The room is the world: reflecting on the lived life of hikikomori through photography

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CHAPTER 2

The Room Is the World: Reflecting on the Lived Life of *Hikikomori* Through Photography

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> It isn't necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don't even listen, just wait, be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy.
> —Franz Kafka, *The Zurau Aphorisms* (1931/2006)

Anyone who has spent several consecutive days in a room, without conversing with others and moving elsewhere, can attest to Kafka's prescription for solitude: that staying at home for a long time does not necessarily bring about indolence, but can open up the entire world to us. That world, however, is not always as auspicious as Kafka envisaged it to be, replete with ecstatic wonders and serendipitous encounters. Succumbing to a recumbent or sedentary lifestyle in domestic space can also usher one into the midst of an irreversible solitude. Since the beginning of the COVID-19

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pandemic, many of us have been subjected to involuntary quarantines, thus inevitably experiencing social isolation as a consequence of home confinement. While such an experience may have been novel to many people across the globe, it is nothing new to a *hikikomori*. This Japanese term refers to the phenomenon of "acute social withdrawal" as well as to the person who undergoes such self-imposed seclusion. As a phenomenon, it refers to a behavior containing elements of "social withdrawal," that is, non-participation in society for at least six months, as well as "social isolation," that is, absence of relationships with others (Krieg and Dickie 2011). Whereas once *hikikomori* was known to be peculiar to Japanese culture, this practice has meanwhile become a worldwide phenomenon. The individuals who embrace a *hikikomori* lifestyle confine their life to the boundaries of a single room, in which they pursue an ostensibly humdrum day-to-day life. It is a life in which one becomes voluntarily "homebound", that is, being both "confined to home" and "searching for home" (Chen 2019, 11).

To reflect on the lived life of *hikikomori* through photography, this chapter will examine the recent photographic work of Norwegian artist Atle Blekastad entitled *Goodbye Without Leaving*. In this commemorative photo research, Blekastad reconstructs from his memories the room in which his brother, who had been a *hikikomori* for over twenty years, took his life in 2012. The result is a 1:1 scale digitally constructed photographic print furnished by several downloaded photos that resemble the real objects in the room (Fig. 2.1). Instead of being the photograph of a place in the strict sense of the term, which implies the existence of the camera in a physical location, Blekastad's digitally constructed photo features a "photographic place": "a perceptible place that is embedded in the photograph as an image" (Shobeiri 2021, 67). It is a poignant yet hopeful photographic place about memory, loss, and undoubtedly the psychological toll of living one's life as a *hikikomori*.

By looking at *Goodbye Without Leaving* via an interdisciplinary prism informed by phenomenology, I will explore the issue of how photography can spatiotemporally manifest the lived life of a *hikikomori*. To achieve this, I will first unpack the recent sociocultural research on *hikikomori* to underline the causes and factors that may induce such a sweeping societal retreat. Next, I will employ Gaston Bachelard's method of "topo-analysis" and Edward S. Casey's notion of "place memory" to shed light on the

Fig. 2.1 Atle Blekastad. *Goodbye Without Leaving*. 2021. Courtesy of the artist

conjunction of memory and place vis-à-vis Blekastad's photograph. Fleshing out this crossover helps distinguish between the lived memory of a place, which belongs to the *hikikomori* who corporeally experienced the room, and the enlivened memory of place, as photographically reconstructed by the artist. Finally, by drawing on the Nietzschean notion of "eternal return" and Gilles Deleuze's and Eduardo Cadava's reinterpretations of this temporal concept, I propose that *Goodbye Without Leaving* embodies the lived life of *hikikomori* as an endless expansion of place and a boundless cessation of time: a unique psychosomatic condition reconstructed through photography. To do this, I will begin my analysis by explaining the etymology and symptomatology of *hikikomori* in relation to Blekastad's photographic practice.

Hikikomori: A Radical Social Withdrawal

In Japan the word *hikikomori* has long been used in its derivative form as a verb, *hikikomoru*. As such *hikikomoru* is a compound verb consisting of two qualities: "to pull back" (*hiku*) and "to seclude oneself" (*komoru*). When individuals decide to leave their social group, such as their school or workplace, in order to seek isolation in their domestic space, they are described as *hikikomotta*: "that person who has withdrawn into seclusion" (Kato et al. 2011, 427). During this period, which may last for a few days, weeks, months, or several years, the individual is referred to as *hikikomori*. Although the first scientific study to include the phenomenon of social withdrawal in Japan dates back to 1978, when patients were diagnosed with "withdrawal neurosis," the term *hikikomori* would enter mainstream culture twenty years later, when the prominent Japanese psychiatrist T. Saito included the term in the title of his book *Shakaiteki Hikikomori: Owaranai Shishunki*, translated as *Social Withdrawal: A Neverending Adolescence* (1998). Since then, the term *hikikomori* has been used as a noun to describe either the pathology of "acute social withdrawal" or the patient who undertakes such a radical retreat. After Ryū Murakami, the internationally acclaimed Japanese author, presented a *hikikomori* as the central character of his novel *Parasites* in 2000, this notion further gained terrain.

