THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONS AND LONELINESS – BUBER AND STEIN

THOMAS J. SPIEGEL

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of parasocial relationships (or parasocial interaction) has been first described by sociologists in the second half of the 20th century (Horton & Wohl 1956).[1] Parasocial relationships feature at least one person featured in a (mass) medium like television and at least one other person consuming and interacting with this mediated presence. This relationship is necessarily lopsided and asymmetric: both sides of this relationship have limited and essentially different means of engagement, making a form of imagination one of the defining features of parasocial interactions (Valkenburg & Peter 2006). While parasocial relationships technically precede the advent of modern mass media (a believer's relation to a deity is parasocial by design), they attain a new quality with the emergence of contemporary online social media, most notably through platforms like Instagram or Twitter and streaming providers like Twitch. The main difference between these forms of parasocial engagement and traditional ones is the specific quality of reciprocity and interaction which suddenly became possible. Despite the term being established in sociology, psychology and media studies, the phenomenon has received virtually no attention in philosophy generally or social ontology specifically. What truly *are* parasocial relationships? How do they differ from regular interactions on a deeper level? What is the social ontology of parasocial relationships?

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[1] "One of the most striking characteristics of the new mass media–radio, television, and the movies–is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer [...] We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a para-social relationship." (Horton & Wohl 1956, 215)

The main movement of thought this article develops goes like this. Loneliness is a secondary, yet fundamental existential condition of being human which consists in the absence of the second person. Trivially, loneliness is problematic in many different ways. Parasocial relations promise to curb loneliness through connecting people digitally in an effort to (re-)introduce the second person. But drawing on the work of Martin Buber and Edith Stein, it becomes clear that parasocial relationships of the kind enabled by contemporary social media technologies do not qualify as relationships of the kind which would be able to dissipate loneliness. This is because parasocial relationships do not feature the second person at all, as shall be explained. The specific mode of interactive engagement, while pretending to traverse the 'gulf' between the first and the second person, serves to mask this fundamental disconnect – a disconnect which is not present in genuine I-Thou relationships. The article closes by pointing towards the connection between loneliness and totalitarianism famously posited by Hannah Arendt to the effect that parasocial relationships, rather than combatting loneliness, might be conducive to the rise of totalitarianism.

Before we begin, there are a few terminological preliminaries to get out of the way. Firstly, parasocial relationships have to be distinguished from (what I call here) *genuine* social relationships. Genuine social relationships are those that make up to core of our social life: friendships, romantic relationships, having acquaintances, having colleagues, classmates, family, and so forth. Genuine social relationships are typically personal, i.e. not typically mediated through some kind of mass medium, and are essentially not lop-sided but rather feature symmetric recognition relations (in contrast to parasocial relationships). Genuine social relationships are those kinds of relationships that seem to be in important ways essential to being human.

Secondly, the genus of parasocial relationships itself can be divided further into two species: traditional parasocial relationships and modern parasocial relationships.[2] I call traditional parasocial relationships those which were

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[2] It is interesting to see that this difference is not really present in the research. However, looking at research in the early 2000s, it can become obvious that people were not able to foresee the ways in which parasocial relations would change in nature in the upcoming years. For example, Ballantine & Martin (2005) aim to analyze online parasocial relationships in a research framework from stemming from the 80s and 90s which predominantly focussed on parasocial relationships via TV. Rojek (2016, 33) introduces a distinction between Category A and Category B parasocial relationships, the former referring to parasocial interactions with

available and prevalent when the phenomenon of parasocial relationships was first described, i.e. the parasocial relations to TV figures, celebrities, and even deities. In contrast to this, I stipulate that *modern* parasocial relationships are those which are qualitatively different in important aspects which will be further described in the upcoming sections; qualitative differences which are closely connected to the kind of lopsided interactivity and reciprocity enabled by internet powered mass media, specifically influencer culture of Instagram or TikTok and interactive video and streaming services like YouTube and Twitch.[3]

Thirdly, I follow the terminological distinction found in Klimmt et al. (2006) according to which parasocial relationships generally consist of a *persona* and an *audience*. While many parasocial relationships may have the broadcasting person in question not performing a persona, and while the audience is often not simply confined to listening anymore, this distinction is apt at bringing out the essentially asymmetrical character of parasocial relations.

A last (non-terminological) caveat is that analyzing the kind of parasocial relationships afforded to us by mainly the internet is not aimed at simply stating technology is 'bad' or 'evil'; I do not aim to propose prescriptions that we ought to return to a 'simpler' or 'better' time. Regardless of one's own convictions, the main reason for the rejection for such a putative return to 'innocence' is that it is impossible to turn back time and undo the effects of technological 'innovations' once they have taken a foothold. Some may come to the conclusion that parasocial relationships (especially the ones I call "modern") ought to be eschewed; but such judgments, if they are to be made properly, should be grounded in a social-ontological analysis of parasocial relationships first.

