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Existential Isolation... Press Play to Escape

Abstract

While consumer research has frequently visited the fantastical search for escape from everyday life, this story (part autoethnographic, part fiction – all the characters and incidents are the author's creation) documents a solo consumer's spirited desire to escape from beyond what quotidian life affords, and society's sometimes unwelcome gaze, in a more sombre and hermit form than has previously been explored. The story plays on immersion, narrative transportation, and parasocial imaginings around a prolonged binge-watch marathon and coping with the existential isolation, a resource in constant need of replenishment.

Keywords: binge-watching, escapism, introspection, narrative transportation, solo consumption, tribes

I've always loved reading books - when I was a young boy, my mum used to walk me to the public library near my school and I would daydream about reading every text in there. Thirty-three years later, my love affair takes me to Lenny's book shop, situated in-between a cluster of quirky independent cafés. Lenny came to Northern England as a child, when his parents escaped civil conflict in Turkey and he inherited the store from his father. The book club meets once a month. This evening, sitting in the cosy, candle-lit back room we transgress to debate the merits of book to screen adaptations. It finishes with Sophie speaking of the subtle messages being overlooked for the more lurid aspects in the TV adaption of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Substituting the camera for the written word is met with universal disapproval from the book club collective, but I harbour a secret. I find myself watching more than reading.

Leaving through the shop's front entrance, and I feel a strong inclination to reach for something to read from the treasure trove of Lenny's pristine second-hand collection, neatly arranged by the arched wooden door. As I wander home, book in hand, through the nearby park on this late, dusk evening, the tall oak trees overseeing the park perimeter try to hold off the taunting darkness. My thoughts immediately jump to winter, inadvertently skipping past autumn.

Winter's imminent arrival means I can hibernate, be reclusive, relatively guilt free. What I failed to admit to the club, and now I'll own up to, is aside from a quick journey to Waitrose for weekly food supplies, book club is the first time I have ventured out of the house in days. Despite the over-time rate, I declined semester three teaching. Instead, I've been watching a lot of TV. Not simply limited to the box nestled in the corner of the living room, I'm streaming shows on my laptop and phone, watching around seven hours a day. Consequently, I have become less of a people-pleaser. The invite to Mark's 40th birthday party was promptly declined. The walking club can jog on. The council letter, dated five

weeks ago, detailing ‘drastic action required’ on the upkeep of my allotment has ominously been ignored. In fact, the only social commitment I keep, is book club. It’s my only interaction, some weeks.

As a middle-aged singleton, I find myself being ever more individualistic. I see fewer people, and I’m guilty of making less effort. Friends are married with children, many are divorced with children, and I decided some years ago, after a wretched double-dose of heartache, that Amy Winehouse was right, ‘Love is a Losing Game’. The last relationship, her final words haunt me like a phantom presence. As the rain hammered on the car roof, my break-up protests went unheard. She slammed closed the car door, and as the raindrops collected in her blonde hair, she pointed furiously at the car - from inside my lip-reading techniques were tested to the limits. I picked up some expletives about driving a two door, climaxing with, “your bumper sticker should read... selfish bastard on board”. Was she right? My relatively self-centred, care-free lifestyle, remains alien, and perplexing to my friendship groups. In fact, my single status is the subject of roundtable discussions at dinner parties, camp fire chats at festivals and with mates gathered in the pub, usually when I’ve gone to purchase the next round. Ironically, overhearing this acts as a catalyst for further self-withdrawal.

There are times when singledom self-inhibits me from engaging in activities, especially when they are observable by others. Cinema is a passion of mine. I once managed a 12-screener in the South-West of England. Having been privy to management meetings, CEO briefings and endless emails about the ‘bottom line’, ‘*For the Love of Film*’ tagline seems disingenuous. Too often the multiplex exists to sell you a super-sized, sugary soda, and a gargantuan box of popcorn at pumped up prices. To extract the last morsels of money from your purse, they charge extra for an unkempt VIP seat, possessing dubious claims of ‘extra leg room’. I’ve tried to cleanse myself from the multiplex experience, and tend to frequent

the city's arthouse cinema. Last time I looked, they weren't showing Harry Potter in 11 of the 12 auditoriums. In case you're wondering, the remaining screen was reserved for the film, 'Day After Tomorrow' - a ludicrous ice-age thriller filled with clunky dialogue.

