barbrook and Cameron state that “each member of the ‘virtual class’ is promised the opportunity to become a successful hi-tech entrepreneur. Information technologies, so the argument goes, empower the individual, enhance personal freedom, and radically reduce the power of the nation-state.”<sup>25</sup> They then assert that “these restyled McLuhanites<sup>26</sup> vigorously argue that big government should stay off the backs of resourceful entrepreneurs who are the only people cool and courageous enough to take risks,”<sup>27</sup> the risks herein described being engineering of digital money and encryption, which the authors see as easily going wrong, as well as potentially expediting the eradication of manual jobs and thus decreasing employment. The more who join this fight, the more they will benefit, and others, loosely. The thinkers behind these technologies reap the benefits of their superior intelligence and technological prowess, but the ‘trickling down’ of these benefits to truck drivers or gardeners has not yet been promised. And, to use Monbiot’s harsh wording, what would make someone feel more like a “loser” than the idea of being replaced by a machine? Does the utopian vision of substituting real human labor with technology emancipate the individual who carried out the labor, or leave them unemployed as well as patronized? Additionally, and more specifically to the trajectory of internet forums, disparities inevitably arose within online spheres as well. As certain narratives rose to the forefront, occupying the most used Twitter hashtags, those who felt excluded or

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<sup>25</sup> *The Californian Ideology*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Referring to Marshall MacLuhan, who famously coined the phrase “the medium is the message.” His writing inspired many belonging to the burgeoning technocratic class of the late 20th century to forge mediums that they believed could change the world for the better, flattening inequalities and disparities inherent to day to day life.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

angered by these narratives, whether based in feminism or racial equality, forged their own spaces online, thus blocking out the people and words they disagreed with.

Barbrook and Cameron mention a little wooden invention adored by Thomas Jefferson within their critique of Silicon Valley and neoliberalism. At first I could not imagine how mentioning something so old, and specific, could carry weight within their work. But upon researching further, I found that this little *étagère*<sup>28</sup> lended itself massively to the crux of the writers' argument.

Sometime in the late 18th century Thomas Jefferson became enamored with a 'dumbwaiter' while in Paris, where he grew accustomed to using them during dinner parties. He would go on to own at least five of these multi-layered wooden tables while serving as president of the United States. These mechanisms were placed strategically in the dining room and tea room at Monticello, his primary plantation in Charlottesville, Virginia. These dumbwaiters stood at about three feet tall, constituting four shelves atop each other wherein one could find all of the culinary accoutrement necessary for a proper dining experience. In her accounts of Monticello, Margaret Bayard Smith remarked that a dumbwaiter was placed by every individual guest at a given gathering, "containing everything necessary for the progress of the dinner from beginning to end, so as to make the attendance of servants entirely unnecessary."<sup>29</sup> Even more telling, Smith noted that Jefferson replaced his slaves normally tasked with waiting upon dinner guests in favor of these inanimate, silent objects for the sake of uninterrupted intellectual conversation

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<sup>28</sup> A piece of furniture consisting of a set of open shelves for displaying small objects and sometimes having an enclosed cabinet as a base according to Merriam-Webster.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, Margaret Bayard, and Gaillard Hunt. *The first forty years of Washington society, portrayed by the family letters of Mrs. Samuel Harrison Smith Margaret Bayard from the collection of her grandson, J. Henley Smith*. New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1906. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/06040262/>.

with his slave-holding peers, believing that “much of the domestic and even public discord was produced by the mutilated and misconstrued repetition of free conversation at dinner tables, by these mute but not inattentive listeners.”<sup>30</sup> Essentially, the physical appearance of slaves moving about the dining room became a source of agitation for those striving, perhaps, to ignore the inherent inhumanity of this dynamic. The dumbwaiter provided a momentary escape from the realities of plantation life, allowing guests to engage in vibrant discourse concerning the arts, and certainly politics, free from the judgment of these ‘mute but not inattentive listeners’ and the guilt brought about by their presence.

Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron adduce Jefferson’s dumbwaiter in their chapter ‘Cyborg Masters and Robot Slaves,’ which casts out a dystopian interpretation of the internet’s future. They remind readers that despite the fantasies held by the technocratic class, “white people in California remain dependent on their darker-skinned fellow humans to work in their factories, pick their crops, look after their children and tend their gardens,” and “increasingly fear that this ‘underclass’ will someday demand its liberation.” Barbrook and Cameron stress that technological determinism and its embracement by the upper class will only deepen segregation, as opposed to emancipate humanity, a prediction outlined within this excerpt:

“If human slaves are ultimately unreliable, then mechanical ones will have to be invented. The search for the holy grail of ‘Artificial Intelligence’ reveals this desire for the Golem - a strong and loyal slave whose skin is the colour of the earth and whose innards are made of sand. As in Asimov’s ‘Robot’ novels, the techno-utopians imagine that it is possible to obtain slave-like labour from inanimate machines.<sup>31</sup> Yet, although technology can store or amplify labour, it can never remove the necessity for humans to invent, build

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<sup>30</sup> Smith and Hunt, *The first forty years*.

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Asimov, *The Foundation Trilogy*, I, *Robot*, and *The Rest of the Robots*

and maintain these machines in the first place. Slave labour cannot be obtained without somebody being enslaved.”<sup>32</sup>

While depicting a dismal and perhaps dramatic prediction, Barbrook and Cameron saliently propose that merely subbing out the exploitation of labour carried out by the needy for labour carried out by robots merely conveys a convenient form of distributing justice without acknowledging the various ways this system could backfire, or fail to come to fruition. The cyber-utopian tradition seeks to de-emphasize the body not for its liberation, but for the ultimate purpose of its contextual irrelevance following an industrial revolution which replaces the employment of humans with a machine-dominated workforce. Thomas Jefferson’s relationship to his dumbwaiter acts as microcosm of the point Barbrook and Cameron seek to impart unto readers; technological advancements have a history of benefitting the privileged, as the elite comprise the only population equipped with the funding and free time to actualize these inventions. To Barbrook and Cameron, one would be naive to assume the rise of the internet could not take a similar course. Writing in the 1990s, these writers focus mostly on inevitable obstacles to accessibility, but the retrospective reader may apply this argument to examples of marginalization taking place between those already granted internet access; silencing the ‘other’ through trolling<sup>33</sup>, and harassing the ‘other’ via doxxing.<sup>34</sup>

Just one year after the publication of Richard and Barbrook’s essay, a real life protagonist of *The Californian Ideology* named John Perry Barlow wrote a manifesto espousing the exact sentiments the authors warned us about. For the sake of this topic, it is important to note that

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<sup>32</sup> *The Californian Ideology*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Trolling is the deliberate attempt to upset or start an argument with another internet user, especially by posting offensive or unkind things.

<sup>34</sup> Internet-based practice of researching and publicly broadcasting private or identifying information about an individual or organization.

‘Utopia’ translates literally to “no place” according to its ancient Greek etymology. Generally speaking, the meaning and usage of ‘utopia’ has shifted in its contemporary use to illustrate a place embodying perfection; a community or society whose entire population thrives due to the implementation and maintenance of a perfect system, aborting any potential suffering caused by real world injustices. In its early days and a bit after, some saw the internet as a potential materialization of a perfect place run by a perfect system, retrospectively, it seems this dream was never realized.

The textual manifestation of this dream can easily be found by reading *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* by John Perry Barlow. Written in 1996, the laconic nature of the manifesto hinders not its histrionic tone, containing dramatic statements such as its opening line, “Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.” In sixteen succinct paragraphs, Barlow makes the case that the United States government should not have the right to apply laws to the internet, arguing that the rapidly growing, amorphous entity had the ability to construct its own social contract as an outcome of the golden rule. To Barlow, the internet displayed, especially to stuffy bureaucratic types, the inherent goodness of freedom: because clearly, when given the reins to self-govern, human beings will naturally treat others exactly the way they themselves would want to be treated.

The late John Perry Barlow was a multi-hyphenate of a man, occupying the diverse roles of poet, essayist, cattle rancher, cyberlibertarian political activist, part-time lyricist for the americana jam-band the Grateful Dead, and founding member of the Electronic Frontier

Foundation, a non-profit digital rights group, alongside the likes of techno-entrepreneurial superstars like Steve Wozniak. It goes without saying the man was a resident of San Francisco, California. Barlow's manifesto did not manifest, so to speak, as a random flare of passion for Silicon Valley and the innovation spawned from that blessed Bay. *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* responded directly to the passing of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 in the United States, which Barlow considers a repudiation of the Constitution, insulting the dreams of "Jefferson, Washington, Mill, Madison, DeToqueville, and Brandeis."<sup>35</sup> It is probable that Barlow's criticisms of the act referred most specifically to the content of Title 3, "Cable Services," which allows for media cross-ownership, or the common ownership of multiple media sources by a single person or corporate entity<sup>36</sup>, establishing the freedom to "let anyone enter any communications business – to let any communications business compete in any market against any other."<sup>37</sup> These government-imposed stipulations did not sit well with pioneers of new media, who saw themselves as the re-delivery men of a lost American tradition of freedom. The tech-savvy trailblazers of Silicon Valley sought freedom from the freedoms now granted to others by the government, which could, in turn, hinder the freedom entitled to them by way of forging the medium itself.

This sentiment does not come across as completely baseless; they wrote and advertised the code from which cyberspace emerged, so it seems perfectly understandable that the state's attempt to build a figurative fence, no matter how dingy, around something nebulous and

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<sup>35</sup> Barlow, John Perry. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." Electronic Frontier Foundation. Last modified February 8, 1996. Accessed April 13, 2020. <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

<sup>36</sup> "FCC Broadcast Ownership Rules". *Federal Communications Commission*. 2011-02-10. Retrieved 2019-03-29.

<sup>37</sup> The Telecomm Act. (2008) para. 1. Retrieved from [fcc.gov](http://fcc.gov)

intentionally unrestrainable would create discomfort in Silicon Valley. However, the United States government informed by a vested interest in censorship cannot accurately be described as the sole contributor to a fallen dream collectively experienced by various male tech entrepreneurs. Many sociological elements at play disproved the utopian reverie encapsulated by Barlow's fervid declaration, unless, of course, his entourage foresaw the multitudes of ways that one could take advantage of the freedoms they so dearly sought to protect and decided that the bad outweighed the good.

