

From Liquid to “Fluidifying”: Actualizing Virtual Intimacies

CHEN Jiaying

In *Liquid Love*, Bauman described modern society as liquefied with rampant “individualization” and uncanny frailty of human bonds (Bauman, Z., 2013). He implied that the convergence of modernity and technological changes had placed intimacy in jeopardy. The Internet plays a vital role in this, as the reality of our material life and a concrete symbol of intimate relationships. However, some offered a somewhat different prospect, suggesting the Internet might turn the relationship into more positive and democratically collaborative projects. The crisis of love may provide an opportunity to embrace a future where the potential for complex relationships can exist.

Working from the concept and the cases of digital (virtual) intimacy, I want to readdress the liquid love as a chance to actualize the polymorphic intimacy. People condemn computer-mediated communications (CMC) for alienating our emotions, considering the neoliberal hegemony. Although this may be true, I want to argue that such condemnation possibly came from the dualistic framework, the exclusive subjectivity, and the illusion of ideal relationships. It faces its challenges in different ways.

First, dualism embeds in philosophy after the Enlightenment. But the scholars were influenced by Gilles Deleuze against such structure. They work on virtuality to indicate the immanence, capacity, and potentiality of modern relationships. Second, Julia Kristeva reveals how people distinguish subject and object, self and other through “abjection” (Kristeva, J., 1982). And some feminists share her opinions to question the monolithic subjectivity and call for a subjectivity “posits a mutual permeability and mutual creation of self and other” (Marks, L. U., & Polan, D., 2000). Finally, Brian Massumi’s interpretation of fluidifying might reveal a parable of the new ontology (Massumi, B., 2002). It helps us not only to question the validity of ideal forms of relationship (including the couple, the family, and the nation) but also reconfigure the norms of intimacy.

The title of this chapter offers a metaphor for modern intimacy and a method of revisiting the concept of virtual intimacy to highlight the positive potentiality of virtual community. While

some suggest that virtual intimacies are unreal love, I argue virtual intimacies are not only the social facts but also the real in Deleuzean interpretation. Therefore, online communities are real communities, online connections are real connections, and online commitments are real commitments. Their digital embodiment and location could transform the character of intimacies. Here, the queer and feminist understanding of “connection, belonging, or love” discloses the intimacies of cyberspaces, are rooted in immanence that enables actual interaction.

1. Revisit the Intimacy and the Virtual

Scholars have paid increasing attention to the study of intimacy, such as the sociologist Eva Illouz, who provides an insightful analysis of intimacy in her book *Why Love Hurts?*. She draws on the political economy of Marxism to exhibit the transformations in three fundamental aspects of modern intimacy: will, recognition, and desire. As she explains, the study of intimacy (love) became central to the core of modernity (Illouz, E., 2012). Since, on the one hand, intimacy has kept its transcendental aspect, and it has gradually become a battleground for gender struggle since the feminist revolution. The tension between the old and new paradigms of intimacy reveals the contradiction embed in modernity. Under these circumstances, our discussion of intimacy should extend from the relationship between two individuals to “many-to-many” relations imbricated in broader social dynamics.

Tensions embedded in modern intimacy have reflected in *Liquid Love*. Liquid society is full of relationships that are both fragile and overflowing with desire. Under these circumstances, modern relationships, such as the “top pocket relationship” and “semi-detached couples”, come on the stage.

They generate novel forms of intimate relationships, including those that emerged with social media, online dating apps, and streaming media platforms. In Bauman’s view, these relationships are more like connections that allow individuals to “stay in touch with people from time to time in their solitary wandering journey, without maintaining stable relationships. Therefore, these connections are virtual, which seems more convenient than so-called real but heavy relationships.

In addition, Bauman explains how virtual proximity sustains the virtual connection, given the presupposition of the Cartesian separation of mind and body. Virtual proximity means that physical proximity no longer intrigues mental connections. That is to say, intimacy does not require physical proximity, nor does physical proximity guarantee intimacy. Virtual intimacy alters the human connection to more frequent and shallower, more intense and briefer. Nevertheless, virtual intimacy achieves a reality in the sociological sense and the vitalism sense.