In my not-inconsiderable experience, cinema is built on duality. Day and night. Solo and collective. Niche and Mainstream. Weekdays house loners, weirdos, the elderly, singletons, and die-hard film nuts. By seven o'clock, the cinema foyer transforms into a hedonic playpen for first daters, comfortable couples, loud lads posturing, and finally, girls bonding and catching-up. On Saturday, February 10th 2018, I broke the first rule of solo screening. I cautiously approached the cinema for the **eight o'clock** screening of *A Quiet Place* (2018), a suspenseful 'silent' thriller, set in a post-apocalyptic universe.

Cinemas serve up problems for the solo viewer. Firstly, the rows of seating are assembled evenly. Perfect for visiting couples, awkward for the lone patron. Requesting seat one on aisle E is met with plausible distain. The seller unashamedly informs me, "the seat next to you will go unsold, now". Nevertheless, the aisle seat would allow for my hastily 'already planned exit' the precise moment the end credits start to roll. Like a police line-up, god forbid affording any couple an opportunity to see me, captured in the florescent lights of the foyer, to be fingered as "*the solo screener*". "It was him officer, he was on his own". As the screen door softly closes behind me, the auditorium is bathed in bright lights, and my entrance is greeted by a quiet intake of breath, signalling the group-think of the audience, "he's on his own - something must be wrong with him". Upon entering the couples' zone, peak Saturday night, I feel like an unwelcome outsider. I panic momentarily thinking about where row E is situated, and twenty-eight other pairs of eyes track my power walk to my seat. Seated, the chair is upholstered in comfy, red velvet and I sense the couples in my closest vicinity whispering. I am consumed with a paranoid consciousness. Restricted from looking at my phone, fidgeting, I guzzle my hot chocolate faster and faster. I long for the lights to

fade, and the trailers to fire up. I sit, anxiously and watch customers continue to stream in. Relief arrives as the previews start, and the lights dim. My mind is awash, contemplating new ways for places like this to encourage solo cinemagoing. It might start with some staff training. How about they don't shame the unaccompanied viewer? What about joining solo screeners with others, also participating alone? How about, I don't ever do this again, and box-set binge at home instead?

This is what I have been doing. My box-set binges have taken over my days and nights, offering an endless escape from a reality that I don't always fit in. I don't think we've ever been more overwhelmed with things to watch. Undertaking the somewhat predictable, nightly scroll through Netflix's limitless library, I suffer from choice paralysis – surrounded by infinite possibilities, it makes selecting a new TV series a difficult decision. There is an abundance of options in our viewing platforms too. There's retro TV, catch-up TV, regular TV, NowTV, Netflix, Amazon, YouTube, HBO, iPlayer, and HULU. There are specialist networks and dedicated 24-7 channels screening fly fishing tournaments, shows turning us into real-life detectives, and a dating channel set in a fried chicken shop. Last night, as I settled into bed, I hopped on to YouTube. Its algorithm pushed me towards compilations of people saving each other from near-fatal traffic collisions, and footage of some fiendishly difficult to open tech packaging. The struggle was cathartic.

I had always privileged watching films above TV. In movies, Scorsese, Bigelow, Peele, Ramsey and Spike Lee are remarkable story-tellers, and I thought TV was a pretty low bar. However, a couple of years ago my brother bought me my first TV box-set for my 35th Birthday. It changed everything. In the subsequent years, I turned into the show's unofficial spokesperson, championing televisual crime fiction as an art form. The series was HBO's *The Wire*. *The Wire* portrays contemporary Baltimore and the show offers a close study of criminal behaviour and the ensuing havoc between communities and law enforcement. The

Wire is so complex, it required my full participation and the box-set format was its natural home. There is no tidy, formulaic, redemptive episodes - nothing is ever wrapped up neatly. I had reached season three in no time. TV viewing was forever changed - self-scheduling my own escapism. Up until recently, three successive episodes had been my absolute maximum. However, this was about to change.

