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## Retreat culture and therapeutic disconnection

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## 10

## Retreat Culture and Therapeutic Disconnection

Pepita Hesselberth

This chapter offers an auto-ethnographic account of my journey through a series of self-care and wellness retreats in which I partook in light of my research on “Disconnectivity in the Digital Age,” a project for which I received a grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research in 2015. The chapter you are about to read, however, is not quite the chapter I initially intended to write. Something happened. COVID-19 happened. Quarantine happened.

Digital detox retreats, mindfulness retreats, yoga and health retreats, nature and wilderness retreats, the *me*-retreat. Within our current culture of connectivity to go on a retreat as a way to reduce stress and improve one’s quality of life by temporarily disconnecting from our everyday (media) environments has been a growing trend. Retreat culture, however, has also been subject to controversy in public and scholarly discourse alike, especially more recently.<sup>1</sup> For, while generally conceived to be beneficial to the well-being of those who partake in it, the (idea of) retreat has also been criticized for feeding into the neoliberal program of privatizing solutions to what are, in fact, social problems—be it stress, burnout, labor precarity, our always-on culture, or the present economy of attention. Here, the retreat reveals itself to be part of a disciplining leisure industry that parasitizes on our need to disconnect, or as Adorno would have it, to “get out” (2001a: 190)—a form of governmentality and control (to speak with Foucault and Deleuze at once) that is fully in line with today’s personality management technologies, where individuals, and individuals alone, are held accountable for their own

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Purser (2019) and Forbes’s (2019) critique of mainstream mindfulness, and Žižek’s on Western Buddhism (for instance here 2001, here 2014, and here 2012) to which I will return below.

development, productivity, *and* health and well-being in the fields of work and society at large (see Villadsen, 2007).

Expanding on this controversy, in this chapter, I will probe the retreat as an (un?)critical imaginary, a term I borrow from Eric Weiner, who uses it to denote the ways in which the “hegemony of realism” may be challenged by engaging “the improbable through acts of imaginative transgression” (Weiner, 2015: 27–28). As an un/critical imaginary, I argue, our present-day retreat culture—as a fantasy of therapeutic disconnection—first and foremost helps to disclose some of the cracks in our existing reality, and perchance may also open up a transitional space in which change may take place.

## Retreat Culture

Brands align with spiritual principles for Millennial appeal. Implications - Though Millennials are less likely to be involved with or motivated by religion, many continue to express an interest in spirituality, meditation and holistic wellness. As a result, brands are offering experiences that closely mimic the religious or spiritual “retreat,” whilst continuing to align with modern-day interests, such as social media or entertainment. By combining community-oriented values with the often solitary activities favored by Millennials, brands create a hybrid experience that promotes self-care and wellness in an accessible way. (Retreat Culture, n.d.)

“Brands align with spiritual principles for Millennial appeal.” Thus reads a 2015 “sample consumer insight” on “the world’s #1 largest, most powerful trend platform” *Trendhunter* (I mean, seriously: Read it, it’s worth it!). Featured examples include “Mindful Beauty Bars,” “Outdoor Writing Retreats,” “Rejuvenating Yoga Retreats,” a “Stress Re-set Retreat,” and even a “Television-Themed Retreat,” a brilliantly branded hoax (as it turns out to be) for a Samsung-sponsored “Catch-Up Grant,” offering one dedicated television fan “the opportunity to binge watch their favorite programs” in peace during a 100-day retreat “in a Tibetan monastery” (Pendril, 2015; also see DDB Stockholm, 2015). And the trend has not waned since; in fact it is raging. Indeed, today, by 2020 the *me*-retreat (the pure me, the happy me,

the me me me, the reset me, the time for me) turns out to be a proven sales strategy, promising its patrons journeys through self-discovery, restored inner balance, and a reconnection of body, mind and soul . . . for anyone who can afford it. For, as New York Wellness Consultant/Designer (and spa columnist) Judy Chapman writes on her blog *The Chapman Guides* (“the best of the best in wellness travel, spas, *retreats*, yoga, nourishing foods, detox, health, Ayurveda, fitness”):<sup>2</sup> “A retreat isn’t cheap but neither is going in and out of hospitals or taking medications.” In times of fake news and the complete dissipation of everything we once believed in (“even the healthcare system”), Chapman’s blog on “Retreat Culture” hollers: “It’s time to believe in ourselves again!” (no date).

