The Disconnect

A Personal Journey Through the Internet

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SERPENT'S TAIL

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Dark Euphoria is what the twenty-teens feels like. Things are just falling apart, you can't believe the possibilities, it's like any-thing is possible, but you never realized you're going to have to dread it so much. It's like a leap into the unknown. You're falling toward earth at nine hundred kilometres an hour and then you realize there's no earth there.

Bruce Sterling, Reboot 11 speech, 2009[1]

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Prologue: SWIM

I AM THE NEW FLESH. I live under technology, and technology is part of me.

I have stolen this term, 'the new flesh', from *Videodrome*, David Cronenberg's 1983 horror film, because it best describes how I feel. In it, people are altered by the media they consume. They mutate, shifting between euphoria and dread. The screen is so addictive, so hypnotic, that they return to it again and again, until it distorts their thoughts and threatens their humanity.

I too am addicted to the screen. Sometimes I think I have spent so much of my life online that I was raised by the internet. I've forgotten where the borders are, where technology ends, and where I begin. Am I a mutant? A cyborg? Or just an ordinary human?

A cyborg is a person whose physical abilities have been extended by technology. My extensions are not physical; my body looks much the same as that of someone alive in the pre-internet age. But I am an emotional cyborg. I outsource my opinions, my memories and my identity to the internet, and I have spent more time with my laptop than with any living being on earth.

This state is not unusual. I'm certain that the several billion other people in the world who use the internet experience it

too.[1] Our use of technology is changing us, in ways we have yet to understand.

It was once claimed that the internet would liberate us. Techno-utopians claimed online life would allow us to transcend gender, age, class and race, and to construct our own identities. It hasn't turned out this way. Instead, we've been led into fixed identities, each person given a biography, a Timeline, and a filter bubble of their own.

Perhaps I am a techno-dystopian. Over the years, I've experienced a slow depersonalisation; cut off from reality, from sincerity and sensation, I've felt urged to compete in a scrolling world. I've been conflicted, at times wanting to be the ideal data subject, then distrusting technology, even as I turned its surveillance on myself.

Perhaps I'm not a cyborg, or a mutant, but a person split in two. As long as I've had a life in data I've also had a doppelgänger. Everyone has one: a shadow that exists in lists and systems, information stored on data farms, on servers hissing and blinking in the dark. The internet tracks us and pieces together a second self, and our every interaction with a service or platform adds to this profile, and is monetised by strangers. Even before you join Facebook, as one example, Facebook has already created a 'shadow profile' around you, a void waiting to be filled.

We live in data, yet we do not, because data is like dead cells shed from our bodies. The internet feeds us what it believes we want, based on what we wanted in the past. This means our doppelgängers are bland and predictable ciphers, the most narrow-minded version of ourselves.

Our doppelgängers grow stronger every time we use the internet. They will surely outlive us one day. They don't belong to us; artificial intelligence is the technology that will dominate our future, and it will be built on the data we create today, for tech companies.

Some claim we'll reach a point of Singularity in our lifetimes, an 'intelligence explosion' where machines will eclipse human capabilities for ever. It's described as the dawn of a sci-fi era, an apocalypse, or a release of near-infinite possibility. But how will technological, even spiritual revolution arise from an internet dominated by surveillance capitalism? Will the future be built on our futility and distraction, on what technology takes from us, as well as what it provides?

The Singularity will be boring, because the internet today is boring. The Singularity will not save us from a dystopia built by human hands.

I had to lose my mind before I was able to write this book. 2016, when the ideas for many of these essays began to take root, was also the year of my mental breakdown. I hadn't been very happy to begin with; since childhood, I'd gone through periods of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and self-doubt.

For years, the internet had been part of my life. I loved its strangeness, its creative possibilities, and this inspired me to write about it. Every niche, and every peculiarity of human nature was present online. I rarely felt like I belonged in the world, but I belonged on the internet.

