Laurence Scott

Speaker Key:

MS: Max Saunders

LS: Laurence Scott

M: Male

F: Female

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MS: Well, a very warm welcome to you all to tonight's discussion which is the fifth event in the series called Life Online Today and Tomorrow, put on as part of the Ego Media research project. Which is a five year project funded by the European Research Council to investigate the impact of digital and social media on the ways in which people present themselves. My name is Max Saunders and I co-direct the Centre for Life-Writing Research here at King's which hosts the project. And it's a great pleasure to introduce our guest speaker tonight, Doctor Laurence Scott. Laurence is a lecturer in English and creative writing at Arcadia University, and his essays and criticism have appeared in The Guardian, the Financial Times and the London Review books amongst other publications.

In 2011 he was named a new generation thinker by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the BBC. And in 2014 he won the Royal Society of Literature Jerwood prize for non-fiction. And in his book, The Four-Dimensional Human was published by Heinemann last year and was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson prize. And it's really that book and the ideas in it that we want to discuss tonight. As many of you will know it's subtitled Ways of Being in the Digital World is very much the subject of the Ego Media project too. And it seems to me, Laurence, that like a lot of the best work on the digital era you take what might be called a sort of existential approach to the field because there's not so much with what the technology can do for us or how it works, but what it does to us as humans, and specifically what it does to our existence or our ways of being. And I wanted to start by asking you about the background to that in a way, Joshua Cohen reviewing the book in the New Statesman wondered about the philosophical influences on the book and suspected there might be a trace of Heidegger in the chapter on the Cabin in the Woods, for example. So I wanted to start simply by asking you that, sort of question about which thinkers would be most useful in sort of thinking the digital today.

LS: Yeah. Well, I mean partly why it was an existential approach was that I didn't really know that much about the technical side of the digital [0:02:23] at all. I don't own a smartphone, although writers [0:02:28] when they're beached, so they're having to write with an internet computer that mimics being out and about in the world with a smartphone. I was very much approaching it from the outside, and my training at King's in comparative literature really sort of left me with existential questions. The big … I suppose it really

came not so much from the philosophers directly, but the novelists who are getting their philosophers second-hand, E. M. Forster's a big literary passion of mine and he said that he could never really [0:02:59] Freud and Jung himself, he had to get those directly from [0:03:04] who felt that they had read them. So I was thinking about … it started off with really a modernist novelist's notion of what a person might be and the possibilities for, or even how a novelist of that time dramatized just a human being and then actual so-called environment thinking.

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That was the early 20th century idea of a human on their own and how is that dramatized in the fiction, so there's a good seeing … can be really sort of a blueprint for that in Henry James' Portrait of a Lady, Isabel Archer, who spends a whole chapter sitting by a fire thinking about her marriage and the disastrous choices she's made. And it was technically innovative because James was so willing to go so interior for so long. But it was really he was most proud of he said, "Of all the scenes in the novel this was the one scene I'm the most proud of." And it must have been because he felt it dramatized some basic truth of what human solitude was like. So now, and I'm teaching, I teach a course called The Human Condition: A Digital Age, I base so much on this book, I asked them to read … the students to read that chapter to see how would the Henry James 2.0 of now, the 21st century, what would be the prototypical or sort of archetypal arrangement of a human look like and how he dramatized that. So the modern [0:04:23] helpful in that way.

MS: It's interesting. And the other side of the question would be to say, you know, that if you need a Henry James 2.0 then Henry James 1 is then … is now too old fashioned, you know, that is there something so new about the world of the digital that the writers and thinkers of the pre digital age simply can't get us very far with it. And did you feel sort of that happening in thinking about those modernist writers that you reached a kind of a limit, you know, beyond which they're no use anymore?

LS: Yeah, I think I mean I just think like just last night an interview, a really weird interview on YouTube with Susan Sontag and John Berger talking about storytelling and Susan Sontag was saying 1983 or whatever, we get stories from all these places, from television, from books etc. And just the fact that she didn't say the internet in a sense was just a strange historical blind spot which she couldn't have even imagined that being a source of storytelling. I don't think that the older writers will be no good to us but I think say for instance, novelists of now if they want to portray isolation they're going to have to create quite contrived environments or reasons to get that. I mean you see it over time in sort of a populous way with sort of soap operas who have quite sort of elaborate dramatic structures. That often is short circuit the digital connectiveness of people in order for the drama to persist in the way it does because so much of the drama the western civilisation has grown up with was hinged on people being separate from one another for at least some periods of time.

MS: And ignorant of some powerful piece of information.

LS: That's right, that hasn't been broadcast everywhere.

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MS: I wanted to ask about the four-dimensional phase in the title, the four-dimensional human because you start very interestingly, and particularly interestingly for me sort as a literary scholar of the kind of early 20ᵗʰ century, quoting a novel that not many other people have probably read these days by Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad called The Inheritors in which a character from the fourth-dimension appears. And it has a strange effect on the narrator and some of the other characters, particularly in this very haunting scene which you quote where they're walking on the downs above Canterbury and looking down at the cathedral. And this woman from the fourth-dimension sort of makes some strange cry, doesn't she? And the tower of the cathedral suddenly goes out of the perpendicular and it's as if the kind of tangible three-dimensional world no longer exists or no longer exists in the same way. And you take this notion of four-dimensions as a sort of metaphor to think through the experience of the digital. And I just wondered if you could tell us a bit more about sort of why that seems such an appealing metaphor for it?

LS: Yeah, I remember where I was when I thought of that particular thing because I was going to write a completely different book and then this ended up being the book I wrote. But in that first book I was thinking about digital life and I was sitting at the breakfast table and I was just thinking about people who were uploading images online all the time. So it's just a clichéd example of the photographed meal that then gets uploaded. And I was just thinking, because I think I was having breakfast and I was looking at my own sort of plate of eggs and I thought if, you know, this moment in time I could choose to catalogue, to give it an adverse sort of index or another vector of life. I didn't even know [0:08:15] that I meant but I thought there is this moment that exists sort of now. But it could also have another life as being replicated as an image and reproduced and centre around and appear in people's pocket who are friends of me on social media. And then it would be commented upon, it would have sort of maybe sort of annotationed moments, editorialised, all of these things that have sort of a trail of an afterlife.

