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## WHAT'S LEFT? MARXISM, LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

# Economies of Reputation: Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* and Practices of Disclosure in the Information Age

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A central project of Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* (2015) is the attempt to situate the development of the Internet and of technocratic corporations within the historical context of Marxist efforts in the postwar era. There remains a dearth of critical work on Franzen's Marxist interests, and he retains a reputation of literary conservatism, though *Purity* shares with other Franzen novels, like *The Corrections* (2001), an interest in the possible directions that remain for leftist ambition in the aftermath of failed radical projects and in modes of collective action that would account for the practical limitations of a neoliberal age. Following what one character refers to as the "mania for secrecy" that characterizes digital media in the era of Wikileaks, *Purity* has at its center the relation of the human user's social ties to a medium dominated by corporate giants and by new measures of governmental surveillance. Franzen's novel is suspicious about the possibility that there are ways of interacting with digital media that can minimize the ideological effects on human relationships, with various subplots of the novel emphasizing the power of a technocratic Internet to manufacture and revoke perceptions of an individual or cause's ideological purity, as secrets can be indefinitely stored and achieve viral status with immediacy upon reveal. Acts of confession and the voluntary disclosure of traumatic and criminal histories are thus given a privileged status in *Purity*, with the novel suggesting that the establishment of any collectivist projects necessitates transparency, but must resist the urge promoted by contemporary Internet culture to fetishize such exposure or assume its inherent radicalism.

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## Article

'I've got some things I have to tell you', says Purity 'Pip' Tyler, the protagonist of Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* (2015), to her new boyfriend in the final chapter of the novel (Franzen, 2015: 579). The choice to begin a romantic relationship with an act of disclosure is one that comes, for Pip, on the heels of her involvement with a series of international entanglements linked by their origins in secrecy and familial drama. Franzen's most recent novel, *Purity*, weaves together his critical interest in the legacies of leftist efforts in the 20th century with the dynamics of transparency and techno-consumerism, which have allowed the Internet to take on a newly totalitarian scope as a mechanism of cultural control.

Continuing in the vein of *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010), Franzen operates in the mode of naturalist fiction, with Dickens and Tolstoy not only featuring prominently as intertexts, but also offering a framework for the amalgamation of the political and interpersonal concerns that frames *Purity*. While naturalistic features remain widely present in contemporary fiction, the question of the continued relevance of the social novel has become more fraught in an era in which the death of the novel itself has become a topic of concern. The legacy of American authors like Sinclair and Steinbeck, and the social novel's definitional project of diagnosing and showcasing the political and relational conditions of the present, has been largely usurped in the information age by the rise of the Internet think piece. While growing stores of free and immediately accessible digital knowledge may have stripped the novel of its presupposed moral authority, the immediate social crisis with which *Purity*, in a self-justifying move, concerns itself is the failed promise of a democratizing Internet. Focalized through the experience of leaker pioneer Andreas and the volunteers who devote themselves to his mission of web-facilitated transparency, *Purity* considers the new forms of social hierarchy posed by the Information Age.

Franzen has gained a reputation of literary conservatism in recent years, fanned in part by a controversial social media presence. In his *New York Times* article, 'Liking Is for Cowards. Go for What Hurts' (2011), Franzen identifies likability as the value around which contemporary Internet culture revolves, suggesting that digital media

provides a sense of convenience and uncomplicated self-gratification for its users.<sup>1</sup> The Internet and the cultural values it engenders, however, have become a site of particular critical interest for Franzen, perhaps not in least part because he has used them to court what Colin Hutchinson has identified as a politically ambivalent reputation (2009: 205). To discount Franzen's suspicion of the digital, however, is to ignore the nuances of his critical stance toward the Internet and the degree to which he makes use of his reputation for rhetorical purposes. Hardly spurning the Internet as a platform, he has instead engaged actively in web-based self-promotion and publicity, having published articles across a variety of digital platforms in the past decade. Franzen has taken advantage of his polarizing reputation to put forward unpopular opinions about the Internet's saturation of social life, the more nuanced criticisms that he offers of digital prevalence and its cultural effects – among them normalizing practices of avoidance, privileging comfortable modes of interaction over more complicated forms of engagement, and the normalization of widespread digital surveillance – receive much of their visibility in part through the controversies in which he is at the center.