Barlow and his team represented an early, and hopeful, example of anti-establishment rhetoric applied to the upholding of free speech through the possibilities of the internet. These possibilities, during the web's nascence, were often characterized as radical, and capable of establishing a new world order. The World Wide Web had the potential of embodying a free-flow of ideas and toppling unjust hierarchies existing in the physical realm, by way of its geographical irrelevance and access to all, ideally. Barlow wrote that the protection of this burgeoning technological medium upheld Jeffersonian ideals 'now born anew in us,' 'us' referring to other major players in the California based tech universe. Barlow, speaking personally to the government, states, "you are terrified of your own children, since they are natives in a world where you will always be immigrants." Cyber-libertarians of the 1990s used language that mirrored, perhaps purposefully, that of the youthful hippies brimming with cock-eyed optimism, fighting on the liberal front during the culture wars of the 1960s; both instances found a nucleus in California's Bay Area, and both espoused a distrust of "The Man." When Barlow wrote,



“Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. You have neither solicited nor received ours. We did not invite you. You do not know us, nor do you know our world. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders.”<sup>38</sup>

He assumed the opinion of all prospective users of the internet, drafting them into his war defending his precious cyberspace, which he adorns with a capital ‘C’ demonstrating its equality to any nation-state. Barlow brilliantly invokes populist attitudes for (cyber)libertarian purposes, declaring that a victory for Silicon Valley over the State would ensure an equally possessed freedom among all setting their virtual foot in cyberspace, an act akin to Commander Neil Armstrong’s ‘one small step for a man.’ The ‘giant leap’ could only occur if mankind collectively seated themselves before a boxed-in screen, pressed a button, and awaited entrance to utopia, the magnificent “ahhh” indicating the computer had arisen from its slumber providing a life-affirming soundtrack.

Hypothetically, the only individuals barred from entry would be those hindered by their outdated logic, idiotically refusing to participate in the most promising of America’s inventions epitomizing the ideals that gave life to its Constitution. Denying the internet’s power to reinforce freedom and democracy reads unpatriotic according to cyber-utopian tradition. It is worth noting, however, that the ideology’s founding father quoted in multitudes thus far throughout this very paper eventually grew embarrassed by his own optimism. During an interview concerning *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, Barlow stated, “we all get older and smarter.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the eight years following the publication of Barlow’s seminal text invalidated his

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<sup>38</sup> Barlow. “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.”

<sup>39</sup> Doherty, Brian (August–September 2004). "John Perry Barlow 2.0: The Thomas Jefferson of cyberspace reinvents his body — and his politics". *Reason*. Archived from the original on September 3, 2009.

assertion that the minds of Silicon Valley, in their contribution to rapidly changing technologies, were “creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.” In her 1998 essay *WHAT IS TO BE SCREENED - NET UTOPIANS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS*, Josephine Berry argues that Barlow’s vein of net-utopianism acts as a contemporary American “frontier myth.”<sup>40</sup> This assertion evokes an amusing image of the technocracy’s origins in the mind’s eye; gangs of brave, moustached cowboys adorned in 501 Levis and plain tee-shirts, their New Balance Sneakers fitting awkwardly in their stirrups, traversing endlessly wide, open, and empty plains conveniently spotted on the horizon, prepared to write the code necessary in erecting the architecture fit for the emergence of small techno-towns across the landscape; Utopia.

Barlow’s essay sharply focuses on one aspect of the internet that many since the medium’s birth have celebrated and exploited; its power to remove ourselves from the imprisonment of our flesh suits. When speaking directly to the governmental powers that be, he states that “our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion,” and that he as well as his comrades will “create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace.”<sup>41</sup> Anyone feeling hindered by the appearance or societal categorization of their bodies could seek refuge in the internet’s caverns, and perhaps find solace as well as like-minded company there. As Barbrook, Cameron and many others have argued, de-emphasizing the corporeal form does not necessarily guarantee emancipation from the negative aspects of physical reality. In the case of the manosphere, and online-based misogyny in general, the very notion of a “civilization of the mind” indirectly excuses violence similar to that carried out by

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<sup>40</sup> Berry, Josephine. “WHAT IS TO BE SCREENED — NET UTOPIANS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS.” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 0 (1998): 66–73. [www.jstor.org/stable/20711369](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20711369).

<sup>41</sup> Barlow. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace."

Elliot Rodger. This thought process has often encouraged certain men, who prize cerebral prowess over physical prowess as a mode of toppling traditional masculinity for their own benefit to act against those possessing the latter with verbal violence in online arenas.

That being said, the concept of a “civilization of the mind” via internet connection proved vital in the construction of early cyber-feminist activism; cyber-space offering an appealing safe haven wherein women could engage in discourse which focused on their words, shielded from the objectification and judgment of their bodies. As we will see later, however, this very civilization turned on itself; in some distant settlements, strong reactions formed against internet-driven female empowerment, using the reality of the body as weapons of harassment.

### **“This is our turf:” Androcentrism Goes Digital**

The turning of another chapter begets one more mention of the latest turn of a century. Bill Clinton remained president of the United States despite being impeached two years earlier: The House of Representatives accusations of perjury and obstruction of justice stemming from the president concealing his affair with 22 year old White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Only the stain of controversy endured in the public’s conscience after Clinton’s acquittal; the president maintained his position as a world leader and frequent flyer of Jeffrey Epstein’s private plane, the ‘Lolita Express,’ amongst the company of underaged girls. Meanwhile, Lewinsky was vilified by the mass media, and First Lady Hillary Clinton carried on her merry way, adorned with a perpetually ardent smile in active defiance of tragically embarrassing chaos. Ironically, the years preceding Clinton’s ineffectual impeachment brought about what Anna Everett refers to as “the arrival of a new postfeminist age,” wherein “feminism and cyberspace became fruitfully conjoined.”<sup>42</sup> The results of this amalgamated in 2000, a year which saw the equalization of participation on the internet between men and women in the United States.<sup>43</sup>

In 2001, reports arose that women actually dominated the internet, so to speak, by a thin margin. Everett follows these statistics by reminding us that these numbers did not translate internationally, as the global percentage of women using the internet during the turn of the century remained very low compared to the United States.<sup>44</sup> Even so, these hopeful figures led

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<sup>42</sup> Everett, Anna. "On Cyberfeminism and Cyberwomanism: High-Tech Mediations of Feminism’s Discontents." *Signs* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1278-286. Accessed April 15, 2020. doi:10.1086/422235.

<sup>43</sup> Media Metrix and Jupiter Communications study, “It’s a Woman’s World Wide Web,”

<sup>44</sup> Pastore, Michael. "Gender Split Nearly Even by 2001." *clickz.com*. Last modified June 7, 1999. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://www.clickz.com/gender-split-nearly-even-by-2001/58162/>.

Everett to consider the (cyber)feminist movements of the 1990s emerging concurrently with rapid changes in new-media.

Published in 2004, Anna Everett's essay "On Cyberfeminism and Cyberwomanism: High-Tech Mediations of Feminism's Discontents" profiles the separate but linked trajectories of two events taking occurring during the fall of 1997; the First Cyberfeminist International Congress taking place over the course of a week in Kassel, Germany, and the Million Woman March a month later in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The FCI and MWM both relied on computer technologies to organize and generate publicity, and shared a common goal in eroding "the patriarchal structuring of technology as a masculine space alienating to women,"<sup>45</sup> in the words of Jennifer Brayton. They also had their fair share of differences; the MWM, organized primarily by black women, found the usage of cyberspace seminal in enlisting "support for their platform issues, which, according to their mission statement, included bringing about 'a probe into the CIA's participation in and its relationship to the influx of drugs into the African American community,' and the rehabilitation of 'Black women upon leaving the penal system.'<sup>46</sup> MWM's organizers proved hugely successful not just in their ability to organize over a million and a half people, nor their achievement in raising \$21.7 million in financial return for the city of Philadelphia; the culmination of their efforts also served as concrete inspiration for other impassioned activist groups ready to utilize the convenience of the internet to their advantage.

Alternatively, the group of 30, mostly white cyberfeminists gathered in Germany did not march, but sat, engaging in complex discourse surrounding the potential pitfalls of cyberspace,

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<sup>45</sup> Brayton, Jennifer. 1997. "Cyberfeminism as New Theory." Available online at <http://www.unb.ca/web/PAR-L/win/cyberfem.htm>. Last accessed March 29, 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Everett, Anna. "On Cyberfeminism and Cyberwomanism: High-Tech Mediations of Feminism's Discontents."

staunchly rejecting the notion that cyberfeminism was a concept necessitating a definition. In fact, the event's organizers satirically calling themselves the 'Old Boys Network' released '100 anti-theses', a multilingual list of 100 things that cyberfeminism was not, the first of which humorously stating: "cyberfeminism is not a fragrance."<sup>47</sup> These 'Old Boys' and their First Cyberfeminist International Congress adopted a rhetoric that had been brewing, at least academically, since 1985, when Donna Haraway, a professor (now Emerita) in the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, published an 88 page essay for the *Socialist Review* titled "A Cyborg Manifesto." Haraway's work encourages women to become proficient in the realm of technology in order to successfully engage with "informatics of domination," thereby disrupting the figurative "grids of control"<sup>48</sup> that keep women, as well as other marginalized groups, contained within toxically singular identities.

Seven years later in 1991, a Haraway-inspired collective of four called the VNS Matrix, in their own words, "emerged from the cyberswap during a southern Australian summer...on a mission to hijack the toys from the technocowboys and remap cyberculture with a feminist bent."

<sup>49</sup> Based in Adelaide, Australia, VNS Matrix collaborated on a project known as the "Cyberfeminist Manifesto," a 1992 text distributed through modes such as fax, posters, and virtual media, housing inflammatory proclamations such as "we are the future cunt," and "we are the virus of the new world disorder/rupturing the symbolic from within/saboteurs of big daddy

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<sup>47</sup> Old Boys Network. "1st CYBERFEMINIST INTERNATIONAL--MEDIA RELEASE." *nettime.org*. Last modified September 27, 1997. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9710/msg00021.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Haraway, Donna Jeanne (1991). "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century". *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge. ISBN 0415903866.