And I remember being an undergrad university student and getting really excited by the idea of the fourth-dimension as time and how you couldn't just describe the glass of water and its physical properties, but you had to talk about it in terms of duration. So how long has it been here and that was really how the fourth-dimension was thought of, but the digital life seems rife with these moments of the everyday physical world, but also have this other side to them, this other dimension of a digital existence. And so I thought it would be an ad metaphor and then I started hunting around for sort of evidence of how the fourth-dimension had been used. And it turned out the heyday of the fourth-dimension was almost a household popular termism in the 1890s until about 1910 it was in vogue. And then I discovered the Ford novel, The Inheritors and that worked for me with the image, the scene that you just described, Max, was the fact that the visitor from the fourth-dimension when she makes this strange bellowing deafening cry that hits the world. It

was very much that the fourth-dimension wasn't a separate plane outside of the everyday reality, but it was sort of penetrating it and warping it in some way.

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And that's so much how we feel about the evolution of the trajectory of digital life since the early days of the internet in the 90s that was thought of as a separate place that you ventured to and all the language was one was of a frontier of discovery of going somewhere else. Microsoft's early tagline was where do you want to go today? But that has really mutated in a very short period of time into just sort of the immobile term online, and we're online all the time. And so there's no sort of clear distinctions anymore between these dimensions. So I was very pleased when I came across that because I thought it illustrated it or dramatized it. So it just became a controlling motif or metaphor. When I say fourth-dimension in this book I just really mean the digital side of life.

MS: There's a lovely passage where you remember the noise of the old fashioned modems and how when people were trying to connect to the internet there was this sort of whirring noise while you were waiting for things to happen, it was like drilling through to another place, sort of one hole through to…

LS: And it could subsidise at any time if say you needed the phone in the house, you know, sort of that little portly drill that just sort of collapse in on it.

MS: But I suppose in a way what I'm getting it as whether what it's really about is time or space because it seems to be both doesn't it, that in one sense your meal that you're about to eat becomes a moment that can be reflected later. So it becomes timeless or omni-temporal. But it also becomes omnipresent because it's in any place at once where someone is.

LS: Well, it's a form of simultaneity I guess, which involves both space and time.

MS: One of the things that … I mean Laurence very kindly said you might do some readings as part of the talk tonight.

LS: From start to finish.

MS: That's right, and we'll have the discussion in three days' time. But what one passage I wanted to ask about was the discussion of Airbnb which is, you know, is partly the example of sort of travelling through space and time and suddenly finding yourself in, you know, other people's houses. And you write very well, I think, about sort of how the

substantial world seems to become insubstantial on the internet. But being substantial develops a kind of materiality, so perhaps if you'd like to…

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LS: Sure, give a very brief excerpt from that. I was interested in the sort of unkindness of Airbnb and we can talk about actually the politics of it after the reading about what sort of the CEO, who's called Brian Chesky, his sort of vision for Airbnb is quite sinister. Okay, so I begin the sort of section talking about because Airbnb happened to me rather than I sort of I sort of partook in it. I was living on the second floor in West London and there was a pizza place on the first floor and then another flat that had been derelict, it seemed to be sort of unoccupied when I moved in. And there was squatters lived there and then it finally got sort of gentrified and [0:13:21] up. And then the story begins with the new tenant arriving. During my second summer there, envelopes addressed to a professor began to appear. One morning I heard the yaps of a dog in the hallway. A writer had bought the flat of shadows, and she greeted me in a boiler suit, announcing that she was going to finish painting the floor and then go on Open Book. I tentatively returned the rolling pin to its drawer, that's the reference to the rolling pin I had sort of holstered to my mattress to sort of ward off the secretive shadow [0:13:52] who'd been there before. Unsurprisingly the flat was only meant as a pied-à-terre, and during her absent times, the writer said, she would be accepting guests from Airbnb ("Do you know it?"). And so it was that my life continued to be perched above a thoroughfare, with none of the reassuring routines of constant neighbours.

At startling times the main door would open and strange, woollen voices would come through the walls, except that now they were often joined with the huffs and strains of suitcase haulage. Indeed, while the revolving door continued to spin, a significant change had occurred. The place had been transformed from a secretive refuge for the temporarily dispossessed and the desperate — a black-hole asylum whose boiler never ran and where letters could be lost and demands evaded — into a spruce and transparent little crash-pad for the global traveller.

I looked up the flat's listing on Airbnb, and soon found the first name and picture of my professor, smiling politely in her good pearls. I could read both the reviews of her visitor-customers and her thoughts on them: the acts of kindness and mutual goodwill, as well as vivid details about one disastrous stay involving (separately) improper linen usage and a toilet bowl full of steeped urine. A man I had seen leaning against the tree outside the pizza shop was now in the gallery of client-friends, and by clicking on him I could see where he lives, goes to university, and peruse samples of his prose.

A key writer in the late-Victorian vogue for the fourth dimension was Edwin A. Abbott, whose 1884 novel Flatland is both a social satire and an allegory of inter-dimensional travel. In the story a three-dimensional being visits the two-dimensional plane-world of the book's title, which is inhabited by sentient lines and triangles and priestly circles. The 3D visitor, a sphere, describes to a Flatlander his higher perception of two-dimensional

space: "From that position of advantage I discerned all that you speak of as solid (by which you mean 'enclosed on four sides'), your houses, your churches, your very chests and safes, yes even your insides and stomachs, all lying open and exposed to my view." Airbnb relies precisely on this kind of exposure, a 4D scrutinising of our three-dimensional world. The flat below me had become like Flatland. Its ceiling had been blown away and I could, if I liked, peer inside it, see its tables and chairs and carpet without ever passing through the front door. And in the case of bad reviews, it is often the private messiness of the body that is revealed, its unsporting excretions and stains, the clots of hairs in the plughole that soil the reputations of slovenly guests.