One of the central points of criticism that Franzen offers in the *New York Times* piece is that the likability culture that characterizes the modern digital world can be productively contrasted to acts of intimacy and love, which he understands as always necessarily local and immediate, and, consequently, unavoidably difficult. Involving a measure of self-reflection and an acknowledgment of the less-than-complimentary qualities and behaviors of both the lover and the loved, Franzen sees love as the antithesis of the ego-gratifying act of Internet liking, with the comfortable psychological distance that it offers in lieu of personal investment. In his own words, he aims to 'set up a contrast between the narcissistic tendencies of technology and the problem of actual love [...] the dirt that love inevitably splatters on the mirror of our self-regard'. Franzen particularly takes to task the painlessness that he sees the Internet providing, claiming that a life driven by immediate gratification and the avoidance of pain compromises the moral foundations necessary for meaningful

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<sup>1</sup> Originally given as a Kenyon College commencement address.

interpersonal experiences. He advocates instead for more self-aware practices of Internet usage, offering alternatives involving local modes of interaction that, as his novels suggest, might be equally useful as models of political praxis.

Franzen's reputation as a literary conservatist derives not only from his online presence, but also from the critical stance his earlier novels take toward the pragmatic considerations involved in putting leftist ideals into practice in an era of global capitalism. As early as with his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), Franzen has offered portraits of corrupted or disillusioned leftists. One such figure is Balwan Singh, confidant of new St. Louis Chief of Police S. Jammu and a Marxist 'of the aesthetic variety, attracted to the notion of exportable revolution at least partly because Continental stylishness was exported along with it' (Franzen, 2013: 18). Similarly, *The Corrections* (2001) sees its protagonist Chip Lambert sell off his Frankfurt School books in the aftermath of his failed teaching career before becoming a willing participant in a fraudulent Lithuanian investment scheme. Offering an overview of Franzen's treatment of politics and spatiality in his early fiction, Ty Hawkins theorizes that the presence of global capitalism in Franzen's novels is treated as an overpowering force against which the contemporary political subject is powerless to act. Describing the apathy that leads to the anticlimactic referendum vote of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Hawkins notes that:

The referendum fails, with voter turnout proving abysmal. Election day brings [...] indifference. Jammu has concluded that "with so much talent, so much investment, so much technique and theory ... it's reasonable to demand resounding victories". Instead of such a victory, she finds herself confronted with entropy. [...] Rather than offer the prospect of change—rather than even call for it—*The Twenty-Seventh City* extends an olive branch of irony to the reader. (Hawkins, 2010: 69–70)

Hawkins's primary criticism lies in the hopelessness that he understands as pervading Franzen's treatment of political failure. 'Upon finishing a Franzen novel', he suggests, Franzen's readers have 'confront[ed] characters [...] who tend toward political paralysis, which, of course, only reinforces a reader's own sense of paralysis

and therein furthers the aims of the “infernal machine” Franzen despises’ (Hawkins, 2010: 64).

Such a reading of Franzen as a fatalist in the face of global capitalism neglects the possible directions that exist in the aftermath of political failures in Franzen’s oeuvre, though they exist more prominently in his most recent novels. By dramatizing such failures – emphasizing the operant humanness rather than abstract theories of morality on which the success of political projects ultimately turns – Franzen’s novels diagnose and warn against conditions that produce the entropic apathy with which Jammu is confronted. His novels suggest that the limitations of many leftist projects arise from their failure to account for the affective investment on the part of others that is necessary for real social change to gain widespread traction. Jammu’s error, as Hawkins points out, is one made by many of Franzen’s characters: she assumes that charisma, intelligence and power will naturally attract interest and attention, such that politics can be conducted in solely the realm of the abstract, without reference to the complexity of emotional experience needed to truly empathize with constituents (Hawkins, 2010: 69–70).

Franzen’s novels, then, offer portraits of intellectual elites whose efforts fail because they take the actionability of their intellectual interests for granted. Walter Berglund’s political ambitions in *Freedom* (2010) lead to a climax in which he is viciously beaten by the coal miners whose family homes he has displaced to create an environmental sanctuary, a project with which he has become disillusioned given its reliance on funding from the coal industry. But to focus only on the hopeless outcomes of Franzen’s characters’ activist projects is to ignore the productive implications of these failures – the lessons they offer about the necessity of confronting difference and the consequent empathy that doing so creates, encouraging readers to renegotiate the relationship between their political ideals and the process through which they become practicable projects or methods. In earlier essays, like ‘Why Bother?’, Franzen has argued that the social novel is particularly well positioned to engage in such didactic commentary about social responsibility in the technological age. Across his oeuvre, Franzen depicts the failures of a particular type of leftism, with his characters almost universally belonging to the college-educated middle- and upper-class.

Franzen's protagonists are almost without exception the bearers of privileged status, relative to the working-class constituents to whom they appeal, and take for granted the success they assume they are owed but are ultimately confronted by a lack of public interest in their efforts. Franzen's novels thus act as warnings against the ideological blind spots of their protagonists, who recognize the structural inequalities that inform their worlds but fail to either diagnose the sources of these inequalities or consider the active role they play themselves in perpetuating such structures. It is not reasonable, Walter realizes, 'to demand resounding victories', as Jammu is starkly reminded by the outcome of her own political machinations (Franzen, 2013: 267). Rather, political projects that offer critical commentary on extant class structures need to call into question any uncritical engagement with ostensibly revolutionary spaces or groups that rely on the funding and management of large corporate bodies for their continued existence.