I'd already been writing for websites and newspapers for several years, focusing on the intersection between the internet and real life. But now life didn't feel very real any more; most of it I spent alone with my laptop, watching a turbulent new culture emerge on the screen.

Throughout 2016, I watched as everything I found fascinating about online life turned dark. Subcultures were coalescing, self-radicalising, pooling their hate. Political beliefs gave way to black-and-white thinking, and anonymity permitted people to attack each other. My screen was a frenzy of tabs and feeds, clap

backs, call outs, hot takes, doxxing, swatting, and people typing in ALL CAPS, silently shouting at each other in tweets. I'd scroll through it for hours; it hurt me, but I couldn't look away.

I knew I was already emotionally unstable, but now everything online was as extreme as my feelings. I saw all my fears confirmed as true; on the internet, we are being watched, not only by state agencies, and corporations, but also by each other. Your friends are all trying to make you jealous. Men do hate women, and women hate men, and yes, everyone *does* hate each other; maybe not in real life, but on the internet, which was beginning to feel like the same thing.

It took a while to realise that the internet had eaten my life. It took even longer to realise that I was experiencing a breakdown, because so much of the internet feels like a breakdown already.

Summer passed by, but my curtains shut out the sunshine. I sat behind the screen and watched Twitter, early in the morning and late into the night, as friends and strangers on my Timeline engaged in what is called 'the discourse'. I took on more work, writing articles each week along with advertorials, vast 3,000-word pieces featuring paid mentions of tech companies. I lived in a house on the Northside of Dublin with two friends, but barely left my room, and slowly became afraid of other people. I broke up with someone I was in love with, stopped eating and then stopped sleeping, and started going to the gym at night instead.

By the end of the summer I realised that I was numb. I was stuck behind a screen, and behind that screen, I was stuck inside a body that felt very little apart from exhaustion. There's an assumption on social media that we are consistent people, true to our Timelines, expressing the same beliefs and tendencies online as in real life. This could not be further from the truth, but at the time I believed it to be real; I thought everyone was utterly certain of themselves and what they stood for, and that my inability to be the same was a sign of some deep-rooted, incurable failing.

'SWIM' is an acronym for 'someone who isn't me'. It's used on forums dedicated to drug use, or mildly illegal acts like shoplifting, when the author wants to ask questions without risking self-incrimination. Usually SWIM will ask about dosage, or where to buy drugs. In the worst cases, SWIM will have been caught, and will ask for legal advice.

The use of SWIM is self-defeating, because the minute you see it you know that the author is up to no good. I was up to no good; I was reading about what I needed for an overdose. It didn't feel like suicide, because it didn't feel like I had a life any more. I would simply remove myself from existence, as easily as deleting an online account.

I waited until my housemates were away for the weekend, then I set my Twitter to private and my Facebook to invisible. I wrote out the passwords to my online accounts on a piece of paper, then swallowed about a month's supply of pills, and some painkillers just in case, and washed everything down with cheap coconut-flavoured rum. Then I lay down and felt my world turn into pillows, a soft, distorted nothingness which must be what it feels like to let go of Someone Who Isn't Me.

I lived, of course.

After the time off work, the group programme and cognitive behavioural therapy, I realised that I had lost perspective, but that writing offered a way to claim it back. I knew, also, that I couldn't simply blame technology for my problems, any more than I could blame other people, but that for me, and likely for others, the internet and mental health were closely intertwined.

I identified a change in myself, then I began to notice it all around me: distraction, loneliness, an ambient sense of existential crisis that is the internet's default state. We've adopted technologies that manipulate our emotions and limit our view of

the world. Social media, especially, encourages us to type before thinking, or fact-checking, and to view life the way a machine categorises data – in binaries, leaving little room for complexity.