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MS: Thank you. And that gives it a terrific sense of the different kind of experience the internet can give you of elsewhere, you know, somewhere you've sort of dimly imagined as the flat below and then suddenly you're in it through your sort of 4D kit. You also write about the sort of corollary of that but the fact that such 4D experiences have on our 3D selves. And that's quite disturbing, isn't it, I think, I mean the suggestion that what effect is that if, you know, the flat downstairs can be turned into Flatlands and you can see through the roof of it. Then the world you're living in, seems flat in another kind of way, I mean in a sort of, you know, sense of being denuded of substance or depleted of reality.

LS: Yeah, I mean that central irony is one of the things that are unintended to write about but it occurred to me just of various case studies that I've took was that I'm [0:17:44] seem to be that the way we've been asked as citizens and consumers to exist online was becoming conquertised and it was actually I realised it was becoming more let's say insubstantial in certain ways in comparison. So the big dream, the big initial sort of utopianism about the internet was that it would allow you to become anyone that allowed you to occupy all different types of subject positions, that you could be a sort of shapeshifting quicksilver self. And yet services such as Airbnb demand that we be stable, conquertised, crystallised online subjects that part of the so-called trust economy of which Airbnb is a part relies on the fact that you can link in, if you want to, sort of stay in someone's house.

You can sell them by the fact that you're not an axe murderer because you have all these friends online, that you're digital presence as such that it sort of corroborates you. And it no longer becomes a case of experimentation in the mainstream sense of online life but more a case in which you can be everywhere, multiple places at once but you always have to be the same stable reliable person. And this has a consumer gender to it too, you know, shops have done very well … consumerism has done very well about us being predictable and stable. The last thing the consumer society wants is for us to be shapeshifting identities because they're now shapeshifting tastes and they don't know how to market to us. So the real irony has been that in order to participate fully in digital life has demanded a crystallisation of the self, versus the virtual promises.

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MS: I mean I'm curious, well, that takes us back to Henry James and Isabel Archer and the imagination, doesn't it? Because one of the things I wanted to ask you about was about fantasy really of the internet and how it seems to me in some ways one of the things it does is open up a different kind of space for fantasy, for society to imagine possibilities, possible selves, possible destinations. I mean that Microsoft tag about where do you want to be today is one example. I mean I suppose, I mean you've got a wonderful discussion in the book of the idea of porn not as sort of pornography itself but as a kind of metaphor that gets applied to other kinds of consumption really. I mean things like food porn or property porn and why it is that these terms have become so popular. And it seems to me that one way of understanding that is that they administer to that sense of fantasy, that it makes it easier to imagine yourself living in a [0:20:46] house or eating a fantasy meal or whatever. Whereas on the other hand the version you're describing tonight is the opposite of that, isn't it? It's a kind of closing down of possibilities and the narrowing of [0:21:05].

LS: Well, I think there is a real conservative view of subject formation that's being [0:21:09] on the internet, again, by and large in the mainstream. Our mainstream usage is one, I mean the Microsoft adverts of where do you want to go today and the idea that all the browsers were called things like Navigator, Safari, Explorer, this sort of Google Chrome now. And a lot of those sort of same adverts were encoding all the ties that you have and always embedding and reminding you about the networks of relationships. And that seems to be the cash cow in a sense of how the internet has been, at least, sold to us, and that is really dictating our behaviour. There's adverts now that encourage you to compile baby books, so the digital baby book is a multimedia experience of babies tottering online on YouTube and this is the map where you were born and stuff like that.

And there's one weird advert where a guy who's broken up with his girlfriend, this is for Google Chrome, wants to try and win her back and he sends this package to her, this link, which is the whole sort of diary of their relationship. And it's just a bench where they broke up, this is footage of us on a rollercoaster, it's a very … like I said, very conservative view of the self that is constantly being reinforced. And it has to do with the sense that each of us can recommend things to other people. The more, you know, like you're often threatened, if you opt out of this then your friends won't know what you like or what Italian restaurant you're into. And that seems to be the worst thing possible to imagine. So the dominant self seems to be one that is sort of in a community of other consumers.

MS: Yes, I wanted also to ask you about that notion of the networked individual that you talk about. And you mention the digital age's great ambivalence over the possibility of the networked individual. What you're suggesting there is the sense that the networking is actually a sort of a trap, a net that catches people rather than that liberates them, is that?

LS: Well, it's very funny to watch advertisers grapple with these two strands of life which is the one which is the particularity and the specialness of people that you're worth it versus the current sort of sense that we're all in this together, that we're all networked. So there's an

amazing tension that occurs, I found this interesting and the idea of that there's a campaign by the Gap the slogan of which was called Dress Normal. And it was to do with this idea that if all our eccentricities can be immediately broadcast and given photos linked to them, and anything on the periphery can instantly become sort of a mainstream trend just through its proliferation through a network, then the only recourse left was to be normal. And then I looked online and the CEO of Gap would say things like, the point is that your normal is different from everyone else's normal. And so a sort of linguistic crisis where they had this sense that everyone was getting fatigued, having to be being eccentric because there didn't seem to be any space for eccentricity when in a proliferated networked environment. And yet they want to preserve the sense of you're special, so in the end the great irony had to be that your speciality was your normalcy, which is also highly idiosyncratic. And just that chasing of the tail seemed to be the perfect emblem of how our consumers [0:24:52] post world war two to sort of target the individualism of people. And that all our products and services are encouraging our collectivism and that tension created paradoxes and sort of nonsense.

