

UNAVAILABLE

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Unavailable

The Joy of Not Responding

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Introduction

MARIE-LUISE GOLDMANN AND ANNA HORDYCH

“The big farewell does not exist anymore,” the author Daniel Kehlmann declared in an interview from 2008.¹ What happens to our goodbyes, when social media keeps us constantly connected? We are expected to message our partner or family as soon as we have entered an airplane. In the digital age, grand gestures have become superfluous. On the one hand, there is no need to endure absence, disruption, or silence. On the other hand, one cannot take a break from one’s relationships when there is always an internet connection. Today’s impossibility of escaping the pressure to communicate extensively forms social bonds and, moreover, the authorities that they are built upon.

Whereas institutions such as monarchies or the church once had a right to keep silent and avoid relationships of response, capitalism, with its promise of unlimited accessibility, has replaced silence with the noise of communication. The well-known bon mot “[n]othing strengthens authority so much as silence,” attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci in the 15th century (Biguenet 2015, 96), seems meaningless today. The proverb undoubtedly builds on an authoritative structure that establishes a relationship of response in which one side listens carefully while the other exercises discretion and restraint. What Søren Kierkegaard described in his existential philosophy as the unavailability of “the absolute” (2005, 64) was precisely this asymmetric relationship in which one side remains silent and the other hopes to be heard. Kierkegaard legitimizes religious belief in his essay *Fear and Trembling* through the negativity and insurmountable unavailability of an absolute other: “Faith is just this paradox [...] a paradox, inaccessible to thought” (2005, 64).

¹ Kehlmann’s remarks on the lack of absence in the digital age emerged in the context of a discussion of his novel *Fame: A Novel in Nine Episodes* which is about new communication technologies and their failure (our trans., Lovenberg 2008, Z6). Theodor W. Adorno reflects similarly on the ways in which modern technology has rendered it unnecessary to withstand the prolonged absence of loved ones, thus hollowing out the ways in which previous generations dealt with the unavailability of the other: “‘Goodbye’ has for centuries been an empty formula. Now relationships have gone the same way. Leavetaking is obsolete. [...] To be lastingly apart and to hold love fast has become unthinkable. ‘O parting, fountain of all words,’ but it has run dry, and nothing comes out except bye, bye or ta-ta” (Adorno 1993, 7).

Such a stronghold of silence has ceased to exist. Even on a political level, the hurried culture of Twitter activity shows that one must speak as much as possible in order to be visible. We, however, are interested in the flip side of this contemporary regime of transparency: unavailability. Do we have to presuppose a dialectic of constant availability that continues to give importance to silence? And, if it is possible to know everything and to have everything at our disposal, is our longing directed toward the blank spots on the map? Dealing with the unavailability that emerges against the backdrop of new technology becomes a challenge.

Non-responsiveness is commonly associated with negativity, with the pain of being ignored. We want to shift the focus from the threat that a disrupted relationship or communication entails to the joy that arises from refusing to respond. Our title, “Unavailable: The Joy of Not Responding,”² may also suggest that the joys of non-responsiveness are not limited to the one who chooses not to answer. Is it not also conceivable that the recipient is relieved or even happy when no answer arrives? Where the communication disruption lies is unclear, and to whose joy the missing message contributes is therefore undetermined. Who benefits from paralyzed connections and sudden silences? Who feels responsible for the imbalances of unavailability, and who is to blame if no one is listening? With ‘non-responsiveness,’ we want to introduce a novel paradigm for understanding the central problems of late capitalist society, one which also sheds light on the interlinking of economic, romantic, and affective spheres in ways that have, until now, not been well understood.

1. Escaping Transparency in Information Economies

Being available must be interpreted in terms of communication, but also in terms of economy. Productivity requires responsiveness. In the realm of literature, Dave Eggers’ 2013 novel *The Circle* shows how capitalism aims at constant availability in the name of transparency and participation.³ In a cynical reaction to Google, Apple & co., Eggers bestows limitless digital domination on the internet giant “The Circle.” The novel reveals a toxic mixture of self-optimization, ranking, and self-presentation, which increasingly

² Our volume has its origins in the seminar “Unavailable: The Joy of Not Responding” that we organized for the virtual annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) in 2021.

³ Tero Karppi explains how social media such as Facebook purposefully limits the possibilities to disconnect (2018).

blurs the boundaries between public and private life.⁴ Eggers' 2021 follow-up novel *The Every* declares these boundaries between inside and outside, private and public space increasingly obsolete, imagining a universal principle of availability in everyday life and suspending the cycling circle-figure in favor of an all-encompassing accessibility. Only his *Circle*-dystopia provides brief moments of relief: whenever the protagonist Mae paddles alone in a canoe on the water for a few hours, self-awareness unfolds independently of a smartphone or internet connection (she is later punished for this attempt at liberation). Mae's isolated instances of escape recall Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1782 *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* and his floating on the Lake of Biemme in "enjoyment" (*Fifth Walk*, 1783, 213), marking a healing retreat that leaves the hectic pace of the digital world behind.