Until recently, however, *hikikomori* was seen as a sociocultural syndrome unique to Japanese society, frequently associated with the word *gamen*, which can be loosely translated as "perseverance." From 2004 to 2010 alone, it was estimated that between 410,000 and 1.5 million people were at the risk of suffering from *hikikomori* in Japan. In the highly competitive labor market of Japanese society, to embrace *gamen* means "to deny self-expression and personal gratification for the more important reward of fitting into the group" (Bennett 2020, 263). Despite sharing the former aspect of *gamen*, which thwarts societal expressiveness and self-indulgence, a *hikikomori* does not seek inclusion in any specific group. Instead, this individual will radically withdraw from society by tenaciously receding into the very constricted corner of the self, at one's home and away from others. In a fervid manner, therefore, a *hikikomori* completely rejects social participation and its concomitant rewards by "pulling out of *gamen* all together" (264).

While *hikikomori* was initially conceived as a syndrome specific to Japanese culture, recent international surveys have revealed its existence

and prevalence in many other countries as well, including the United States, Australia, France, Spain, Italy, Canada, Taiwan, Oman, Bangladesh, and Iran (Hamasaki et al. 2020). In fact, one of the decisive factors hampering the prevention and treatment of *hikikomori* is the difficulty in classifying it as a disorder that is culturally specific to Japan or as a "symptom of comorbid psychological disorders," such as depressive disorder, social phobia, anxiety disorder, and personality disorder (Krieg and Dickie 2011, 61). This is why *hikikomori*, despite its inclusion in the *Oxford Dictionary* in 2010 (which defines it as "the abnormal avoidance of social contact, typically by adolescent males"), has not yet been incorporated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Kato et al. 2011, 428). Instead, the *hikikomori* syndrome was divided into two types: "primary hikikomori," which refers to a person who shows the symptoms of the *hikikomori* phenomenon without being diagnosed with any psychiatric disease, and "secondary hikikomori," which refers to an individual who suffers from a variety of severe mental disorders (Suwa and Suzuki 2013, 193). Although Saito initially had a different set of conditions for identifying the *hikikomori* syndrome,[1] recent psychiatric research defines a *hikikomori* as a person who exhibits the following four criteria for a period of at least six months:

> (A) physical withdrawal (the person stays at home almost all day, almost every day); (B) avoidance of social participation (the person avoids nearly all social situations, such as school and work); (C) avoiding social relationships (the person avoids direct social interaction with family or acquaintances); and (D) distress in social life (the above hinders the individual's social life). Individuals who fulfil all four of these criteria would be defined as *hikikomori*. (Kato et al. 2011, 430)

While some secondary *hikikomori* may be diagnosed with psychiatric disorders prior to their seclusion, others may develop such conditions during their confinements. In minor cases, for example, they may suffer from depression and anxiety, and in more severe cases they can experience

[1] In 1988, T. Saito defined the following criteria for recognizing *hikikomori* syndrome: "i) sedentary lifestyle in which the person lives most of the days in their own home; ii) lack of interest in performing school or work activities; iii) persistence of the phenomenon for at least 6 months; iv) schizophrenia, mental disorders and other disorders are excluded from the syndrome; v) subjects that maintain interpersonal or social relationship are excluded from this symptomatology" (Magila 2020, 97).

psychotic and delusional experiences (Yasuma et al. 2021, 1–6). Needless to say, the most grievous case is when a *hikikomori* decides to put an end to such a self-imposed and repetitive cycle by taking one's life.