This argument lies at the heart of *Purity's* reading of the Internet as it takes up questions of Internet use as political praxis: the transparency offered by digital platforms, for Franzen, is not to be trusted uncritically. A number of Franzen critics, among them Joseph Carroll, James Annesley and Rebecca Braun, have pointed to Franzen's interest in the ethical obligations of the writer of the social novel in an age of globalization and increasing surveillance, while Margaret Hunt Gram shows how Franzen reconciles contemporary eco-political problems like unsustainable population growth with 'affective engines' that evoke the reader's empathy and are thus central to the reading experience of realism (Carroll, 2013; Annesley, 2006; Braun, 2016; Gram, 2014: 296). Hutchinson similarly contends that behind the political 'ambivalence' that many critics have found in Franzen's work 'lies an unsaid but much-desired resolution and transcendence of that ambivalence' (Hutchinson, 2009: 205).

*Purity*, perhaps more than any other Franzen novel, engages explicitly with the possibility of such resolution. A prototypical working-class American at the novel's outset, Pip is also in many ways emblematic of the millennial of the 2010s, having substantial student loan debt so that she works temporary low-wage jobs in an

effort to pay it off, while squatting with her roommates in a house that is at risk of foreclosure (Franzen, 2015: 40). As with many of Franzen's other novels, fraught family dynamics lie at the center of *Purity's* plot: Pip's mother, Anabel, is a reclusive hypochondriac, whose constant phone calls have rendered the two codependent, with Pip effectively mothering Anabel. After Pip and her roommates shelter German travelers in their house in Oakland, one of the travelers puts Pip in contact with Andreas Wolf, a technocrat who is the famous leader of the Sunlight Project and a figure reminiscent of Julian Assange. The Sunlight Project, an organization of international scope, publicizes news leaks regarding public and political figures, as well as the ethically dubious dealings of large corporations. Upon realizing that she might make use of the vast technological resources of the Project to locate her father and driven to exhaustion from the obligation of caring for her mother and roommates, Pip leaves Oakland to work at its headquarters in Bolivia.

Secrecy and its consequences thus form the basis for much of the plot. Pip is a woman surrounded by people with secrets; indeed, much of the novel involves her efforts to clarify the motives of those around her who style themselves as truth-seekers. Much like the experiences of her Dickensian namesake, no one in Pip's life appears able to be fully honest with her, even as many of them attempt to win her loyalty. Pip's interest in working with Andreas on the Sunlight Project is prompted, in part, by the refusal of her mother, Anabel, to give her any information about the identity of her biological father. Pip's father, Tom Aberant, for whom she later works without knowing about their biological ties, meets Andreas in Berlin and helps him when the corpse of a man Andreas murdered, who needs to be reburied. Subsequently, Andreas uses the algorithmic resources he has accumulated over the years of intelligence work to uncover the identity of Tom's vanished ex-wife: Pip's mother, Anabel. In doing so, he realizes that Tom is Pip's biological father, and sends her to spy on Tom's journalism in an effort to engage in counter-blackmail.

Franzen draws heavily from the structure of WikiLeaks in his creation of the Sunlight Project. Like WikiLeaks, the Sunlight Project relies on volunteers for its operation, having established a culture of ethical technological obligation that Pip



enters into upon being recruited. The organization headed by activist leaker Julian Assange, WikiLeaks, gained notoriety in 2010–11 by leaking a military video showing a 2007 Baghdad airstrike on civilians, among other classified documents like war logs from Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, as well as a set of diplomatic cables originating from the State Department. Originally launched in Iceland under the name Sunshine Press, a title Franzen pays homage to, WikiLeaks is a self-described 'new model of journalism' that summarizes its mission as such:

Publishing improves transparency, and this transparency creates a better society for all people. Better scrutiny leads to reduced corruption and stronger democracies in all society's institutions. [...]

Scrutiny requires information. Historically, information has been costly in terms of human life, human rights and economics. As a result of technical advances – particularly the internet and cryptography – the risks of conveying important information can be lowered. [...]

WikiLeaks has provided a new model of journalism. Because we are not motivated by making a profit, we work cooperatively with other publishing and media organisations around the globe, instead of following the traditional model of competing with other media. We don't hoard our information; we make the original documents available with our news stories. Readers can verify the truth of what we have reported themselves. (Wikileaks, 2015)

This imagined ideal of transparency through democratic access to information, accessible without risk, ignores the mediation of the Internet and the lines of power that underlie it. Franzen's novel reveals the Internet to be not a democracy, but a technocracy, controlled by an elite that has gained celebrity through the branding of digital platforms. Indeed, far from the democratizing possibilities to which proponents of using the Internet for the purposes of social change often lay claim, transparency efforts like the Sunlight Project in *Purity* instead serve to re-stage dynamics of hierarchical social stratification.