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celebrities, the latter to less focussed, unidentified mass, e.g. the kind of sympathy we feel with survivors of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima.

[3] Some may wonder why I do not explicitly name online gaming (like World of Warcraft), message boards or social platforms (like Facebook, LinkedIn). The reason is that while these forms of interaction do in fact feature and allow for parasocial relationships, they are still widely (perhaps even predominantly) as an extension of genuine social relationships.

2. Loneliness: The Second Person Disappearing

It has been widely observed that the last century has seen a dramatic diminishing of the time people in industrialized countries spend *together*.[4] Sociologists estimate that the time we spend in the presence of others (talking, in silence, laughing, crying) has been cut in half compared to the 19th century. This effect is at least partially enabled by the rise of nearly instantaneous communication technologies (telegrams, phones, the internet first on desktop PCs and now portable internet-accessing devices). Simultaneously, the multifaceted need for connection is what drives the development of more technologies of the same kind which in turn enable us to spend less and less time in the actual presence of others. While tele-communication through space and time qua writing (most notably: writing letters) has been part of non-oral cultures for millennia now, it would be conceited to claim that parasocial relationships would therefore be 'nothing new'. There certainly is something new about the kind of parasocial relationships which are only now enabled through new technologies. One of the main aspects of what is new about parasocial relationships of this kind is their connection to an epidemic of loneliness swathes of people in industrialized countries experience. The history of the 20th century can, among other things, also be written as the history of loneliness.

What is loneliness? We all know what loneliness is and what it feels like even if putting it into words can elude us.[5] Loneliness as a phenomenon outruns our attempts at putting it into words. Loneliness feels unpleasant. While being alone can be joyous, it is analytically true that feeling lonely is

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[4] This is closely documented for North America: The average US-American citizen spends 2,8 hours a day watching television versus 38 minutes per day socializing in person (cf. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf). Interestingly this seems to be reflected in our linguistic usage: In 1674, the word "loneliness" was "in a list of infrequently used words, and defined it as a term to describe places and people 'far from neighbours'. A century later, the word hadn't changed much." (Hill 2020).

[5] One of the better 'flowery' descriptions of loneliness as a feeling is found in the writing of psychiatrist John McGrath: "Loneliness not only refers to the absence of the desired other's presence but this very absence is perceived as a presence, albeit a presence that is felt in the manner of an absence, that is, as a privation or deprivation of the other. Hence, it is not only the other's absence and the felt presence of its absence that constitute loneliness, it is also that this absence creates a lack or loss within the lonely self such that one feels porous and drained. Consequently, when the other is absent, the lonely person feels that something is wanting within one's self. One feels emptied (the lack of intimacy) and hollowed (the lack of meaning)." (McGrath 1995, 44).

terrible. Loneliness is a negative state–deprivation of something, more specifically: someone. This someone is usually not a specific person as one usually does not require a *specific* person to not experience loneliness. This someone is rather the generalized second person.

While anyone knows by acquaintance what loneliness feels like, it would be incorrect to identify loneliness as a mere feeling. Loneliness is neither *only* a feeling or emotion as some authors, predominantly psychologists, imply (Roberts & Krueger [forthcoming], Murphy & Kupshik1992, Cacioppo & Patrick 2009, Ettema 2010). Loneliness is more than an emotion. Loneliness can be accompanied by emotions, but loneliness itself is an existential category. Rather, loneliness is a subject-transcendent existential phenomenon. As Heidegger notes, being-with-others (*Mitsein*) is ontologically fundamental: we always already find ourselves with others; all Robinson Crusoe-style thought experiments to the contrary are hypothetical exercises. If being-with-others is a primary existential state, then being-without-others is a secondary, if irreducible, existential state. It is therefore not mere coincidence that "one of the fundamental experiences of every human life" (Arendt 1973, 475, cf. also Shuster 2012, 474). Since being-with-others is an existential condition, its privative form–loneliness–is, too, 'baked' into what it means to be human.

Hence, I shall understand loneliness here at its core as the lack or disappearance of the second person, the generalized person that is not oneself. Loneliness as an emotion is, under this aspect, not a binary, all-or-nothing state; one can feel vastly different degrees of loneliness and isolation, regardless of whether the second person is present. And it is certainly not the case that any and all people in industrialized Western countries feel lonely, i.e. wholly deprived of other people. Some are lucky to never experience true loneliness. Yet, there is a definite trend of loneliness connected to our changing forms of life.