Instead of viewing social withdrawal as a sign of incapability, deficiency, and abnormality, contemporary interdisciplinary research into *hikikomori* aspires to destigmatize this global phenomenon by seeing it as a willful "desire for solitude" (Chen 2019). From this angle, a *hikikomori* is a person who recalcitrantly decides to reside outside the prevailing norms, systems, and discourses of social relationships through a "passive protest" (Berman and Rizzo 2019, 802–3). A *hikikomori*'s rebellion against imposed ideals, however, takes place within the architectural boundaries of a room, in which one's sense of self remains shielded from the unwanted expectations and demands of society. For a *hikikomori* in turn "the bedroom becomes a counterforce of near-total ipseity, an obscure philosophical world that describes a virtual world devoid of the discomforting influences of others on an individual's identity" (Chen 2019, 13). In other words, by rejecting putative ways of living, a *hikikomori* chooses seclusion over inclusion, repetition over newness, and domestic security over ontological anxiety, thereby turning one's bedroom into a miniaturized yet innocuous space coinciding with the world as a whole. In this case, the bedroom becomes a domiciliary battlefield in which and by which *hikikomori* expose their ceaseless rejections of communal conventions. It is in this self-made and self-imposed sanctuary that *hikikomori* safeguard the fragile core of the self from the outside world. Therefore, to understand the lived life of *hikikomori* one needs to delve deep into the intricate and intimate rapport *hikikomori* have with the room in which they enact their passive protest. For *hikikomori*, it is this very room that imbricates and implicates the entirety of time and space within its fabric. Such an investigation of *hikikomori* is precisely what Atle Blekastad has dexterously fleshed out in *Goodbye Without Leaving*.

Aiming to raise awareness about the prevalence of the *hikikomori* syndrome in Norway, in 2021 Blekastad exhibited *Goodbye Without Leaving* in the Netherlands. In this commemorative photographic research, he attempted to conceive and perceive the lived experience of his deceased brother by digitally constructing the room in which he had been living as *hikikomori* for over two decades. After his attempted suicide in 1988, Blekastad's brother stopped attending school and gradually slid into seclusion within his parental home. Living in his childhood room for over twenty years and avoiding any kind of social contact during this period, his home isolation ended in late 2009, when he was admitted to a psychiatric

hospital and diagnosed with schizophrenia. During his treatment, Blekastad's mother decided to sell the house in which both Atle Blekastad and his brother grew up. This unforeseen decision left his brother with no option but to go to a welfare-provided apartment after being discharged from the psychiatric hospital. Due to the lack of adequate psychiatric support and knowledge about the underlying cases of acute social withdrawal, the brother eventually decided to take his own life on February 22, 2012.

Around a decade later, Blekastad digitally reconstructed the room where his brother spent over twenty years of his life as a *hikikomori* (Fig. 2.1). This photographic place underscores that *hikikomori* is not merely a Japanese syndrome, but a global phenomenon in need of immediate recognition. Based on Blekastad's fragmented memories of his brother's room, this photographic place allows us to imagine a myriad of possible ways with which the lived body of a *hikikomori* once interacted with the architectural space. In order to better understand how the *hikikomori* lived in the room, I will next look into Blekastad's photographic practice in relation to Casey's notion of "place memory" and Bachelard's method of "topo-analysis." In doing so, it will become possible to situate the lived life of a *hikikomori* at the crossroad of memory and place: the conjunction that is photographically constructed in *Goodbye Without Leaving*.

The Lived Place of *Hikikomori*

> What is contained in place is on its way to being well remembered. What is remembered is well grounded if it is remembered as being in a particular place.
>
> —Edward S. Casey, *Remembering*

As philosopher Edward S. Casey reminds us, the act of remembering is essentially place-bound and place-dependent. In other words, to remember an event or a thing is to remember it "in a particular place," in which that particular entity made its first appearance in time and space. For, as Casey contends, "places are potently receptive and preservative of memories" (2000, 213). It is precisely through their containing power that places allow us to sediment our memories in and through them, thus functioning as mnemonic frameworks whereby we remember the past. Casey concisely argues that, by safeguarding past events within its "self-delimiting parameters," place "is a *mise en scène* for remembered events" (189). But places, like memories, do not only function as containers of things and events, but also as mergers of their seemingly disparate contents. If we

conceive of human remembering as an act of amalgamating diverse moments of time in order to create the illusion of continuity, place can perform a similar role. When fragmented memories of the past gain unicity and lucidity, "any given place serves to hold together dispersed things, animate and inanimate; it *regionalizes* them" (202, original emphasis). Drawing on functional similarities between place and memory, Casey argues that remembering is essentially an act of "re-implacing":

> *In remembering we can be thrust back, transported, into the place we recall.* We can be moved back into this place as much as, and sometimes more than, into the *time* in which the remembered event occurred. Rather than thinking of remembering as a form of re-experiencing the past *per se*, we might conceive of it as an activity of *re-implacing*: re-experiencing past places. (201, original emphasis)

Rather than understating remembering as a temporal return to the past, Casey conceives of it as a spatial conveyance by which we can "re-implace" ourselves in "past places." The question is now: what exactly do we remember when we "re-implace" ourselves in the past? Or, in other words, what does one remember when the act of remembrance equates with reassembling the constituents of places in the past? To develop this concern, we first need to know what constitutes a place.