<sup>49</sup> Starrs, Josephine, Julianne Pierce, Francesca Da Rimini, and Virginia Barratt. "A CYBERFEMINIST MANIFESTO FOR THE 21ST CENTURY." 1991. In *NET ART ANTHOLOGY*. Accessed April 14, 2020. <https://anthology.rhizome.org/a-cyber-feminist-manifesto-for-the-21st-century>.

mainframe.”<sup>50</sup> In the words of Judy Wascman, VNS Matrix (comprised of Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt) “coined the term to label their radical feminist acts and their blatantly viral agenda: to insert women, bodily fluids and political consciousness into electronic spaces.”<sup>51</sup> That same year, British cultural theorist Sadie Plant cited cyberfeminism as an embodiment of her argument that “women are naturally suited to using the Internet, because women and the Internet are similar in nature— both...are non-linear, self-replicating systems concerned with making connections” and thus women “must seize opportunities to advance themselves and to challenge male authority.”<sup>52</sup> While certainly a mouthful, the Harawayian interpretations espoused by both VNS Matrix and Plant encapsulate what can be described as a ‘cyberfeminist utopianism,’ their words mirroring those of cyber-utopians mentioned in the previous chapter, the technological enthusiasm expressed by these women, instead, championing the use of the internet for expressly feminist purposes.

The Old Boys Network, as articulated earlier, vehemently refused to define cyberfeminism by content or category. The term’s diverse theoretical and tangible applications and appropriations preserve it in proper obscurity. Keeping this in mind, I take great pleasure in citing a theorist offering a far less utopian conception of ‘cyberfeminism,’ whatever that means. Rosi Braidotti published her aptly titled work “Cyberfeminism with a difference” in 1996, the same year in which John Perry Barlow released his cyberlibertarian manifesto declaring the internet our last remaining portal of freedom into the ether. Contrastly, Rosi Braidotti’s essay connects subjects ranging from the ‘post-human bodies’ of celebrities such as Dolly Parton and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Wajcman, Judy. *TechnoFeminism*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Consalvo, Mia. "Cyberfeminism." *Encyclopedia of New Media*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2002. 109-10. SAGE Reference Online. Web. 4 Apr. 2012

“that masterpiece of silicon re-construction that is Elizabeth Taylor,”<sup>53</sup> to Michel Foucault’s panopticon, even analyzing Canadian director David Cronenberg’s body-horror-centric filmography. When observed objectively, these characters may seem miles apart, but Braidotti tactfully sews a thread between them that leads readers, hopefully, to the conclusion that the rise of a virtual reality does not promise an obliteration of old world sentiments, nor a new world free from sexism, heteronormativity, racism, or economic inequality. Braidotti begins by likening the heavily altered forms of Jane Fonda and Michael Jackson to posthumanity, stating that these public figures inhabit “artificially reconstructed bodies” that stray “far from biological essence,” and act as “inscriptions of social codes.” These social codes reflect Foucault’s musings on “the paradox of simultaneous disappearance and over-exposure of the body,” acting as a reformulation of the poststructuralist philosophy which sought to re-think a “non-essentialized embodied self” that should accompany “the decline of the naturalistic paradigm.” In other words, Braidotti argues that technology can expedite the manifestation of this paradox; as the shared presence and interaction of real human bodies diminish by way of their virtual materialization, cultural obsessions with corporeal realities and biological distinctions may simply translate to these new mediums, thereby spreading and intensifying with unimaginable rapidity.

Braidotti brings our attention to the undeniable fact of the “omnipotence of visual media,” a condition that “our era,” being the period following the placement of the television in most nuclear American households, has turned into “the ultimate form of control,” marking “the triumph of vision over all other senses.” Having asserted American culture as a primarily visual one, Braidotti then considers the extent to which “an American and more specifically

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<sup>53</sup> Braidotti, Rosi. 1996. “Cyberfeminism with a Difference.” Available online at [http://www.let.uu.nl/womens\\_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm](http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm). Last accessed April 14, 2020.



Californian 'bodybeautiful' ideology,” that is, the media-driven commodification and overexposure of Western beauty ideals, has “re-colonized” the rest of the world by way of the ownership of the technology by U.S. corporations, as well as asking readers to confront logistical matters such as access to computer literacy, as well as actual computers, arguing that “it is always at times of great technological advance that Western culture reiterates some of its most persistent habits, notably the tendency to creating differences and organizing them hierarchically.”<sup>54</sup> The eye of this positively depicted virtual storm is located in California’s exponentially gentrified Silicon Valley, and the further one happens to be from this eye, whether in terms of geographical or cultural proximity, the less likely they will be able to access virtual mediums falsely advertised as emancipatory.

Concerning gender, Braidotti makes a similar claim, expressing a “worry about designing programmes that allow for ‘virtual rape and murder,’ both of which exist in the form of video games and virtual reality technology today, and have proven quite popular. Apparently vested with the cerebral power of frightfully accurate foresight, Braidotti predicts, considering that American culture is both visual and obsessed with violence, the new technological frontiers of virtual reality and cyberspace will inevitably “increase the polarization between the sexes.” The author delineates one remaining mode of salvation against this dismal projection, a strategy wherein women “use technology in order to disengage our collective imagination from the phallus and its accessory values: money, exclusion and domination, nationalism, iconic femininity and systematic violence.”<sup>55</sup> Recent efforts led by women online such as hashtag feminism like #MeToo could possibly serve as an attempt at this disengagement. However,

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<sup>54</sup> Braidotti, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Braidotti, 10.

seeing as this movement was grasped from the hands of its originator, Tarana Burke, and thrust into the spotlight of the Twitter stage by millionaire Hollywood actresses, #MeToo and its subtle neoliberal undertones do not indicate a distance from any of the phallic accessories Braidotti seeks to destroy. Moreover, hashtag feminism aligning with the #MeToo era spawned copious bipartisan backlash, some of which contributed to anti-feminist movements that will be explored later within this chapter.

*“Feminist women have a long history of dancing through a variety of potentially lethal minefields in their pursuit of socio-symbolic justice. Nowadays, women have to undertake the dance through cyberspace, if only to make sure that the joy-sticks of the cyberspace cowboys will not reproduce univocal phallicity under the mask of multiplicity...”<sup>56</sup>*

Perhaps it is time to consider the unparalleled Audre Lorde’s eminent assertion that, in regards to the establishment of intersectional feminism in the U.S., “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”<sup>57</sup> Applying this logic to cyberspace, the ‘masters’ of this house remain, for the most part, cyber-cowboys. In 2017, the Harvard Business Review reported that Facebook, Google, and Apple’s employment of women only amounted to 17%, 19%, and 23% of their staff, respectively.<sup>58</sup> Beyond the glaring issue of representation, it has been duly noted that Silicon Valley may have a “sexism problem,”<sup>59</sup> as suggested by the headline of a BBC article published just two months after Bhaskar Chakravorti covered the technological gender gap for the HBR. The BBC’s editorial coverage of Silicon Valley’s unwholesome gender politics was

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<sup>56</sup> Braidotti, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110- 114. 2007. Print.

<sup>58</sup> Chakravorti, Bhaskar. "There's a Gender Gap in Internet Usage. Closing It Would Open Up Opportunities for Everyone." *Harvard Business Review*, December 12, 2017. Accessed April 17, 2020. <https://hbr.org/2017/12/theres-a-gender-gap-in-internet-usage-closing-it-would-open-up-opportunities-for-everyone>.

<sup>59</sup> BBC. "Does Silicon Valley have a sexism problem?" BBC News. Last modified February 21, 2017. Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39025288>.

prompted by a blog post written by former Uber engineer Susan Fowler, describing her own run-ins with sexual harassment while working for the ride-hailing service, as well as drawing attention to a greater culture of misogyny present within her field. As the BBC puts it, Fowler's blog post represented "the latest blow for a company that has gained a reputation as a bastion of Silicon Valley's macho "bro" culture." This "latest blow" prompted deeper investigations into this progressively protruding culture defined by a particular form of masculinity, unearthing earlier studies revealing the inherent sexism of the tech world.<sup>60</sup>

In 2015, the *World Wide Web Foundation*, a non-profit founded by Tim-Berners-Lee, the English computer scientist and engineer credited with inventing the World Wide Web, introduced their "Women's Rights Online Project." This project outlined five barriers to the last reading "Women don't feel safe on the web." The WWWF clarifies this issue by positing that "women around the world report being bombarded by a culture of misogyny online, including aggressive, often sexualised hate speech, direct threats of violence, harassment, and revenge porn involving use of personal/private information for defamation." As Bailey Poland reminds us in "THE MANY FACES OF CYBERSEXISM: Why Misogyny Flourishes Online," the internet's "hate mobs" emerging during moments like Gamergate and The Fappening,<sup>61</sup> as well as the amount of individual abusers like doxxers and cyber-harassers, many of which belonging to incel or incel adjacent internet groups, have multiplied and escalated in the years following the turn of the decade.

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<sup>60</sup> For further information on this topic, visit the *Elephant in the Valley* study, conducted in 2015: <https://www.elephantinthevalley.com/>.

<sup>61</sup> To be further explored later within this chapter.

Poland also makes the case that “online harassment is rooted in offline beliefs.”

However, it is worth questioning whether the average ‘keyboard cowboy’<sup>62</sup> believes they are doing God’s work, or whether they act out of a confidence derived from the protective barrier of the screen before them that informs the level of aggression expressed by their comment or reply. Online, anyone seeking to deliberately disrupt conversation or provoke anger by sharing derogatory and inflammatory statements often employ ‘trolling’ as a tactic of domination. Two major instances of internet troll takeover with misogynistic leanings have been #GG (Gamergate) and The Fapping, which took place in 2014.

Urban Dictionary’s ‘top definition’ of trolling, by user ‘Drogs65’, explains the etymology of the action as “analogous to the fishing technique of ‘trolling,’ where colorful baits and lures are pulled behind a slow moving boat, often with multiple fishing lines, covering a large bodies of water, such as a large lake or the ocean.” While internet users troll Twitter feeds with unrelated content to the original post for reasons expanding far beyond the weaponization of internalized misogyny, in the context of cybersexism specifically, trolling often occurs in order to subdue women into silence or invisibility by derailing even the vaguest of feminist or feminine discourse.