The question then remains: what is the relationship between parasocial relationships and loneliness? Modern parasocial relationships are designed to help curb loneliness. Their promise is human connection. Nowhere is this idea expressed more clearly than in Facebook's ubiquitous CSR statements, in Mark Zuckerberg's own words:

> "I started Facebook to connect my college. I always thought one day someone would connect the whole world, but I never thought it would be us. I would have settled for connecting my whole dorm. We were just college kids. But we cared so much about this idea -- that all people want to connect.

[…]

It's not enough to simply connect the world, we must also work to bring the world closer together." (Zuckerberg 2017)

Facebook, the juggernaut of social media, is all about "connecting" people. And it has indeed been a research topic in psychology and communication studies whether social media technologies are effective in 'fighting' loneliness. The results are mixed (Miller 2020). It might be an empirical matter whether certain people *feel* more or less lonely with social media (e.g. Rubin et al.1985). Yet, it is not an empirical matter, all things considered, what the relation between modern parasocial relations, facilitated by such technologies, and loneliness truly is. This non-empirical link is the general frame for what follows. This is because loneliness is as shall become clear, an existential phenomenon, *not* simply one that may or may not have developed in the history of mankind. Therefore, modern parasocial can curb loneliness as a phenomenon if and only if they make the second person (re-)appear.

3. Parasocial Relationships:
The Second Person Reappearing?

Technological optimists will rejoice at this point. Some will state that while the second person gradually disappears, this disappearance is accompanied by a coeval rise and development of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are relationships which a "viewer or user holds to a media person, which includes specific cognitive and affective components" (Schmid & Klimmt 2011).

Fittingly, political scientist Chris Rojek states that parasocial relationships facilitate and operate on what he calls *presumed intimacy* which enables "distanced ontological identification with strangers" (Rojek 2016, 39). Presumed intimacy can be viewed as a form of soft power which does not openly coerce, yet asserts forms of dominance through a disclosure of empathy. Presumed intimacy can be established between truly anonymous strangers (the survivors of catastrophic incidents broadcasted through the news) and relationships with celebrities (Rojek 2016, 11). Parasocial relationships create a quasi-familiarity through presumed intimacy, the strange person is "no longer precisely vague or general", becoming what Rojek calls "pixillated people" (Rojek 2016, 32). Interestingly, genuine social relationships create emotional involvement through a development of intimacy by getting to know and understand the person's life and character.

In parasocial relationships with merely presumed intimacy, emotional "involvement is urged to precede" our familiarity with the persona (Rojek 2016, 32). Such preliminaries are helpful. Yet, we can further characterize parasocial relationships through the following aspects: asymmetry, pretense, and commodification.

 Firstly, parasocial relationships are asymmetric insofar as typically only audience forms a cognitive or emotional bond with the persona. And in situations where there is some form of interaction between audience and persona, the bulk of cognitive and emotional engagement is typically on the side of the audience. This will, of course, be relative to the medium involved and other factors. Traditional parasocial relationships mediated by way of television are usually entirely one-sided whereas, say, a musical performer responding publicly to a fan's question on Twitter is slightly less one-sided. Contemporary forms of streaming services like Twitch allow for a minimal simulated form of reciprocity where, depending on the celebrities 'clout' and audience, the relationship to their viewer-base may be more or less intensive. For example, a professional Twitch streamer with an audience in the ten thousands can engage in virtually no individualized contact with his viewers whereas a smaller streamer with an audience of a few dozen or a few hundred is in a position to engender such interactions. It is, finally, constitutive of parasocial relationships that this distance is never fully closed. While it is usually the purpose of genuine social relationships to lessen and perhaps make disappear the perceived distance between the friends, colleagues, acquaintances in question, parasocial relationships can, by definition, only be maintained as long this distance is maintained. A parasocial relationship whose constitutive distance gradually disappears simply becomes a genuine social relationship.

This is intertwined with a *second* characteristic of parasocial relationships: pretense. Pretense applies especially to the more modern forms of parasocial relationships. As an example of traditional parasocial relationships, A-List Hollywood actors (e.g. Scarlett Johansson or Leonardo DiCaprio) do not need to pretend to be within grasp of their fanbase (regardless of whether some fans may feel some celebrity's social proximity). This is not to say that such celebrities do not feel pressure to seem approachable or likable, but rather that the audience by far and large does not expect any form of specific interaction (beyond, say, signing paraphernalia at a movie premiere) by those venerated almost like demigods. In contrast, contemporary influencer and streaming culture (as representations of modern parasocial relationships) almost necessitates the need to style oneself as someone who could, in principle, be socially *reached*, i.e. as someone to whom the social 'gulf'