These essays were written during and about a process of recovery, but not withdrawal, from the internet. They are an attempt to make sense of what we've lost, and to consider the lonely dystopia in front of us. Donna Haraway writes that 'writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs', and that 'cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly'.[2] If I am a cyborg, I write in the spirit of this ambivalence, in defence of the imperfect and human. To write is to manipulate information, to claim it as one's own. This essay, and the book you hold in your hands, is the product of information mined from machines and human life.

Introduction: A History of the World Since 1989

I was born in dublin, the same month and year as the internet as we know it. In March 1989, an engineer named Tim Berners-Lee submitted a proposal to his employers at CERN for a new system of 'information management'.[1] It described a decentralised, open-source map of information, connected by hyperlinks.

'The WorldWideWeb (WWW) project aims to allow links to be made to any information anywhere,' Berners-Lee wrote in a Usenet post. 'We are very interested in spreading the web to other areas, and having gateway servers for other data. Collaborators welcome!' Berners-Lee's superiors responded by calling it 'vague, but exciting'.[2]

This technology advanced throughout my first years of life, and use of the internet gradually spread beyond academia and the military. In 1992, in a lab in Urbana, Illinois, the fictional computer HAL 9000 became operational. The first popular web browser, Mosaic, later called Netscape, appeared in 1993, the same year that id Software released *Doom*, inaugurating a gory new era of first-person gaming. A 30-year-old Jeff Bezos founded Amazon in 1994, naming his company after the longest river on earth, while in England a group of cyber hippies protested the law against outdoor

raves by email-bombing the government and overwhelming their servers. It was the world's first act of online civil disobedience, and is remembered as the 'Intervasion of the UK'.

At the start of 1994, the websites accessible online numbered 623.[3] By the end of that year, the number had grown to over 10,000, with over 20 million internet users.[4]

I remember none of this. I was, after all, only five years old.

In August 1995, Bill Gates, then the CEO of Microsoft, danced awkwardly on a stage to 'Start Me Up' by the Rolling Stones.[5] He paid $3 million for the rights to the song. Gates wore high-waisted trousers and a polo shirt, his hair in a glossy bowl-cut, and as he danced he was surrounded by his doppelgängers: other early-middle-aged white men, also wearing polo shirts and dad trousers, some dancing more enthusiastically than others. In the outside world, beyond this campus in Redmond, Washington, people queued outside malls to purchase the product Gates was launching: Windows 95, the operating system that would make Microsoft a household name.

That same year, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* jointly published *Industrial Society and Its Future*, a 35,000-word treatise against technology, in a bid to stop the mail-bombing campaign instigated by its author. Linguistic analysis of the text helped police track him down, and in April 1996, Ted Kaczynski was arrested at his cabin in Montana. He was sentenced to life in prison, for taking arms against a wave of technological change even his extreme actions could not stop.

Momentum set in, and computers became an aspirational product for people who didn't already know how to use them. Netscape went public in 1995, launching its IPO without significant profits or revenue to speak of. eBay was founded, growing to 200,000 auctions per month in two years, in large part due to

Beanie Baby collectors. Hotmail launched the following year, and rapidly spawned users, signing off each message with its own viral marketing copy: 'Hotmail: Free, trusted and rich email service. Get it now.'

In 1996, a 23-year-old student named Larry Page created BackRub, a system of 'spiders' that crawl the web for links, arranging search results in an order he called PageRank. This marked the beginning of search engine optimisation (SEO), the value search engines assign to web pages and, increasingly, to the people they represent.

That same year, an article appeared in *Fast Company* by an American business writer called Tom Peters, titled 'The Brand Called You'. It outlined the future of cybernetic selfhood, a struggle for self-promotion where people market themselves like companies. Peters wrote:

> You're branded, branded, branded, branded. It's time for me – and you – to take a lesson from the big brands, a lesson that's true for anyone who's interested in what it takes to stand out and prosper in the new world of work.