Representing the ironies of building a cult of personality by using the rhetoric of revolutionary populism and democratic access to information, Andreas understands

himself as having a privileged relation to the digital age because of his experiences in the German Democratic Republic. Imagining the 'New Regime' of the Internet as a site that operates according to the same logics that governed postwar Germany earlier in the twentieth century, Andreas understands the Internet that was once heralded as an open space of free and unfettered choice as having morphed over the postwar era into an instrument of behavioral control:

Before he'd quit doing interviews, [Andreas had] taken to dropping the word *totalitarian*. [...] In fact, he simply meant a system that was impossible to opt out of. [...] The Internet's] competing platforms were united in their ambition to define every term of your existence. In his own case, when he'd started to be properly famous, he'd recognized that fame, as a phenomenon, had migrated to the Internet. (Franzen, 2015: 475)

Much of the novel's second section focuses on Andreas's experiences as a teenager in East Berlin, growing up on Karl-Marx-Allee as the son of high-ranking Committee members. Finding himself infatuated with a young girl, Annagret, Andreas murders her Stasi official stepfather with the intention of liberating her. After years of subsequent paranoia about the possibility of being discovered, Andreas's sloppy disposal of the corpse in the yard of a house owned by his own parents necessitates that he dig up the remains and rebury them. Andreas's career as a leaker is itself an accident of fate, as his famous act of invading the Stasi archives results from his desire to rebury the evidence of his own secret. Encountering a group of television crews while fleeing the building, Andreas uses the excuse of civil dissent to claim that the Stasi archives are corrupted and must be 'disinfected', becoming instantly famous and heralded as a revolutionary (Franzen, 2015: 76–7).

In the New Regime, Andreas observes, surrender to social control is cloaked in the rhetoric of personal liberty, an ideological move he imagines as appealing to impulses of individualism on a global scale (Franzen, 2015: 476). The totalitarianism of the Internet, Andreas suggests, operates not through the threat of physical violence, but rather through the installation of a self-policing and reflexive insecurity on the part of its users that takes individual identity as its operative object. This

insecurity arises from the definitional qualities of the Internet itself as a medium: its vast size enables it to host a near-infinite amount of information that can be preserved indefinitely. Given the nature of Internet virality, or the immediacy with which information can be transmitted and gain widespread public attention, every gossip and speculation is at constant risk of being exposed to the world in a way that can have severe consequences for individual reputation.<sup>2</sup>

Weinstein describes how:

...well over a decade before the 9/11 catastrophe and the uncontrollable surveillance activities to which it has given rise, Franzen [in *The Twenty-Seventh City*] seems to have grasped a cardinal contemporary fact: that average American citizens now lead their lives, unknowingly and continuously, within an invisible and inaudible grid of electronic circuitry. Tracked, photographed and recorded, their activity and the speech that accompanies it – the domain of individual freedom itself – thus risk becoming one more hollow routine, merely an empty fiction. (Weinstein, 2013: xiv)

Weinstein also notes that ‘nowhere is Franzen’s political imagination more compelling than in his capacity to convey the all-embracing reach of this media circuitry that turns supposedly spontaneous behavior into familiar echo chambers’ (Weinstein, 2013: xiv). *Purity*, written more than a decade following the events of 9/11 and the normalization of ensuing digital surveillance measures, suggests that what the Internet Age offers in exchange for the subject’s total adoption of a life without secrets – a life under constant threat of exposure – is ‘the safety of belonging’ (Weinstein, 2013: xiv). No longer is loyalty to the regime enforced by the threat of violence, but it is instead cloaked in the guise of free and unfettered choice, a rhetoric that recalls the promises of neoliberal capitalism. At one point, in *Freedom*, Walter notes that: ‘The reason the system can’t be overthrown in this country [...] is all about freedom. The reason the free market in Europe is tempered by socialism

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<sup>2</sup> Theorists like Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner have attended in recent work to the increasing neoliberalization of digital media and the ability of technocratic corporations to neutralize consciousness-raising on social media platforms (Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

is that they're not so hung up on personal liberties there' (Franzen, 2010: 363). In *Purity*, Franzen seems to consider how the Internet might be a tool that is able to capitalize on this discourse of individual freedom and the notion of opting-in, marketing itself as a space of free choice even while creating conditions under which such opting-in is largely involuntary. As Walter suggests during this conversation, part of the failure of leftist efforts is their general willingness to ignore the emotional experiences that nonetheless determine to a large degree the political choices made by individual Americans.