In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Emile Durkheim delineated the exact field of sociological research for defining “social fact”. There are two essential characteristics of a social fact. First, it can be identified by the external coercive force which exerts or can exert on individuals. Second, it exists independently of the particular form it may take in the process of group communication (Durkheim, E., & Lukes, S., 1982). In terms of the former, virtual intimacy offers the flexibility traditional intimate relationships cannot provide. So that individuals who practice or expect traditional intimacy are facing both a nuisance and a challenge. A new paradigm of intimacy continues to intrude on conventional relationships and causes them untenable. Meanwhile, virtual intimacy has given rise to forms of relationship that are immune from individual volition and particular means. Thus, virtual intimacy is already as real as a social fact in our lives.

As Shaka McGlotten suggests, virtual intimacy also works as a real force in Deleuzian ontology (McGlotten, S., 2013). For Gilles Deleuze, that virtual is not the opposite of reality but something engaged in the process of actualization. The virtual and the actual are jointly sufficient characterizations of the real. “Becoming” as a non-linear process is imbued with the dynamics of virtual/real tendencies. We can illustrate it with the following schema: virtual/real <-> actual/real <-> virtual/real, which goes round and round to infinity. This schema not only shows the reversibility of the process but also the structure of temporality.

Three syntheses of time in *Difference and Repetition* help us understand the context of the virtual, which also provides a deeper contemplation of virtual intimacy and community. Deleuze points out the first synthesis of time, “the living present”, as passive synthesis, stems from David Hume’s discussion of habit, contraction, and contemplation. He further introduces the memory as the second passive synthesis of time through the virtual object and Bergsonian cone metaphor.

What we call their noumenal character is constituted by the relations of virtual coexistence between the levels of a pure past, each present being no more than the actualization or representation of one of these levels. (Deleuze, G., 2004)

It suggests one gains individualized knowledge in the process of “reminiscence”. It is not about extracting information from a container full of memories, but about being involved in a dynamic process of the generation that leads to novel differentiations. In this mode of virtual/real, the virtual maintains actualizing into a new reality, and the reality feeds on the virtual. It is unnecessary to ask what reality is, but in what virtual life is unfolded. The third synthesis ends with Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the “eternal return”, which reveals an image of univocal beings - immanent life. These three syntheses nested and folded in each other. The root of their substances lies in the virtual.

Revisiting the virtual intimacy with Deleuze, we could imagine the virtual intimacy as the actual relationship’s multiple mirror image rather than distorting or diminishing the reality. The virtual is multiple, existing in many states in an immanent plane until it was captured/actualized (when one relates to memory or identity narratives). It encourages us to explore the expansive forms of virtual intimacy in various online communications without the presupposed forms and ideas (*eidos*). For example, there are ongoing transformations in intimacy in multiplayer online games like *The World of Warcraft*. As Shaka McGlotten discovered, virtual intimacy became the central experience of the game, not only in a transactional and instrumental sense. Players adopting virtual sex by in-game chat channels change intimacy from “a means to an end” to “means without an end”. Singularities of these practices have actualized a virtual or immanent capacity of intimacy - they only adopt the forms they may have or tend to adopt. Desire, which surges through the virtual world, is not following ideal forms (coupled, straight, monogamous, and real) or a particular teleology. Accordingly, virtual intimacy shows its potential capacity.

2. Virtual Community

Turning from the more philosophical tone of part 1, I gesture toward a more generous and open reading of virtual communities. Virtual community refers to the communities where people using computers to communicate, form friendships, intimacy, and the basis of societies. But some doubted whether it is the same thing as a real community. Through revisiting the notion of virtual intimacy, we have already understood how virtual intimacy can be a social fact

and how virtual/real dynamics can actualize diverse forces and engage the becoming process. Therefore, differentiating the narrative of reality and emphasizing the potential changes of the virtual community is the way I capture/actualize the virtual by forms. In this case, virtual is vitality, events, the past, also “the impassive and dynamic aspects of multiplicities in the process of actualization” (Parr, A., 2010). I want to elaborate on the complicated virtual/real landscape through three potential changes, especially in the post-pandemic time. As Howard Rheingold emphasized, digital communication changes the virtual community in three levels: 1) personalities, perceptions, and thoughts; 2) human interaction; 3) politics (Rheingold, H., 2000).

Being a Generation Y (Millennials) who grew up in the Internet Age, I have experienced tremendous technology development. More and more individuals claim themselves as digital natives.