could realistically be bridged. Part of this game of pretense is to pretend that there is no asymmetry or that *their* user engagement is less asymmetrical than that of their competition or that the asymmetry could in principle vanish or be alleviated. Parasocial relationships, especially modern ones, create an illusion of companionship, intimacy, identification, community, and sometimes even friendship. For example, it is standard procedure of the vast majority of Twitch streamers to refer to themselves as "we" in a manner that is supposed to include the chat: "we did it!", "we won", "we will end the stream here". The word "chat" in these contexts is used as a name for the amorphous, everchanging, growing, shrinking mass entity of consumers which can engage with the streamer during the stream via chat interaction and donation messages. Simply put, "chat" is used as a proper name in such contexts in statements such as "chat thinks that p". And more often than not, this way of talking about "us" and "ourselves" is adopted by large parts of any given "chat". Contrast this with the way in which traditional celebrity athletes tend to refer to their fans and viewership. For example, athletes in a team sport like football will rarely use statements like "we won" or "we played badly in the first half" to refer to their team *plus* the fanbase, but rather to themselves, their team and its support infrastructure. (Conversely, it is not rare that fan-talk includes using "we" and "us" as a means to refer to the team plus themselves as fans.) The "we" of modern parasocial relationships is an artificial "we", a pretend-we.

The main incentive for pretense in modern parasocial relationships lies with the *third* aspect: commodification. Parasocial interactions of the relevant interest here are almost always transactional, hardly ever somehow without the motive of some form of monetary gain.[6] Examples of commodifying parasocial relationships even date back to times when radio was the most relevant mass medium: singer and radio star Kate Smith raised §39 million USD in donations for the Second World War in a one-day marathon of broadcasting (Rojek 2016, 13). While this extreme early example is obviously impressive, commodification has become much more pervasive, trite, and normalized in modern forms of parasocial interactions. So-called

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[6] There are some counter examples, at least anecdotal ones, for some personae looking for human connection rather than financial gain:

> "The reason I started streaming was that I was kind of looking for human connections," said Richárd Szélesy, a streamer who has spent the last few years mostly broadcasting hardcore games to zero viewers.[…] "[I streamed to] escape loneliness and depression," he said. While he has mostly been streaming without an audience, every so often an errant person will drop by and stick around." Hernandez (2018)

'influencers' and other smaller and larger media personalities often receive direct payment for individualized engagement with some fans, subscription services, or access to 'candid' pictures of the 'influencer' in question (Sokolova & Kefi 2020). (This is indeed the main purpose of platforms like *Onlyfans*). Another example is the interesting, so-far largely unique phenomenon called *Cameo*, a website on which celebrities (of truly different popularity statuses–most you will never have heard of) offer 'shout-outs' (short personalized video messages) to fans for prices starting at around $10 up to several thousand US dollars. Streaming platforms like Twitch have become highly influential, highly profitable social media platforms. On platforms like Twitch, so-called streamers broadcast themselves to an audience, usually playing video games, although recent years have seen the rise of other forms of entertainment on that platform (for example, real-life streams or workout streams). The audience can interact with the streaming persona using a screen-name via a chat, however, without their own visual or auditory representation, thus creating a more or less asymmetrical communicative situation. Streamers have a financial incentive: viewers can "subscribe" to a channel for §5 (USD) and they can donate money directly to the streamer, making both the platform and the partnered streamer money. The most successful streamers are millionaires, mid-sized streamers can still make a very good living. The so-called "cheer"-mechanic alone generates a collective net-gain of $10 million for streamers alone (Spangler 2017), the main driving force motivator to "cheer" being social integration (Wohn & Freeman 2020) and a sense of community (Hilvert-Bruce et al 2018). Such forms of social media "codify and managerialize" central aspects of human connection by "commercializing and standardizing" interactions and related emotions (Rojek 2016, 136). Similar instantiations of commodifying relationships and attention can be found in virtually all forms of modern parasocial relationships.

The upshot is that parasocial relationships consist in interactions between a first and a second person, like genuine social relationships–at least in the standard picture. The difference to genuine social relationships is that parasocial relationships are constrained by their constitutive asymmetry, pretense, and commodification in the form of monetary gain. While genuine social relationships are sometimes permeated by aspects of pretense and commodification, these aspects are usually seen as a detractor of what one would want their genuine social relationships to be. For example, some marriages are built on pretense and commodification (e.g. marrying for money or to attain citizenship), yet this is reasonably seen as a corruption of an idealized idea of marriage. Thus the second person does appear in modern parasocial relationships, but as defective or incomplete. The second

person is never *really* there. In what follows, it shall become apparent why that is the case.

4. Stein and Buber on the Indispensability of the Second Person

It would be an absolutely naive understatement to say that the role and value of the second person has been studied before. Philosophy, sociology, socio-biology, psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, communication science and many other disciplines research the nature of the second person and sociality more broadly speaking. One could then accordingly view the phenomenon of parasocial relationships through any and all of these different lenses. For the specific social-ontological aspects of recent kinds of parasocial relationships, we can look to two thinkers in the phenomenological tradition whose analysis of the role of the second person gets to the roots to the question in what sense the relation between the first and the second person is fundamental. Presumably, it may turn out to be these roots which also underlie the (mostly negative) social and psychological ramifications that accompany loneliness understood as the disappearance of the second person.