Inundating the reply section of an unsuspecting user has the ability to overshadow the content of the original post. When these trolls gather in the name of a specifically masculine objective, they reinforce “the sexist attitudes that see women’s proper role as silent and objectified” and contribute to “an Internet where men are not challenged on their use of

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<sup>62</sup> “The sarcastic, combative, and apparently omnipotent self-appointed expert on any topic of discussion”, as defined by Urban Dictionary user ‘Rob Bites’.

stereotypes or violence against women.”<sup>63</sup> The most extreme cases of this form of trolling in recent internet history have taken place within incel forums, and now expressly provocatively disturbing forums like ‘r9k’, or ‘Robot9000’ on 4chan. These androcentric environments also exist in “dude-centric” comedy Twitter or Instagram accounts, etc. What distinguishes the content posted by a Twitter account called something like “@MensHumor” from posts found within a seedy 4chan forum is that the latter concerns itself with trolling via posting content as offensive as possible, though not always for the reasons one might assume. The expressed goal of anonymous users on incel adjacent forums like 4chan’s ‘r9k’ is not to garner attention through mainstream, lightly misogynistic humor; many times, it is to share personal issues regarding mental health, struggles in finding friends or a community to attach oneself to, and the dismay that accompanies these problems. However, the comment sections beneath these deeply revealing and vulnerable posts do not reflect Alana’s (of Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project) ethos of establishing an uplifting community through story-telling. Alternately, it is the sadness expressed within many on incel related or adjacent forums that leads them down a path of overt cyber-misogyny, if it can even be referred to as such, as misogyny necessitates that one hates women, and not ‘femoids;’ the preferred term for women used by incels.

Two major instances of cyber-misogynistic trolling consisted of #Gamergate and ‘The Fappening.’ To the unfamiliar, both of these ‘events’ took place online, and consisted of the rapid and viral spread of content aimed at trolling and harassing women, carried out mostly via the sharing platform Reddit. The controversy of #Gamergate, or GG, was ignited in August of 2014, when Eron Gjoni posted a blog on a thread about bad breakups to the ‘comedy website’

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<sup>63</sup> Poland, 18.

known as SomethingAwful. Moderators swiftly removed it, but Gjoni's post, which outlined his ill-fated relationship with female independent game designer Zoe Quinn, found its way to 4chan, and #Gamergate was born. The reason why this particular blog post written and posted by a resentful ex-lover took off to such an extent lies within its inflammatory content, which included alleged screenshots of Facebook conversations between Gjoni and Quinn, as well as implications that Quinn had, for lack of a better term, 'slept her way up to the top' of the gaming community by dating gaming journalists who positively reviewed her latest work, *Depression Quest*. Having already been a target of online harassment such as death and rape threats after posting *DQ* to a platform for developing games to be reviewed and accrue publicity, Quinn found herself in a similar, but worse position following the exposure of her personal life to the internet. Things snowballed, and even members of the gaming community perceived as allies to Quinn's situation became victims of cyber-harassment via Twitter and other platforms.

Then came the betrayal. Discussions of #Gamergate and broadly Zoe Quinn as an individual were banned from 4chan a month after the movement took hold. Unsurprisingly, gamergaters interpreted this decision as proof that even the most sacred of spaces upholding the tenants of political incorrectness were not safe from the infiltration of social justice warriors. These warriors fighting the internet-left found shelter elsewhere, such as 8chan.co., as well as subreddits /r/KotakuInAction, or KIA, an appropriation of /r/TumblrInAction, a subreddit devoted to the mocking of 'liberal interests' such as feminism and the trans community, all in the name of libertarian and conservative politics which deem PC culture a disease.

No one knows what cosmic or cultural turning of the tides led to the late summer and early fall of 2014 inhabiting two major instances of cyber-misogyny making global news. And

yet, during late August of that very same year, 4chan once again became a haven for digital postings of the private lives of unsuspecting women. Many of these posts consisted of female celebrities' selfies leaked via iCloud, Jennifer Lawrence's nude body making up the vast majority. This time, 4chan erased any proof of these images immediately, Reddit's overtly horny usership then taking the reins in concocting what came to be known as 'The Fapping.' Subreddit '/r/thefapping' gained Reddit 100,00 subscribers within 24 hours of the illicit posting of these nude photographs, and due to the site's algorithm prioritizing both new and highly upvoted content, Reddit's 'homepage' known as 'r/all' became riddled with links to these images, only expediting their distribution to internet users everywhere.

These two separate but similar accounts are significant not only because of the content that was shared, but how and why it was shared to the extent that it was. It goes without saying that the rapidity and intensity by which both of these movements carried themselves out would not have been possible without the algorithmic realities of websites like Reddit. Massanari outlines the ways in which Latour's 'actor-network theory'<sup>64, 65</sup> "sensitizes us to the often unintended consequences of non-human actants (bots, scripts, algorithms, policies) and the ways in which they shape online cultures."<sup>66</sup> In terms of Reddit, the site considers its treatment of content democratic, due to the various 'default' choices and 'karma' point system they provide. 'Reddit karma' essentially quantifies the amount of 'upvotes' a post receives in relation to its 'downvotes;' a post can have negative karma if these votes supersede the positive ones. If one

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<sup>64</sup> Latour B (1992) Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts. In: Bijker WE and Law J (eds) *Shaping Technology/Building Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 225–257.

<sup>65</sup> Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>66</sup> Massanari, 336.

chooses the ‘controversial’ setting on either /r/all, Reddit’s ‘homepage’, or any given subreddit, the posts accruing high amounts of simultaneous up and down votes appear first, for example. Because the ‘karma’ each user accrues contributes to their exposure on comment threads, redditors tend to post content that would ensure more karma, adding to their value as a contributor to the site and garnering attention to their individual postings. As Adrienne Massanari points out in her piece “#Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit’s algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures” the comments receiving the highest number of upvotes tend to “reflect the general ethos of Reddit’s culture in terms of its cyber/technolibertarian bent, gender politics, and geek sensibilities.”<sup>67</sup> When subreddits aligning with this ethos become inundated with unsavory and/or illegal content, as is in the case of The Fapping and #Gamergate, only the moderator’s request for its removal ensures its disappearance.

The platform’s policies regards censorship as a last resort, as elucidated by former Reddit CEO Yishan Wong’s post regarding the site’s decision to not ban /r/thefapping, which read “each man is responsible for his own [sic] soul.” Wong’s statement harkens back to the cyberlibertarian sentiments expressed by John Perry Barlow during the mid-1990s; the internet is best used as a vessel for freedom, not to be censored or controlled by anyone but its users. After the reversal of that decision, Reddit administrators attempted to explain themselves initially by stating they felt it necessary to maintain as neutral a platform as possible, and to let the communities on Reddit be represented by the actions of the people who participate in them.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Massanari, Adrienne. (2015). #Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society*. 19. 10.1177/1461444815608807. 337.

<sup>68</sup> alienth (2014a) Experimental Reddit change: subreddits may now opt-out of /r/all. Available at: [http://www.reddit.com/r/changelog/comments/2a32sq/experimental\\_reddit\\_change\\_subreddits\\_may\\_now/](http://www.reddit.com/r/changelog/comments/2a32sq/experimental_reddit_change_subreddits_may_now/) (accessed 6 August 2015).



These higher ups at Reddit view their platform as a mere medium for the redistribution of already available content, thus considering the site and its bureaucratic alliance free from any responsibility concerning the consequences. Understanding Reddit's attitude toward the circulation of content taking place through their service merits a dissection of why exactly posts pandering to "geek sensibilities," to use Massanari's terminology, take off in such a way throughout online spheres; especially when their viral nature is lodged in misogyny, as is in the case of #GG and The Fappening. The clearest explanation for Reddit's approach to the Fappening is simple: sex sells.

But The Fappening's origins as a hacker-led movement, as well as #GG's narrative as a cyber-centric vengeance story ignited by a scorned ex-boyfriend, merits some discussion of the popularity of "revenge fantasies" in online spheres. Massanari cleverly touches on the "revenge fantasies" of Silicon Valley founders, in which the geek or nerd gains power and moves from a marginal position to dominate their competitors"<sup>69</sup> in order to provide a background for misogynistic activity taking place online. While Massanari never mentions Mark Zuckerberg or Facebook within her piece on #GG and The Fappening, the origins of a now universally recognized and commonly used social networking service provide a perfect example of the phenomenon she describes.

Facebook's humble beginnings became known to the public following the release of *The Social Network*, directed by David Fincher in 2010. The film won three Academy Awards and was nominated for eight; *Esquire* named it the best film of the 2010s. The film's first scene portrays Mark Zuckerberg, played by Jesse Eisenberg, getting dumped by girlfriend Erica

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<sup>69</sup> Massanari, 332.

Albright, played by Rooney Mara, in a raucous Harvard bar. Scorned and emasculated, Eisenberg as Zuckerberg returns to his dorm room, where he immediately writes an insulting post about Albright, posting it to his LiveJournal blog. In an apparent attempt to assuage his inner sadness and get a look at the other fish in Harvard's sea, he then created "FaceSmash."

Mark Zuckerberg's earliest iteration of what came to be TheFacebook, a Harvard University based site originally restricted to only Harvard students, burgeoned from a website with slightly less savory intentions than connecting you with "friends and the world around you" as the now expanded and globalized Facebook.com promotes in friendly type across its homepage. Zuckerberg developed the software for a service called "FaceSmash" during his second year at Harvard in 2003, which allowed fellow students to view "photos compiled from the online facebook of nine Houses, placing two next to each other at a time and asking users to choose the hotter person,"<sup>70</sup> according to an article published by *The Harvard Crimson* titled "*Facesmash Creator Survives Ad Board.*" This article gives illuminating insight into the mindset of a certain type of tech-savvy man, one who seizes an opportunity given by the ostensibly lawless nature of the internet for the purposes of female objectification. Kaplan's piece considers FaceSmash the "short-lived but popular Harvard version of the *Am I Hot or Not?* Website," referring to a site founded in 2000 by University of California, Berkeley graduates and Silicon Valley-based engineers James Hong and Jim Young.

