Cybermournings: Grief in Flux From Object Loss to Collective Immortality

Stephen Hartman

This essay examines features of cyberreality that are reconfiguring loss and mourning. In turn, it queries a transformation in the nature of object loss that is taking place on the Internet. As we move from a reality based on the acceptance of loss and limit to one of infinite access, concrete losses may be less necessary to mourning than forms of access that propel the object’s capacity for collective re-use toward immortality. If we focus too intently on loss at the level of the individual and the group, we will surely overlook howcyberspace is transforming loss into a collective event. Clinical examples illustrate how the burden of loss is increasingly mitigated by mourning’s sudden twin: cybermourning.

October 27th
As soon as someone dies, frenzied construction of the future (shifting furniture, etc.): futuromania.

October 29th
In the sentence, “She’s no longer suffering,” to what does “she” refer? What does that present tense mean?

November 30th
Don’t say “mourning.” It’s too psychoanalytic. I’m not mourning. I’m suffering.

—Roland Barthes (2010, pp. 26–28)

REALITY 2.0

Clinical psychoanalysis has a very interior life. Analysts and analysands generally meet behind closed doors in a hermetic space to address deeply personal matters. Confidentiality, although often breached in subtle ways, is confirmed by the close of a door and the slumber of a couch. Consent is offered, even though analyst and patient can only guess where their journey will take them and how influence will circulate among them (Sakotopoulou, 2010, Dimen, 2010). This closed loop is theorized to be protective and containing, a holding environment that allows meaning to come forward gracefully and, in more chaotic circumstances, with a gentleness that fosters thinking and reflection (Altman, 2009).

From this perspective, psychoanalysis and cyber modes of communication could not be more at odds. Online communication takes place without doors, minus the enveloping atmosphere of mutual co-presence. The virtual space better calls for its own kind of analyst or analysts, not the psychoanalytic kind.

In this essay, about mourning and access and the event, we look online. Lately described as an atmosphere of loss and mourning, the Internet as a whole and the phenomena describe the supplen
shiny fetish object.

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aside, authors as a telemark.

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natural atmosphere of "Befindlichkeit." Dr. Hartman sees.

mutual containment, and with all manner of threats to a sealed frame. These intrusions, perhaps better called extensions, of the frame occur even in the most traditional of analyses as soon as a text arrives or an e-mail is sent (Gabbard, 2001). Despite this challenge to the frame, many analysts, myself included, have begun to view online communication with patients as inevitable, especially with patients who have Googled us long before the first session.

In this article, I discuss some important features of cyberreality that influence my thinking about mourning and loss. I reexamine these traditional concepts in a cyberlandscape of infinite access and think about how online phenomena are increasingly staging mourning as a collective event. Mourning, in the culture at large, is in a state of flux as individuals group to grieve losses online. Losing a beloved still involves all the grieving processes that psychoanalysis has well described over many years (Frankel, 1994). But, increasingly, an alternate construction of loss and mourning is taking shape in cyberspace (Walker, 2011). One form of mourning does not replace the other. Yet if we psychoanalysts focus too intently on loss at the level of the individual and the group, we will surely overlook how cyberspace is transforming loss into a collective event endowing the lost object with a new kind of immortality.

Before turning to discuss how the online collective configures psychological phenomena differently than the individual or the group, I want to take a moment to note that psychoanalytic discussion of cyber phenomena and the Internet has been generally reactive (see Hartman, 2011, for review). Recently, as an evaluator of submissions to a psychoanalytic conference that aims to explore the next psychoanalytic frontier, I read dozens of proposals that mentioned the role of the Internet in contemporary psychic life. Very few of these submissions actually theorized the Internet as a psychological space. Nor do most psychoanalytic commentators on cyber phenomena describe the patient's engagement in cyberspace in the diachronic thickness of time. For all the suppleness that is attributed to the psychoanalytic couch, the computer screen is treated as a shiny fetish toy.