Geographically speaking, places are made of three main components: location, locale, and sense of place. It is through the conflation of these three aspects that a place, to use an adjective coined by Casey, gains its "placial" status. The term location, according to geographer Tim Cresswell, "refers to an absolute point in space with a specific set of coordinates and measurable distances from other locations." Location pertains to the "'where' of place" (2015, 1). In the case of Blekastad's photographic place, location refers to the specific latitude and longitude by which one can access the real physical room in Norway; it is the "where" of a *hikikomori*'s place. The term "locale," however, "refers to the material setting" of a place that constitutes its appearances: it is "the way a place looks" (1). In other words, while "location" addresses the exact point at which a place is situated, the term "locale" describes the material assembly that gives a particular look to that place. For instance, in relation to Blekastad's photograph, locale refers to the Iron Maiden and Pink Floyd posters on the walls, the imbricated red-green-white curtain on the right side, the crimson door on the left side, and the empty bed in the middle of the room. The locale of this photographic place includes all the material

Fig. 2.2 Atle Blekastad. *Mind Map*. 2021. Courtesy of the artist

components that once furnished this *hikikomori*'s room in Norway and now ornament its photographic reconstruction. The last and arguably most intimate and intricate element of place is "sense of place," which refers to the "unselfconscious intentionality" that situates places at the "centres of human existence" (Relph 2008, 43), a requisite concept to which I will soon return. To recognize the act of remembering as re-implacing, by which we can re-live past places, one needs to reconstruct all the components of place: locale, location, and sense of place. In such a place-based mode of remembrance, the locale plays an essential role, for without their material supports, places would be exposed to an ineluctable disappearance in time: they would be irreversibly forgotten.

To remember his brother's room via re-implacing, Blekastad had to first search on the internet for all the objects that he could remember from the actual room, that is, he had to gather the locale of place. As shown in Fig. 2.2, the result of such a free-floating memory exercise was a clutter of

images with no particular contiguity. Summoned from the past without any spatial coherence, such a mélange of images resonates with what the philosopher Siegfried Kracauer once referred to as "memory images": a jumble of recollected things that lack the spatial continuity of photography. From the perspective of photography, Kracauer wrote, "memory images are out of kilter" (1927/2014, 31). To make these recalled but disorganized images into a photographic whole, Blekastad had to resort to a place-bound remembering technique devised by the ancient Greeks, called "method of loci," also known as "art of memory." Through such an effective "mnemotechnique," Casey explains, "a given place or set of places act as a grid onto which images of items to be remembered are placed in a certain order. The subsequent remembering of these items occurs by revisiting the place-grid and traversing it silently" (2000, 183). In other words, the method of loci allows us to use places as mental frameworks, virtual grids, or as spatial scaffoldings onto which we can project the fragments of the past, in order to remember a particular event, place, or a person by revising such a "place-grid" in our mind. It is this method that propelled Blekastad to create an initial drawing of the room and a digital sketch thereof, which are visible in the background and the upper side, respectively, of Fig. 2.2. Having now gathered the various elements comprising the locale of the room and sketched its virtual parameters, the question is: how does one dispose of the locale of such a place in order to enliven it with human presence? Or, put differently: how did Blekastad manage to instill this room with the lived and corporeal life of *hikikomori*?

The answer to this question lies in "the customary body," a concept coined by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are composed of two distinct layers: "the body at this moment" and "the customary body." While the former is in charge of instantaneous experience of the world (as one touches a doorhandle in a room), the latter is based on the mental exercises of the body in space (as one imagines touching a doorhandle in the mind). It is owing to the customary body, or such an "impersonal being," that we feel spatially inhabited in our environs (1945/2002). To clarify this point, Merleau-Ponty exemplified the ways with which humans utilize spatial prepositions:

> When I say that an object is *on* a table, I always mentally put myself either in the table or in the object, and I apply to them a category which theoretically fits the relationship of my (customary) body to external objects. Stripped of this anthropological association, the word *on* is indistinguishable from the word "under" or the word "beside." (116, original emphasis)

Because of the customary body we tend to say, for example, that the book is *on* the table, rather than the table is *under* the book, as the former corresponds better to the mental positions and orientations of such an "impersonal being" in space. In order, then, to infuse his image with the lived experiences of human habitations, Blekastad had to dispose of the recollected images of the objects in the room according to the functions of the customary body in space. This is how the viewer of Blekastad's photograph can try to imagine the bodily inhabitations of *hikikomori* in the domestic space, because the customary body can make us feel not only *inhabited* in the present, but also *domesticated* in past places. As explained by Casey:

> It is this customary body that not only finds but *makes* the surrounding bedroom familiar and thus habitable; and it does so by allowing initially unfamiliar-seeming objects to find their own "right places." … Such work of the customary body is (thus) *domesticating* in function; it forges a sense of attuned space that allows one to feel *chez soi* in an initially unfamiliar place. It does so in a manner quite analogous to the way in which the same body, through its own remembrance, feels already at home in the past places which its memories summon up. (2000, 193)