My first retreat more or less coincided with the origins of my project on disconnectivity. I was recovering from a herniated disc in my lower back and had continued working because, back then, I was still on a temporary contract and simply did not want to risk it. By the time I could stand up straight and walk again I had nearly reached the end of my summer break and decided to go on a five-day hike to recover the strength in my legs, followed by a one-week mindfulness retreat at Plum Village, a Buddhist monastery in the south of France, led by the then still active Vietnamese monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. It was life-changing. Many retreats would follow, some short, some long; some nearby, others in more remote places;<sup>3</sup> some at my own initiative (meaning: on my own); others fully catered for. Some I joined out of curiosity, others I joined out of need.

There is a number of traits that the organized retreats I have been to have in common, different though as they may have been. Besides the good food and the promise of an arguable break with daily routines—the chance to “get out,” “unwind,” “unplug,” or “disconnect” from all the things that we feel are tiring, stressful, and demanding in everyday life—these common denominators are, to briefly sum them up, the terms of the public debate on the topic: first, location, location, location; second, time . . .; and third, the promise of healing (or therapeutic disconnection if you will, whether packaged as such and/or not). I will return to each

<sup>2</sup> Italics in text. The slogan has been changed since, but its original phrasing can still be found, for example, here: Oneworld Retreats (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Though no doubt it would have generated wonderful research material, I never had the heart nor felt the need to take intercontinental flights or spend more than a three-figure amount for a retreat.

of these traits below in my brief walk-through but, for now, briefly want to call attention to correspondence between these traits and the multiple meanings of the noun “retreat,” which, interestingly, has its origins in both military and ascetic practice. A quick glance at *Lexico*, Oxford’s online dictionary, suffices to see that the retreat signals, at once, a gesture (“the act of moving back or withdrawing,” especially after a defeat); a siren or an alert (to sound a retreat, i.e., a signal to withdraw); and a specific kind of place (“quiet or secluded” where “one can rest and relax”) and a particular period and/or quality of time (“a period of seclusion for the purposes of prayer and meditation”). These meanings, I hope to show, are indicative for the kind of role the retreat fulfills in our present-day culture, which has been variously described in terms of a “culture of connectivity” (van Dijck, 2013), an “economy of attention” (e.g., Crawford, 2016; Odell, 2019), a “burnout society” (Han, 2015), and the still relevant discourses on discipline (Foucault, 1988, 1995), control (Deleuze, 1992, 2011), and the cultural industry (Adorno, 2001b; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2007).

### Three Retreats: A Brief Walk-through

Three retreats marked my journey through the disconnectivity project: a vinyasa pranayama retreat at *Yoga Rocks* on the Southside of the Greek isle, Crete (summer 2017); a Digital Detox Retreat in Puglia (Italy) organized by *Time to Log Off* (autumn 2017); and a series of extended stays at *Plum Village* near Bordeaux in southwest France over a period of four months (spring/summer 2018).<sup>4</sup> These retreats, as indicated earlier, have a number of traits in common. First of all, they all took place at locations that were outstandingly beautiful and somewhat remote (meaning inaccessible by public transport). Indeed, location is one of the major selling points on the sites of both *Yoga Rocks* (“breathhtakingly serene coastline,” “incredible atmosphere,” “picturesque location”), *Time to Log Off* (“held in areas of outstanding natural beauty”), and to a lesser degree *Plum Village* (who on their site first just state that the monastery “began as a small, rustic farmstead” but elsewhere also speak of it as a “home away from home, and a beautiful, nourishing and

<sup>4</sup> To specify: in 2018 I spent two weeks at Lower Hamlet during the Spring Retreat, five weeks as a volunteer at Upper Hamlet for the 21-Day Retreat, and another three weeks at Lower Hamlet during the Summer Opening Retreat.