I was lecturing at 9.00am to a class of final year students, and attendance was surprisingly good, given that it was a cold, bleak morning. Roshon was lurking, and I was aware of his presence, as I wiped clean my frequently criticised hand-writing from the whiteboard. Roshon was a thin, eleven stone or so with brown eyes and black hair in straggly wisps. Was he going to ask if mobilisation of co-created resources was an exam question? Surely, not another discussion on the distinction between tribes and neo-tribes? Actually, Roshon was seeking advice for his upcoming assessment day at a prestigious London advertising agency. The all-day affair sounded exhausting. Roshon would be subjected to psychometric testing, and interviews. Followed by an afternoon working with Audi on a campaign to market the luxury interior of the A8 model, a 4-door saloon with the world's first relaxation seat, using a heated footrest complete with massage function. During our chat, Roshon enquired about *Mad Men*, and its relevance (or not) with modern-day advertising agencies. Roshon confessed to watching all seven series of *Mad Men* in less than a month, and was visibly surprised I hadn't seen a single episode. Wishing Roshon genuine good luck, I immediately pulled my phone from my pocket, and bounced onto Netflix, searching for *Mad Men*. After some buffering, there it was, in its entire splendour, seven series, all 92 episodes waiting to be devoured. A quick read of the synopsis: '*The show centres on the professional and personal lives of those who work in advertising on Madison Avenue - self-coined "Mad Men" - in the 1960s. The stories focus on those at one of the avenue's smaller firms, Sterling Cooper*'. A perfect end-of-week tonic, and I added the show to 'my list'.

The bus was only a single decker and jam-packed. Observing my fellow commuters, I looked around to see a middle-aged man in a tight-fitting Marvel T-shirt, zooming in on photos on his Facebook timeline; a petite, spectacled lady reading a Trump tweet, chuckling or crying, I couldn't distinguish; a teenager sat at the front, wearing bright blue headphones, squeezing in a quick episode of *Stranger Things*. People are constantly looking to be somewhere else, and I was struck by how alone we all are. Has consumption of things like TV and social media become more of a commitment than entertainment? There is a constant sacrificing of time away from our real lives, and these commodities seem to be self-selecting reminders of who we are not, and the roles we may never fulfil.

The bus heaved itself along the road, eventually reaching my stop, conveniently placed for a visit to the supermarket. A fresh batch of supplies would accompany the long-haul bout of marathon viewing. The supermarket was hectic and a kid wearing a *Monsters Inc.* baseball cap, was zooming around on a scooter, constantly harassing his distressed Dad, dropping unwanted items into his basket. As I wandered down the aisles, I was purposely thinking about *Mad Men* and what food sources will work best to enrich the experience of the binge-watch. I watched *The Sopranos*, with meat feast pizza, beer and large bags of hand-cooked prawn cocktail crisps. I joined Tony Soprano in becoming a slob, and our waistlines exponentially increased together, almost every weekend. *House of Cards* was a slower setting. The American political system, language and terms, required focus, and cups of strong tea and chocolate digestives were staple favourites. A bowl of rum and raisin ice-cream made a series finale appearance. I was thinking ahead, given that I'm unlikely to re-surface until Monday morning. My basket was a mixture of indulgence and healthy as a counter balance. Builder's tea, organic yoghurts, three pre-packed salads, steak, raspberry jam doughnuts, mini Heinekens, two 300 low calorie meals, and the pièce de résistance, Canadian lobster.

I looked at my phone, and it read 19:17. Having selected the most comfortable seat, with reclining features, I cracked open a Heineken and the 10oz rib-eye steak was cooked to perfection. Its luscious marbling effect made the meat look so tender and juicy. *Mad Men* was ready to go and I pressed the play button...