By taking the position of the customary body in arranging the locale of the room, Blekastad has attempted to embody the inhabitational experiences of *hikikomori* in space, thereby demonstrating how one can feel *in situ* in a past place. Knowing how the customary body can breathe new life into unfamiliar places by endowing them with bodily directions and orientations, Blekastad's photographic place invites viewers to walk *through* the room, sit *at* the table, and lay *on* the bed in their imagination, and thereby momentarily feel inhabited in the domestic space of *hikikomori*. In other words, by projecting the correct schemas of space onto the "place-grid" summoned from his memories, Blekastad has created what Casey calls a "place memory": a place-cum-memory that requires bodily remembrance as much as mental recollection. Containing and synthesizing what they enclose, place memories congeal the memories of the past through corporeal implacement. That is why, for Casey, "they are as much in us as much as we are in them" (193). Instead of being memories of places in the world or places of memories in our mind, place memories point to the indivisible ontological and existential rapport between memory and place—to their co-existence and co-operation. Within the framework of "place memory,"

in the words of philosopher Dylan Trigg, "place is not simply the context on which memories hang, but the very texture of the specific content itself" (2012, 53).

To gain their full potential, however, place memories need to be replete with the third constitutive element of place as well: sense of place. In general terms, sense of place refers to the "feelings and emotions a place evokes" (Cresswell 2015, 1). It is this subjective aspect of place that makes the same place unique to each individual, for how we are attuned to a place is rooted in the exclusive sentiments we have experienced in that place. Through such an affective feature of place, one's childhood room is made distinctive and thus indelibly registered in one's memory. To explore such an eccentric and intimate feature of place, Bachelard developed the method of "topo-analysis." Drawing on geography, psychology, phenomenology, and poetry, he defined "topo-analysis" as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (1958/2014, 30)—our room being the most profound instance. By means of topo-analysis, we may not only grasp the vital role of the sense of place in the creation of memories but also realize how some of our most deep-seated memories are essentially localized in particular places. To recall the feelings and emotions sedimented in one's room, Bachelard writes:

> The topo-analyst starts to ask questions: Was the room a large one? Was the garret cluttered up? Was the nook warm? How was it lighted? How, too, in these fragments of space, did the human being achieve silence? How did he relish the very special silence of the various retreats of solitary daydreaming? (1958/2014, 31)

It is through asking these seemingly banal questions that the topo-analyst enters into a past place in which a person's inmost sentiments regarding domestic spaces can be remembered. Stepping into the role of a topo-analyst, Blekastad, too, had to ask: did the *hikikomori* feel ensconced in the room? Was the bedsheet warm during the nights? Was the curtain shut and the bed lamp on during the days? Would listening to the cassette player throw him into solitary daydreaming? For Bachelard, getting lost in daydreams is the archetypical case for grasping the inner experiences of a person in the architectural space of a room, for "daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity" (201). Beyond dispute, *hikikomori*, like Blekastad's brother who has lived most of his life in one room, master daydreaming during their

lengthy social retreat, however, not only to distract their attention from the present but also to transport themselves into the outside world. For Bachelard, it is the projective mental state of daydreaming that allows a solitary person to feel the "immensity" of existence as a whole in one's room. While daydreaming, Bachelard notes:

> Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, *immensity is the movement of motionless man*. (202, emphasis added)

While voluntarily confined to one's own room, involuntarily daydreaming interjects itself into *hikikomori*'s life cycle, thus allowing one to experience immensity via the intimate corner of one's room. This means that *hikikomori*, as not being willing to leave their room, can instead expand their domestic space onto the external world through incessant daydreaming. In Bachelard's topo-analytical model, such a solitary experience of one's room conduces the feeling of "intimate immensity": a situation in which daydreaming blends the space of architectural intimacy into the infinite space of the world. Bachelard links up such an adjoining of experiences with the theme of "correspondence":

> Immensity in the intimate domain is intensity, an intensity of being, the intensity of a being evolving in a vast perspective of *intimate immensity*. It is the principle of "correspondences" to receive the immensity of the world, which they transform into intensity of our intimate being. They institute transactions between two kinds of grandeur. (210, emphasis added)

It is precisely through daydreaming in solitude that the intimate inner space and the infinite outer space find their "coexistentialism." That is to say, through the conceptual framework of "intimate immensity" a solitary person will feel the grandeur of the universe within the intimate depth of inner experience and in one's room. "When human solitude deepens," Bachelard asserts, "the two immensities touch and become identical" (219).