In the submissions I read, many, indeed most, viewed cyberspace, one might say, in a blank, flat-screen mode, without space and time, as a site ripe for the concrete, projective display of psychological phenomena: Perverse encounters, not with real people, are noted and measured against the gold standard of fact-to-face encounters as mastered in the psychoanalytic dyad. Feared loss is any recognizable subjectivity. In print, there are noteworthy exceptions to this alarmist point of view—most impressively among writers whose skepticism of the Internet as a potential locus of psychic retreats stands in comparison to their view of it as an often-helpful medium for communication or as a portal to the enhanced elaboration of subjective multiplicity (Leary, 2004, Lingiardi, 2008). But, by and large, the way in which people interact online is deemed second-rate and hollow. Teleconferencing via iChat or Skype is feared to lose the human touch (not that analysts and patients do touch after all). The International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) recently issued guidelines for training candidates that explicitly forbid cyberanalysis.1 Ethicists worry about the cyber-trail that patients and analysts leave behind, and states have begun to regulate virtual telehealth (American Psychological Association, 2010). Questions of confidentiality aside, authors writing up cases tend to portray contact by e-mail as a frame violation as irksome as a telemarketing call.

1One may read this as an effort to protect psychoanalytic technique. On the other hand, by delimiting the psychoanalytic frame in defiance of a cultural shift in the way meaning happens, the IPA's position serves to protect a hallowed modernist principle, the Unit Self, and to isolate it from postmodern deconstruction.
Given my general belief that psychic and social life are intimately intertwined and recursively evolving, I step outside this tendency to judge the Internet on the merits of whether what happens there is deemed psychologically good or bad. I prefer to treat the Internet—not as a blank screen where psychological phenomena are projected in freeze-frame—but as an extension of the psychic realm into collective, indeed infinite, space.

COLLECTIVE SPACE

By collective space, I am not referring to group phenomena. For me, the difference between collectives and groups is best thought of structurally and spatially. In the infinite expanses of the Internet, collective gatherings are not as discrete as I take the collection of individuals into groups to be in traditional psychoanalytic understanding. Taking form as a collective object held in the imagination of like historical subjects, (Rozmarin, 2010), partnering polymorphously in liminal spaces where desire takes its name (Gonzalez, 2009), and amassing as an unconscious object in the political imaginaire of would-be activists (Crimp, 2002), collective gatherings are as often an anticipatory object as they are an entity. Indeed, if and when collectives adopt a cohesive group identity or groupself (Kieffer, 2003), their structure and purpose changes. They become totemic. As Lévi-Strauss (1966) put it (contrasting group’s games to myths’ bricolage), groups produce events by means of a structure. Collectives, by comparison, “take to pieces and reconstruct sets of events (on a psychical, socio-historical or technical plane) and use them as so many indestructible pieces for structural patterns in which they serve alternatively as ends or as means” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 33). Organized by anticipation rather than identification, as playing rather than play (Winnicott, 1971), collectives are neither as unruly as Freud imagined, as mimetic of universal mind as Jung did, nor as dominated by intrapsychic dynamics as Bion feared.

I wish to distinguish between the structured spaces and institutions where individuals gather in groups (by familial, cultural, economic, racial, linguistic, goal-oriented, or basic-affinity design) and more emergent spaces that convene and morph depending on what needs to be done in these spaces. Indeed, what happens in collective space may mimic group phenomena (and vice versa), but it has a different character: If groups are primarily about ordering and, hopefully, transforming individuals given certain structural principles (social, psychic, economic, etc.), collective space is where structuralization (Ghent, 2002), the relational transformation of structure itself, occurs among individuals (Gonzalez, 2009, Hartman, 2009).2

Psychoanalysts generally treat group phenomena as a battleground where psychic integrity is in constant flux. Projections travel among group members and the group shifts shape, but the individual retains a discrete self, as does the group.3 Groups are seen to highlight patterns by which

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2My discussion of groups is not meant to be a comprehensive review of the group literature. I am aware that I am working with a very limited selection of the literature to elaborate a comparison between groups and collectives that will help clarify the nature of collective organization online. It would be interesting to explore how the group literature has imagined, what Volkam (2009) called “large-group identity” in this regard, and to factor in the recent literature on collective mourning during truth and reconciliation inquiries in South Africa and elsewhere. Because these efforts to imagine a group are still bound by juridical borders, I am not discussing them in this study of cybercollectives.

3This is the basic principle of parliamentary procedure: to order “deliberative assembly” (Roberts, 1876).
Seemingly discrete individuals get caught up in the group’s dynamics; the group-as-a-whole takes shape in reaction to individual dynamics that the group struggles to contain. Individuals soak up and cast off elements of self and other in the service of psychic survival and, all the while, the group-as-a-whole organizes around necessary tasks and “basic assumptions” (Bion, 1961). The ensuing dynamic is shaped by phantasies about internal objects and real life circumstances that iterate the structural limitations inherent in the group psychology given individual fault lines. The group ideally evokes the primary mother–infant environment in such a way that it can become an object in and of itself to facilitate emotional development, reflection, and understanding (Pines, 1998).