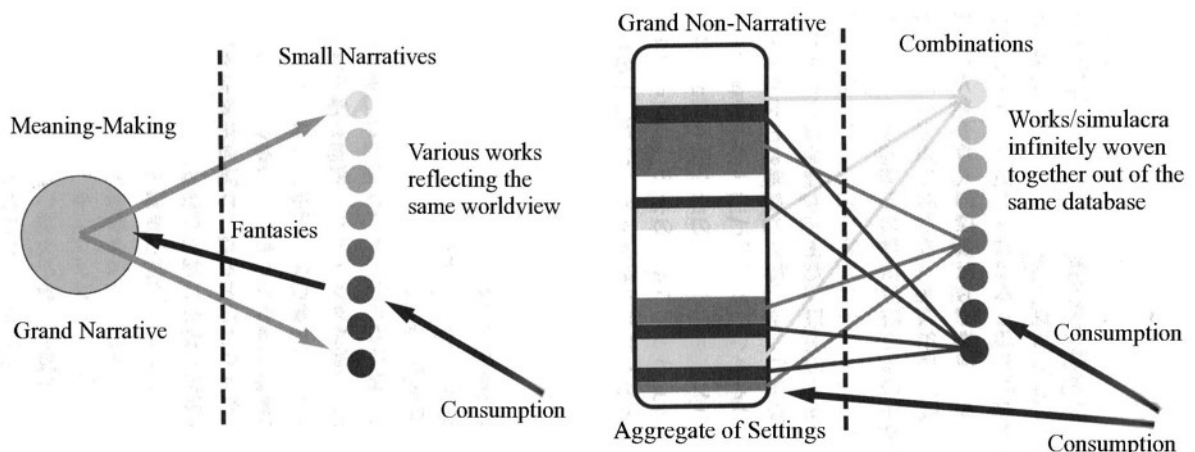
They live in their virtual community and mix the online and offline conversations up in life. The virtual community colonized the physical life, leading to our virtualized sense of relationships. Online behaviour has shown that wherever and whenever people apply technology, they inevitably access it to build virtual communities, just as microbes inevitably create colonies.

Also, the transformation of intimacies in Asia, whether romantic, familial or communal, is marked as a unique situation compared to the Western. The region has also seen the proliferation of its “homegrown” digital culture such as WeChat, bilibili, TikTok. Cabañes and Uy-Tioco underscore a phenomenon of “global intimacies” emerging from the contexts of Asia (Cabañes, J. V. A., & UyTioco, C. S., 2020). It refers to various imaginaries and practices among the virtual intimacies that negotiating global modernity and local life. Although Roland Robertson raises globalization to articulate cultural homogenizations, the simultaneity, and the inter-penetration of two geopolitical levels, people are reconfiguring the local networks and enact global relationships. I work to manifest how virtual communities are both normalizing and subverting the conventional intimacies with this intention. In particular, virtual communities in Asia invent the past and perform multiplicities while struggling with the existing framework.

As mentioned above, online communications have a powerful impact on our personalities, perceptions, and thoughts. Take Otaku, a subculture that emerged in Japan in the 1970s and

gave rise to the vast entertainment industry, as an example. Otaku is now growing with the expansion of the Internet, where anime, video games, the virtual community are booming. In *Otaku: Japan's Database Animal*, Hiroki Azuma draws out two models of narrative consumption to elaborate the shift from a modern world image to a postmodern world image in Otaku culture (Azuma, H., 2009). The following figure shows the tree models (left) and the database models (right). I consider that the analysis of Otaku is proposing a theory of post-modernity which will also come into play for elaborating virtual community.

Two models explain how we are leaning upon grand narrative in the modern age, which prompts us to grasp a rough image of the world through the tree model. Our worldview is more reliant on the hidden structure and overarching philosophy. In the meantime, this tendency reflects on our perception. However, with the advent of postmodernism, this tree structure completely collapsed. Azuma brings up the database model (or a reading-up model) to help us understand the postmodern world. For instance, the Web has no centre and no hidden grand narrative governing. There is a double-layer structure on Internet, in which, on the one hand, coded information has accumulated, and individual Web pages have grown according to the user's "reading them up". The distinction between the postmodern double-layer structure and the modern tree structure is whether there is a hidden narrative under the surface we read. The database model means the outer surface layer in the postmodern world is not determined by the deep inner surface. Data reveals different expressions when the audience "read them up". Here, the gesture of "reading up" actualize the virtual.