You are your website, and the success of that website determines your worth. Peters blurred the lines between commerce and personhood, combining marketing advice with a near-mystical faith in cybernetic individualism. Employment rights got no mention here; Peters suggested working for free in return for self-promotion, and readily embraced cloud feudalism – in his vision of the future, we'll rely on internet platforms to keep us in steady, if temporary, work.

Personal branding, for all its hyperbole, is not about glory; it is about simply staying afloat. It aims to make of its reader the perfect data subject: the more you give of yourself to the internet, the more, apparently, you'll get back.

*

My parents didn't own a computer until 1996, the same year 'The Brand Called You' was published, when my father brought home an Apricot PC from work. The monitor was boxy and white, and the system unit was comically large compared to today's machines. I didn't use it much, but I knew how to play Minesweeper, and how to draw things with Microsoft Paint. Our babysitter, an older boy who lived next door, ran MS-DOS on it sometimes, and I remember the otherworldly look of the blue and the white, the stiff, typewriter-esque font, and the unsettling feeling that we were seeing the machine's entrails.

A few years later my parents upgraded to a giant, wheezing desktop made by HP. Soon after that we got dial-up. Readers alive in the 1990s will recall precisely the sound of the modem, the clunky melody of circuits, a mystic handshake between machines.[6]

Google was incorporated in 1998, its name a play on the number 'googol' – the digit 1 followed by 100 zeroes. That same year, the watch company Swatch announced an ambitious experiment in physics-based marketing: 'Internet Time', a concept that divided the day into 1,000 'beats' across time zones. It didn't take off. Netflix launched as a mail-order DVD rental business, Apple released the iMac, and a now-defunct electronics company, Diamond Multimedia, released a $200 device, box-shaped and roughly the size of a deck of cards, called the Rio PMP300, which became the first commercially successful MP3 player.

As the new millennium approached I began to explore the internet, which didn't feel limited then, even though it was. Users were staking out territory, creating homepages decorated with 1337 h4x0r slang and animated GIFs. It felt exciting and vaguely illicit, priced by the minute and delivered in slow, guilty quantities. Someone elsewhere in the house was always waiting to make a phone call, and you were adding minutes to the bill, so every click needed to count.

Perhaps this is why my earliest online memories retain a deviant quality; pictures downloaded slowly, torturously, and websites that were deeply, sometimes inappropriately, personal. On Comic Chat I spoke with anonymous adults, and other children, from around the world in the guise of a cartoon beatnik, or an alien. One especially vivid memory is of the day of the porn virus. Our babysitter clicked on a bad link, or perhaps he was surfing dodgy websites, and the computer downloaded malware that manifested in video pop-ups. I remember watching the screen fill with gyrating actresses, ladies of the digital evening, and lipstick lesbians kissing in the back of a car. A week or two later, my parents hired a repairman to clear the virus away. That was the first time I thought of the internet as dangerous, a viral entity, waiting to infect you with one wrong click.

It didn't put me off: I pushed further into the internet alone, and at roughly the age of eleven I found pro-ana websites, which offered tips for 'perfecting' anorexia, a problem I didn't yet know I had. Those sites had a very 1990s look to them: black backgrounds with white text in Papyrus and Jokerman, butterfly motifs, sidebars full of bad poetry and starvation tips. They were lonely places, documents of suffering unspoken in the world outside the screen.

I don't remember Y2K, except for a juvenile thrill at the thought of a shiny new post-modernity, the earth overthrown by robots.

Of course, the humans behind technology were dangerous enough on their own. The first years of the new millennium saw the dotcom bubble burst, an ending less glamorous than anything imagined by prophets of technological doom. Pets.com came and went. eToys went bankrupt, leaving children without Christmas presents. An online currency called Beenz appeared, then disappeared, and was forgotten, while Pixelon, a company claiming to

have created a revolutionary new TV-to-internet product, threw the legendary iBash '99, featuring performances by The Who, the Dixie Chicks, Faith Hill, Tony Bennett and Kiss. It cost over $16 million, more than 75 per cent of Pixelon's funding. Soon after, their CEO Michael Fenne, known for his volatile management style, was revealed to be David Kim Stanley, a conman and fugitive named on Virginia's most-wanted list.[7] His video company was secretly running Windows Media Player instead of its own, non-existent product.