One way to read this literature is to follow how the story that unfolds about collections of individuals retains the theoretical assumptions of one-person psychology read en masse. In Bion’s (1961) words, “the ‘individual’ is a group animal at war, not simply with the group, but with himself for being a group animal and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his ‘groupishness’” (p. 131). Indeed, “it will be seen that in the scheme I am now putting forward, the group can be regarded as an interplay between individual needs, group mentality and culture” (Bion, 1961, p. 55). Intrapsychic structure remains the guiding principle in the clash among the group’s unconscious titans. This way of configuring group structure by intrapsychic principles prevails even when one factors in culture: Social surround is more often treated as a third element on the psychic landscape with interests of its own than as a fractal space were new structure assembles (Harris, 2010).

Like Grossmark (2007), I am more interested in what is emergent in groups than that which is thought to be delimited by intrapsychic structure. Grossmark (2007) used principles drawn from relational psychoanalysis to “focus on the fine-grained moments when there are shifts from one state to another, from dissociation and enactment to reflection and the creation of meaning” (p. 485). His keen understanding of the group as a matrix for the collective assembly of unformulated experience emphasizes how containment and multiplicity are complexly intertwined.

Online, I argue, there is no group and, likely, no individual in the traditional sense of the term. The kind of reflective space that people call containment is provided by infinite access, rather than through the group process. The idea that knowing means uncovering something inchoate (and that the group incubates and contains this struggle) is replaced with a notion of freedom by accretion. Freedom for personal expression is a move toward ever-greater accessibility of objects via interface with others. One’s objects are not destroyed when others add to them or alter them or, even, cancel them: they morph. Structures—i.e., rules that delimit what is a self, what is a group, what is knowledge, etc.—morph accordingly.

This is a key poststructural feature of cyberspace that one would not want to overlook. An individual may suffer a psychic wound. Dyadic space allows that wound to fester in the hollow of the Other (Laplanche, 1999) until it is knowable in triadic space (Benjamin, 2004) and time shifts to allow the wound to be and not to be at the same time (Harris, 2010). If groups elucidate this process of healing structure, collectives assemble to transform wound and, therefore, structure itself. Such was the vision of the young Marx and the late Foucault.

Groups and collectives do their work simultaneously, just as people currently live in two realities that exist simultaneously: the reality of loss and limit that guides intra- and interspace development and the reality of infinite access that steers the collective. So, returning to my earlier concern about psychoanalytic bias against cyber phenomena, one would not want to immediately
assume that something is lost when individuals become cybersubjects and groups morph into collectives. Cyberspace has qualities of relationality inherent in it that require elaboration. Therefore, I believe that we psychoanalysts are not in the position to judge the psychopathological parameters of cyberreality until we have updated the concepts we use to map it.

**COLLECTIVE LOSS**

Loss, it seems to me, is among the first concepts to be reconsidered. Where analysts once judged patient’s reality testing by reference to a principle that certain illusions must be lost for psychic equilibrium and intersubjective encounter to flourish, the Internet is stubbornly inviting of ever-rechargeable multiplicity. Loss, as I have written elsewhere (Hartman, 2011), is increasingly lost. You and I understand each other online, not through acceptance of the limits of self and other, but through infinite play and reconfiguration. Indeed, as the author of a recent expose, entitled *Things to Do in Cyberspace When You Are Dead*, observed, it’s possible to live forever on the Internet whether one wants to or not (Walker, 2011).

A number of psychoanalytic critics of the Internet have protested that, in the kind of rapid replacement of one self-state for another that occurs online, there is no time for intersubjective reflection and no connection to embodied meaning. From a Lacanian perspective, in cyberspace, one can easily suffer the illusion that the Real is there within our grasp and even malleable (Nusselder, 2009). From a phenomenological point of view, one might argue that there is no there there to experience self from. To me, arguments such as these hinge on a suspect notion that some core self fingers in a zone of physical and psychological reality that is prior to representation and social articulation. Even if one were to accept this premise, it seems to me somehow beside the point in lived time. In a cyberlandscape, I might know you (and therefore, me) more by allowing you to continually morph than by accepting our inevitable truncatedness.