simple environment”). The imagery of the sites also clearly contributes to projection of the freshness and beauty of the environments. What these locations have in common, besides being located in the country or seaside, is that they are secluded places, not only in the sense of “away from the pressures of everyday life” (*Yoga Rocks*, 2020a), but also in the sense that they hold the promise that, here, intensified mental activity can take place. For this, obviously, time is needed—not just time spent (however important), but also, and more importantly, a particular quality of time, that is, time for oneself, time dedicated. The time of the retreat, however, is also scheduled time. To support retreatants in their practice of letting go (of daily routines, distractions, and external stimuli), significantly, the retreats were all structured around a daily schedule, a program of activities that generally included, among others, the following: three meals (simple or copious), and a variation of walking and sitting meditation, yoga, (dharma) sharing, singing, relaxation and/or service. Finally, the promise of healing was central to this retreats, which was said to offer the retreatant the time and place “to immerse yourself in all things yogic” (*Yoga Rocks*, 2020a), “to reconnect with your physical self” (*Time to Log Off*, 2020), and “experience the art of mindful living” (*Plum Village*), promising to leave the retreatant “refreshed and restored” (*Time to Log Off*, 2020), with “a rarely experienced feeling of peace” (*Yoga Rocks*, 2020a) and “more freedom, peace and happiness in our daily life” (*Plum Village*, 2020a).

Despite the commonality of these traits, a recipe that will sound familiar to anyone who has ever been on (any kind of) retreat, there were, of course, also notable differences between the retreats of *Yoga Rocks*, *Time to Log Off*, and *Plum Village* in terms of location, time, and the way the promise of healing was packaged (or not), but also, as well as in terms of the incentives of the organizers and the aspirations that brought retreatants to them. A brief walk-through will help to clarify this.

*Yoga Rocks* is the habitat of Helen (British) and Phil (half British, half Greek), who used to spend their summers at the yoga practice center in Tripetra with their two kids until 2019, when the couple made Crete their full-time home. The hosts are supported by Morag (admin) and a “changing group of incredible helpers,” mostly woofers (*Yoga Rocks*, 2020d). Classes are taught by an international group of “exceptionally experienced and generous” teachers (*Yoga Rocks*, 2020b; and I have to concur) most of whom have dedicated their lives to yogic practice. The program usually runs from

April until October.<sup>5</sup> The retreat of Patrick (Shukram Das)<sup>6</sup> that I attended was relatively laid back with a regular and steady daily schedule consisting of optional morning meditation, two yoga classes (one before breakfast, the other before dinner, except on Thursday when we had the afternoon off), and an evening program comprised of Satsang (being together), a short dharma talk (a “teaching,” if you will, of yogic philosophy), and a short meditation or Kirtan (chanting). It was encouraged to remain silent from after Satsang until after breakfast. It was also encouraged not to use phones, but very few retreatants stuck to that. Partly due to the weather—which went from windy, to boilingly hot, to extremely windy—there were no excursions except on the last evening, when—some of the retreatants fully dressed up—we all walked down to the taverna on the beach to have our final dinner together. Perhaps as a result, most of us spent our time at the resort, where the program allowed for plenty of time to relax, connect, doze off in the sun or in a hammock, take a nap, read a book, or go for swim. In the spirit of *Yoga Rocks*’ overall atmosphere and branding strategy if you like, everything at the retreat was explicitly presented as optional, with “no pressure” (“no one’s judging!”), indeed no more than an invitation (and opportunity!) to “[d]elve deep inside or simply kick back,” unwind and enjoy the place “as your mood takes you” (2020b). After all, the site reads, “it’s your holiday”—a holiday, the resort promises, “from which you will return feeling refreshed and revitalized” (2020d). The food was very tasty, “locally sourced, freshly prepared, [and] vegetarian,” and in fact had earned the resort the *Yoga Journal*-label “Foodie Retreat” that year (“The Must List: Foodie Retreats, 2018”)—though, admittedly, I was astounded by the large amount of it that went to waste, as it was common policy not to serve the delicate leftovers to the retreatants a second time. The retreatants: about 20 in number, two-thirds of them female; all of them European (Denmark, Britain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, Italy) or North American (the United States and Canada); aged between 20+ and 50+; and predominantly (if not all) middle-class and white. Duration: one week (seven days, six nights). Costs: 850 euros for a shared room +travel expenses +optional massage.