At the end of the year 2000, when I was about to turn twelve, I received my first phone as a Christmas gift: the Nokia 8210. Most of my classmates had the 3210 instead, known for its changeable fascias – the one I remember boys at school owning had a picture of Eminem on it, crouched down, wearing a hoodie and a scowl – but the 8210 was lighter, smaller, and had appeared as an ad placement in the *Charlie's Angels* reboot earlier that year.

I quickly became attached to my phone. I decorated it with a pink hand-strap and Hello Kitty stickers. I collected polyphonic ringtones and odd, sentimental chain texts from friends I met at summer camp. Texting was itself a kind of pre-teen performance of independence; during long car journeys, on holidays and even during meals with my family, I would produce my phone – conspiratorial at first, under the table, but later shamelessly – and lose myself in composing the perfect text. This was my first taste of immersion in a tiny screen, a way to disappear in plain sight.

In 2001 the iPod launched, later joined by the iPod Mini. A cousin gave my brother and me his old one, filled with illegally downloaded tracks by Queen and Wu-Tang Clan. That same legendary cousin also gifted us his old PlayStation 2 and a copy of *Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex*. Soon after that we got *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, and it taught us all about adult life.

That was the year HAL 9000 ran rampant, perniciously, fictionally, in space. The number of CDs burned worldwide became equal to the number sold in record stores. Google passed 100 million searches per year, or 1,000 queries per second, and began to place pay-per-click ads among their search results.[8] Apple launched iTunes, finally, and brought downloadable music into the mainstream.

A rash of social platforms appeared in the years that followed, including Flickr, OkCupid and MySpace. MySpace taught me a lot about hair products, and very little about musical taste. In school I pretended I was too cool for Bebo, but at home I signed up under a series of fake names to spy on my friends. For a while I wrote a LiveJournal about my feelings, then I signed up to Blogspot, where I posted pictures of my attempts to bake bread (not that I ate much of it; I was still anorexic, on and off, channelling anxiety about school exams into a diet that was almost as rigidly controlled as my study schedule). Neither of my blogs lasted very long; the posts were mostly apologies, made to non-existent readers, for not writing more often.

In January 2004, Mark Zuckerberg, a 19-year-old student and future Harvard dropout, registered thefacebook.com for $35 and launched the site from his college dorm room. By the end of that month, three-quarters of the student body checked in on it every day.[9]

In 2007 Facebook expanded to England through Oxford, Cambridge and the University of the West of England. One year after that, I arrived at Cambridge as an undergraduate. I resisted a while, then joined out of fear that I was missing party invitations and official college announcements. I remember setting up my Facebook page, and using the network for the first time. It was like creating a blog, but lazier; the user was asked to fill a pre-written template with information, rather than building one of their own.

In 2008, 145 million people worldwide had signed up to the social network,[10] Zuckerberg was the world's youngest billionaire, and Facebook opened an office in Dublin. The following year, at a rave somewhere in California, somebody who looked extremely like Zuckerberg was photographed dancing in front of the DJ booth, sweating from the face, eyes glazed and possibly high, or, at least, lost in rapture at the thought of taking over the world.[11]

When I graduated from college in 2010 I ported my college emails over to Gmail, and Google became my digital shepherd into adult life. Gmail was where I sent out CVs from, trying desperately to make myself seem grown-up and professional. Google Docs was where I worked, writing articles in a series of internships at print media companies, most of them already on the verge of bankruptcy. Gchat was also where my first serious relationship played out, in a series of flirtatious, then affectionate, then finally passive-aggressive sidebar chats, archived by Google for ever.