The fact that the second person is never really there in parasocial relationships has, of course, not eluded these disciplines. Traditionally, psychology and sociology focus on certain superficial traits of parasocial relationships, both positive and negative. For example, parasocial relationships are sometimes attributed the property of being conducive to one's character development, identity formation, and self-reflection (Madison & Porter 2015). Or conversely, parasocial relationships are sometimes said to be partially responsible for an increase in aggression or the development of body image disorders (Maltby et al. 2005). From a philosophical (more specifically: a phenomenological) perspective, the conceptual ramifications of parasocial relationships can be investigated on a 'deeper' level.

The work of Martin Buber and Edith Stein can serve to highlight certain unexplored blind spots in the available thought on the nature, impact and ramifications of parasocial relationships. They each can provide us with a different reason for the following key-thought: parasocial relationships are not relationships in which a first person *truly* encounters the second person. In Stein's thought, this idea is implicit in her account of the transcendental role the second person's body plays for the constitution and experience of the first person. Even more problematically: If we take Buber's account of

I-Thou relationships seriously then, it turns out, parasocial relationships are not even relationships between an I and a Thou, but rather between an I and an It (in his terminology). I will not argue for the truth of either of Stein's and Buber's accounts. It is, instead, a conditional claim: if Buber and Stein are correct about their respective accounts of the second person, then we bring into view seemingly novel ways in which parasocial relationships essentially differ from genuine social relationships. Both of them show us different ways in which the second person is indispensable, yet is left absent in parasocial relationships.

In her doctoral thesis *On the Problem of Empathy*, Edith Stein seeks to fill a theoretical lacuna in the work of her teacher and arguably greatest influence, Edmund Husserl. One of the then greatest research desiderata for a complete phenomenological account of experience was the experience of the other person, more specifically the mind of the other, second person to which the experiencing subject does not have the same privileged access it has to its own experience. Stein first establishes the role of the experiencing subject's own spatially situated body (*Leib*) as essential to experience as such. Some thinkers in the Germanophone phenomenological tradition famously distinguish between a *Körper* and *Leib*, two different concepts which have no simple linguistic differentiation in English:

> The living body [*Leib*] in contrast with the physical body [*Körper*] is characterized by having fields of sensation, being located at the zero point of orientation of the spatial world, moving voluntarily and being constructed of moving organs, being the field of expression of the experiences of its 'I' and the instrument of the 'I's' will. (Stein 1989, §5, 63)

The living body, according to Stein, is most notably characterized by being the spatial center of one's experience, being able to be moved voluntarily (contrasted with involuntary reflexes of the merely physical body), by being *literally* living, and being the center of the experiencing subject's will. Stein then delves deeper into what the generalized second person's body's role plays for the experience of the first person. In what follows, I provide a brief, abridged recounting of Stein's conception of empathy with regards to the lived body of the second person in a manner that is tailored to the aims of this paper:

Firstly, sensual empathy (*Empfindungseinfühlung*) is made possible in virtue of the subject being able to change to position of its body as well as the subject analogously altering its lived body's properties in imagination (Stein 1989, §5, b, 65f.). This imaginative capacity is what enables the subject to imagine what it would be like to be (in the position of) the other person.

Secondly, empathetically projecting oneself into the second person's lived body ("einfühlend in ihn versetze…", Stein 1989f, §5, d, 68), the second person's lived body becomes a new "zero point of orientation" (ibid.) in addition to the subject's original point of orientation which is its own lived body. While one's own original point of orientation is *primordial* to oneself, the second person's lived body provides a *non-primordial* point of orientation. The second person is a point in space just like oneself. In having acquired another non-primordial spatialized point of orientation, the subject is now in a position to understand its own point of orientation not as *the absolute* point of orientation *as such*, but rather as one among many. Moreover, the subject also comes to understand that its own lived body (*Leib*) is merely a physical body (*Körper*) for the second person, just like the second person's body is a lived body for them, but merely a physical body for the subject.

Thirdly, Stein uses the results thus far to motivate her conception of the concept of world:

> The world I glimpse empathically is an existing world, posited as having being like the world primordially perceived. The perceived world and the world given empathically are the same world differently seen.
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> […]
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> Were I imprisoned within the boundaries of my individuality, I could not go beyond 'the world as it appears to me.' At least it would be conceivable that the possibility of its independent existence, that could still be given as a possibility, would always be undemonstrable. But this possibility is demonstrated as soon as I cross these boundaries by the help of empathy and obtain the same world's second and third appearance which are independent of my perception. Thus empathy as the basis of intersubjective experience becomes the condition of possible knowledge of the existing outer world […]. (Stein 1989, §5, g, 71f.)