<sup>5</sup> Due to COVID-19 the new 2020 schedule doesn’t run as usual and the program started instead in June; see *Yoga Rocks* (2020c).

<sup>6</sup> Together with his partner Gösta (Shunya), Patrick is the co-founder of Svaha Yoga in Amsterdam, where I volunteered as a Karma Yogi while working on the disconnectivity project. Both Patrick, Gösta, and the then managing director of the studio (and spirited yogi) Josie Sykes are among *Yoga Rocks*’ changing group of international teachers.

Of the three retreats, “The Digital Detox Retreat”—now strategically re-branded as the catch-them-all “Mindful Digital Detox and Yoga Retreat”—of *Time to Log Off*, for me, stands out most for its unconcealed branding and ongoing sales strategy (even *during* the retreat), which, admittedly, was also what sparked my curiosity and drew me to the retreat in the first place. The retreat took place at Masseria Della Zingara (literally: gypsy farm or house of the gypsy), an 18th-century building in the Puglia area in Italy, surrounded by cherry trees and olive groves, and available for weddings, private rentals, and “specialist holidays.”<sup>7</sup> The retreat was organized and hosted by “digital entrepreneur,” “tech ethicist,” and self-proclaimed “digital detox evangelist,” Tanya Goodin<sup>8</sup>—founder of *Time to Log Off*. Upon arrival we had to hand in our mobile phones and were asked to state our expectations and aspirations for the week; at the end, as the phones were returned to us, we were asked about our experiences, challenges, and revelations. Throughout the retreat our host repeatedly informed us about, first, the dangers of our digital devices, “especially for children”;<sup>9</sup> second, a phone call she was expecting about a “possible interview about the retreat for *The Guardian*” (presumably this one: Hayes, 2018); and third, about *her* aspiration for the week, which was to finally “write her second book,” which has since come out as *Stop Staring at Screens: A Digital Detox for the Whole Family* (Goodin, 2018). As for the daily schedule, I cannot even begin to describe the “full program of activities” we were offered. In addition to a daily program of optional early morning walks (“in silence” with the masseria’s eccentric owner Jan King); three meals (prepared by King and her exquisite cook); two yoga (or tantra) classes (taught by a sweet but not-so-experienced teacher flown in from Britain, except on Thursday when she had the afternoon off); and an optional massage at one’s own expense by a local ayurvedic therapist, we were offered a plethora of other (not quite so) optional activities, parts of which were presented to us at our doorstep upon our return to our room at night, every night. A book to be read—Tanya’s first, *OFF. Your Digital Detox for a Better Life* (2017), “a little book with a big message” quizzed the next day; a gratitude jar to fill; poetry to be memorized; a notebook to make notes in; mindful coloring books

<sup>7</sup> For the Masseria, see “Home” (Masseria Della Zingara, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> For the many labels of Tanya Goodin, see [www.tanyagoodin.com](http://www.tanyagoodin.com).

<sup>9</sup> On the problematic of using the children trope in the discourses on the digital detox, see Hesselberth (2018).