Furthermore, in a matrix of infinite access, nothing prevents me from imagining your self through all the permutations of other that surround and envelop us. I can go into a chat room and speak as you or for you with the full expectation that you may do the same. There are no rules to prevent me from donning your identity. Weird as that may sound, analysts deal with this situation all the time in psychoanalysis under the guise of projection and fantasy. There are subtle differences, however. By comparison to a paranoid schizoid complementarity, where our interaction limits subjective experience to a projected matrix of you versus me, cyberspace thwarts doer and done-to dynamics (Benjamin, 2004) by virtue of its inherent complexity. In a closed dyad, where interaction is guided by a sense of impingement, we might be stuck, but in a chat room, my projection of you forces something new to happen to each of us because of the open-ended chain it initiates. If we don’t have enough thirdness to yield reflective function within the interiority of our exchange, it doesn’t matter: Meaning will take shape in the rapid assimilation of our exchange among other online users. As modern culture shifts toward ever-greater elasticity of object-related experience in collective space, the priority on object-loss shifts toward immortality. An intriguing, if not bizarre, Website, Lifenaut.com, encourages users to eternalize their digital presence in the form of a digital avatar. Even postdeath, the avatar evolves as new information about you joins its database.

In this way, the group’s task to appoint a working narrative is taken a step further by collective action. If you and I face off on a blog, someone will inevitably offer a third, and forth, and fifth point of view. Articulations of what is at stake are subject to counterpoint as something can be lost or gained. The self-loop is not a closed category (Gurvitch).

Whereas my temporal contingency is a core aspect of being, and rigid, other times to breathe and to let the cyberspace preoccupations of the day and the odd bedfellows that come along with it, exist alongside more enduring collectives.

As such, collective mourning becomes a necessary part of the process, alongside collective celebration.

**Mourning 2.0**

Consider if you will, the form of mourning is a call to action, a process of mourning that typically attends human dispossession and dispossession of the body.

On the day we mourn the loss of the city, we mourn the loss of the body, the loss of the body, the loss of the body. On the day we seen refer to the street, we mourn the loss of the body, the loss of the body, the loss of the body. On the day we refer to the street, we mourn the loss of the body, the loss of the body, the loss of the body. On the day we refer to the street, we mourn the loss of the body, the loss of the body, the loss of the body.

4The same collect
point of view. Because there is no effort after closure, even the most entrenched complementarities are subject to constant critique. Whether one hears criticism in a kill-or-be-killed frame or as something constructive will vary from moment to moment. But the important point is that the loop is not closed. Learning about oneself becomes very public as oneself becomes a suspect category (Guralnik and Simeon, 2010).

Whereas some critics fear the Internet as a site of either isolation or diffusion, the spatial and temporal contours of infinite access seem to me, rather, to pose opportunities for fantastical identification (Corbett, 2009) and a kind of empathy that respects individuality’s social flare. At the Internet’s best, relations of mutual influence online are in a dialectical tension with omnipotence: Access overcomes me to the point where my need to control and delimit the experience of those around me yields to our capacity to make something new happen. The old version of me need not be disavowed.

Just as I will struggle with envy and loss, I will meet the deaths of loved ones and the limitations of what I may or may not accomplish. Among my cast of selves, some will be brittle and rigid, others fluid; some will gape for air and others will assemble context in ways that create room to breathe (Harris, 2005). If psychoanalysis fields reparations to lost objects (Frankiel, 1994), cyberspace presents objects for resignification (Butler, 1990). The two strategies may seem like odd bedfellows, but this is the nature of Reality 2.0. Old representations of self and others can exist alongside new ones, informing my transformation or not, as space and time allow.

As such, collective loss online is a very different species of loss from the kinds of losses that humans, who individually group into collectivities, share. Our lost objects gain immortality in collective space. I am not arguing that losses need no longer be suffered, but that that suffering is increasingly mitigated and reconstituted by mourning’s sudden twin: cybemourning.

Mourning 2.0

Consider if you will, a brief vignette to open a window onto a cyberexpansive of mourning. It may not immediately strike you as being about mourning: No one died, and the exercise of mourning is a call to action, rather than a contemplative retreat. The subject is a social group and the loss is one of a collective sense of self, rather than the kind of conflictual ego state that psychoanalysts typically attend to.