Lost in a normie shuffle, in June 2010, Steve Jobs danced on stage to a song by Jonathan Mann, a musician known for posting a new song every day to his widely followed YouTube channel.[12] After the song ended, Jobs announced the launch of the iPhone 4, the first iPhone to feature a front-facing camera, which made selfies easier, more popular and, ultimately, socially acceptable.

Elsewhere Netflix killed video shops, an 'app goldrush' was declared, and Bitcoin was invented by a pseudonymous genius. I remember attending a party around this time, the summer after graduation, where a guy offered me a joint from what looked like a selection box filled with different strains of weed. The Dread Pirate Roberts had recently launched his deep web marketplace, Silk Road; as I took a drag, my new acquaintance told me he'd

signed up for a monthly subscription, having his drugs sent to a false address.

I spent a year in Dublin, writing fashion features and bad music reviews, breaking up and getting back together with my boyfriend, and steeping myself in blog culture, which at the time mostly involved the music site *Pitchfork*, the Cobrasnake, a widely mocked, much-imitated club photographer, and Tao Lin, the author, who doubled as a kind of career internet troll. I also remember reading the satirical blog Hipster Runoff, which may or may not have also been authored by Tao Lin.[13] Finally, my relationship ended, properly this time, and I decided to get out of Dublin.

It was in a market heavily influenced by personal branding that I began my working life after university, at an advertising agency in London. I was employed as one of an early wave of social media specialists, professional magpies employed to curate 'shareable content' and to 'drive engagement' between brands and their customers. I rented out my own personal brand – my voice, my taste, and my familiarity with internet subcultures – to companies that had little business being online in the first place. This was a time in which online 'customer interaction' very often went too far, relying heavily on hashtags, pandering to memes, and almost always coming off as disingenuous and smarmy.

During this time I lived in a dingy flat in Hackney, earned £22,000 per year, and believed that I had finally grown up. I was a Social Content Creative, working for an electronics brand as the moderator of a group of lighting engineers on LinkedIn, and, more regularly, as the custodian of social media accounts belonging to a popular brand of cheddar cheese. Consulting the data division, I would work out the best day and time to post on Facebook and Twitter, studying the habits of bigger, more successful brands and downloading endless white papers in order to work out how to phrase a 'killer call to action'. I would diligently write

calendars of tweets one month in advance, and send them to the client for pre-approval.

In my cheese-related work, the words 'healthy', 'indulgent' and 'comfort food' were banned, and we were encouraged to use the terms 'on the go' and 'snacking'. The posts that did best tended to emphasise British heritage, and featured macros of melting cheese on toast. This particular cheese is not difficult to guess – a brand of supermarket cheddar, unchallenging and mellow, family-friendly and popular today, I'd imagine, with pro-Brexit voters.

My time as a cheese on the internet was eye-opening, a primer in the crude, instantaneous logic of social media. If you ask your followers to do something – 'Like', 'share' and 'subscribe' – there's a very good chance they'll do it. Followers respond well to competitions, giveaways and jokes, and are grateful if you take the time to reply to them. Crowdsourcing was a trend in digital marketing at the time, a response to a perceived democratisation of the media. People were optimistic about the role technology might play in building a better world, bringing transparency to politics and giving a voice to the marginalised. This was the early 2010s, a time when a blind faith in social media fuelled by Occupy, the Arab Spring and, less eminently, the campaign to find Ugandan war criminal and viral sensation Joseph Kony led many to believe that the combined powers of social media users could accomplish pretty much anything ('We did it, Reddit!').

This clearly isn't the case, because on the internet people are bored; they go there for distraction from work in the daytime, and at night from life itself. On Twitter, my cheese was followed almost exclusively by teenage girls, who befriended me only because the cheese was followed, likely as a joke, by Harry Styles, the milquetoast Mick Jagger impersonator then known for fronting the pop group One Direction. The girls often sent my cheese account private messages, begging me, or, rather, begging the cheese to contact Styles on their behalf and ask him to follow