## Therapeutic Disconnection? A Reflection

Now, as already becomes clear from this brief walk-through, there is a tremendous difference between a profit-oriented venture like *Time to Log Off*, and the incentives of a (monastic) practice center like *Plum Village*—with *Yoga Rocks* holding somewhat of a middle ground: between the slight decadence of copious three-course meals and food wasted, and the simplicity of plain vegetables, rice and oats; between bunk beds and (made-up) double beds in single rooms; between jam-packed schedules designed to circumvent the retreatants' *ennui* and a schedule that allows for enough space and time to actually touch on emptiness; and for that matter, between a host who arguably has taken on mindfulness and "all things yogic" *pro tem* to brand their persona (and therewith their product), and those who have developed a practice that is steady and (often) lived through, devoting (parts) of their lives to it. There are clear variations and notable differences too, in the kinds of retreatants that are drawn in, and in the ways in which they arguably pass through. While variations are rarely so extreme, one could overstate the difference like this: There are retreatants who merely seem to consume a retreat as a product—"a new experience," i.e., of digestible chunks of mindfulness entertainment, bite-sized and picture perfect; a form of conspicuous leisure (Veblen, 2016 [orig. 1899]) if you will, that never gets them "beyond the threshold of the eversame" (Adorno, 2001a: 191) because they are stuck in a program that never sets them loose and confronts the retreatant with nothing, and to which they nonetheless keep returning to spend money on, simply because it is comfortable. At the other far end, and again the difference is rarely so extreme or absolute, there are those retreatants for whom the retreat really offers an opportunity to nurture inner growth, and to look in deeply "in order to transform both our individual difficulties and the difficulties in our society," as the site of *Plum Village* suggests (2020a). Significantly, the incentives of the organizers and the aspirations of the retreatants need not necessarily be aligned. I have seen retreatants everywhere who had deep revelations about the nature of their burnout or their media use. I have also observed retreatants gulp down the offerings as instant commodities no matter where, fleeing the resorts in a frenzy on free afternoons to go on shopping sprees, eating cheese and meat and drinking wine to make up for the vegan food (and no alcohol, of course), because they simply did not know what to begin with themselves, reporting of it at the end of day.

A certain entrepreneurialism, moreover, seems unavoidable in all the retreats that I attended—which all were relatively mainstream, welcoming, and above all, remunerated, whether they are offered for profit or at a cost price.<sup>14</sup> I would be hard-pressed to conclude, therefore, that an entrepreneurial approach cannot also be committed to one, even Goodin's, who dedicates her book *Off* to her children and whose voice in *Time to Log Off*, I would say, is a welcome one in the world of corporate and digital tech. Surely, a monastery like *Plum Village* is not run like a company—which also has its "downsides," the most notable one perhaps being the apparent lack of efficiency in the most trivial of daily activities, which over years I have learned to appreciate as a good friend to practice with (i.e., my own solutionism and impatience). But (!): There is a little bookshop in each of the hamlets that over the years has become more and more professionalized (even if opening hours remain erratic and the way it is run still appears somewhat disorganized). The shop is stocked with books by Parallax Press, a nonprofit publishing house founded by Thich Nhat Hahn that prints books and other media in mindful living and applied Buddhism, including his own. Besides books, dried plums, and some bare essentials (toothpaste, tampons, water bottles), the shop now also sells t-shirts, postcards, cookies, ice creams, incense, meditation pillows, bells, and all kinds of other little souvenirs—arguably producing a revenue that makes the activities of *Time to Log Off* (an online shop) and *Yoga Rocks* (a small local business in site-branded t-shirts), disappear into thin air.<sup>15</sup> I was once recounted the story of how, upon his arrival in the West, Thich Nhat Hanh soon realized that it would not be an option to go around for alms (offering blessings in exchange for food as Buddhist do in the Far East), and that—in order to survive as a spiritual community there—something other than mere blessings had to be offered, indeed "traded," in return; which is presumably how the organized retreats began. After all, no different from the hosts of *Time to*

<sup>14</sup> There are exceptions to this in the West as well, of course, like for example the vipassana courses in the Goenka tradition—a relatively more demanding 10-day silent meditation retreat that are taught across Europe free of charge and are run by volunteers (themselves prior retreatants). Here, voluntary donations at the end go toward paying for future students. Interesting though this phenomenon is in light of the present discussion, retreats like these fall beyond the scope of this present article.

<sup>15</sup> I even once caught a young sister saying, cynically albeit with a generous and gentle smile, "welcome to Plum Village factory," likening the community's on-site production of souvenirs to an assembly line.