On the day when Prop 8 swept aside gays’ right to marry in California, San Franciscans hit the streets in spontaneous demonstrations that erupted under the banner of the rainbow flag. Called to action by mass e-mails, Tweets, Facebook alerts, and AOL instant messages, gays, lesbians, straights, trans people, drag queens, children, and grandparents banded together in protest to mourn the loss of a basic civil right. Voters had overturned a court order that had briefly ensured marriage equality; a collective sense of personal integrity threatened to dissolve in a flash. Just at the moment when the protest started to heat up, my 20-something patient, Brad, and I instinctively checked our iPhones because, although in session, we recognized the whirl of police helicopters overhead—a siren call that each of us remembered from living in New York after September 11th. In the street outside, people were beginning to gather. Among them, a few older men and women wore the anachronistic pink triangle embossed with the Act-Up motto Silence = Death to mark
losses then and now. I had recently read that the bulk of gay youth could not identify that slogan—one that had so marked my generation’s coming of age during the AIDS crisis. Our losses, in many ways, defined us. Brad did not know the reference even though he is in the highest risk group for exposure to HIV. As one of the younger people yelling, “Equality—now!” he hails from a generation whose identity is not being shaped by loss but, rather, by access.

I begin these comments about mourning and cyberreality with this snapshot of digitized political culture because I want to highlight two aspects of psychoanalytic culture that are perched at a moment of significant change. The first is the understanding of what constitutes loss and mourning in a moment when the Internet makes it possible for memories that may have lingered to rejuvenate, for people to have an interactive presence even after they die, for a person to connect with whomever as whoever wishes, and for boundaries to expand beyond physical constraints. The second is to reconcile object-loss (including the loss of self) with a contextual, social constructivist understanding of what constitutes a person (Guralnik and Simeone, 2010) or a self-state (Hartman, 2010) online. Yes, parents may die, relationships fragment, rights may be lost rendering qualities of self object, bodies do have real limits, but the Internet has made it possible to circumvent these losses without disavowing them.

Traditionally, perversion has been understood as the disavowal of loss. The pervert renders loss unnecessary by shaping objects after a fashion that prevents loss’s presentation to mind. Insofar as the pervert disavows the differences between the sexes and the generations (Chassagneu Smirgel, 1984), perversion hinges on finitude. In the traditional reality, objects linger as images, as spectral presences waiting to be finally laid to rest, mourned. In Reality 2.0, mourned objects become enigmas, rather than ghosts. I can never possess you, but if I can search for you indefinitely, you will always live in me as you live beyond me. Perhaps you will help me to never find you? As you multiply, in what I understand as the hollowed-out transference (Laplanche, 1999), we each thrive. Indeed, the same difference to the constraining features of time, place, and person that used to be called a grip on reality is increasingly evidence of isolation rather than common sense. If I refuse to use Google, I can do research, but can I search?

A shift in focus, from understanding truth by homing in on it (an archaeological approach to knowledge: e.g., peeling away layers of defense to get to the kernel of the unconscious) to gathering possible truths by ever expanding-outward (a linking approach to interactive communication: perhaps, fostering play among multiple self states?) frames how people are increasingly able to imagine searching to forge meaning. Consider three quick views over the new cybermourning landscape:

1. The popular social networking site Facebook retains members’ pages in memoriam. By recent estimate, 408,000 Facebook users passed away in 2011 without deleting their digital presence (www.entrustit.com). Just recently, Facebook announced a new feature to help members find and reconnect with long-lost friends—even dead ones. Although this feature is shrouded in controversy, generating legal and media attention, it is impossible to take it away.

2. In defiance of state censorship, Iranians (and most recently Syrian and Yemeni rebels), tortured and imprisoned though their compatriots continue to be, are called to rally on

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5 Please allow me to repeat for clarity’s sake that one does not replace the other; for the moment, at least, the two must find a way to exist in tandem.
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Twitter. The democratic vision of the Arab Spring cannot be crushed by force alone:
Access to others is as simple a matter as owning a cell phone. I follow events in Iran in
live time on the Facebook page of a person with whom I lost touch more than 20 years ago.
3. Brad’s birth mother (with whom he has recently been corresponding after arduous Internet
research on adoption Web sites) is a woman who lives in a far away village that he and I
have seen in bird’s eye view on Google Earth.

What makes these moments of access different from earlier innovations in technology is that
the Internet, unlike, say, the telephone in prior years, is not understood to be a conduit to real
interaction, nor as a resource such as a telephone book, but, rather, as a space. In this space,
collective events occur. Graphic representations of these collective events do not function as
memento mori in the same way that photographs in lockets or cameos posit transitional objects.
They are tags to be posted in collective space. One connects from online photo to online photo as
if playing leap frog. The vector is not from melancholia to mourning, from holding on to letting
go, but from one version of a cherished experience to the next. The object’s vitality relies on its
capacity for reuse.