*Purity* suggests that the fundamental irrationality of the human subject – a messiness only truly understood through intimate knowledge – cannot be erased and must instead be actively accounted for in any political endeavors. The Internet markets itself as able to “liberate” humanity from the tasks – making things, learning things, remembering things – that had previously given meaning to life and thus had constituted life’, with these components of unstructured day-to-day existence replaced by the singular and universal goal of ‘search-engine optimization’ in all domains of life (Franzen, 2015: 522–3). The offer of choice provided by the Internet is an illusion, Andreas’s reflections suggest, and the motive that drives participation in both the old and new regime is the creation of a state of self-surveilling terror in its subjects. The individual who does not opt into the all-consuming sphere of social media and digital communication risks forfeiting the community connections, job opportunities and knowledge of the world that an Internet presence provides:

Like the old politburos, the new politburo styled itself as the enemy of the elite and the friend of the masses, dedicated to *giving consumers what they wanted*, but to Andreas [...] it seemed as if the Internet was governed more by fear: the fear of unpopularity and uncoolness, the fear of missing out, the fear of being flamed or forgotten. (Franzen, 2015: 477, emphasis in original)

The ability of the Internet to preserve a near-infinite quantity of information indefinitely offers perfect conditions for paranoia to proliferate, involving the constant possibility of threats to one's reputation: there is always another page to check or refresh. When faced with a photograph of himself collaborating with

Tad, a colleague whose reputation is less ideologically spotless, Andreas remains terrified that it will surface on the Internet. 'There seemed to be no limit to the amount of reassurance he required', Andreas thinks about himself. 'He was so immersed and implicated in the Internet, so enmeshed in its totalitarianism, that his online existence was coming to seem realer than his physical self. [...] Private thoughts didn't exist in the retrievable, disseminable, and readable way that data did' (Franzen, 2015: 522–3).

Tad, like Andreas, is a member of the new technocratic elite, capable of deploying technological prowess to personal financial gain. However, Tad lacks the purity of reputation that Andreas enjoys due to his connections with the Sunlight Project. Tad thus enlists Andreas to 'be truth-telling's friendl[y] public face': to act as the necessary symbolic storefront of ostensibly revolutionary but financially profitable projects (Franzen, 2015: 516). One of the novel's central theses is that individual reputation has come to stand in symbolically for the social currency of ideological purity – possessing the 'correct' way of being in relation to extant social communities. The users of the Internet are 'hungering for clean', as Andreas says, and the Internet can provide this illusion of purity that is absent in the messy complexities that come with physical proximity (Franzen, 2015: 520).

Andreas's ability to market himself as an iconoclastic revolutionary reflects the reification of the Internet in the twenty-first century. Although Andreas explicitly identifies the Internet as a totalizing force with symbolic reverence akin to the political atmosphere of his childhood in Berlin, the novel's characters are plagued by the more general failure of the Internet's promise to democratize by providing equitable access to knowledge. The totalitarian reach that Franzen understands as having been achieved by the Internet functions in large part because of this capacity for recording and archiving near-boundless quantities of data. Dependent on the technocratic structures of neoliberal capitalist enterprise, the Internet's most vital efforts at transparency, *Purity* observes, have only fed the gaps of wealth and power and solidified the most destructive parts of capitalist culture. Tad, who records all of his daily interactions on cameras that he carries with him and stores them in the web-based storage of the cloud, states that his obsession with what he calls 'life-logging' is

directly connected to the notion of immortal celebrity (Franzen, 2015: 516). Andreas notes that 'Tad's dream of luxury reincarnation [...] was a metaphor for something real: if – and only if – you had enough money and/or tech capability, you could control your Internet persona and, thus, your destiny and your virtual afterlife. Optimize or die' (Franzen, 2015: 523). Optimization has become the controlling principle for not only global capitalism, but for all interaction with the Internet vis-a-vis the construction of a personal reputation: the greater one's ability to cultivate a persona of ideological purity, the novel suggests, the better one is able to leverage that public image for access to power.

For someone, like Andreas, who knows how to use totalitarian systems to his advantage, the Internet offers new possibilities for opportunistic personal growth. Andreas perfectly understands the volatile economy of reputation that drives the relations of the Internet landscape, identifying the terror he sees it producing as inherent to its totalitarian control as a natural product of this economy. The Internet, Andreas realizes, markets itself to users by claiming that it puts them in total control of their image, a facade that obscures the extent to which the algorithms employed by technocratic giants like Facebook and Twitter are capable of determining user choices by presenting them in a context that optimizes user absorption and participation in the system. Andreas is keenly aware of his own reputation as an iconoclast and acknowledges that he is only able to maintain it through his own form of apparatchik activity. On two occasions, he refuses to leak data dumps about Google's practices that 'plainly revealed how the company stockpiled personal user data and actively filtered the information it claimed passively to reflect' (Franzen, 2015: 478). 'In both cases, fearing what Google could do to him, Andreas had declined to upload the documents. To salvage his self-regard, he had been honest with the leakers: "Can't do it. I need Google on my side"' (Franzen, 2015: 478).