What both *The Social Network* and Kaplan's article teach us is that the origins of the first widely used social media website are lodged in misogyny, and exploited a youthful tendency to rate women's bodies on a scaled basis. This contextualized Massanari's assertion that those

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<sup>70</sup> Kaplan, Katharine A. (November 19, 2003). "Facemash Creator Survives Ad Board". *The Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved June 24, 2017.

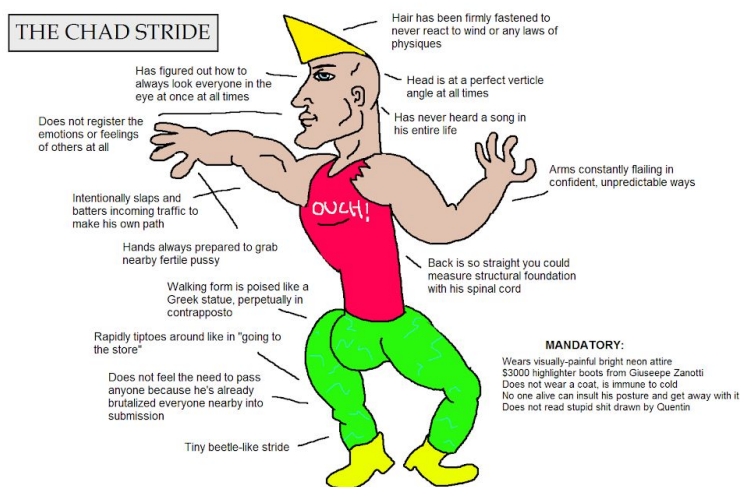
possessing “geek sensibilities” feel that the internet is “their space,” as social media and Silicon Valley culture at large would not exist without a strong vein of nerdism; their intellect held in the highest regard. It should not surprise us then that the darkest corners of the web are entitled to those who see themselves, intellectually speaking, as comparable to the earliest examples of techie beta-males in power, a new kind of cowboy traversing the unfolding frontier of the early internet sans the brawn necessary for survival, equipped, instead, with the knowledge of coding and a fervent desire to instate an entirely different vision of society, a Global Village. Kaplan’s piece also provides us with the information that “in the course of one day, the number of visitors to “Facesmash” quadrupled—by 10 p.m., the site had been visited by 450 people, who voted at least 22,000 times,” a similar trajectory to /r/TheFapping’s effect on Reddit’s popularity.

As has been stated, sex sells, or at least serves as efficient clickbait. What The Fapping teaches us is that it sells particularly well when it is sold against the will of the sexy protagonist. Furthermore, when we add FaceSmash and #GG to the equation, it becomes abundantly clear that those who aim to negatively publicize the internal lives of women without their consent do so as a form of vengeance, and while those who follow this clickbait may do so out of pure curiosity, their clicks give life to a dangerous cycle that keeps illicit and misogynistic content alive on online forums. The anger felt and expressed by Reddit users in the name of “free speech” following the site’s banning of subreddits relating to both events shows us that this speech translates, in some cases, to the unlawful and nonconsensual publishing of content that hurts personal lives. Adrienne Massanari gives a compelling explanation for this anger in her explanation of “geek masculinity:”

“Like other gender expressions, geek masculinity is both liminal and performative. For example, geek masculinity often embraces facets of hypermasculinity by valorizing

intellect over social or emotional intelligence....Despite the increasing cultural acceptance of geek pastimes, those who identify with geek culture often feel marginal, as their interests are marked by the dominant culture as odd or weird. Because of this, critiques of the immense amount of capital (particularly cultural and intellectual capital) that geeks possess may be met with skepticism or outright hostility.”<sup>71</sup>

Here, geek masculinity and hegemonic masculinity exist opposite of each other, the existence of one informing the other. For example, a popular meme format found within incel-adjacent forums portrays a “Virgin vs. Chad” narrative, the “virgin” usually representing the poster, the “Chad” representing his more physically daunting, better-looking male counterparts.



<sup>71</sup> Massanari, 332.

<sup>72</sup> Multiple variations of this image exist and new ones are created daily. They have become so popular that many redditors design them whether or not they belong to incel-adjacent communities. Their purpose, now, is mostly used for the sake of humor.

The physical elements of traditional, or perhaps ‘hegemonic’ masculinity as is cited here, do not hold the same weight in the world of the ‘geek.’ The geek, in this scenario, prizes the strength of the mind vastly above the brute strength of the body, taking this distinction so far as to patronize, and in some cases demonize, men who occupy conventionally attractive bodies and seek to maintain the favorable form of these bodies. Venturing through the multitudes of subterranean voids of the manosphere sheds some light upon these divergences, as the mentality and online identity of the average incel exists in staunch opposition to Pick-Up-Artistry, Body-Builders, and their blogs. Incels condescendingly view any man who copes with the rejection of women by taking up a hobby in hopes of increasing his chances of receiving sexual and romantic feminine attention and affection. Massanari also states that “suggesting that geek culture can also be oppressive and marginalize certain populations may create a sense of cognitive dissonance for these individuals, who likely view themselves as perpetual outsiders and thus are unable or unwilling to recognize their own immense privilege.”<sup>73</sup> Reddit’s decision to censor discussions of gaming, like #Gamergate, feed into this self-victimizing narrative. This cognitive dissonance in androcentric online spheres contribute to the rise of what Massanari refers to as the “toxic technoculture,” a phenomenon which both #GG and The Fapping embody.

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<sup>73</sup> Penny L (2014) On nerd entitlement. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/laurie-penny/on-nerd-entitlement-rebel-alliance-empire> (accessed 6 August 2015).

Toxic technocultures incorporate various aspects, such as their tendency to “coalesce around a particular issue or event,” as has been profiled throughout this chapter. The tactics used within these cultures “often rely heavily on implicit or explicit harassment of others” as well as a collective “othering of those perceived as outside the culture, reliance on outmoded and poorly understood applications of evolutionary psychology, and a valorization of masculinity masquerading as a peculiar form of ‘rationality.’”<sup>74</sup> #GG and The Fappening both assert, as Massanari explains, masculinity in its divergent form from a traditionally ‘jock-ish’ vein as the most rational form of being, giving way to reasonable thought. In these arenas the STEM or game-savvy, muscle-lacking and self-described ‘nerd’ prizes their brain capacity as their ultimate source of power. The “smart” participant of these movements contrast themselves with the “buff” or “woman-obsessed” man, considering their brain power more powerful than the sexual prowess of even a famous actress, more powerful than the kind of sexy, youthful heteronormativity portrayed in blockbuster films that assembles their delusional social narrative.

Essentially, through the textual harassment and digital degradation of sexually attractive celebrities, or women acting ‘out of their league’ by engaging in ‘male activities’ such as gaming or game design, the average internet obsessed recluse can theoretically empower themselves. This process establishes their ultimate superiority to themselves and their online communities; by disrupting an unfair social hierarchy that has never served them, echoing Elliot Rodger’s hatred of the rich, beautiful, and famous.

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<sup>74</sup> Massanari, 333.

## Manosphere of Earth

I'll begin the final chapter of this thesis with a sufficiently revealing personal anecdote. While discussing this thesis with my male roommate, I mentioned that The Fappening would be included as an example of cyber-misogyny. I found his response quite striking: "Oh, The Fappening? Yeah, I was *there*." I pressed him further, and he explained that what he meant by "I was *there*" was that he visited Reddit while the nude photographs of Jennifer Lawrence and others took over the site, and he well, Fappened.<sup>75</sup> I can assure you, reader, that he's grown older and wiser since then. That being said, what struck me about my roommate's response was his use of the phrase "I was there", considering he was likely perusing Reddit in pursuit of masturbation material in his childhood home. By stating that he was "there," he unknowingly and quite symbolically blurred the lines between the internet and tangible life.

This blurring matters in the context of what flies online and does not so easily in the real world, a world composed of face to face interactions. I highly doubt that my beloved roommate and friend would have comfortably walked up to a bulletin board in the main hallway of his high school covered in printed nude photos of Jennifer Lawrence, and stolen one as his classmates watched in horror. Instead, he was "there;" the location being Reddit, out of the bounds of his parents' vision, free from judgment. To use Sarah Soberiaj's blunt take on the matter, "there is a long history of women's objectification and sexualization, but I would argue that bodily references are especially common in digital spaces because they help reinforce the salience of

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<sup>75</sup> To "fap" is an alternate term for masturbation. Thus, "The Fappening" as a title indicates that the many internet users visiting Reddit during the event did so in order to view the nude photographs displayed en masse, and masturbate to them.

gender in the digital arena.”<sup>76</sup> This phenomenon, referred to as the “equalization hypothesis” gives contemporary credence to Rosi Braidotti’s predictions outlined within the previous chapter; the internet and the virtual modes of communication that accompany its rise will not necessarily liberate, or emancipate silenced or marginalized identities of voices by way of its democratic essence. In fact, the emergence of increasingly complex virtual realities may in fact have the opposite effect, including within the realm of gender. Braidotti’s words may have read as a harsh slap in the face to cyberfeminists and their utopian reveries during the mid 1990s, but history has unfortunately proved her correct.

In Soberiaj’s explanation of the equalization hypothesis, she cites research suggesting that “computer mediated communication reduces status inequality because we have a smaller number of social cues available (particularly in text-based exchanges)” such as “signals that might convey information about an interlocutor’s race, age, gender, class, level of education, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and the like.”<sup>77</sup> In some contexts, this described reduction of status inequality has positive outcomes online; niche publics, which Soberiaj refers to as ‘micro-publics’ “can serve as staging grounds for the development of strategies to inject...marginalized interests and views into mainstream public discourse.”<sup>78</sup> The Million Woman March of 1997 had incredibly positive financial and social impacts for the city of Philadelphia, the founders relying heavily on the newfound power of the internet to raise awareness of both the march itself and the validity of its goals. In contemporary settings, people united by any number of social factors can positively convene online, educating each other,

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<sup>76</sup> Soberiaj, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 3.



establishing worthwhile discourse, and taking action as a result of forging of a digital community.