However, the existential correspondence between intimacy and immensity is not just peculiar to a social recluse. For example, while gazing at mirrors for a long time, many of us have caught ourselves engrossed in daydreams, as if the gazed-upon mirror had momentarily teleported us outside the enclosed domestic space. In this situation, the mirror becomes

a window to the world beyond, a gateway to the unknown, which enables daydreamers to creep into the splendor of an external world through their imagination. Looking at the center of Blekastad's photo, we see the reflection of a large-format camera in the mirror, although without the presence of any photographer. This affixing and transfixing gaze of the camera at the mirror conjures up how *hikikomori* would voyage along a deluge of thoughts while being lost in daydreams. As such, in this situation, the mirror functions as the metonymic agent of the external world and the camera as the metaphoric surrogate for *hikikomori*. Although we are not able to see how *hikikomori* would fall into the transitory but transmogrifying experience of daydreaming, we are obstinately reminded of such a psychological teleportation by the camera's pensive gaze. Placed in the center of the room, it is the camera's silent gaze that puts us in relation to a *hikikomori*'s solitary drifting into fantasies. This specular gaze in the center of the room stands for *hikikomori*'s repetitive daydreams, evincing how the intimate space of one's room can conjoin with the infinite space of the universe through the conduit of daydream: a coexistentialism par excellence. In other words, this is how topo-analysis infuses a room with sense of place, including the buried sentiments therein, thereby allowing a "place memory" to exponentially expand in circadian reveries. This is how an oneiric exercise allows an endless expansion of place under the rubric of "intimate immensity."

Having discussed how the lived life of *hikikomori* can be seen as a perpetual augmentation of place in the mind's eye and through daydreams, I now turn to a specific temporality that may help better understand *hikikomori*'s lived experience of time during their voluntary social retreats.

The Lived Time of *Hikikomori*

> Signing off from the dull absurdity of the adult world, hikikomori become the centre of a story with *endless restarts*, a tale with magic and wonders as given.
>
> —Xi Chen, "Homebound"

What does it mean to live a life that is marked by "endless restarts"? How can we envisage a temporality that is endowed with ceaseless renewals? Even if we can answer these questions, a more baffling inquiry would be: what constitutes the present, the past, and the future of a time that is ineluctably bound by repetition? Besides *hikikomori* who possess the lived

experience of such a rarefied sense of time, in which the distinction between today, yesterday, and tomorrow seems to dissipate, it is the Nietzschean idea of the "eternal return" that can shed light on such a temporal conundrum. Aspiring to reconcile many ontological couples, such as past/present, same/difference, and being/becoming, the Nietzschean concept of "eternal return" suggests that all events in the world eternally repeat themselves in the same sequence. Besides the existential weight imposed on the history of Western philosophical tradition by the audacity of this idea, the temporality of eternal return has prompted many art and cultural critics to consider the concept of time anew.[2] Being both a physical and cosmological doctrine, the concept of eternal return suggests that the universe and the entirety of existence have been recurring and will continue to recur an infinite number of times. In his distinctive, maverick writing style, Nietzsche first introduced the idea of "eternal return" in a passage in *The Gay Science*. In a paragraph entitled "The Heaviest Weight," he writes:

> What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the tress, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust! (1882/2001, 194)

For many of us, having been accustomed to circadian rhythm, through which each new dawn proceeds a former dusk so as to promise the novelty of a day, the concept of eternal return poses several daunting questions: what if we are to live the same life over and over again? What if everything we experienced today—from walking, talking, and eating to writing and thinking—will come back to us tomorrow in the exact same order? In short, what if tomorrow brings nothing new but the repetition of the same day without end? Such existential inquiries have been explored, albeit in comical fashion, in several contemporary films, such as Harold Ramis's

[2] See, for example, Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which the idea of "eternal return" is presented through Sisyphus's commitment to repeatedly rolling a stone up the hill without end (Camus 2000).

Groundhog Day (1993) and Max Barbakow's *Palm Springs* (2020). In both of these cases, the film's protagonists are stuck in a time loop that forces them to perpetually live the same day: waking up from the same bed, meeting the same people, using the same apparatuses, taking the same road, and so on. In these scenarios, the only way to break away from such a monotonous cycle is via a willing acceptance of this temporal state. According to philosopher Catherine Malabou, thanks to the affirmation of repetition, an alliance between "the circle of eternal return" and "the singular life of the one who has revelation about it" comes into being (2010, 26). In this way this Nietzschean doctrine can escape the popular culture clichés, because from this angle, after all, "the eternal return is not only the hourglass turned over and over again of all things in their neutrality, their banality, or their anonymity, but *a* life that sees itself return" (24, original emphasis). For the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, this singular life, which sees itself returning in a never-ending cycle, is always defined by a willful choice.