Fast-forward to 21:50 and episode three finished. Just before I composed my thoughts... 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 autoplay kicked in - each episode automatically bleeds into the next and I tuned in, and tuned out of my real-life. I was gripped whilst Don Draper, the main protagonist, and his colleagues at the fictive Sterling and Cooper advertising agency, merciless outlaws in swanky suits, pitched adverts for part of the day, and spent the rest smoking, drinking and womanising. Draper is mysterious, smooth and alluring. The most interesting *Mad Men* might be women, and there were glimpses that Peggy Olson (secretary with copywriter aspirations), has the potential to shake things up. I found the show incredibly immersive, with every detail beautifully restored to give it a 1960's feel, which radiated from the screen. I felt like I was working at this ambitious, Madison Avenue agency. Watching *Mad Men* reminded me of reading a favourite book, and for the last few hours, I've been taken away from my living room and travelled to a distant world filled with endless possibilities. I was Alice, into the wonder, but much better. I had experienced what it might be like to live in 1960's Manhattan. In episode two, I was granted covert access into the girls' break room area, the excitement palatable, passing around a recently legalised Lady Chatterley's Lover. Next, I was transported to the majestic boardroom, seated alongside Don pitching for Nixon's election campaign. I journeyed with Roger Sterling (co-owner of Sterling and Cooper) up the 23-floor ascent, when the lift was unexpectedly broken. I shared his exhaustion upon reaching the summit. The experience of watching it alone, bathed in the ghostly light of the screen, enhanced the enjoyment and transportation experience to the world of *Mad Men*.

My Fitbit on my wrist buzzed again, reminding me that I hadn't moved for the last four hours. I pondered momentarily, whether to keep going, or fall into bed and dream of 1960's New York, instead? I was experiencing a duality of pleasure and pain. The show helped me forget about everything else, a welcome distraction from my own existence. The narrative of the show spoke to me personally, and enhanced the enjoyment of losing myself in the series. Draper's story was one of a man, desperately wanting to transform himself. I remained gripped, wanting to know what was going on with him. On the other hand, the experience confronted me with feelings of loneliness and remoteness. Couples were frolicking, families were sharing the very things absent in my own life. There's pain from the ideology of the show compared to my own realism. Aside from the narrative, there was angst from feeling out of control. Netflix had imprisoned me, with these rapid, next-episode countdowns. The algorithm must know I will succumb, and hang in there for "just one more episode". I felt grubby, having eaten two doughnuts and downed two thirds of a warm beer during the last episode. I was physically exhausted and fought off the urge to sleep several times. Watching a box-set feels a bit like a chore, obliged to finish it, and the winning prize is being able to talk about the series to anyone willing to listen.

I completed my first, and only thirteen-episode *Mad Men* marathon. My thoughts scrambled, and my clothes crumpled from this exhausting journey. As the sunlight crept in from behind the blinds, heralding the arrival of a crisp, fresh morning, this only heightened my feelings of guilty excess. I was dizzy, disorientated, tired, fat and annoyed with myself for succumbing to what amounts to staring at a screen for an unhealthy period of time. The sacrifice of sleep and comfort had been too much. But more than that, I was drowning in thoughts about the existential nature of my life and what resonated was a fundamental craving for genuine human connections. Binge-watching serves to bring doubts and anxieties about the individualistic self-interests that have driven my life thus far to the surface,

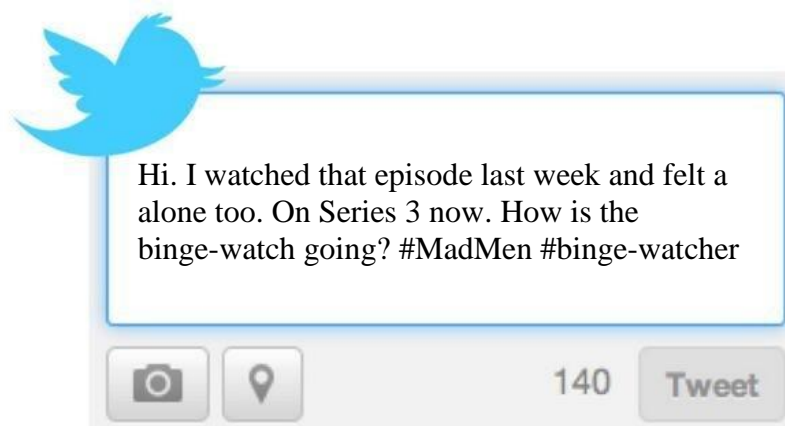
introducing the possibility of a reality that is different to one's own. Wonderings about all of the opportunities I rejected to progress in the way that I have, and all of the relationships that could have been but never were, had driven the experience of an isolated binge-watch. Surrounded by a sense of interrogating the existential "opportunity costs" of my current life trajectory, this set in motion a chain reaction of rumination and further imaginings that reflected a curiosity that may never be satiated.