Andreas himself recognizes the artificiality of the online reputation he has built, and the lack of clear moral purpose that underpins it:

Inwardly winc[ing] when his workers spoke of making the world a better place. From the example of Assange, he'd learned the folly of making

messianic claims about his mission, and although he took ironic satisfaction in being famed for his purity, he was under no illusions about his actual capacity for it. (Franzen, 2015: 479)

Andreas, out of all of Franzen's characters, recognizes the crucial illusion of purity on which many leftist projects rely and acknowledges its status as an empty signifier, open to manipulation, and it is this recognition that allows him to make advantageous use of the economy of images that comprises the contemporary Internet. The left-leaning characters of Franzen's previous novels – Martin Probst, Walter Berglund and Chip Lambert – fail in their political efforts because they assume a natural or pre-existing correspondence between their understandings of themselves as empathetic, liberal-minded and conscientious people, and the practical consequences of the civic projects they undertake. Andreas, on the other hand, recognizes the failures of his own internal locus of morality, realizing that just as liberal sympathies do not automatically translate into viable external praxis, a publicly liberal stance need not necessarily correlate with moral commitment.

While Pip acknowledges the necessity of self-exposure, even if it leads to conflict and painful revelation, Andreas adopts the avoidance of his parents, capitalizing on the appearance of transparency while keeping secrets tight to his chest. His biological father, Peter Kronburg, who has been a figure of absence and mystery for Andreas – another experience he shares with Pip – seeks Andreas out after his rise to international fame. Kronburg, who asks for Andreas's permission to publish a book that would reveal their identities and a number of family secrets, attempts to persuade Andreas to endorse the book by mirroring his ironic attitude toward cultivating a reputation, saying that he recognizes that Andreas's 'marketing plan is sunlight. If you endorse the book, [...] you'll demonstrate that no secret is so sacred that you won't expose it' (Franzen, 2015: 507). As Andreas recognizes, however, this gesture itself is fundamentally presentational: absent the secret of the murder that actually spurs much of Andreas's anxiety, the book, in fact, cultivates the appearance that no secret is sacred to Andreas while still protecting the one secret that is.

In spite of Andreas's adept manipulation of the Internet's economy of reputations, he eventually recognizes, through his unrequited romantic pursuit of Pip, that capitalizing on the system precludes acts of genuine passion. For Andreas, and, it seems, Franzen, the question of privacy is important because within it lies the question of essential human agency itself. During Andreas's early life in America with Annagret, in the aftermath of the murder, his increasing boredom and apathy lay the conditions for a new obsession with Internet pornography of the 1990s. Andreas goes as far as to say that pornography:

Sold him on the Internet and its world-altering potential. The sudden wide availability of porn, the anonymity of access, the meaninglessness of copyright, the instantaneity of gratification, the scale of the virtual world within the real world, the global dispersion of file-sharing communities, the sensation of mastery that mousing and clicking brought: the Internet was going to be huge, especially for bringers of sunlight. (Franzen, 2015: 494)

Andreas's fascination functions as less of an interest in the content of pornography as a specific genre of media, and instead as more of an interest in the fundamentally pornographic features of the Internet as a whole, with its ability to reduce the viewer to a conditioned subject whose capacity to imagine new creative and ethical modes of engaging with the world is imperiled by the constant cycle of stimulus-gratification offered by the Internet. 'It was only much later, when the Internet had come to signify death to him', that Andreas, for whom death is always bound up with the erotic:

Realized he'd also been glimpsing death in online porn. Every compulsion, certainly his own viewing of digital images of sex, which quickly became day-devouringly compulsive, smacked of death in its short-circuiting of the brain, its reduction of personhood to a closed loop of stimulus and response. But there was also already, in the days of file-transfer protocols and "alt" newsgroups, a sense of the unfathomable vastness that would characterize the mature Internet and the social media that followed it [...] a premonition



of the dissolution of the individual in the mass. The brain reduced by machine to feedback loops, the private personality to a public generality: a person might as well have been already dead. (Franzen, 2015: 494)