Thus, according to Stein, the world is that which the subject experiences both qua its lived body and through that which is given to it through acts of empathy or empathizing. Furthermore, empathy is what allows one to transcend one's "boundaries of individuality" in a way that enables access to an intersubjectively shared world which is the transcendental enabling condition ("condition of possibility") for knowledge of the world as such.

This is in the briefest of terms Stein's account of the relevance of the lived body of the second person for experience as such. It is important to note that this is a decidedly *transcendental* account. That is, this is not a story about

how–phylogenetically or ontogenetically–we come to be with others. It is rather theoretical dissection of transcendental layers which enable the full content of experience as such in the first place, i.e. that which must be the case for there to be at all an experiencing subject with access to the world.

How then does this relate to the phenomenon in question, i.e. parasocial relationships? Parasocial relationships are characterized by the fact that they are essentially disembodied, making the relationship always a spatially distant one, even if this distality is attempted to be overridden by different means of tele-communication and reciprocity. The streaming personality I follow on Twitch may employ certain maneuvers to simulate a decrease of distance in manifold ways (by chatting, reading my messages etc.). Yet, it is constitutive of the streaming experience as such that the streamer to whom I have this parasocial relationship is not present, only an image of his lived body on a screen. Thus, the lived body of the streamer cannot serve as a second point of direction in space; namely, because the streamer (as an image on the screen) does not share a space with me. Accordingly, there is no lived body with which I could come to understand that my lived body is simultaneously a physical body for the other. This goes, by the way, *vice versa*: The streamer herself does not have her viewers present as (lived or physical) bodies such that her relationship to her viewers does not support Stein's analysis either. Consequently, the parasocial relationship cannot play the transcendental function of constituting an intersubjectively shared world in which the first and second person come to find themselves, again due to the absence of the body of the second person–either persona or audience. In this sense, a reading of Stein demonstrates that parasocial relationships do not implicate a second person the full sense.

Of course, Stein's story, again, is neither supposed to tell an either phylogenetical or ontogenetical story. Yet, her account implies that the *fundamental* relationship to a second person with all these important transcendental features is a genuinely social relationship. If Stein's account is true, this assessment then supports the following counterfactual: If there was a world in which individuals could only entertain parasocial relationships, then the subjects in that world would not be able to have experience of a non-subjective world at all. But this seems like an obvious contradiction. Of course, this then implies that parasocial relationships are parasitic on social relationships: there are *a priori* (not merely empirical sociological) reasons why there need to be social relationships for there in order to be parasocial relationships. And while such a counterfactual world may perhaps not be realistically possible, it demonstrates that parasocial relationships are profoundly deficient insofar as they cannot, in principle,

serve the fundamental role of co-constituting the experiencing subject as such. The simple, yet crucial main point we can extract from Stein's transcendental analysis of the second person is that the very fact that parasocial relationships do not involve a lived body makes them defective and ontologically parasitic upon genuine social relationships in an essential manner.

There may be some misleading exceptions. For example, a fan can briefly shake hands, take a picture, and exchange three or four words with their object of admiration at a 'meet-and-greet' event or a film premiere. This objection leads us to Buber's view of the role of the second person. For, while there is certainly a living body present in such moments, it might be the case that this is not properly called a *relationship* to another person (a Thou) at all–at least if Buber has something to say on that matter.

Martin Buber's philosophical thought is notoriously difficult to situate. A deeply religious thinker, Buber is often not canonically counted as a phenomenologist; his *I and Thou* can be read at least in a phenomenological spirit that is compatible with thinkers like Stein and other's.[7] Buber uses the word pairs I-Thou and I-It to stress that these modes are a priori, that is *always already*, established. For Buber, it does not make sense to speak of an I that is not in engagement with an I or a Thou.

The I-It mode is perhaps more readily understood. In I-It relationships I treat things as things, usually as a means to an end. The It can be animate or inanimate. For example, I use a hammer to put nails into a board. I can engage with the cow as a source of meat and milk. I talk to the clerk at the post office in order to get my mail sent. More generally, Buber states that the It-World is the world of experiencing: I experiences an It, the It is disclosed to the I in experience. It is not only the mode of teleological engagements with the world (Heidegger's *um zu*, Heidegger 2006), but rather a mode of engagement with the world as it is in dependency to me. This also includes other people: in the mode of I-It, another person is merely

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[7] Kojima (1987) and Zank (2020) both call his thought "phenomenological" without supplying further reasons. He is also often mentioned alongside Levinas, e.g. Atterton et al. (2004). There are a few seemingly methodological remarks in the otherwise wholly unacademic *I and Thou*, for example: "For I speak only of the actual human being, of you and me, of our life and our world, not of any I-in-itself and not of any Being-in-itself" (Buber 1970, 65). This remark seems wholly in line with the phenomenological tenet to let oneself be guided in one's inquiry by the phenomena themselves.

a He or She (not a Thou).