One of the episodes, I lost count, likely around 4.00am, was incredibly powerful, and emotionally charged. Draper poignantly pitches the carousel slide projector to Eastman Kodak executives. "This device isn't a spaceship, it's a time machine. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again," he says, using the carousel to switch to a photo of his daughter, Sally, sitting on his broad shoulders, moving to a picture of his wife, Betty, holding a baby, to another of him carrying his bride over the threshold, which he says is "to a place where we know we are loved". The emotion is heightened, as he rushes home to discover a vacant house. This scene, echoing emptiness, and desolation was reflective of my non-stop binge ride. I posted on Twitter, not expecting anyone else to be binge-watching *Mad Men* at the same time as me.



I was wrong. Eleven people, living in varied and remote locations as far-flung as Osaka, Japan and more locally, in Cumbria, liked the tweet and a conversation with other *Mad Men*

devotees ignited. Rebecca was a fellow laggard to the *Mad Men* fraternity and her follow-on tweets expressed her desire to acquire some cultural capital, before a university reunion. Rebecca had drifted away from her university friends, but *Mad Men* was her contingency conversation - giving her something to say at dinner, and acting as a useful deflector from the open interrogation of her life. She had tried *Breaking Bad*, but the once milquetoast high school teacher was hard to empathise with. She had turned back time and visited the 1960's, instead. This was Rebecca's first, of many connections that morning, and more followed over the coming weeks and months.



Rebecca kept me posted on her *Mad Men* adventures and was always ahead of me in the race to the finish line. I was watching at a more cerebral pace, clocking up a few episodes each day. In sharing *Mad Men* updates, a small collective formed, existing on a virtual, somewhat proximal level. This *Mad Men* tribe shared a real and observable consumption of a like-minded devotion to the show, and others, noticeably *Game of Thrones*. However, we were naturally isolated from one another. While, there were no desired collective rituals, or struggles for unity, we engaged with each other, like we do with our onscreen heroes, in a way that mirrors and reflects the distance between one another. Rebecca encouraged me to cheat on my beloved *Mad Men* and watch other shows. First up was the Scandinavian thriller,

The Bridge. Rebecca also pointed me towards *The Guardian*, where a *Mad Men* blog lives. Each episode is dissected with fan care, passion and precision and reading the comments below illuminated the viewing experience. The blog has a long-tail, and late one evening, after the climax of the season four finale, I posted:

Don's pitch to the cancer foundation was amazing, along with his critique of tobacco companies appeal to sell teenagers adulthood and rebellion - conformity and non-conformity in one easy package.

To my surprise, people liked the comment and someone responded with anti-marketing rhetoric, serving as a natural accompaniment. Sharing and camaraderie, on Twitter timelines, fan blogs and Facebook groups means you don't have to Netflix and chill alone. The freedom, and opportunity to self-schedule our consumption patterns, doesn't necessarily mark the death of the water-cooler moment. There is a new water-cooler, living on-line, constantly alive, welcoming those late to the party to join the final celebrations. Now, I'm happy to say, I'm no longer in the office with Don Draper and that adventure ended satisfactorily, some months ago. Instead it's eight o'clock on a Saturday night and I've returned to the cinema. I'm sitting in screen seven, waiting for the latest Guillermo del Toro adventure to come on screen. As I wait in anticipation, my phone pings. An alert informs me a new season of *Narcos* has just dropped and I find my fingers swiping it away. I no longer have the same urge or appetite to binge-watch... Rebecca will be back soon, she has gone to buy us some popcorn to share.

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