However, in the context of what Adrienne Massanari refers to as toxic technocultures, and virtual expressions of what has come to be known as the manosphere, this flattening of social cues leads to a lack of, or perhaps repression, of guilt one may normally experience when objectifying, insulting, or degrading someone in person. It is worthwhile to note that the manosphere is not a location necessitating a ticket, or membership; its power is partially derived from anyone's access to it, including the curious 16 year old boy who visited one day based on the promise of seeing Jennifer Lawrence naked, later becoming my close friend and, a respectful and self-aware example of a cisgender, white, straight man. My friend has not visited the manosphere since; which leads one to ask, who makes up the population tasked with keeping it alive, at least online?

Angela Nagle, in her 2017 book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan And Tumblr To Trump And The Alt-Right*, describes the manosphere as having been used to describe “everything from progressive men’s issues activists dealing with real neglect of male health, suicide and unequal social services to the nastier corners of the Internet, filled with involuntary celibacy-obsessed, hate-filled, resentment-fueled cultures of quite chilling levels of misogyny.”<sup>79</sup> Nagle acknowledges the validity of certain issues men’s right activists seek to shed light upon such as fair and equal treatment in courts, the widespread underachievement of boys in academic settings, and high suicide rates: it is no question that these must be reformed. She also delineates

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<sup>79</sup> Nagle, Angela., and OverDrive Inc. *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right and*. Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2017. 75.

her focus upon the “darker online underbelly” of the men’s rights ethos specifically, rather than the movement as a whole.

Nagle reminds us that, ironically, “the original men’s movement grew out of and alongside the feminist movement and the sexual liberation movement as a critique of rigid traditional sex roles, according to masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel...” Furthermore, it was not until the 1990s, during what journalist Susan Faludi describes as a ‘backlash’ against second-wave feminism in the U.S. in particular, that the formulation of the men’s movement that we associate with the term today gained prominence, which necessitated a certain antagonism toward feminism.<sup>80</sup> By the 2010s, the men’s rights movement became what many associate with it today, “rage-filled, hateful and chauvinistic,” to use Nagle’s words. The rage described here could be explained by the equalization hypothesis as written by Sarah Soberiaj, wherein the internet’s ability to level the status of its users “may not sit well with members of groups accustomed to having the upper hand.”<sup>81</sup>

Those belonging to the groups who have grown “accustomed to having the upper hand” act out directly against the assumption that they belong to said privileged groups. Red Pill and subsequently Black Pill<sup>82</sup> forums represent major segments of the manosphere, and exist in staunch opposition to the concept of gender-based oppression by men to women, instead considering it a problematically proliferating fabrication on the part of the increasingly left-leaning mainstream media. As a response, proponents of the Red and Black Pill aggressively invert the “myth” of systematic and socially-constructed misogyny by postulating a revisionist

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<sup>80</sup> Nagle, 76

<sup>81</sup> Soberiaj, 8.

<sup>82</sup> Explored and defined on page 65.

history in which women have actually subdued the male species by sexual manipulation, assigning the role of the marginalized “other,” historically, to men.

“Differences in stature that often advantage men are not relevant in digital exchanges, nor can men rely upon body postures that command physical space, nonverbal gestures that signal dominance... or communicative habits such as interruption or amplification to maximize their influence and command attention.”<sup>83</sup>

Reddit’s Red Pill forum, which has now been banned, often inhabited discussions of the horrors of false rape accusations and the cultural acceptance of misandry. Red Pillers also concerned themselves with the delineation of beta and alpha males, the former perceiving themselves as unfairly ignored by women. One website emerging from the Red Pill vein of the manosphere took the form of ‘Return of Kings,’ spearheaded by Roosh V. On the website, visitors could find articles espousing Darwinian gender politics masked by ‘ironic’ humor. Roosh V’s website published articles with titles spanning from “Biology Says People On Welfare Should Die” to “5 Reasons to Date a Girl With an Eating Disorder,” to give some context.

Curious about the 5 reasons? I’ll include them here; “Her obsession over her body will improve her overall looks, She costs less money, She’s fragile and vulnerable, Probably has money of her own, She’s better in bed.” The explanation for the last one reads;

“crazy girls are exceptional in the sack...a girl with an eating disorder has *just* the right cocktail of pent-up insecurity, neuroses, and daddy issues to ensure that your whole building knows *every time* you’re beating it up. Say what you will, a girl with a

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<sup>83</sup> Soberiaj, 9.

mild-to-moderate eating disorder—that hasn't excessively marred her appearance—is today's best-buy in the West's rapidly plummeting dating market.”

While visiting Return of Kings for research purposes, an advertisement for their mailing list popped up on my screen reading: “stop getting tricked by bad girls who are pretending to be good” followed by the subheading, “This important article gives you 30 signs that a girl has been with over 100 men. Get instant access by signing up to my useful weekly newsletter below.” While tempting, I did not sign up for the Return of Kings newsletter. But this sarcastic-yet-telling pop-up teaches us that the website's desired audience either experiences frustrating and consistent encounters with women wherein they trick a man into believing they are virginal and innocent when they in fact embody more of the “whore” than the Madonna, or, that this content may ring true to no one, but concurrently corroborates already held sexist perceptions of women, while providing entertainment to those attempting to justify their inability to land said women by claiming the West's dating market is “plummeting,” rapidly.

Establishing a mutual understanding between all site-visitors, or forum-contributors, that the world at large has allowed and become subject to a toxic ideology empowering women and therefore emasculating men presents itself as a common trait across the manosphere: a larger universe housing multitudes of misogynistic technocultures. Red Pill ideology, a term derived from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, asserts that women's increasing adoption of feminism contributes not only to a degradation of their personalities, but to their looks, by encouraging them to reject their inherently feminine identity on an aesthetic and ideological level. The Red Pill exists opposite to the ‘Blue Pill:’ like characters in the film, those who have taken the Red Pill can see the truth behind the simulation, the bare bones and code lingering out of the bounds

of society's collective view. Once the film's protagonist, Neo, decides to take the risk and swallow the Red Pill, he has access to the truth, in all its ugliness. His newfound ability vested in him by the power of the Red Pill allows him to join the resistance against the intelligent machines masquerading as humans referred to as "agents," the suited soldiers tasked with keeping humanity trapped within a simulated reality. Alternately, the Blue Pill offers a much less terrifying option: if one takes it, they may continue on their way through life, never realizing that everything, and everyone they encounter is merely a part of a simulation created for the expressed purpose of keeping humans captive within this system of virtual reality. In the realm of the manosphere, taking the Blue Pill is the option most people opted for, or at least those who established a dominant culture of leftism and equality throughout the Obama era. Red Pillers consider taking this figurative Blue Pill as the weak, cowardly, and ultimately emasculating option: men of the world, don't you want to assert your dominance? Why are you letting your wife, or the women who refuse you, dictate your life?

*The Matrix* rose to cultural and aesthetic importance for reasons opposite to the Moon Boot, discussed within the first chapter of this thesis. The film forced viewers to confront the potential horrors accompanying the rise of technological advancements, as well as embodying a view of the internet that may empower those accessing it for the first time to utilize not just for its connective abilities, but to hack the system. Instead of spending hard earned money through virtual shopping malls, the more radically oriented could hack through databases, assert power and dominance, disrupt hierarchies. The hopeful and glitzy Y2K aesthetic discussed previously found its 'evil twin' in the cyberpunk alternative: long black leather trench coats, tiny black glasses, military boots. Hack the internet, but do it in sleek, minimalist style. The cyberpunk

tradition did not start with the release of *The Matrix* in 1999. *Cyberpunk*, directed by Marianne Trench in 1990, profiles the movement in its exciting origins.

The documentary includes an interview with Michael Synergy, an early internet hacker labeled a “cyber-hero,” who achieved his heroic status, in his own words, by the explicit mode in which he exposes the technologically unsavvy and increasingly paranoid public to the capacity of the hacker caste to carry out the rapid spread of internet viruses, or trigger terrorist attacks. Synergy proudly describes his ‘3D policy;’ if he dies, disappears, or is disabled by an attempt on his life, a digital “trigger” that Synergy must reset on a weekly basis goes unattended, alerting like-minded hackers of his absence, after which a hinted-at chaos ensues. Synergy’s policy reads more like a threat to bureaucratic entities attempting to censor and harness the omnipotence ascribed to the internet during its nascent stages. It also posits the internet as a means of achieving not only omnipotence, but immortality; the digital forms one creates with their own two corporeal hands, through the computer, can ensure the posthumous recognition of whatever content one chooses. Given that *The Matrix* plays into cyberpunk aesthetics and its ideology as concisely provided by Synergy’s testimonies, its adoption and adulation by alternative, anti-establishment internet hacker types lines up perfectly. When the ‘establishment’ becomes feminism, we see the clear route that transported *Matrix* terminology into the role of manospheric etymology.

Here, we have another ironic origin story: after Lilly Wachowski, one of the directors of *The Matrix*, came out as transgender, she encouraged viewers to look back on her work “through the lens of...transness,” as themes such as identity, self-image and transformation are apparent in the film, one “about one person's struggle with and eventual acceptance of an identity that exists

beyond the borders of a rigidly defined system.”<sup>84</sup> Wachowski’s testimonies beg some questions for the Red Pill, and subsequently Black Pill movements. Are they aware that the film from which their labeled identities emerged get at such themes? As we have learned from the origin and trajectory of the term ‘incel,’ sometimes the origin story does not matter. In fact, the appropriation of a term may serve perverse pleasure to those using it in new, angrier ways.

To one who has consumed the Red Pill, feminism has cursed an entire batch of potential mating partners, influencing young women to reject standard beauty norms and demand equal respect in relationships, academic settings and the workplace. What Red Pill, and later Black Pill share is an emphasis on categorizing both genders: alpha vs. beta, Chad vs. virgin, Stacey vs. Becky. What distinguishes these media-driven archetypes is physical appearance as well as the internal traits that are understood as commonly accompanying these appearances, Red Pill and Black Pill forums encouraging anecdotal corroborations of the validity of these archetypes from fellow members. An anecdote of this nature may read, “this girl at my university is a total Stacey, and in class today she ignored me, as if I expected anything else to happen..” A ‘Stacey’ is an attractive, popular woman, and a ‘Chad’ is an attractive, popular man, as designated by Black Pill terminology spoken of on various Reddit forums, 4chan posts, etc. The whole process of the designation, labeling and verbal degradation of these archetypes presents itself as a manifestation of the well known phrase; “nice guys finish last.” There is scientific evidence to actually prove this, as it is a fact that people do treat those with conventionally attractive features better, on a greater scale, but these numbers are often skewed and mis-used as corroborative evidence of the Red Pill and Black Pill’s validity as mindsets.