Database Animals Source: Azuma, Hiroki. *Otaku: Japan's database animals*. U of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Virtual community can also trigger the change in human interaction, where relationships, friendships, and communities have been formed. “Many to many” connections breed “collective goods” in different shapes. In a competitive world, individuals obtain value only by binding together through Marc Smith called “collective goods”, such as social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion. Social network capital happens when we get to know the existence of a specific virtual community. Knowledge capital is becoming the basis of question-and-answer websites like Quora or Zhihu. And one can find communion in the fandom community, where shared interests in particular subjects become the bond between different people. Both online and offline events cater to fandoms such as movies, celebrities, comics, fashions, and even opportunities to buy and sell related merchandise. Fandom culture has drawn little attention until it proves its potentiality during the pandemic. Many fandoms become effective civilian rescue teams in the battle against the coronavirus in China. Even people in the fandom community come from entirely different classes or regions. They can develop a bond with each other. The organization of various resources and assistance in efficiently delivering medical supplies to hospitals becomes doable because of virtual communities.

Finally, the virtual community has shown its political permeability and the capability to challenge the monopoly of the existing class and revive the citizen-based democratic project. Black Lives Matter (BLM) becomes a specific case here. BLM originated in the African-American community to protest violence and systematic discrimination against black people. The campaign began in 2013 with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter being broadcast on social media and remains a dispersed network without a hierarchical structure. In 2020, the Murder of George Floyd sparked BLM, leading to worldwide protests. Protests were conducting in various ways. I want to bring up an ongoing project conducted by Forensic Architecture (FA) to display how a virtual community can create an alternative planetary information network to support a political protest. FA invites the public to share footages that directly depict police violence or severe misconduct. By which, they can reveal patterns and trends across months of violence and interactions between officials and members of extreme right-wing hate groups. People who contribute to the data come from different regions and classes, but the same racial concerns and expectations motivate them. This methodology impels a virtual community to act as a data generator and investigating agent. There’s virtual intimacy undergoing and eventually turns into a revolution bond tying them to each other.

However, the virtual community also proved its potential hazard. As FA mentioned, re-sharing and amplifying materials from protests can have a range of positive and negative

consequences. For instance, in late May 2020, Snapchat launched the “George Floyd Challenge”, requiring participants to imitate Floyd’s strangulation and add other parodies. The challenge quickly spread to other social networking sites. Although Facebook and Instagram immediately deleted the relevant article when they acknowledged it, such an event unfolded the contractions of virtual intimacy and virtual community. It reminds us to be aware of the Janus-face of the virtual. As Rheingold pointed out, with much of our intimate data and behaviour moving into cyberspace, the critics of potential totalitarian abuse of the information network are worth listening.

3. Conclusion

On the whole, I try to revisit the concept of digital intimacy to face the crisis of love raised with liquefied society by Bauman. As space does not permit thorough philosophical speculation, I focus on the Deleuzean contemplation of the virtual to explain virtual/real dynamics hidden in the virtual space. It allows us to question orthodox intimacy and communication and embrace the process of “becoming”. With this in mind, I enumerated cases in the virtual community where virtual intimacy has actualized in diverse ways. Indeed, we can never imagine these intimacies and practices until they emerge as an outstanding phenomenon. And the pandemic stimulates these as an extreme disaster. We are inventing online summer school (like Gather), zoom club meetings, virtual reality sex, and even virtual religious events. In a word, reality is proliferating by the virtual.

Brian Massumi can speak loud for me in a similar position. He lists several consequences of Bergson’s explanation of fluidifying in *Parables for the virtual*. One of these consequences reveals the priority of procedural indeterminacy (the virtual), and the model’s derived position of social and cultural determinations. He infers that “gender, race, and sexual orientation also emerge and back-form their reality” in an ontological sense (Massumi, B., 2002). As a result, the virtual precedes reality. Virtual space establishes the field of emergence, where new paradigms of intimacy and communion emerge. The aim of this paper is not to establish a new theory or call for a ground-breaking revolution. The micro-revolution happens at all times. It is crucial to embark on new dimensions to actualize the virtual.

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