Andreas's understanding that one of the central features of the Internet is its ability to reduce the human mind that engages it to a series of 'feedback loops' recalls the description that Hannah Arendt offers in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* of regimes of terror as involving endeavors to destroy the capacity for spontaneous human action (Arendt, 1968). For Andreas, it is the scope of content and anonymity of participation as defining features of the Internet that make it an agent of spiritual death. A system with a vast amount of content constantly attracts new content in addition to reproducing and remixing that which is already present, such that it becomes an infinitely self-replenishing system. The knowledge of access to a perpetually refreshing well of media and consumable content that is far too vast for any one person to reach the end of is a sublime experience that exceeds the mind's faculties of conceptualization, such that upon encountering it, the user can only react to the stimuli it offers. The novel thus suggests, following the line of argument present in Franzen's *New York Times* article, that the Internet functions as a key tool in fostering avoidance as a central practice of contemporary life. With the standardized formats of media consumption that it offers, the Internet allows for a reliable series of predictable daily actions through which confrontation can be voluntarily postponed. The Internet, double-minded, is at once the source of threatened exposure to public censure and the tool by which an anodyne persona can be created and a system of inoffensive habits established. As Andreas considers the terror on which the New Regime of the Internet relies to operate, he reflects that this regime, like the German Democratic Republic, owes itself to the legacy of Scientific Socialism and the more general history of rationalism as the basis for political movements. He recognizes the current form of terror on which such rationalism relies as that of 'technocracy, which sought to liberate humanity from its humanness through the efficiency of markets and the rationality of machines. This was the truly eternal fixture of illegitimate revolution, this impatience with irrationality, this wish to be clean of it once and for all' (Franzen, 2015: 478).

In *Purity*, then, Franzen poses the question of what directions are left when the promises of equitable access to information offered by new technologies and media forms fail to produce a corresponding social change. Franzen's argument in the *New York Times* piece offers a hint to the political approaches he considers more viable, given conditions of human irrationality. Describing his own budding interest in environmentalism during college, Franzen notes that it was based on an abstract sense of identificatory obligation: being an issue that he tried to care about because he felt as though he should, he describes how his interest was quickly overpowered by a sense of angry hopelessness. Franzen's story of his own political interests, however, does not stop at this apathy and political disillusionment. Instead, he discusses his eventual return to environmentalism in the form of an organic investment that was not self-interested or based on the desire to perform politicized selfhood, but was rather other-directed. Franzen is led back to politics because of his love of birds:

And here's where a curious paradox emerged. My anger and pain and despair about the planet were only increased by my concern for wild birds, and yet, as I began to get involved in bird conservation and learned more about the many threats that birds face, it became easier, not harder, to live with my anger and despair and pain [...]

I think, for one thing, that my love of birds became a portal to an important, less self-centered part of myself that I'd never even known existed. Instead of continuing to drift forward through my life as a global citizen, liking and disliking and withholding my commitment for some later date, I was forced to confront a self that I had to either straight-up accept or flat-out reject. (Franzen, 2011)

Franzen's self-reflection here gestures toward an important consequence of the political failures that his novels dramatize. Namely, these failures are necessary preconditions for the development of a more selfless – and thus more efficacious – approach to political engagement. Failure is, Franzen suggests in the *New York*

*Times* piece, a catalyst for reconfiguring one's political relationship to the conditions of others in the world. It is the inherent irrationality and unpredictability of the experience of love for Franzen that makes it capable of not only disrupting the sanctioned relations of interpersonal desire, but also offering a basis through which one can empathize with the irrationalities of the emotional experiences of others. As *Purity* reveals, the irrationality of love represents the antithesis of the predictable and mechanical engagement fostered by Internet culture, with the immediate gratification and media consumption that it provides – love eludes algorithms and other predictive measures that lead the Internet to function as a space of social discipline – and can most effectively arise from conditions of close proximity.

*Purity*, then, advocates for a political praxis that privileges the local and provisional, warning the reader not to mistake the immediacy offered by Internet use for practices of empathy that rely on being able to recognize the dynamic state of another's reactions, and thus the full range of their human experience. Attentive to the conditions through which the Internet's easily moralized celebrities come into public awareness, Franzen's novel thus emphasizes the need for proximity in confessional practices. For Franzen, the practice of a loving confrontation – one that does not guarantee, but still bolsters the possibility of productive resolution – is inseparable from the ability to be in close contact with the other. The notion that the Internet can provide transparent democratic platforms is undermined by the practices through which it obscures its own status as media. The Internet offers only a partial contact with the other, without the necessary witnessing of the other's full expression.

Much like Andreas's characterization of the Internet as a 'narcotic' due to its ability to distance the user from the world (Franzen, 2015: 497), Franzen suggests in his *New York Times* essay that 'liking' is comfortable because it can be conducted through the safe and distancing mechanisms of irony and computer screens, not requiring confrontation with difficult emotions or questions about the self. Effective political action, on the other hand, must bring the individual into contact with experiences that are nuanced and often painful. Pip herself recognizes the necessity of such confrontation, however much relational 'dirt' it might produce. For the other

characters of *Purity*, avoidance is bred from an unwillingness to face the possibility that they will experience difficult or painful emotions – avoidance enables them to postpone experiencing hurt, the novel suggests, but it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in which recalcitrance becomes preferable to active engagement with the world around them.