That being said, I-It engagements can even be reciprocal too: I sometimes treat living beings as an It who also, in turn, treat me as an It. For example, try as I might, my colleague's Chihuahua simply views me as a living food dispenser, perhaps as I may only see it as a source of entertainment and play.[8] Likewise, a prostitute and her suitor treat each other as an It: the suitor (a He) is a source of income for the prostitute, the prostitute (a She) is a way to satisfy the suitor's desire temporarily. Contrast this with the relationship between an I and a Thou. Buber uses the term "relationship" (*Beziehung*) terminologically. Where the I-It mode is one of experiencing, *relationships* can only be between an I and a Thou. This also means that a Thou is *not* experienced on Buber's account. The mode of engagement in an I-Thou relationship is not of the kind that gives us an experience as such, but rather something different. The Thou is not a *thing* or *object* to which an I would relate.

The I-You mode can be between an I and nature, an I and another human person, or between an I and mental beings (*geistige Wesen*) (Buber 1970, 56f.). For example, the I-Thou can be between me and any sentient being, a tree, a dog, or a human person. I-Thou engagements have three defining characteristics. Firstly, they are *unmediated*:

> "The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness." (Buber 1970, 62f.)

The I and Thou are in *direct* contact. Note that this is not meant in a spatial sense: the Thou does not need to be in close proximity.[9] This is relevant due to the second characteristic.

The second characteristic is *reciprocity*. It is not entirely certain how Buber conceives of the reciprocity of I-Thou relations. This is because in one place he stresses that they are reciprocal (*gegenseitig*, Buber 1970, 58), while shortly after stressing that the

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[8] In contrast, my aunt's Border Collie does respond to me as a Thou, just as I treat him as a Thou, in a manner that is difficult to explicate in language.

[9] "Before the immediacy of the relationship everything mediate becomes negligible. It is also trifling whether my You is the It of other I's ("object of general experience") or can only become that as a result of my essential deed" (Buber 1970, 63).

> "relation can obtain even if the human being to whom I say You does not hear it in his experience. For You is more than It knows. You does more, and more happens to it, than It knows." (Buber 1970, 60)

He thereby makes it appear as if the question whether an I-Thou relation obtains is entirely up to the I itself. And indeed, this needs to be the case for two reasons. First, otherwise no I-Thou relation between the I and non-sentient nature would be possible. Second, otherwise an I-Thou relation between the I and an unresponsive God would not be possible; and that is simply not feasible for Buber. In fact, for Buber, the primordial, most fundamental I-Thou relation possible is between the I and God. Yet, this relation cannot be the same as between an I and another human person.

The third characteristic of I-Thou relationships is *purposelessness*.

> "No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur." (Buber 1970, 62)

I-Thou relationships do not allow for instrumental concerns. A Thou cannot be treated as a means to an end. The Thou cannot be used for anything or be hold as anything or can be approached with ulterior motives, otherwise it is merely an It. This is for conceptual reasons if we follow Buber: the Thou in the I-Thou relation is not a "something" that one could use as a means to an end. The necessary condition for us to enter an I-Thou relationship is to not treat the Thou as something at all.

Buber stresses that both modes of engagement are irreducible although he is certainly not using this term. Yet, Buber clearly prioritizes the I-Thou mode as more important. It is more important because *all actual life* occurs in the mode of I-Thou (Buber 1970, 62). He calls it the "sublime melancholy of our lot that every [*Thou*] in our world must become an It" (Buber 1970, 68). It is not possible to always treat sentient beings as a Thou. It seems to be a hard, metaphysical necessity that we treat others as an It. For example, in my everyday life, I treat the cashier at the supermarket as an It. Reciprocally, she does the same with me. She is the means to an end for me, and I am simply an affordance that comes with her job. But it might just be the case on a lazy Saturday morning that I am the only customer at the super market and I start, for some reason, a conversation with the cashier that goes beyond the necessary pleasantries (politeness is most certainly part and parcel of the It-world). And if the conditions are right ("if will and grace are joined", Buber 1970, 58), then we may enter an I-Thou relationship. In an

I-Thou relationship, the I and Thou enter a new mode, without experiencing ("erfahren") each other.

What does this now have to do with parasocial relationships? Buber's notion of the I-Thou discloses that parasocial relationships–especially modern parasocial relations–might not deserve the title *relationship* at all. In other words, it is very questionable whether parasocial relationships can even count as I-Thou relationships; they are seemingly better understood as I-It relationships.