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MS: Yeah. So, Will Self has written about this in a way, and I think actually in a review of your book, to talk about how, to talk about in some way the speed with which this notion of the networked self has caught on is inexplicable by the way in which it had been prepared for by the industrial revolution. And particularly by the sort of experience of urban modernity, the kind of late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, arguing that we found, or that people found themselves in that situation of being networked differently and needed to adjust to it. And I wondered whether you thought there was anything in that, I mean to make it a more precise question, whether the kind of networked subjectivity that's involved in the internet is really different from that? And is it only different in this sort of corporate marketing sense or is there an existential sense in which it's different as well?

LS: I'm glad you've given me the opportunity to rebut [0:26:13]. Yeah, he is sort of saying, as far as I could tell, this is an extension of modernity, the sort of the anomy of the city, the ability to be a cyber fan and navigate through the different pathways of the internet. And really there was nothing that [0:26:31] subjectivity sort of has been fairly fixed since, you know, the 19th century by and large in an urban modern context. It's funny, people; I am interested to see what you think of this generally that people tend to be a bit sniffy when people suggest that these terms are different. Rebecca Solnit wrote a piece in the LRB saying how her life had changed, just a simple change that the postman now is coming all the time. And that there is no longer a discrete half hour where she watched the news and once the postman had been there was no more post. And someone wrote in the letters saying, you know, this is, you know, everyone always feels rushed, this is a modern condition, this is the maelstrom of modernity. Everyone feels that there's a bombardment of information, we were all in a period of information overload in the 1860s. And I just don't believe in that argument that there's no material differences between these things when obviously these technologies are obviously different.

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And I think, I mean there are certain ironies about say online life which have parallels in 19th century urban modernity such as the anomy or the sense of great loneliness and depression whilst surrounded by tons of people. And that being sort of grown up from city early metropolitan life, but there's still huge differences just through that basic collapsing of walls that I think the digital age is responsible for. That sense that we can be both here unless you're listening politely to like [0:28:08] be in multiple places at once and that you're no longer forced. Social life is no longer a negotiation between the people that you're in immediate surroundings with, that there are always options for you to escape in some sense and have multiple conversations happening at once. I think that is a major difference of the fact that you can move across continents and have your family bobbing on your duvet, their sort of severed heads on a screen talking to them. I just don't think that's like Virginia Woolf's [0:28:38] it just isn't. But how this affects us existentially I think it will just magnify certain effects of others and one of them may be the sense of the quality of solitude or the quality of isolation, feeling more sort of hunted down.

And the [0:29:02] there is always a possibility to interact, will create a different sort of set of emotions, many of which could be ideas of guilt and not responding on time to people's messages. Or just certain, those effects, we have a limited [0:29:18] emotions and as I say, they get mixed differently. And I think digital life will just bring up certain colours more vividly.

MS: Yes, you had a lovely sort of Freudian phrase for talking about how it mixes the sort of psyche, the psyche [0:29:35] different, it's saying that social media gets a bad rap for egomania. A phrase which is often sort of used by mistake for Ego Media in reference to this project, but that it actually fosters the superego, that people are kind of more worried about what's going to be said about them or have internalised that sense of criticism.

LS: Yeah, so I think the [0:30:00] turned out to be a bit of a red herring in a way in terms of sort of psychic apparatus of narcissism. I think it won't be the narcissistic qualities that had the most existential impact; I think it will be that, you know, policing that is happening all the time. I was seeing it even in the last six years of Facebook usage, when I think of what I used to post on Facebook, my updates, you know, if I look back they will be just these completely inappropriate, a nice American term, sort of things, just because the community I was speaking to would understand my tone. And there would be much more sort of freewill then and now is this sort of guardedness and everyone's feeling it and it has to do with sort of the online sort of culture of shaming. In the sense that you'll be policed. I mean I teach several American students and one of them said that their guidance counsellor in high school made them all befriend her on Facebook so she could monitor them. And make sure they don't screw anything up for their university admissions; there would be a picture of a cigarette.

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And then there was a group of [0:31:07] women all of them from the same university in a class and they talked about how there would be some sort of [0:31:14] warden who would put the letter A under captions of pictures in which [0:31:19] drinking. And that was a symbol to remove them, A for alcohol. I mean the [0:31:25], so obvious. And I think if you read a lot of stuff on Digital Life I think [0:31:35] dredged up a lot because of Only Connect, and I'm one of them. But Hawthorn [0:31:40] is another one because it's that sense of the badge or the trace that can't be sort of removed, which Digital Life is all about. You know, can I sort of outrun these sort of posts about me or these news stories or these shamings, you know.

MS: We've talked a lot about Digital Life and I wondered if we should also think about death in the digital because that arguably is one area that's changed sort of in, at least as dramatic a way as these others and possibly more so. And there was an odd passage that you might want to read from the book about that.

LS: So there's a chapter on the digital Gothic, my academic interest is sort of quite Gothicky, so I was naturally prone to think of digital life in Gothic terms. But there's a chapter called Weeping Toms which is about the sort of the ability for us to mourn [0:32:44] for perhaps people who had never met or don't know very well, through getting to know them online. Just to set this up, there's a good … you probably know the James Joyce story in Dubliners about the boy who goes and watches. And he's watching the window with the screen down and his friend, the priest is lying dying and he knows, so when the candles go out that will be the sign. So there's sort of a screen between himself and the dying. And Digital Life in some ways has moved that screen up and allowed the dying to sort of live exuberantly and boisterously quite latent to the sort of physical, the decline of their physical bodies. And still tweet and be robust which is brilliant, but it has some strange implications for us who are not used to really having perhaps the dying in the middle of life quite in the same way. So it seemed to be quite a spectral median, Digital Life, so this is just what I call a digital ghost story, a true digital ghost story.