*Log Off* and *Yoga Rocks*, the monastics too, are dependent in part on the revenues generated by the retreats for their livelihoods.

To reduce the problematic of the retreat within our present-day culture (its role in society so to speak, its significance for critical thought) to the tension between entrepreneurialism and idealism, consumerism and dedication, or to distinguish between “good” retreats and “bad” ones, or “right” ways of doing them and ways that are “wrong,” therefore seems far too reductive. Indeed, we need another model, another paradigm, to critically consider the retreat. Which brings me to the controversy surrounding retreat culture that opened this chapter.

As part of today’s leisure industry, “the retreat” shares many of the characteristics Theodor Adorno once attributed to the notion of “free time” in the 1970s (2001a [orig. 1977])—regardless of whether they are organized for-profit or offered at cost price. Like the idea of free time, the idea of retreat is “a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life,” an “oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system, that has itself been reified” (Adorno, 2001b: 189). Like free time, moreover, the time of the retreat is heteronomous time—“time subject to constraints not of one’s making” (Shippen, 2014: 127): a period of seclusion, a daily schedule—whatever we believe our intentions may be. Like free time, then, the retreat seems “shackled to its opposite” (p. 187), that is: to all that from which one seeks to retreat (withdraw), be it the pressures of labor precarity, our always-on culture and the current economy of attention, and/or, for that matter, the inconveniences of urban or (heteronormative) family life (to retreat into “nature,” to take time “for oneself”). What in Adorno’s reading goes for free time’s relation to wage labor, equally holds true for the retreat’s relation to all of the preceding. Where wage labor is predicated on the internalized assumption that one should “not be distracted or lark about,” the retreat, like free time, “must not resemble work in any way whatsoever, in order, presumably, that one can work [or connect *better*, or be a *worthier* spouse] all the more effectively afterwards” (pp. 189–190). This makes of the retreat, or therapeutic disconnection if you will, a form of social control beyond our self-determination, part and parcel of a society that not only “foists upon you what your free time [retreat] should be” (p. 190), but above all that it should be put to (good) use.

A similar line of reasoning can be found in Purser and Loy’s (2013) critique of mainstream mindfulness and the idea of therapeutic disconnection

(or healing) so central to the retreat. Purser writes in *McMindfulness*, that mainstream mindfulness, decontextualized from its foundation in Buddhism and its social ethics, has become “the new capitalist spirituality”—a form of psycho-politics (Han, 2017) that “slots neatly into the mindset of the workplace,” and is “perfectly attuned maintaining the neoliberal self” (2019: 19). Along similar lines Slavoj Žižek has called “Western Buddhism” the “hegemonic ideology of global capitalism.” He writes: “Although ‘Western Buddhism’ presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace and *Gelassenheit*, it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement” (Žižek, 2014: 65, 66). Like mindfulness, the retreat in this reading, becomes “a therapeutic solvent,” “a universal elixir” (Purser, 2019: 20), a form of “stoic self-pacification” (p. 25) that helps us to auto-exploit ourselves (in the name of self-care). Moreover, Forbes adds in *Mindfulness and its Discontents*: “Instead of relinquishing the ego, *McMindfulness* promotes self-aggrandizement; its therapeutic function is to comfort, numb, adjust, and accommodate the self within a neoliberal, corporatized, militarized, individualistic society based on private gain.” This logic of “mindfulness for me,” Žižek writes is “arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity.”

Significantly, Purser (2019) likens neoliberal mindfulness to a “disimagination machine” (p. 37), a term he borrows from Henri Giroux, who in his turn takes it from Didi-Huberman. “To change the world, we are told to work on our selves—to change our minds by being more mindful, nonjudgemental and accepting of the circumstances. In this way, neoliberal mindfulness functions as a machine of disimagination” (p. 37). A disimagination machine, Giroux writes (2013: n.p.) in a good old historical materialist fashion,

is both a set of cultural apparatuses extending from schools and mainstream media to the new sites of screen culture, and a public pedagogy that functions primarily to undermine the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue: put simply, to become critically informed citizens of the world.