Making acute observations on the idea of eternal return in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze succinctly writes: "It is the *thought* of the eternal return that selects. It makes willing something whole. The thought of the eternal return eliminates from willing everything which falls outside the eternal return, it makes willing a creation" (1962/2013, 64). As Deleuze suggests, it is the willful selection of the eternal return that singularizes such a circular temporality and makes it particular to a life, to a subject, precisely to the one who willingly embraces this thought. If not endlessly, *hikikomori* are among the few individuals who temporarily exercise the thought of eternal return, by selecting the same over the new, by obstinately living the same life during the period of their voluntary isolation. It is this willful choosing of a solitary life infused with the repetition of sameness that brings *hikikomori* face to face with the idea of eternal return.

Needless to say, in a life that is defined by perpetual returning of the same, the very idea of linear time comes to an inevitable collapse, for, as Deleuze reminds us, the time of eternal return "must be simultaneously present and past, present and yet to come" (45). As a direct consequence of such an uncanny temporal conflation, the ontological frameworks of being and becoming are essentially enmeshed. That is, within the Nietzschean framework of eternal return the progression of time becomes simultaneously its stagnation, because the same time, or the same day or the same week, comes about ad infinitum for the denizen of eternal return. To understand such a temporal dissonance, in which past, present, and

future are fused together under the heading of returning, Deleuze proposes the following:

> All we need to do to think this thought is to stop believing in being as distinct from and opposed to becoming or to believe in the being of becoming itself. What is the being of that which becomes, of that which neither starts nor finishes becoming: *Returning is the being of that which becomes.* (44, original emphasis)

This means, within the Nietzschean principle of eternal return "returning" itself is the primary mode of existence, through which the invariability of being is enmeshed with the variability of becoming. It may, however, sound unimaginable to discuss such an incompatible temporal model apropos the medium of photography, because photography has been typically defined by stillness and immutability: with its ability to eternalize the unique existence of the photographed subject in time. To illustrate this point, one needs to recall the multitude of metaphors used to describe photographic time: for film theorist André Bazin, photographic time was like a process of "mummification" (1967/2004); for philosopher Stanley Cavell time was somewhat "moulded" in photos (1979); for essayist Susan Sontag time was as though "frozen" in the frame (1977); for semiotician Christian Metz time could be "sliced out" of an ongoing stream and kept in the photo (1985/2003); and for literary theorist Roland Barthes it was indeed such fixity and stasis that would infuse the photograph with the "punctum" of time: the inedible "that-has-been" of the photographed subject that was recorded in the past but confronted in the present (1980/2000). What all these temporal allegories and concepts have in common is the persistence to subsume photographic time under the philosophical pole of "being," the fixed and the immutable, instead of under the opposite pole of "becoming," the fluid and the mutable. To liberate photographic time from the supremacy of "being," art historian Jonathan Friday coined a contradictory term: "stillness becoming" (2006). While drawing on the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who believed everything in the world is in the state of constant change, or becoming, Friday notes:

> Every materiality we know of is subject to a more or less apparent process of continuous change over time, with some, like rivers, managing to persist despite being in a condition of radical flux. … So when Heraclitus famously remarked that "you can never step into the same river twice," he was posing

> an apparent paradox: the river you step in on two different occasions both is and is not the same river. (45–46)

While the steadfast essence of the river marks its *being*, which suggests immutability and stillness, the fluctuating essence of the river constitutes its *becoming*, which suggests mutability and fluidity. Similar to the Heraclitus allegory of the river, which is concurrently fixed and moving, Friday proposes that photographs are, too, simultaneously still and changing, thus existing via the paradoxical temporarily of "stillness becoming." Evidently, in order to think of photography through the temporal model of "stillness becoming," one needs to insert motion into the putative immobility of the photographic image. It is also via such an oxymoronic temporal model that it becomes possible to examine the Nietzschean idea of eternal return in relation to Blekastad's photographic place.

Friday suggests that there are two ways to endow photographs with the fluidity of becoming: considering the material alterations of photos in time and acknowledging that, despite the photographed subject in the frame, the real subject in the world is disposed to change. Yet, one may further argue: what if, like Blekastad's digitally constructed photo, the subject matter (i.e., *hikikomori*) is not even presented in the image? Or what if, due to digital manufacturing, there is no material basis for the photo that can erode and corrode and thus change in time? How, then, would photography be able to exhibit a "stillness becoming," or an "eternal return," through which the stillness of being could coalesce into the flow of becoming? The answer to this question lies in literary theorist Eduardo Cadava's reinterpretation of the concept of eternal return in connection with photography.