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<sup>84</sup> "Lilly Wachowski Acknowledges Re-Examination of The Matrix With Lens Focused on Transness". [www.themarysue.com](http://www.themarysue.com).

“The pop culture cliché of the American High School movie, which adapted old archetypes, depicted a social world in which the worst sexists were always the all brawn no brains sports jock. But now that the online world has given us a glimpse into the inner lives of others, one of the surprising revelations is that it is the nerdish self identifying nice guy who could never get the girl who has been exposed as the much more hate-filled, racist, misogynist who is insanely jealous of the happiness of others.”<sup>85</sup>

If ‘nice guys’ finish last, and bad boys always win, perhaps their only remaining option is to be bad, and finish last, together. Cross the finish line, holding hands, screaming vitriol toward the winners of the race, who crossed that same line so long ago, they are out of earshot already. As we have discovered, however, some of these “nice guys” are not very nice. Furthermore, the population of primarily cisgender, straight men perceiving themselves as inevitably “finishing last” in the context of dating women is not limited to those labeling themselves “nice guys.” Short guys, skinny-necked guys, small-wristed guys, to name a few, have also forged online spheres, often in the form of subreddits wherein they convene and discuss how their particular physical or social predicament causes them to be unlucky with women. The negative aspects of this vein of discourse lies in its framing. Men gathering around a virtual fire and discussing their shared flaws leading to their lack of self-esteem could theoretically have positive effects for them, only if they eventually came to the understanding that their perception of these flaws

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<sup>85</sup> Nagle, 98.



manifests as a product of a system, a “Californian 'bodybeautiful' ideology” as Rosi Braidotti put it, that does not benefit most people. Everyone suffers from insecurities, whether self-imposed or as a result of bullying, parental insults, to name a few potential sources. Dealing with insecurities in a healthy and efficient manner is a skill few have mastered. One very unhealthy way of dealing with insecurities is by assuming no one else possesses them, and diverting the anger springing from a lifelong low sense of self unto those who are assumed as not suffering from the same affliction.

The conversation commonly taking place throughout these forums often revolve around women’s stupidity and therefore inferiority for caring about said flaws. They assert that women, more specifically attractive women, only care about a man’s income and looks. The latter gives way to an ideology known as ‘lookism’ in the Redditive. Lookism refers to the discriminatory treatment toward those considered physically unattractive, a valid concern. In the realm of many toxic technocultures, however, “lookism” only applies to men, because women can “score whenever they want.” The assumption described here is not only baseless, but indicative of the entitlement these particular forum members possess when it comes to sex with women. The hypocrisy of “lookism” is well-displayed within Roosh V’s take on Trump’s election, stating “I’m in a state of exuberance that we now have a President who rates women on a 1–10 scale in the same way that we do and evaluates women by their appearance and feminine attitude...we may have to institute a new feature called ‘Would Trump bang?’ to signify the importance of feminine beauty ideals that cultivate effort and class above sloth and vulgarity.”<sup>86</sup> Lookism and

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<sup>86</sup> Nagle, 78.

other manspheric beliefs often posit themselves as truth-revealing, but what expressions of these beliefs often reveal is the dark interiority of their purveyors, such as Roosh V.

At one point, V wrote a blog post titled “How to Stop Rape” which advocated for the legalization of rape, which would work itself out, because an unsuspecting and vulnerable woman, in his “utopia,” would never walk without the company of a man capable of protecting her from predatory force. When confronted with criticism of articles like these, he claimed that much of the content found on Return of Kings is merely satire. As we will see, cyber misogyny and trolling culture in general often hides behind this facade.

An in depth survey of the mansphere in all its eccentricities and iterations calls for its own senior thesis. As Nagle herself writes, much of the mansphere is composed of various cohorts of “alt-right tinged online anti-feminists;” the term acting as an umbrella with a sizable circumference, shielding even neo-nazis from rainfall. I understand you came here to read about incels, so for the remainder-ish of this chapter that shall be my priority. Of the /r/incel subreddit, Angela nagle wrote, “at the time of writing, the latest post on the /r/incel reads: ‘I spent 4 hours just staring at the wall in my room. What normies call an existential crisis, for the incel is simply... life.’”<sup>87</sup> Let us compare this depressing lamentation to Elliot Rodger’s pre-murderous Youtube confession:

“Well, this is my last video, it all has to come to this. Tomorrow is the day of retribution, the day in which I will have my revenge against humanity, against all of you... I’ve been through college for two and a half years, more than that actually, and I’m still a virgin. It has been very tortuous... I don’t know why you girls aren’t attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it... I’m the perfect guy and yet you throw yourselves at these obnoxious men instead of me, the supreme gentleman...the Second Phase will take place

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<sup>87</sup> Nagle, 84.

on the Day of Retribution itself, just before the climactic massacre... My War on Women... I will attack the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender: The hottest sorority of UCSB.”

Let me explain some Black Pill language and provide some background now that we have seen two expressions of the ideology, taking very different forms. I shall outline the basics: the world is a terrible place, especially if you are not conventionally attractive. The world is an even worse place if you are socially awkward, and it is a basically uninhabitable place if you are a man who has never had sex, and probably will never have sex, for the reasons just listed. Once one comes to understand these facts of life, the only sensible option left is to LDAR, or Lay Down And Rot. Furthermore, “Chads are the only male beneficiaries of the sexual revolution” according to a site dedicated to logging incel terminology, ‘incels.wiki.’ Oppositely, every woman is a beneficiary of the sexual revolution, because they do not have to seek sexual interactions. However, women, for the most part in fact, have benefitted *too much* from the sexual revolution, becoming slutty, and thus undesirable. To one who has consumed the Black Pill, women are what is most desired, and most reviled. This contextualizes why Elliot Rodger’s manifesto portrays a utopia without women. This utopia is a lie; women, clearly, are what he desires more than anything. His delusional perception that this desire would never be reciprocated is what leads him to wish for their erasure, what induces his need to erase them himself, what tasks him with this ultimate purpose for ‘good.’ But something is amiss here; Elliot Rodger did not do the thing asked for by Black Pill ideology. He did not LDAR, he WOAK (Went Out And Killed), which is not an official term in the Black Pill dictionary, but I felt it apt. Rodger became such a celebrity in this one enclave online that his actions inspired

Alex Minassian, as well as others. What could explain this disconnect may amount to something so obvious we have never noticed it.

What many fascinated by incel culture might not know is that the community was represented quite well in a film called *Bad Ronald*, released for TV in the mid 1970s, and pretty much lost to history. The story goes as follows: Bad Ronald did not try to be bad, at first, per se. He was just an awkward high school aged kid living alone with his mom, sometimes ogling the pretty neighborhood girls for too long. One day, in pursuit of one of these girls, she denies him, and he pushes her; her head lands on a rock, and she dies. He goes home to his mother, who demands he lives behind the walls of their home to avoid the police. She then goes to the hospital to get surgery and never returns, leaving Ronald to live off of the many cans of beans she had provided him before she left for good. A new family moves in... the family of the girl who Ronald had accidentally murdered. Slowly going insane, Ronald creates an entire universe through the art of painting, still stuck behind the walls of his home; there is a king, and a jester, and a princess, who all represent people in his life. He creates an imaginary utopia wherein he gets the older sister of the girl, and murders the jester, her boyfriend. As he hears their conversations during dinner, he grows more and more angry at his circumstance; he is stuck, unable to participate in love or dating or socializing at all. By the end, he escapes, and tries to kill pretty much everyone in the house. His initial violence excused his future violence; he was so shocked after accidentally killing that girl, and perhaps by his perverse arousal following the incident, that his only remaining recourse was to keep up this new persona; terrifying, lingering in the shadows. It was in this position that Bad Ronald finally found power in scaring people, his unflinching ability to kill vesting him with this very power.

On a related note, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* came out in 1976. Writing as a very young person I'm doing my best to piece it together, but it seemed the 1970s had its fair share of issues. A decade following the sexual revolution, suffering from a widespread mistrust of the government, grappling with the gore and horror of action taking place overseas. Ted Kaczynski, or the Unabomber, took it upon himself to shed light on these spreading maladies by acting out violently. Elliot Rodger did something similar, instead for the sake of sad virgins far and wide. Again, to survey all known instances of murderous violence parading as activism within the U.S. and their subsequent cinematic interpretations necessitates its own thesis, however, it is worthwhile to look at some examples side by side.

Contemporarily and retrospectively, Todd Phillips' *The Joker* tries its best to grapple with these same themes; it takes place in the 1970s because it has to. The 2019 film sort of amalgamates as a hybrid of *Bad Ronald* and *Taxi Driver*, sprinkled on top are some elements of *The King of Comedy* also starring Robert De Niro and directed by Martin Scorsese. In *The Joker*, De Niro essentially plays the antagonist to his character in *The King of Comedy*, a purposeful nod to Scorsese's box-office flop, as the celebrated actor's portrayal of both victim and villain in the context of American media culture seems to comment on itself. *The Joker*, *Taxi Driver* and to some extent *Bad Ronald* give life to protagonists burdened by their ineffectual pursuit of a woman they see around from time to time. However, Phillips' attempts to humanize Arthur Fleck of *The Joker* by making him a loving son, turned evil by a rapidly and morally decaying society, whereas *Bad Ronald*'s mother enables his violent tendencies and outlook by hiding him from the authorities. Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver* simply lives alone and is depressed. And yet, De Niro's portrayal clearly struck enough of a chord to influence John Hinckley Jr., who tried to

assassinate President Reagan in 1981 in an attempt to impress real-life Jodie Foster after becoming enamored with her portrayal of an underaged prostitute in the film.

*Bad Ronald*, in my opinion, is an overlooked gem of a film; too ahead of its time, a star that shone so bright it blinded everyone to the point that they never even realized it existed. *Taxi Driver* and *The Joker* had the advantage of being big budget Hollywood productions, explaining their multiple Oscar nominations and, in the case of *The Joker*, a win for best actor. It is impossible to know the intentions behind both of the filmmakers responsible for these films... I take that back.