Over time, concrete losses may be less necessary to mourning than forms of access that
resignify them. I do not deny that “time heals all” or that “people come together to mourn
and take comfort in one another, and then it gets easier” (Stephen Seligman, July 24, 2009).
In cybermourning, the emphasis is not on reparation to the loss but on transforming the structure
of experience. The picture of me that you tag is not me; it is me becoming something new as you
pass me along. Over time, if all goes well, a discourse of impingement gives way to something
more like multiplicity.

By contrast, throughout the history of psychoanalysis, constraint and loss has framed
what people call reality and, with it, the development of subjectivity. Dating from Freud’s
(1920) efforts to demonstrate the reality principle’s intervention in primary process and extended
through the evolution of the discipline, psychoanalysis has measured what a person is able to
do by comparison to his relative estimation of what he cannot or should not do. People limit
themselves for a measure of intrapsychic freedom and interpsychic understanding. This might
take the form of the ego staving off the wild impulses of the id or the depressive position holding
away over aggressive drives toward an unobtainable object. The balance of health, in this
framework, rests on coming to terms with loss. Fantasy and creative illusions—in particular,
transference—have been seen as useful to the extent that they prepare people for the inevitable
sacrifice necessary to the acceptance of a self/other dichotomy: termination (Davies, 2009).
Subjectivity—and intersubjectivity—are intrinsically made possible by constraint. Containment,
kind of psychic limit setting broached by the loss of omnipotence in the presence of an Other,
as Bion (1970) and Winnicott (1971) well understood, engenders reality. Play is seen as the most
creative form of containing losses and transforming them into opportunities.

Although it hasn’t happened yet, and it may never fully take shape independent of the reality
based in loss that I have been describing, cyberspace launches the possibility that access will
trump containment as the bulwark of meaning. As I elaborated elsewhere (Hartman, 2011), in
Reality 2.0, cybereality frames experience in a matrix of ever expanding limits: “Not circum-
scribed by potential space that articulates the subject in deference to the environment, it has the
expansiveness of infinite space. Not constrained by consensus, it is a reality that need simply be
declared. I present myself, therefore I am; I give access to myself, therefore I relate” (Hartman,
2011, pp. 472-473). Any image or thought or gesture that I post will outlive my intention and, indeed, my life. People may join together to interact with me even after I am gone.

Typically, scholars meet to reinterpret the work of a colleague who has died. A text is revisited to celebrate the author's influence on one generation to the next. Contrast this lovely tradition with an art piece by the Dutch sculptor, Maarten Baas. Baas scours original, iconic pieces of furniture and presents them as new work. As seen in a recent San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition (Bishop et al., 2010), his 2004 piece, Zig Zag chair (Rietfeld) from the series Where there is Smoke, is a petrified version of the Dutch modern master's. Charred to perfection, Baas's neither celebrates nor remembers Rietfeld's minimalist wooden chair. His interest is not in demonstrating Rietfeld's influence, but in shifting the designation of museum-worthy masterpiece from product to process. The discourse of preserving and collecting, not to mention sitting, is called into question.

Painters, sculptors, and DJ's have investigated similar tropes in recent years. In a good electronic music mash-up, the object is not "covered" (as when other performers cover a song); it is gutted. It is broken down to basic elements that can be reused over and over again to establish a DJ's style. As New York Times music critic, Jon Pareles (2010), explained, "dance music is no place to quibble over authorship" (p. C3, ital. added). DJs dissect songs down to usable elements and surround them with "new superstructures." Sampling is a spatial feature of cybermourning, just as the eulogy inscribes the scene of traditional loss. The summer of 2010 was all about Lipps Inc.'s 1980 disco anthem, Funky Town. Likely no one knows or cares what became of Lipps but, as I listen to Ibiza Global Radio online, I can confirm that the beat structure and melodic riff of Funky Town lives on.8

One might be legitimately wary of having his or her memory mashed up. Still, is this the same kind of ironic afterlife that Elvis impersonators hew, or is it something new—an attenuated kind of life contrived by access rather than lifespan? If identifications and disidentifications are not bounded by the reality of person but by access to the infinite, interactive vitality of his or her resignation, how then should we think about self or omnipotence? What kind of act is mourning—is it the acknowledgement of a loss or the celebration of the proliferating meanings that emanate from a bracketed life?