As Cadava puts forward, "[T]he thought of eternal return is a thought of technological reproducibility" (1997, 31), the feature identified by Walter Benjamin as an intrinsic potential of photography in the 1930s (1935/2007). If Cadava equates the technological reproducibility of photography to the Nietzschean doctrine of eternal return, it is because both mechanisms operate via an everlasting recurrence of the same: the logic of eternal return is that time repeats itself endlessly in a self-identical form; the logic of technological reproducibility is that the same photograph can repeat itself infinitely through reproduction. The possibility of reproduction, intrinsic to photography, implies not only "that time repeats itself endlessly" when the photograph is reproduced but also "that what is

repeated is a process of becoming, a movement of differentiation and dispersion" (31). For Cadava, it is this structural possibility intrinsic to photography that can instill each photo with the mutability of becoming; for having been reproduced, the same photograph can come to pass endlessly in time. In other words, for both Nietzsche and Cadava it is the possibility of *returning* as such that instigates and perpetuates the flow of *becoming*. What comes into being at the moment a photograph is taken, Cadava asserts, "is the reproductive mechanism at the heart of eternal return" (39).

Such a conception of time, defined by the eternal return of the same, is precisely what has been given a new life in Blekastad's photographic practice. Not having access to the *hikikomori*'s room, Blekastad had no choice but to accumulate a large corpus of reproduced photographs that would resonate with the actual objects in the room, such as the red chair, the black cassette player, the green drawer, the bed lamp, and the analogue TV shown in Fig. 2.1. Not only have these objects furnished the *hikikomori*'s room with the locale of place, as I discussed above, but they have also become irrefutable visual testimonies to the technological reproducibility of photography. Having been entirely constituted of reproduced photographs, every perceptible portion of Blekastad's photo is thus marked by returning itself, thereby revealing how photography provides the possibility of perpetual resumption through technological reproduction. Like the eternal return that promises an interminable repetition of the same, Blekastad's photograph exposes how a ceaseless returning can be achieved through photographic reproduction. It is, in Friday's words, a sheer manifestation of "stillness becoming": an incongruous temporality that interpolates the fluidity of becoming into the immobility of being.

Still, as Cadava reminds us, the most effective reproduction is "the one that reproduces reproduction rather than the matter or event reproduced. Or rather, the matter or event is reproduced, but only as *an* altered reproduction" (36). In doing so, it becomes possible to think of mechanical reproducibility as the animating kernel of becoming, or as the prime agent of returning. To experience such an "altered reproduction," which can exceptionally extend the process of reproduction itself, one needs to have a closer look at Blekastad's photograph. In the center of the room and in front of the mirror, Blekastad has created and projected an incongruous black-and-white image onto the analogue TV. It is the image of another room, a more austere living space that bears some resemblance to the colored room that encloses it. It is a room within a room, which, if taken

pensively, can display the temporal paradoxicality of eternal return. This second room is where Blekastad's brother, the absentee of this photograph, spent several months immediately after his first attempted suicide in 1988. Located at his grandparents' house, this room, and the short time spent therein, became the starting point of the *hikikomori*'s social retreat. As Blekastad explains:

> After his suicide attempt in 1988, my brother stopped attending school and gradually slid into his confinement. For him, *time stopped* in 1988–89. Apart from an increasing pile of music magazines, a steady rotation of newspapers and a CD player I bought him in the mid-1990s, nothing changed in his room. (2021)

If the mechanical reproducibility of photography promises returning, repetition, and resumption, the black-and-white room in Blekastad's photograph reminds us that what keeps returning to *hikikomori* is the experience of sameness: same day, same room; same time, same space. It is this room within a room that can visualize the antithetical temporality of eternal return, in which yesterday, today, and tomorrow are all shackled together under the rubric of returning. In this situation, to use Deleuze's words, "returning is the being of that which becomes." In other words, it is this perspicacious mise en abyme that affirms that for this *hikikomori* time did not stop only once in 1988, but kept stopping every day until 2012. It is how *Goodbye Without Leaving* can embody a lived experience of time that is concurrently stagnant and swirl, still and moving, thereby allowing the flux of becoming to seep into the stillness of being amidst two rooms: a "stillness becoming" par excellence.

As such, if the Bachelardian topo-analysis reveals how *the oneiric act of daydreaming* can create a boundless augmentation of place, the Nietzschean doctrine of eternal return uncovers how *the noetic act of returning* can create a ceaseless stoppage of time. This is how *Goodbye Without Leaving* evinces the lived life of *hikikomori* as an endless expansion of place and a repetitive cessation of time, a situation in which one's room becomes infinity and one's day turns into eternity. It is this sui generis life, once lived by a *hikikomori*, which is forever monumentalized through photography: somatically spatial, psychically temporal.

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