Like Purser and Giroux, in his critique of “free time,” Adorno (2001a) too, laments the stifling of the imagination that results from free time’s prescriptive

logic, i.e., the fact that it imposes on people how nonworking hours should be spent (i.e., on a hobby, to go out camping, sunbathe, relax, or: go on a retreat!) and the uses to which these hours should be put (i.e., the recuperation of our productive forces). Under the strict division of labor and the sort of conditions of heteronomy, Adorno writes, free time, however, also gives way to boredom, i.e., when our desires are satisfied and new ones are not triggered yet. It is worthwhile to quote Adorno at some length here:

If people were able to make their own decisions about themselves and their lives, if they were not caught up in the realm of the eversame, they would not have to be bored. Boredom is the reflection of objective dullness. As such it is in a similar position to political apathy. The most compelling reason for apathy is the by no means unjustified feeling of the masses that political participation within the sphere society grants them [...] can alter their actual existence only minimally. Failing to discern the relevance of politics to their own interests, they retreat from all political activity. (Adorno, 2001a: 192)

Boredom, Adorno writes, is “objective desperation.” But, he writes, it is also indicative of “the defamation and atrophy of the imagination (*Phantasie*).” It is free time’s truncation of the imagination, Adorno suggests, that deprives people of their faculty to imagine things/ life otherwise. “This is one good reason,” Adorno concludes, “why people have remained chained to their work, and to a system which trains them for work, long after that system has ceased to require their labour” (p. 193). What, then, to make of the retreat in this context?

It is here, I feel, that the comparison between free time and the retreat no longer fully holds. For, while there may be a kernel of truth to the idea that the organized retreat, too, may prohibit people from imagining how their time/retreat could be spend otherwise—or, more generally, how life could be otherwise—this is only a partial truth. For as a gesture of withdrawal, I have argued elsewhere, to (go on) a retreat is by no means an apolitical gesture. In fact, Joost de Bloois and I argue, “with the condition of ‘no exit’ becoming ever more universal in the Global West,” to withdraw; retreat, disconnect, or resign has “become *the* political gesture” of our times, constituting a radical “break with modern and contemporary conceptions of what counts as ‘(the) political’” (2020: 10; also see Hesselberth, 2020). It goes beyond the

scope of this article to fully unpack this argument with its politics of withdrawal) here; suffice it to say that in my reading of it, there is nothing apolitical about the retreat. To elucidate my point, I will briefly return to Adorno before moving on to the organized retreats I attended. Crucially, Adorno’s observations on free time and the division of labor originate from a place and time of retreat—a place of refuge where he himself seems (in fact: feels) unburdened by (some of) its challenges. Adorno is well aware of this, as he reflects on the privilege he enjoys as a university professor, which grants him the “rare opportunity to follow the path of his own intentions and to fashion his work accordingly” (p. 189). It is from this retreat from society—not completely severed from it, but temporarily disconnected—that he can see the glitches of his times and conjure up ideas about, indeed: Imagine, what role the imagination could (but ceases) to fulfill. It is this disconnect/ retreat, in other words, that enables him to imagine things/life otherwise.

The (organized) retreat, I suggest, fulfills a similar function in our times, albeit in part and somewhat differently. On the one hand, I have shown, the retreat shares many of the characteristics Adorno attributes to “free time,” in the sense that it works prescriptively. On the other hand, however, I suggest, the retreat also enables the dis/connect by way of which such prescriptive workings can potentially become undone. The role and function of the daily schedule, one of the hallmarks of the organized retreat presumably modeled after spiritual retreats like those of Plum Village, is key here. Clearly premediated to unshackle retreatants from their daily routines and responsibility, the daily schedule has a clear prescriptive working: It will tell you where to be when, what to do, when to eat and when to sleep; food and sheltering are provided for, albeit at designated hours.<sup>16</sup> As such, it is undeniably an example of heteronomy—time beyond our self-determination, the opposite of independent, autonomous, and free.<sup>17</sup> Heteronomous though it may be, or, in effect, precisely because of its heteronomy, the daily schedule also allows for the mind to be emptied of external stimuli and responsibility, at least in potential, and it is in this emptiness that new imaginings can emerge. Just as it takes Adorno a retreat/disconnect from society to see its shortcomings and imagine the place imagination could fulfill, it takes the different way of

<sup>16</sup> The struggles retreatants have with this principle, me included, are staggering—another paper could be devoted to this...