In many ways, *Purity* can be understood as an instructional social novel that, while firmly situated in the information age, traces Pip's development from an aimless college graduate to a competent and self-determining adult. Pip's growth arises largely out of opposition to the characters around her, who showcase models of adulthood that are fundamentally reactive and based on the need to avoid any confrontation or conflict. Pip becomes an adult in large part by recognizing that the failures of the adults around her have mostly arisen as efforts to avoid confrontation with the long-term consequences of their own choices: her mother chooses to disappear and change her identity in order to avoid familial conflict and obligation, and the childish nicknames that she gives Pip emblemize the stagnation of maturity that has come with their withdrawal from the larger world; and Andreas, when confronted by the limitations that his Internet persona imposes on his ability to fully engage in interpersonal connections, can only resort to suicide. Throughout *Purity*, the addictive features of Internet use function as shorthand for the return to this type of childlike state. At one point, Andreas observes that 'the Internet had made it easier for both [him and Annagret] to be like children' (Franzen, 2015: 495) and childlikeness in the novel is directly linked to habits of avoidance.

The question to which Franzen's novel finally shifts its attention, then, becomes whether anyone living in the Internet Age – with the necessary participation it involves – can avoid being co-opted into the service of the new totalitarian machine. The novel suggests that the Internet has become such a pervasive force of cultural change that it is nearly impossible to entirely escape the consequent sociocultural effects. To that end, the development of Pip's relationship with her boyfriend and her efforts to reunite her biological parents represent a set of practices for privileging empathy. Pip, out of all the novel's characters, is the only one who is consistently honest about her motivations, going so far as revealing to Tom that she

is doing intelligence-collection on him for Andreas, because of the guilt she feels about lying. The web of secrets that constitutes the characters' connections with one another, slowly established by Franzen over the course of the novel, is climactically unraveled because of Pip's actions. Pip and Jason become a more hopeful model of relationships, in contrast to those posed by her parents and Andreas. Despite her lack of overt political commitment, Pip's approach to relationships is one that prioritizes disclosure, a model with importance that can be extended to political praxis.

By the end of the novel, Pip has recognized the fallibility of all of her potential role models and understands that she cannot rely on the hope that her parents will adopt a more conscientious approach to their relationships. In spite of this recognition, Pip begins to assert her own values, refusing to continue coddling and mothering her mother. Endorsing confrontation with painful realities – with the consequences that have resulted from secrets – is a practice that Pip herself understands as tied directly to attaining a state of adulthood. After a speech from Anabel about her existential concerns over rearing children, Pip responds that she needs Anabel to 'try and have an adult conversation' (Franzen, 2015: 584), and, shortly after, tells Anabel: 'I'm a lot older than I used to be' (Franzen, 2015: 585). During a bid to bring her biological parents together for a conversation and to complete legal work requiring her mother's signature, Pip says to her mother: 'You created me and now you have to deal with me. That's my purpose. I'm your reality' (Franzen, 2015: 586).

During Pip's project at the end of the novel to restructure her life – along with reuniting her parents, persuading her mother to make use of her inherited wealth and forming a healthy relationship with Jason – she becomes aware that it is she who is best situated to write a post-mortem exposé on Andreas because of her experiences working alongside him and those who knew him. Pip tells Tom that she feels 'like someone should tell the real story' about the murder and Tom responds that while the confession that Andreas left was 'covered up' by his employees, it is a resource he can make available to her, a benefit of her time spent cohabiting with Tom and Leila (Franzen, 2015: 593).

*Purity*, while it ends with the failure of Pip's parents to reconcile, nonetheless sees its characters begin learning how to empathize with one another as Pip, her parents and her boyfriend all come together in person in the small cabin that Anabel lives in. While the novel's ending may strike the reader as an untenable appeal to Luddism, an attempt to flee from the Internet that is futile in the context of a contemporary culture saturated by digital media, *Purity's* interest lies more in practices of humanization: though the Internet may not be permanently escapable for the contemporary information subject, the voluntary choice to disengage from the Internet's attention-demanding tide means a turn to privileging Levinasian face-to-face engagements. Transparency in *Purity* is necessary for growth, but can easily stretch beyond the scope of individual determination and become a force of coercion. The novel thus advocates for conscious ownership and ethical disclosure of individual secrets, suggesting that practices of turning toward and claiming one's own secrets can inoculate them from the threat of shame, should they risk exposure.

Confrontation and confession, Franzen suggests, while important, must be conducted not through screens, but through in-person acts of bearing witness, with all of the related discomforts and experiences of strangeness that inhere in closeness to the other. The Internet may not be a system that one can opt out of, Franzen's novel suggests, but it is one whose determining reach can be neutralized by practices of turning inward toward the local. Though absent the numbing (and thus comforting) mediation of the digital, the experience of being in physical proximity to those to whom one has ethical obligations, Franzen's novel suggests, is indispensable for the production of a loving relation that is necessary for interpersonal empathy.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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