Several years ago I was living in Paris; one of my Parisian acquaintances was a tall lanky pianist whose hands, once unfurled, seemed to stretch from one end of the keyboard to the other. He could be shown a song on YouTube and reproduce it a few minutes later. He lived in a tiny one-room apartment near the Asian Quarter in Belleville, and would sit at his electric piano with his headphones on, the window open to the courtyard below, practising a silent and difficult concerto. He drank excessively and regularly, and if you met up with him early in the morning you could catch him pressing his thumb and forefinger over the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes. At home he made artless coffee from a tub of Nescafe. When a model scout approached him on the Metro he ripped up the man's card in his face. On the bookshelf by his front door was a disorderly collection of horror movies such as Chucky: Jeu d'enfant or Chucky: La poupée de Sang. He was gentle and indulgent, though owing to glitches in my fluency I wasn't always sure what he was talking about. He had what I noticed to be a very charming French quality, which was that if he was with you he'd be uninterested in the world beyond, and would blow off upcoming plans to extend the one [0:35:04] at hand.

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The flipside of this emotion in the present was that he could fall out of contact for weeks at a time. When I left Paris we didn't keep in touch but I would occasionally think of him filling his apartment with silent notes. When my Facebook told me that it was his 33rd birthday I was in bed and about to go to sleep but decided on one last lap around the circuit of email and social media. Clicking on the birthday icon I recognised the names of some of the friends who had left messages, my last knowledge of him was from some so-called Facebook stalking undertaken three years previously. And he seemed to have left Paris for a provincial town; I remember not being surprised that he hadn't stayed in that tiny studio in Belleville. But I also knew that [0:35:51] of his friends, many of them fellow musicians would miss him. He seemed to be at the centre of a communal feeling that was a mix of protectiveness and awe. Among a few generic birthday messages of smiley faces and hearts were more plaintive sentiments. I felt the warmth and steadiness of a confirmed prejudice, Parisians were melodramatic people.

I hadn't read French in a while and I was rusty but I kept hearing this dolorous note struck, he had left such a hole one of them said. Another admitted to having dreamt of him again, his lover at the time I knew him, had posted some forlorn words and so I assumed that they had freshly broken up. Also his Facebook page was vivacious, friends, companionship and his movie interests and pictures of him clowning around. Then I read a message from [0:36:37] friend who presumably was not naturally prone to Parisian melodrama, wishing him a happy birthday, "Wherever he was." My breath began to quicken and I sat up on my elbow, I had suddenly realised that among all these well-wishers and laments, my friend himself was nowhere to be found. The one [0:36:55] can give to this excitement, this instant [0:36:59] what I felt, the [0:37:01], the pizza shop had long since shut off the fan that ground outside my window. I followed the sense of grief back down through the posts; shock isn't a condition that encourages our finer traits. In my case it [0:37:14] with the sorrow that was to come later with an almost pleasurable curiosity at the puzzle before me. While all the posts were loading I put his name into the mini Google search field and saw that Google presumptuously added the word 'mort', making him hideously double barrelled and stopping my heart for a moment. The search yielded no results.

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close includes a run of freeze-frame images of 9/11's infamous 'Falling Man'. They are arranged in reverse chronological order, so that when you flip through the pages the man is sucked skyward, heading back into one of the upper Twin Tower windows. In the logic of this rewound world, the planes will un-fly into the buildings; the victims will un-walk themselves from the disaster. Social media's ability to bring you back into the past shadows our instinct to deny tragedy and to retreat into a safe time when the horrific thing that has happened needn't necessarily have happened at all. And so it is the summer of 2010, and the birthday boy reawakens, sanguine and full of the future. No one is sad for him. His 'activity' must negotiate with my morbid nosiness, which is the beginning, and in some cases the end, of empathy. He is planning to move back to Paris that autumn, from what I

can tell, to enrol in a musical conservatory; there are posts of him playing the piano and singing songs in small bars and coffee shops. Occasionally he writes teasing messages to friends. Now that he is re-alive, I find that I need to locate the precise day when all of that stops, all over again. It feels like homing in on a crime scene, and all the while there is that excitement that seems at once to have everything and nothing to do with being human.

00:38:56

His last few posts were music videos: the Ronettes, Broadcast's 'Come On Let's Go', a nostalgic nod to Natalie Imbruglia. And then it occurred, manifesting on his relatively sparse timeline like a pile-up of traffic: friends keening at him or through him at each other; his father possessing his mother's account to gather information and make almost stern, efficient arrangements. I recognised a female friend of his, whom I'd met once, among the anguished voices. She had appeared in one of his music videos with live snails placed here and there on her body. It came as a relief to find this scalded patch of his profile. He had fallen away as though through a trapdoor, and suddenly he's colonised and animated by others. What an appetite I had for the posts and there was little else besides garden variety disappointment when they began up through the days and weeks to thin away. It was then through what had happened to him and to this day Facebook respects this mystery. Next I clicked across his pictures wanting to look him in the eyes as best I could, we were born in the same year and I felt [0:40:00] wonder that he had managed to grow so cold.

But then again there he is smoking and [0:40:07] smiling. One afternoon in Paris we were standing on a bus, I pointed out an old woman playing Sudoku though now I can't remember why. "I feel sad when I see that," he said in English, gently panging his shoulder against the pole. I had to be up early and my eyes were getting tired but I was now hooked to the aftermath, in the quiet of that first autumn when friends came less to the side of the grave site, it was of course mother who kept returning, standing in the bleak weather of his silence. She called out his name asking him to come back, she spoke to him about going to the [0:40:38] concern, for which he had bought her tickets and how in the songs they were reunited. Facebook was now no doubt one of the several places where she went to commune with him, but nevertheless she must have felt that she could reach him there. The [0:40:52] imagine during those nights of fevered coding and [0:40:55] that he was building among other things, channels into the underworld. The mother's presence on his page seemed hostile to my gaze, the depth of her grief reproached my nocturnal curiosity and she subdued the adrenalin that had been making me realise edgily about how it had happened.