Counterintuitively, the asymmetry between audience and persona is not the decisive factor though. After all, Buber admits that the second person does not have to directly reciprocate. Although, realistically speaking, the viewers probably usually engage with the streamer in a manner that is in an I-It mode, the viewer might even find himself in the mood conducive to an I-Thou relationship. Hence, the crucial moment is not the asymmetry between streamer and viewer. This has to be the case since Buber conceives of the relationship between I and God as the prime form of an I-Thou relationship.

Instead, the relevant characteristic is the third aspect of I-Thou relations previously specified: purposelessness. The lack of instrumentalization is a necessary condition for there to be an I-Thou relation. Audience and persona are more like consumer and producer. The engagement between consumer and producer, however, is an I-It par excellence. The viewer is a commodity to be milked. The producer depends on the audience watching. Commodification–money for entertainment and simulated closeness– remains the main theme of their relation. It is perhaps the most pernicious aspect that the viewer is conned into treating the streamer as a Thou as one without ulterior motive.

Therefore, if we follow Buber, a parasocial relationship merely simulates and pretends to be a genuine social relationship. Parasocial relationships cannot be genuine I-Thou relationships because they are virtually never purposeless.

5. Glossy Loneliness and Totalitarianism

We can take stock and provide an overview of the relationship between parasocial relationships (specifically modern ones) and loneliness. Loneliness is the absence of the second person. Modern parasocial relationships promise to introduce and make acquainted with the second

person. Yet, as a reading of thinkers like Buber and Stein, lays bare, modern parasocial relationships do not *really* feature a second person at all, rather a simulation of the second person. Therefore, modern parasocial relationships do not do away with loneliness; instead, they are apt to perniciously perpetuate it.

There is no point in 'blaming' the actors themselves for, perhaps, not realizing this. The audience who may wish to fill their otherwise silent houses with the voice and face of an interactive human being cannot be blamed for trying to alleviate their loneliness. Nor can the personae trying to make a living and entertain people at the same time be made to feel at fault. As Buber already saw, the It-world offers a kind of soothing calmness. By contrast, engaging in an I-Thou relation is a gamble on Buber's account because. Just like I do not risk anything in playing with a stuffed toy, I do not risk or gamble anything engaging in a parasocial relationship (other than perhaps the content of my wallets).[10]

Technological determinists claim that technological advancement drives human advancement and well-being. Specifically in this context, the central promise of technological advancement was the promised creation of McLuhan's *Global Village* (McLuhan 1962), the vague idea that mankind becomes 'closer' through information and communication technologies. The phenomenological analysis drawing on Buber, Stein, and to a lesser degree, Heidegger demonstrates that technology of the kind that engenders modern parasocial relationships is not apt to fulfil McLuhan's promise: a village, even a metaphorical one, is partially characterized by the immediate proximity to the second person. Yet, as seen, the second person remains absent in modern parasocial relationships. Perniciously, modern parasocial relationships are borne as a technological alleviative solution to loneliness which was in the first place partially caused by the technological advance

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[10] Interestingly enough, Buber's main example for the ones fleeing the world of relationships (*Begegnung*) was the academic intellectual:

> "To be sure, some men who in the world of things make do with experiencing and using have constructed for themselves an idea annex or superstructure in which they find refuge and reassurance in the face of intimations of nothingness. […] But the It-humanity that some imagine, postulate, and advertise has nothing in common with the bodily humanity to which a human being can truly say You. The noblest fiction is a fetish, the most sublime fictitious sentiment is a vice." (Buber 1970, 65)

It stands to speculate how harsh a judgment Buber would have passed on modern parasocial relationships.

that accompanied the process of social atomization. Rather than offering a solution, modern parasocial relationships are more like a colourful patch on a gaping wound.

Given the pervasiveness of modern parasocial relationships, it may yield unsettling results to think them together with Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism. Arendt famously posits the controversial thesis that there is an intrinsic link between totalitarianism and human loneliness:

> "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century." (Arendt 1973, 478)

It has become a platitude to claim that we are (again) in an age of totalitarianism with world leaders like Putin Erdogan, or Trump, yet this time around furnished with more so-called "fake news" and conspiracy theories.[11] If this is correct, and if there is anything to Arendt's idea that totalitarianism thrives on loneliness, then modern parasocial relationships deserve a more thorough, and decidedly more critical treatment than virtually all of the current research endeavours. Having tried to establish the intrinsic connection between modern parasocial relationships and loneliness, a subsequent inquiry would now have to deal with the question how this ties into Arendt's thesis of the intrinsic connection between loneliness and totalitarianism.

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[11] It would be an impossible endeavour to try and name even just the most salient publications in 2020 alone on the rise of (quasi-)totalitarian leadership in different countries around the world. This topic is simply anywhere and everywhere.

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