As psychoanalysis gathers a greater appreciation for the interpenetration of psychic and social life, and as the Internet propels people ever more into collective space, it behooves analysts to revisit and retool concepts that were developed to describe intrapsychic dynamics to accommodate the recursive elaboration of personal development and social context. Framing this imperative in regard to mourning and melancholia, Crimp (2002) persuasively argued that people shun melancholia, mourning's pathological cousin, because it relentlessly mirrors society's unmetabolized prejudices. Crimp's detailed study of collective mourning rituals during the AIDS crisis illustrates how deceased abnormal subjects, who continue to live as abject objects in the collective unconscious, can only be mourned in melancholic rituals that attenuate resistance to normativity.

Likewise, gender may be "melancholic" as a theoretical construct (Butler, 1995), but analysts concern themselves clinically with one boy or girl at a time. In the clinical context, analysts rarely see the loss of an individual as a split that occurs in social contiguity. The level of the personal encounters with loss, the remembrance and increase of an individual (Bolas, 1995) in a collective ever-expanding field of ambivalence may be the rituals of mourning and with the object.

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see the lost Oedipal object as the representative of a set of normative values that are contested by a class of like subjects. This focus on mourning at the level of the individual’s loss reinforces a split that already isolates individual’s gendered needs for security and recognition from their social context (Layton, 2006). I am not arguing that the tasks of mourning have ceased to exist at the level of the individual; nor would I suggest that a collective cyber solution trumps a deeply personal experience. What I do feel certain of is that mourning is increasingly not synonymous with loss, nor does it happen in an isolated period of time.

In Reality 2.0, the contrast between individual and collective tasks of mourning is both stark and increasingly blurred. When a protected class’s right to marry is lost, for instance, how can an individual mourn? Although I might tend to my narcissistic bruises in a melancholic mood (Bollas, 1989), my linked-in-ness to my class via cyberconnection propels me to join Others in a collective space. I receive several e-mail alerts daily with links to other mourners in an ever-expanding chain that recognizes the loss and keeps it afloat. This political example of ambivalence, held en masse, is becoming the model for Web sites that generate collective rituals of mourning that attenuate loss indefinitely as a boon to new experiences among the living and with the dead.7

Remember Freud’s insight about mourning: “Just as mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live, so does each single struggle of ambivalence loosen the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it. It is possible for the process in the Ucs. to come to an end, either after the fury has spent itself or after the object has been abandoned as valueless” (Freud, 1917, pp. 255–256). One might say that cyberspace recharges the libidinal cathexis to the object, reassembles it (Harris, 2005), and that mourning launches the object into ever-new iterations such that the ego is no longer impelled to give up the object. The ego, like the object, engages in ever more iterations. Mourning can remain incomplete as long as it is socially productive. Melancholia, as Crimp (2002) wrote, gives way to militancy and mourning becomes a public, creative event. Cybermourning has no need to end, so long as it is a beacon to ever-expanding parameters of relatedness.

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As I began to write this article, I was fortunate to come upon an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times (Cohen, 2009, p. A14) that illustrates my argument more concisely than a traditional clinical vignette.

Adam Cohen, writing as the Times’ Editorial Observer, recounts an experience that is, by now, familiar to all. A long-lost law school classmate named Luke befriended him on Facebook. (Like other social networking sites, Facebook facilitates these kinds of reunions by linking users’ lists of friends. When you log on to Facebook, it scans your friends’ rosters of friends to suggest people you might also like to befriend. Likewise, one is often greeted by the welcome—or

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7See, for example, www.caringbridge.org. On this site, families and loved ones link together during health crises in a manner that sets collective mourning in motion before, during, and after a person’s physical decline.
much feared, as the case may be—invitation from a long-lost acquaintance seeking to reconnect.)

Cohen was happy to "reconnect" with Luke, a man whom he had admired and whose regular updates about his environmentalist projects and humanitarian concerns spoke to his own. I put reconnect in quotes here, because it is not clear that Cohen and Luke ever met in person or chatted one-to-one online, other than to accept each other’s friendship, retrieve each other’s posts, and follow each other’s news.


Until Luke’s death, I had not considered what would happen as my Facebook friends began to die. Facebook allows you to de-friend dead people the same way you de-friend live ones. I suppose you could view deleting dead friends as simply routine updating of the sort people have long done with their hard-copy address books. But it seems callous to look into the eyes of an old friend and hit "remove" [p. A14].

Cohen continued to explain that, although an online memorial cannot grant the physical coming together in space and time that an in-person memorial offers, it

is remarkably democratic—instead of a few people speaking, anyone who friended the deceased can offer a memory or a reflection. It is also long-lasting: Memorial services end after an hour or two, but a Facebook page remains. It can even be, in an odd way, uniquely spiritual. It is striking how many of the comments written on Luke’s wall are addressed directly to him [p. A14].