<sup>17</sup> The free, here, it that of freedom, not free time, a distinction Adorno time and again stipulates.



being in time and being together that the retreat enables to envision the place that alternate ways of being in time and being together may fulfill within the political imagination of our times.<sup>18</sup> This, in conclusion, brings me to the retreat as an (un)critical imaginary and the etymology of the noun “retreat” that I opened this chapter with. As a *gesture* of withdrawal, the popularity of organized retreats *signals* some of the fissures in our existing reality (stress, burnout), opening up different time and space, and ways being together in and through which change may take place. This, to me, makes of the retreat one of the most central figures of what, elsewhere (Hesselberth, 2017), I have called the paradox of dis/connectivity that marks our times.

### Going Full Circle: Quarantine and the Online Retreat (a Very Brief Coda)

As I embarked on writing this article the world was shaken in its grounds by the COVID-19 pandemic. The quarantine imposed a retreat from public spaces into the private sphere of the home, as well as a retreat from work, the repressing rhythm of which would soon pick up again, arguably in an even more rigorous manner. The organized retreats I had planned to go to were all cancelled, and in due time relocated online. I am not sure what to make of the online retreat, which has a politics and aesthetics of its own, that would require a separate investigation. Perhaps it is because the online retreat emerged simultaneously with the “new normal” of working from home and the aesthetics that came with it (the most notable being called Zoom)—or because my own research on dis/connectivity originated from the advent of the totalitarian logic of online connectivity and my own need to retreat, but the online retreat seems somewhat contentious to me. More important for our purpose here, and the question I have asked while writing this chapter, is what kind of retreat the quarantine was—not the one as we came to know (the new normal), but the one prior to that: the first few weeks where we simply had no idea yet (of what would come, of how to do it, of how to be in time and space differently); the panic of harvesting food, the liberty of

<sup>18</sup> The function of these schedules, in other words, is to release the retreatants from their daily responsibilities, duties, and distractions that come with the sheer need take care of and feed oneself, so that other ways of being with oneself and the world around us may become possible/imaginable.

having to figure things out for ourselves, the quiet of no appointments, the challenges of having to be or become a family again. The chapter you have read is in many ways not the one I had intended to write because of quarantine. But it is not about quarantine. All the way through I realized this would have to be, once again, another article.

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## 11

## Networked Intimacies

## Pandemic Dis/Connections Between Anxiety, Joy, and Laughter

Jenny Sundén

The most important advice government authorities have given people across the globe to slow down the spread of COVID-19 is the practice of "social distancing." In many places where the virus' spread has been severe, or on the verge of becoming severe, people have been told to self-quarantine, to stay home, to "shelter in place." Such advice and regulations have spurred rather radical forms of self-isolation as many have stopped going to work and other public spaces, stopped visiting family and friends, perhaps even been forced to refrain from going outside altogether. These physical modes of confinement have also resulted in quite vivid digital forms of being close and coming together, highlighting how digital intimacy is an intrinsic part of the social fabric in ways that become critical in spaces of physical disconnection. Simply put, to keep bodies physically apart is not necessarily the same as being socially distant with regard to others.

The idea of the social as not merely consisting of face-to-face encounters is of course not new. The use of media technologies has continuously tied people together at a distance, from letter writing, personal ads, and phone calls, to the use of networked digital media, creating new forms of relational spaces. With the development of the Web in increasingly social and participatory registers, in tandem with progressively more powerful devices, connections, and networks, digital modes of sociality have proliferated. In a continuous movement through social media platforms and social media feeds, private messaging functions, and hookup apps, everyday forms of intimacy have an undeniable digital dimension (cf. Andreassen et al., 2018; Dobson et al., 2018).