These amplified graveside whispers remnants are in themselves an intruder alarm, they scrutinise one's own bad faith and they activate those deterrent emotions of shame and guilt. Yet, even these warnings were muted by my own visibility by my permitted trespass which seemed both victimless and victim filled as I would go into this space somewhere between gossip and literature and memory. After a while the mother's beseeching

stopped too, I wandered my way back towards where I had started to the mournful birthday part of the present. Time began moving quickly as the posts became more sporadic, but the mother was on my mind, and so I clicked on her profile, summoning her up now to answer to me, my next witness. Near the top of her profile were a few friends bidding her farewell. I realised that she had died almost exactly one year after her son, and that, in the depth of the night, I had been listening to one ghost mourn for another.

00:42:09

From my open bedroom door, I could see out into the darkened kitchen. The saucepans were hanging in the shadows, as expected, and the road beyond was quiet. I closed my laptop and lowered it to the ground. The power cord's overheated box knocked against the floorboard. I leaned over the side of the bed to set my phone's alarm. Then I clicked off my bedside light, and tried to settle into sleep.

MS: Thank you, it is a really haunting sequence that I think. But were the posts all addressed to the dead person?

LS: In that case it was … I mean what happens is that like I said, that he becomes sort of possessed, there's a locus of grief, so you begin to see fan conversations almost talking over him and through him. But I mean it was shocking, while I was interested in that paragraph or that section, I wasn't sure if I was going to include it. But to me it was really taking the sort of the least attractive sides of my emotion or reaction through to that and just trying to be as honest about them as I could. And there was something about the adrenalin that in the generalist moment you could say was still the shock. But it was also just the excitement of the sniffing which I felt that sort of stuck in my mind that this was a form of entertainment in a sense. And this was why I want to try and sort of position these experiences that we have online somewhere between gossip, memory and literature as though the person who perhaps, for instance a dying person who is blogging about their lives that you can follow. They're sort of crafting an anaesthetised version about themselves and you're following them almost as a character.

You may never have met them so what are they, are they a real person or they a character in a novel? And then the question becomes is this just sensationalist tawdry just excitement and sort of sitting a big public execution or something? Or is it to do with the empathy that can be created when an anaesthetised individual sends something out for you to commune with in the space between the writer and the reader. And there is all these sorts of questions about our emotional responses to things and it can lay quite bare some quite uncomfortable reactions. Because I wasn't in touch with him, I was sort of safeguarded from sort of … I didn't [0:44:37], I didn't know what happened. So although I cared for him as a friend, in that way it was sort of all complicated by just the mystery and the sort of the zeal, which I've never forgotten and that was why I wrote it actually.

00:44:53

MS: Yeah, there is something very strange isn't there about the initial sort of reactions where people are saying, "Happy birthday wherever you are," as if, you know, as if they were going to be heard. I mean I suppose there are earlier forms like poetic elegies that sometimes do that. But it's hard to think of many equivalents, isn't it, as rhetorical forms?

LS: Yeah. And the fact that the Facebook mechanisms keep them alive in a strange way, so sort of wish them a happy birthday, there's sort of this dumbness to bare sort of coding.

M: I'm sorry, isn't all of that in Dickens? You've just given us a Dickensian account. Dickens does all that, novelist, you get overwhelmed by it, by the way the characters in the past are there and the way they [0:45:50], for instance, it all comes back.

LS: And is there a sort of a … I mean is there a sense of them … one form that's in Dickens [0:46:01] was mourning for one another remotely or not, yeah?

M: Pretty much. Sorry about that.

MS: No, I mean we're about to receive questions from the audience anyway. But before we do that, I just had one more … I mean in a way that's a sort of timely steer because I wanted to ask about the writing. And I suppose there are two questions, I mean one is why a book about all this? There must have been some pressures to sort of think if you were writing about the digitalism phenomenon, perhaps a digital sort of place to publish it might be the thing. But what I'm more interested in, in a way than that is what you say about originality and how the sort of drive for novelty all the time, it really is, it's a kind of threat to originality. And there's a nice idea that … I mean you contrast a beautiful passage from Alan Bennett's play, The History Boys where Hector the teacher is talking about, you know, what's so important in reading is when you come across a passage, that isn't sort of totally new but is actually something familiar, something you've always thought but have never been expressed by anyone else. And he says, "Well, it's as if a hand has come out and taken you almost, you know, sort of out of a page." And that's perhaps rather sentimental but sort of, you know, very heartening sense in a way of how important community and solidarity is in literature. And Laurence contrasts that with the image of the writing using a search engine, and sort of finding that the phrase that you're very proud of, I mean just [0:48:02] has been used before somewhere else, there it is.

LH: Yeah, that's [0:48:06], I've written about that, with the relationship between the writer and the reader is not symmetrical in the sense that the writer sees something I've always thought that hadn't written it, it's like a hand's kind of snatched it out of [0:48:18]. I mean it's just … and it's amazing, Google's good for that and sort of puts you in your place. But like I was going to write something on the environmental section and I thought about the idea of that old [0:48:32], you know, why the two sets of footsteps on the beach and then there's only one and why did you leave me when I needed you the most and things like

that. And I thought, that I was going to [0:48:40] about that in carbon footprints because I was thinking about recycling in terms of sin, there was something going on. And so I had a religious and bio thing going on, I typed something like, you know, footsteps that show a carbon footprint.

00:48:52

And I thought okay, please, hopefully, and it came up in someone's blog, that they had sort of referenced it. And I just thought that is a real challenge to originality [0:49:02]. And I wonder if there's still actually impact writing and actually push writing now metaphorically because that is sort of a guarantee hopefully of novelty if you can compare two things that aren't necessarily alike and create a case for why they are. That might be your best sort of hope at sort of quoting sort of new sort of passive thinking through metaphorical writing. I mean there is no way I was going to publish this digitally; I mean it's too old fashioned now, sort of old quite pathetic notions of vanity that this entails. But was the sort of very nice part of me would not have gone for that, yeah, it's as simple as that.

MS: Okay, at this point what we'll do is open up to questions from the audience. And then we have a reception after that. Does anyone have a question they'd like to start with?