The fictional canoer avails herself of what American author Akiko Busch demands in her culture-critical 2019 essay *How to Disappear: Notes on Invisibility in a Time of Transparency*: the right to spatial and temporal invisibility in the digital universe. With increasing visibility, the longing for invisibility grows. But how does one articulate one's absence? A history of the out-of-office message is yet to be written. Jenny Odell's 2019 study *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* points in a similar direction to Akiko Busch's reflections on withdrawal, albeit with a focus on attention rather than visibility. Odell's study focuses on the lack of concentration and intensity that has caused alienation from nature and the self. As our attention span decreases, our perception of the environment changes. While Odell explicitly states that she is "not anti-technology" (2019, XII), proposing neither retreat nor exile, she calls for a "a simple disjuncture" of "standing apart" (2019, 61), meaning achieving "the view of the outsider without leaving" (2019, 61). The goal is to stay "in the midst of the broken present," although "the exit is tempting" (2019, 87). But "the desperate desire to leave (forever!) matures into a commitment to live in permanent refusal" (2019, 62), which is why a radical negation would be wrong (2019, 61). Reevaluating attention as an "antidote to the rhetoric of growth" (2019, 25), Odell counters the contemporary loss of vigilance with the methods of "deep listening" (2019, 23) and heightened sensitivity, "as the attention economy works to keep us trapped in a frightful present" (2019, 62).

These recent publications develop lines of thought first charted in Roland Barthes' *The Neutral*, one of the few theoretical apparatuses enthusiastically devoted to "a right to be silent" (Barthes 2005, 23). In the context

⁴ Alain Ehrenberg reflects on the increase in depression in contemporary society, arguing that depression is the flip side of a capitalist order that exhausts the individual (2010).

of cultural semiology, Barthes suggests possible gestures of withdrawal from answering, such as hesitation, weariness, silence, postponement, departure, flight, exhaustion, anorexia, drunkenness, dreaming, forgetting, deviation, disinterest, and abstinence—all states and behaviors that society either does not tolerate or outright bans (see Barthes 2005, 109–113). Not published in France until 2002, Barthes' thoughts on *The Neutral* go back to a series of lectures held in 1978 at the Collège de France. “Nothing is protected from information and at the same time nothing is open to reflection,” Barthes states, complaining about the pressure to respond that has increased since the 1970s (2005, 203).

Sociologist Urs Stäheli offers a similarly affirmative approach to withdrawal: Using the metaphor of “network fever” [*Netzwerkfieber*] (2021b, 12) and the associated rhetoric of contamination, Stäheli states that the modern individual is defined by a trend toward “hyperconnection” [*Übervernetzung*] (2021b, 4). However, Stäheli argues that gestures of disconnection cannot be separated from networking. Instead, de-networking and networking happen simultaneously (2021a, 218): “Connection goes hand in hand with disconnection” (2021b, 15). Stäheli is interested in practices that put networking itself to the test (2021b, 6). He refuses to believe in the glorification of de-networking as a project of sovereign control: “In the new dietetic and therapeutic regime, the digital is taken to be a toxin, in analogy to sugar, alcohol, or drugs, that needs to be eliminated from the body through disciplined work on the self, with the analog representing a sort of superfood” (2021b, 8). Problematizing the romantic illusion of the analogue as that which is deep, authentic, and real (2021b, 9), Stäheli paves the way for an understanding of more modest tactics than the grand gestures of sovereign strategies. Such tactics could include a mode of “indifference” (2021b, 4–5) or a mode of shyness or introversion as an “inability to make connections” (2021b, 6). Contrasting “the heroism of disconnection strategies” (2021b, 20), Stäheli calls these “tactics of the weak” (2021b, 20). In this sense, disconnecting can be understood as a passive technique of distancing. However, Stäheli's trope of shyness cannot be separated from gendered coding (2021a, 247–250). While only the shy man rebels against the masculine norm of assertiveness and extroversion, femininity is, by nature, closely linked with introversion and silence. Against the backdrop of the metropolis theory developed by Georg Simmel around 1900, Stäheli concludes that separating and distinguishing oneself despite or precisely within the framework of the inevitable connection can be understood as a productive technique of distancing.

These observations bring Stäheli close to the sociologist Hartmut Rosa who shows that the capitalist gesture of making things available confuses

accessibility with availability. Rosa argues that, paradoxically, attempting to possess the world at all costs makes the world recoil. Controlling things and relationships by commodifying and owning them prevents “resonance” from unfolding. Rather than letting relationships disturb us in unexpected ways, late modernism aims to get rid of uncertainty and surprise. For Rosa, the ideal response to the exhausting societal imperative of availability is not procrastination, anger, and aggression, but a mode of “half-responsiveness” [*Halbverfügbarkeit*] toward the world, allowing for relationships of “resonance” (2020, 52).