Cohen (2009) brought a tear to my eye, as he concluded that the cybermemorial “is a tribute to a good person gone too soon and a reminder that, as the poet said, his death diminishes me” (p. A14). In this line, Luke touched me very directly as I was, at the time, consumed with worry about my mother’s pending cancer diagnosis. Luke and Cohen brought my worries back into the social context and I became, I confess, somewhat more sympathetic to my mother’s telephone habit of recounting the personal travails of each of her elderly friends. My own worries about loss came alive in connection to others’. This may not appear to be very different from what happens in traditional mourning at the level of the individual. But, at the level of the collective, cybermourning alters what it means to be, as Cohen (2009) said, “diminished” (p. A14) and, in that collective space, it changes how people will formulate (Stern, 2003) and deal with this wound.

In Cohen’s example, Luke is acknowledged to be deceased. But what will happen over time as the loss of Luke wanes and the community of Luke grows? Will Luke continue to exist as an empty hologram? Or, perhaps, given that so much interactive assessment of his ideas, his bodily person, his work, his travels, his relations with others, continues to thrive, how far out on a limb would I be to suggest that Luke’s death marks what Harris (2005) called a “strange attractor”—a subtle reorganization of the state of his emergent “self.” Of course, Luke cannot reply to posts that are made on his behalf. As a person in the flesh, he is gone. But as a person to be mourned,
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as Hillary's observation ("I would be lost without this") portrays, he lives. This, I might add, is
ot a reified entity, as in "Luke was this person who inspired me." Paradoxically, in death, Luke
is this life in process (Ghent, 1992).

I can imagine that one might retort that Luke only lives in the manner of any sage whose
life and motives are interpreted for reflective purposes, that this is the kind of "intersubjectivity"
that inspires religious hermeneutics or political hagiography. To this I reply: Will the real Ché
Guevara please stand up? We celebrate revolutionaries differently than we laud founders. Ché is
to cyberspace as George Washington is to the United States dollar bill.

I tried to imagine what might happen if Luke or his mourners were engaged in psychoanalysis.
How would I think about Luke if Cohen were my patient? Would I imagine Luke dead or alive, a
person in fantasy or in reality? As Cohen's object, would I imagine him lost or immortal or both?
What part of Luke would be shaped by the circumstances of Luke's death and what part by his
continuing life? And for Cohen's sense of his own mortality and the vitality of his lost objects,
would I be able to hold two paradigms of loss in mind at the same time? I think the task demands
more than the kind of both—and approach that one adopts when containing the plausibility that
an object is both good and bad. It seems to me that one must constantly imagine how, for Cohen,
psychic structure and the structure of culture evolve in a recursive relation in the space that Luke
has become.

If Luke were my patient, would I continue to follow his life online? Or, just suppose, what
if Luke had not, in fact, died, but had fallen into a coma? What if the report of Luke's death
had been an error, and Luke survived the accident only to return to consciousness months later.
Perhaps Luke later learned that he had been pronounced dead while he continued to live online?
I imagine Luke reading his wall caught between multiple self-states, various stages of in-life
and near-life and after-life, needing to reconcile them in much the same way that Bromberg
(1996) described "standing in the spaces." Luke would be shuffling among self-states that are
dissociated or mobilized in relation to the manner by which they are assembled and/or mourned
by an interactive community. Cohen, by virtue of his online mourning, would, in some ways,
avatars in the manner of an artist who strictly curates his legacy? Or, would he allow them to
inform him alive as they now evolve with him deceased? What position would I take toward

Fantastic as all this may seem, it is not so far from familiar clinical reality with one major
hitch: Loss is neither the focus, nor is letting go the task of cybermourning. Brad, an artist who is
adopted, is a genius at writing computer code. Ever since he began to learn details of the circum-
stances of his birth, he has been programming an algorithm that inserts data about his birth into
his known life narrative. A computer program that he has written graphically represents various
outcomes of his interwoven biography. Details emerge that have the qualities of dream work:
Experiences that had always seemed enigmatic to him take graphic shape and have a narrative
plausibility. After years of carrying the weight of being given up, the yarn that cyber technology
allows him to spin has helped us formulate dissociated aspects of his experience that had been,
for all intents and purposes, foreclosed. Together, we acknowledge Brad's sense of loss—as it
is, indeed, very real. At the same time, we also graph stories from the access a different kind of
mourning provides.
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