F: [0:50:13]?

LS: In terms of by pursuing this?

MS: Probably raising hell.

LS: Probably not, I mean the way I wrote the book was I meant it to be a more [0:50:31], and I sort of walk a strange line between is this good for us, is this not? Because I mean there's no way to generalise on people's experiences on social media, for some people it gives them, for instance, it gives them great [0:50:43], other people feel bombarded by it. As a private citizen, that I was voting for policy, I probably think it is a bit of a shame that certain aspects of social life have been dominated by people's obsession with their online … sort of attending their online presences, which again is seen as … I mean, you know, it's easy to joke about that. So I think it's a teenage phenomenon of just being obsessed with sort of posting pictures from parties. But actually one's professional life demands that, you know, if you set up a conference now you have to tweet about it, you have to tend it constantly. And that is real pressure and now, certain writers, I've not been this way that they didn't care. But certain writers are chastised for not being on Twitter and having a certain number of followers. To me that seems a hellish environment to be raised. I think there's hellish aspects, I think the mixing of the language of the brand and the language of digital presence is a real problem, which is why I tend to talk a lot about advertising in this talk more than actually the book talks about. So certain aspects of hell may need to be subdued. Why do you think hell may be raised?

00:51:59

F: Because a few things, so the solitariness, I read a news article today, the pope said something about that we're on the way to hell, which is solitariness. Also mentioning that people have said [0:52:17] Facebook and how it makes it more of a real place for [0:52:22] disappear into the ether, [0:52:26] more tangible ether.

LS: Yeah, hades anyway, a sort of an underworld, yeah.

F: You're raising our specific aspects [0:52:39], water was the underworld, [0:52:52] so technology is liberating in one sense but for others it's out of mind. But then maybe [0:53:10].

LS: Yeah.   Well, I think there's an interesting ecological link, as you mentioned, so the phishing, one of the tensions that I wanted to talk about in the book was that as there seems to be so much press in terms of where the digital revolution cane take us and expand life and make life more expansive and we can be in more places. The actual ecological foreboding is quite strong, you know, if we listen to climate change at all as a phenomenon that's actually happening. So as the physical world seems to be sort of in parallel and diminishing in some ways, we have this parallel enthusiasm for the new capaciousness of life. So I think that's an interesting tension we're constantly living with between an apocalyptic view and a sort of a salvation or [0:54:04] to a new … into a productive space. [0:54:09] tension, it's maybe a Dickensian thing as well quite possibly. But it's particularly rarefied or sort of vividness times, sort of an overheated [0:54:22] on the one hand, and just a sort of limitless, sort of seemingly playground online.

MS: You talk don't you about what you call the demon of melodramatic prophecy, I mean that's the kind of devil that you summon up in the book. The idea that, you know, as you've already suggested tonight, so many books about the internet do go in for sort of apocalyptic melodrama and prophecy. But there's a nice idea that every book has at least one demon and I think you say, it threatens to make it less interesting. And you've clearly avoided that one, but did you have a sense when you were writing it, there have been other ones there that were also having to be fended off?

LS: Yeah, that one demon was my own sort of idiosyncratic of dislike and sort of just as a style thing about this style of social life being sort of tilted away in a certain direction I didn't like. And like another demon, you know, I think that was the main one, the demon of being obvious, it was probably every writer's sort of fear. And the sort of elaborate metaphorical languages and some of the reviews are like is making comparisons between things that aren't alike and [0:55:45]. But that was part of that, thinking how am I going to cut a path through that sort of hasn't been sort of easily [0:55:54] or technical or social science books. Because there's no studies on this, so I don't have any data. I'm more

interested in the fact that we all as laypeople all sort of half know the studies, and that's another one of the tensions that you hear every other day, you know, Facebook makes us lonely, social media is making us depressed. I mean now that we're all the real coalface of this data, to analyse it, it would just go down the streets and in the air that no this isn't a great thing, at the same time as young people feel they have no choice but to submit to it. So I think the demon was mainly the keeping in the judgemental side.

00:56:30

F: These are just some sort of thoughts that came while you were talking, and I find this thing about death has really struck me very much this year. People have said, "Well, isn't so and so dead?" You know, and I've looked and there have been colleagues and I couldn't find that they were. And somebody said somebody is dead and I looked and [0:56:50] before and I didn't know. Or I've looked up somebody's name whose abroad and there's been [0:56:57] from years ago, and it's very shocking in a way. And I think the thing I find difficult about the day's sort of [0:57:07] stuff that comes to [0:57:08], is actually that the tone is difficult to read because they're voice messages and it's much less clear than when you hear people and when you see them. And it sort of almost goes on the greater sense of CD disjunction than if I am actually with people then when I can much more readily figure out what's going on. And an almost compulsiveness about actually carrying on using it which you describe, when you should be going to sleep, you know, you can't actually put this thing away. And, you know, I sort of have a ritual that I try to do and I wonder whether the rise in mindfulness is related to the terrible overload we're getting.

LS: For sure.

F: Where I sort of do, you know, 10 minutes mindfulness, put away my computer things and then sort of wind down a bit and try not to go back to tit in my bedroom, you know, so I don't get sucked into it.

LS: I mean I'm really glad you mentioned tone because I find this one of the trickiest aspects to handle when certainly someone's Twitter feed, there'll be sort of a mournful announcement at the one hand and then inevitably that time I will go on, and there was one specific example where a friend of a friend had died. And someone had posted a mournful tweet, but then the next tweet was something about their favourite flavour of jelly beans. And they were, you know, three days apart, but that concertinaing of … so demanding of us these different aesthetic responses that are quite the definitions of psychosis, you know, this ability to shift between laughter or levity and sort of mournfulness is the sign of, you know, sort of the pantomime villain who'll be sort of kind one minute and then plotting the next. So we're constantly forced to sort of navigate these extreme emotional gear changes. And it creates quite, what I call the tactlessness, digital life can be very … social media can be highly tactless, just in the juxtapositions of how it's all arranged and because the media is so uniform that one tweet looks formally similar to the next but the content is so different, that that's sort of the jarring quality. It

doesn't even shock, it's almost something else, I don't know what to call it, but it's a minor more outrage. But you're so right; the tone of serious things is really hard to judge.