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han, who argues against the hostility of the digital, develops a similarly positive attitude toward the escape methods of contemplation. In his 2022 essay *Vita contemplativa: oder von der Untätigkeit*, Han laments the loss of inactivity in modern society (9). Inactivity, for Han, is not a deficit or the mere absence or refusal of activity, but an independent faculty [*eigenständiges Vermögen*] (9). Labelling the trend toward transparency and control a fatal moment in modern communication, Han observes an increase in factuality, conformity, and acceleration. According to him, capitalist “circulation without interference” (2015, 2) aims to eliminate all complexities, blockages, and obstacles.

One of these obstacles is the prominent literary figure Bartleby, the scrivener, who gave up his writing activities in a notary’s office. By denying willfulness with his statement “I would prefer not to,” he negates common juridical and ethical discourses of communicating and negotiating (Agamben 1999, 254). Speaking of an undefined potency between doing and undoing, Agamben highlights the unused possibilities in Bartleby’s perplexing response (1999, 255). Agamben expands on Deleuze’s argument concerning the agrammatical character of Bartleby’s formula, which refers to nothing in particular, not even copying, and thus retains the speaker “whirling in a suspense that keeps everyone at a distance” (1998, 71). The copyist’s “I would prefer not to” reveals a destructive power (Deleuze 1998, 70) by not preferring any preference and even “eliminat[ing] the preferable” (1998, 71).

The provocation that lies in Bartleby’s non-preference or “negative preference” (1998, 71) (*to prefer not to*) and which disturbs the bustling business cycle on Wall Street, becomes visible when the narrator urges him to respond: “Will you not speak? Answer!” (Melville 2016, 27). Bartleby’s passivity marks a gentle revolt which elicits harsh reactions from his counterpart. Negativity disrupts a working culture that can be seen in today’s neoliberal terms as a “vicious cycle of *jouissance*” (Žižek 2006, 116).

Following Žižek’s path, political scientist Juliane Marie Schreiber, in her recent polemic pamphlet *Ich möchte lieber nicht. Eine Rebellion gegen den Terror des Positiven*, warns of a “terror of the positive,” a “culture of saying

yes,” and the trend of “positive psychology,” in which everything negative is turned into something positive, every crisis interpreted as a chance. However, one must consider whether Schreiber has in fact fallen prey to the very method that she critiques (Goldmann 2022, 16). Romanticizing depression and fetishizing pain by suggesting that great art comes from great suffering, Schreiber fails to escape the dominant paradigm of efficiency and productivity.

With this dilemma in mind, one must wonder if honest ways of withdrawal exist—or if every retreat ultimately aims at perpetuating the status quo. Digital detox camps, for example, could be interpreted as a strategy for escaping digital overstimulation and capitalist demands of availability. Yet these ‘unplugged holidays’ are entangled with productivity in three different ways. First, they are often undertaken with the expectation of an even more productive return to the workplace.⁵ Second, detox resorts like “Camp Grounded,” consulting workshops, and dropout festivals like “Burning Man” are rarely free of cost or financial investment. Indeed, they came about in Silicon Valley under the guidance of the founders of digital companies (Stäheli 2021b, 18). Third, they are often embedded in the same neoliberal structures of tracking, performance, and competition as the daily working routine from which escape is sought. In this context, disappearance must be understood as a productive mechanism that maintains and enables rather than questions present systems. As Tesla founder Elon Musk has stated, “Burning Man is Silicon Valley” (Buhr 2014). Regular vacations stabilize rather than disturb everyday business.

This approach to unavailability often goes hand in hand with a romantic glorification of the analogue, characterizing the digital as a destructive force that must be avoided at all costs.⁶ We want to ask if forms of pleasure that do not fall into the cultural pessimist trap of idealizing modes of disconnection are possible. What would real unavailability look like—a refusal to respond that capitalism cannot integrate into its system, as it does integrate yoga retreats, chai lattes, and digital detox camps? Or, to put it differently: How can we maintain withdrawal’s negativity, rather than turning it into something positive? Then, if we do so, why is the concept of “joy” central to our investigation?

⁵ Byung-Chul Han also emphasizes that, in capitalist systems, what we call “leisure time” [“Freizeit”] recurs as an included external [“*eingeschlossenes Außen*”], only intended to offer relaxation from work (2022, 9).

⁶ Guido Zurstiege suggests some possible methods for finding silence and disconnection in the digital age (2019). Ulises Ali Mejias warns of the threat that digital networks pose (2013). For an analysis of analogue nostalgia in digital media, see *Analoge Nostalgie in der digitalen Medienkultur* (Schrey 2017).