“Phillips, who directed the comedies *Old School* and the *Hangover* series, pitched the idea of a Joker movie to Warner Bros. as a kind of anti-superhero film, with practically no CGI effects or cartoonish plots, but instead a dark realism drained of heroics. Phillips had found it increasingly difficult, he says, to make comedies in the new “woke” Hollywood, and his brand of irreverent bro humor has lost favor.”<sup>88</sup>

The *Variety* article focusing on Phillips’ cinematic endeavor also includes an illuminating look into the filmmakers inspiration behind *The Joker*:

“Go try to be funny nowadays with this woke culture,” he says. “There were articles written about why comedies don’t work anymore—I’ll tell you why, because all the fucking funny guys are like, ‘Fuck this shit, because I don’t want to offend you.’ It’s hard to argue with 30 million people on Twitter. You just can’t do it, right? So you just go, ‘I’m out.’ I’m out, and you know what? With all my comedies—I think that what comedies in general all have in common—is they’re irreverent. So I go, ‘How do I do

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<sup>88</sup> Chu, Henry. "In 'Joker,' Joaquin Phoenix Wanted to Create a Character 'That Wasn't Identifiable.'" *Variety*, August 31, 2019. <https://variety.com/2019/film/festivals/joker-joaquin-phoenix-todd-phillips-venice-film-festival-1203320067/>.

something irreverent, but fuck comedy? Oh I know, let's take the comic book movie universe and turn it on its head with this.' And so that's really where that came from."<sup>89</sup>

The director employs sentiments favored by members of the manosphere; born in the wrong generation, complaining about the creative restrictions of the day and P.C. culture. Perhaps Phillips himself feels like the Joker, clearly, as both the protagonist (Arthur Fleck/ Joker) and the director feel attacked by audiences whether presumptively or not. They see the audience as a direct threat, or enemy to their pursuit of humor. They blame the audience for their inherent failure to understand what they see as their genius. Sound familiar?

As stated, it is impossible to know the true intentions behind these directors' portrayals of outcast, obsessive, isolated, violent white men, given the very real American epidemic of this archetype carrying out real world violence. Scorsese's filmography, for example, has historically towed the line between commentary and romanticization. Or, more honestly, he disguises his films as commentaries when they inevitably romanticize whichever deviant yet commanding male protagonist they portray. At least from my little corner of the world, I did not notice an uptick of discussions regarding the inherent unsustainability of capitalism among my youthful peers following the release of *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Instead, I heard the release of a song singing Jordan Belfort's praises, and witnessed the birth of a cultural icon for young, financially motivated young men. I wonder why; it's not like Leonardo DiCaprio's character marries a woman portrayed by Margot Robbie, an actress consistently included on "World's Hottest" lists, nor does he, despite this marriage, consistently snort cocaine off of expensive stripper's asses, or jet-set, or own a huge mansion... I take that back, all of these situations take place throughout

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

the film. To Scorsese's credit, DiCaprio as Belfort also develops a grotesque addiction to quaaludes which leads to his entire life falling apart, but he still got to experience something most never will; wealth, and sex-at-will with a bounty of beautiful women. Scorsese knew what he was doing.

So let us now look at Phoenix as Joker as the brooding, anti-Belfort alternative. Many were literally afraid to see the film. *The Joker* became referred to as an 'incel' movie prior to its release just based off of previews. Incels have a reputation for violence, given that eight known mass shooters either self-identified as incels or were found to have affiliations with incel or incel adjacent communities online after the fact. This fact, as well as the cultural memory of the 2012 Aurora shootings taking place within a movie theatre screening *The Dark Knight Rises* carried out by a man apparently lacking a motive, contributed to this paranoia. The film was still released, many people saw it, and Joaquin Phoenix won an Oscar for his portrayal of an anti-hero inspired by incels. As I have stated many times within this very thesis, sex sells. Violence sells too. When the two are combined, and executed properly, enough people will watch or log on to justify another iteration of whatever media preceded the initial example. Phillips knew this when he made *The Hangover* and then *The Joker* some years later, and Scorsese knew this when he made *Taxi Driver* and then *The Wolf of Wall Street* some decades later. The hackers responsible for The Fappening knew this, too. Sex and violence sell, but, as we all know, it sells particularly well when the sex part is either funded, desired, or stolen by a man. I need not spell out the reality of misogyny in mass media for you, because it speaks for itself and its reasons for existing are quite obvious. However, it should contextualize why the cyber-utopian dream never made much sense. Let me explain.



Like Elliot Rodger, The Joker of *The Joker* and Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver* choose not to “LDAR” they “WOAK” (Went Out And Killed)<sup>90</sup>, a violent alternative most incels do not take. Most, however, Lay Down And Rot, in defiance of their Red Pilled predecessors who would go out and try to score sexually. The fact remains, however, that most ‘incels’ do not take this route. They may celebrate it virtually with adequate geographical distance from the coordinates where the violence takes place, or vocalize an urge to do something similar out of frustration, but most of these plans never come to fruition. They sit there, and watch, and write about it. Just as I have seen, and to some extent enjoyed, every movie I have spoken of here. And written about them. And I have certainly absorbed aspects of their imagery, their brilliant usage of Braidotti’s “California body-beautiful ideology,” and probably manifested parts of it too, in subconscious ways. That is how media works. And yes, I am going to quote Marshall MacLuhan for the very first time at the very end of my last chapter. The Canadian philosopher famously asserted that “the medium is the message.” He also said,

“Electronic media...abolish the spatial dimension... By electricity, we everywhere resume person-to-person relations as if on the smallest village scale. It is a relation in depth, and without delegation of functions or powers... Dialogue supersedes the lecture.”<sup>91</sup>

Remember Richard Barbook and Andy Cameron, who wrote *The Californian Ideology?* Here’s what they had to say about that:

“Encouraged by McLuhan's predictions, West Coast radicals became involved in developing new information technologies for the alternative press, community radio

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<sup>90</sup> I made this one up too.

<sup>91</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pages 255-256. Also see Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message*; and Gerald Emanuel Stern, *McLuhan: Hot & Cool*.

stations, home-brew computer clubs and video collectives. These community media activists believed that they were in the forefront of the fight to build a new America.”<sup>92</sup>

And here lies the crux of it all. In the tradition of Barbrook and Cameron, I’m going to go ahead and say that I disagree with Marshall McLuhan. That is not to say I do not respect the man, he is and was very important to the study of media and that is why everyone who studies media at least within the U.S. and Canada has to read his work at some point. Additionally, I have found that sometimes the medium does inform the message. Trolls online, as has been explored, feel emboldened by the screen-barrier between themselves and their victims. The MacLuhan inspired “West Coast Radicals” spoken of by Barbrook and Cameron did, in fact, forge a medium that changed the way we all live our lives, communicate, and shop.

However, as certain thinkers of the 1990s like Richard Barbrook, Andy Cameron, and Rosi Braidotti predicted, the rise of the internet did not arrive sans the ‘delegation of functions or powers.’ Some aspects of it reified the oldest delegations of functions and powers that we know of. Progress is not linear.

Let’s apply this logic to a hypothetical situation: in early March of 2020, a reality show resembling *Survivor* is in the middle of filming. The show takes place on an uninhabited island in the Bahamas and seeks to attract viewers by displaying 20 contestants from all walks of life slowly reaching insanity as they endure an entire month of ‘living off of the land,’ unable to use their smartphones to communicate with the other contestants, or friends and family back home.

The production crew, equipped with one cell phone that they are restricted to using only once a day, experiences difficulty getting in touch with the production company based in Miami;

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<sup>92</sup> Barbrook and Cameron, 4.

they need more supplies, some equipment isn't working, so it is important that they communicate. The crew decides to travel to Miami via helicopter in order to make contact with the production company and restock on supplies, leaving only the designated doctor behind with the contestants, and the one island cell phone. Arriving upon Miami's sandy shores, the crew is shocked to be greeted by men in hazmat suits who take them into quarantine. After two days the doctor, as well as the 20 reality show contestants left on the island grow increasingly confused and concerned when the production crew has not shown up as promised. In addition, one of the contestants has fallen ill.

Distressed, the doctor charges the cell phone using the dwindling gas supply powering the last functioning generator on the island. It is then that he finally receives a text message from the president of the production company alerting him of the circumstances of Covid-19, contextualizing why the crew cannot return to the island, but assuring him that supplies will be dropped off via helicopter as soon as possible. The doctor replies by notifying the president of one of the contestant's feverish condition, the president then making it abundantly clear that all contestants must stay as far apart from one another as possible for at least two weeks, keeping the uninfected safe from the virus.

Hungry and scared, the 20 contestants donning only loin-cloths are thrilled to receive their care packages the next day. The doctor demands that the contestants stay away from each other, and that he will distribute the contents of the packages to them, so as to limit the potential spreading of Covid. Among food, water, and medical supplies, the packages include megaphones; the producer tasked with dropping off the package, before chopping away to his

own private island with his family, quite thoughtfully considered the plight of the contestants and their need to communicate with each other distantly.

As the packages were handed out, the 20 islanders quickly discovered that only 15 megaphones were included in the drop off. As the lucky 15 began to speak through these megaphones, it became clear that some took advantage of the new technological addition to the island, screaming over the others to complain about how they felt they didn't get their fair share of the supplies from the care package. Some people's megaphones broke, so no one could hear them, causing them to go hungry. One day, a member of the 20 stranded contestants decides he hates the beautiful lady two huts over because she refused his sexual advances back in the early days of filming. So he steals her megaphone, using two at once to shout insults at her from his hut, so that everyone else may hear them. This deems her unable to vocalize her needs to the doctor across the island, who is left unaware of her situation. No more supplies for her.

In this case, the medium of the megaphone informs the scorned man's message. It is louder, and clearer than everyone else's. But, because his message is negative, and at the expense of the lady two huts over, we cannot with a healthy conscience say that the big bag of megaphones had a broadly liberating effect on the group of 20 stranded on the island. It made certain things easier, and certain things harder. It made some people's voices louder, and silenced the voices of others. There is no hope for any utopia when most are struggling to survive. The only true utopia, then, aligns with its original meaning: non-existent.

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