00:59:34

F: [0:59:39] it used to be amaze when my daughter was little, you know, was like a children's programme [0:59:45]. So it's interesting though that we accept it, we have to take that for granted. And I thought that was the case actually about the incident that [1:00:07], a person was attacked. The media was very shocked, rightly, [1:00:08] recording it on their phones, but I also thought that the media has been doing that for years. We are so used to [1:00:20] photographed and sent to us, and we don't know what the human contact was between [1:00:26]. And I think also there's something about this discourse which is how much is it alerting us to [1:00:35] we're seeing it but we don't see it.

LS: And I think you're so right, and French and Saunders [1:00:44] spoof of sort of daytime television and the line-up where it will be like acute schizophrenia from 9:20 to 9:23 and then a makeover. And then wanting to do that, but just sort of the list of the table of contents, there'd be totally clashes like that. I love this idea that it's actually where it's sort of teaching us what was always there all along; I think that's a lovely idea.

M: Just going back to the discussion of loneliness, I'm just thinking because I've been really [1:01:22] these days, and the whole idea of we are our own networks [1:01:25] and etc. But I think clearly if you are on a network society, we're always connected somehow, so other people should know this or whatever. But thinking that like maybe the idea of being lonely didn't change but actually the idea that we cannot be lonely anymore, like you're not allowed to feel lonely, you have to always be in touch.

LS: Yeah, and I suppose because I mean that is a 19th century thing, there's Edgar Allan Poe story, The Man of the Crowd which has a quote from [1:02:01] at the beginning which is the great unhappiness not to be alone. But your point is slightly more interesting because in the past perhaps you were allowed to actually feel the loneliness even though felt you had no right to, now the [1:02:15] is that you've not even sort of expressed that, that you express a sort of quite constant joviality online, or a sort of the smile inside of you, whereas it's actually lonely. So I mean that could be a thing, loneliness is a huge topic to do with this because it intersects with these notions of isolation and the possibilities of isolation. There's an excellent American writer called Laurie Moore, and she was talking in an interview and she said you can't carve solitude from loneliness out of loneliness. So she was talking about the writer's life, a writer needs a full life from which they retreat into their sort of pastoral cabin to produce, but then emerge out into a full life again. But if there isn't that fullness or richness of sort of social life, it is actually quite denuded subtly, although there's the nicotine patch of [1:03:09]. Then we won't have that separation and solitude will be a constant problem when we get it, but yeah, I think that's interesting.

01:03:20

MS: Well, what do you make of the phenomenon of people unplugging themselves sort of either wilfully or consciously from the net, do you [1:03:29]?

LS: Well, it seems like we're reinventing sort of the past, just that the digital revolution's been about sort of like after the initial phase, there's been this recalibration. And there's all these programmes, and I'm sure you know about online where you can sort of lock yourself out of the internet for so many hours. They're called things like Freedom and Self-Control. So I like the idea that some of our virtues are being outsourced and coded back to us. And people sort of say giving up their smartphones for just more basic Nokias or whatever. Although I think that Google is really going to knock that phenomenon on the head because even the staunchest resistors to having a smartphone are now getting one because of the Uber app because it's just to convenient. I mean you see other [1:04:12], my high school has a sign saying, you can get your pictures printed here, as though this is a new service, that had sort of gone away for a while, get all your digital pictures printed here, which used to just be the photo shop that you used to go. So I love the sort of this almost skeuomorphic reinvention of things that the digital age is supposed to release us from, we're actually finding our tolerance, our stomach for them isn't as much as we thought.

MS: Okay, we can take one last question if anyone's got one, yeah.

M: I was just thinking about the notion of Laurence being kind of taboo online. And I'm not sure whether loneliness is [1:04:54], but I was thinking about my Facebook [1:04:56], there's people writing about, [1:05:01] all alone or how hard it is to live with cancer or [1:05:07] at times. And if you look at the wider internet and think of blogs, or thinking about blogs, a lot of people blog about the answers to hardship. And yet there is this notion that everyone needs to present [1:05:28], and sometimes I wonder, when I think of these examples whether that is actually a case or just something, [1:05:40] that kind of goes around [1:05:41] as extreme as it's often presented.

LS: Yeah, so the received idea that there is no sort of variety, that everyone has to be as positive as possible all the time. Yeah, and I think you're right, I think there is, depending on the forum, I think so each platform has its own sort of microclimate or ecosystem. I think on Facebook there is more of those pressures to sort of present a whole convivial life in another form. And the blog is a more intimate form anyway so perhaps that's where hardships are sort of worked through and communicated. There is a section in the book towards the end that I argued that there wasn't enough duplicity to online social media life, by which I meant, not enough doubleness, there's sort of a monoculture of effect of sort of positivity. And I thought about artists like Tracey Emin, her neons, and where she just makes this confession or statements in neon, and how a critic said, "I would sleep better at night if more people just would write such things in neon. And there is that sense that status updates are more tilted towards the positive. But I'm not sure I think, yeah, it's hard to sort of generalise across all platforms. I think you've identified an interesting tension though that on the one hand you do get a huge confession. But within the culture of

narrow social media platforms I do think those people would seem to be sort of very strange, and that's [1:07:14] examples, if they were putting these really heavy dolorous announcements in the midst of this levity, but I may be wrong.

01:07:26

MS: Okay. Well, talking of levity, let's sort of break up the formal part of the evening and you're all invited to come and join us for a reception not far down the corridor and have a drink and continue the conversation with Laurence there. But before we do that, please join me in thanking him for some really interesting discussions [applause].