

ANESTHETICS

Who doesn't admire our generation's lust for life? The last half a century has been a time of unprecedented freedom and opportunity and we've grabbed at it with both hands. There was a recognition that life is short, and that we should be determined to live it to the full. To the max! as the drinks companies and the manufacturers of extreme sports posters told us.

Jesus has said that he came so we could have life and have it to the full, but we imagine that he must mean something obscure and religious and probably restrictive, and so we said that we were already living life to the full without him. But have you ever seen so many people so intent on distracting themselves from their own lives?

Our question begins with the realm of entertainment and leisure. That is, what are we choosing to do with, what we call, our own time? Shall we go out drinking tonight, or shall we stay in and watch TV? Or shall we go out drinking? Or shall we watch TV?

Entertainment is escapism. We have accepted the routine of escaping the realities of our lives, and entering a realm of illusion where we are only passive spectators. Soaps, films, adverts, reality TV (not our reality, but someone else's. In fact, possibly not even their's). When it comes to our free time, we choose to escape from the reality of our lives, rather than engage with it, notching up countless hours lost in various kinds of little glowing screens. We don't have any idea how it would even be possible to be entertained without escape. Is this life to the full? It's not even a life that's empty. It's not even our life. When given the choice we prefer to escape our lives altogether.

Entertainment is amusement. Not the opposite of musing, but the total absence of it: thoughtless space... Entertainment is a place where the trials of thought and the painful conclusions it comes towards can be switched off. Silenced. It's a place of passivity. A voluntary lobotomy. The constant spoon feeding of stimulations, safe fears and low-risk desires. The incessant distraction from conscious thought.

Leisure is escapism. We don't know much about leisure without drink. If we do venture away from the mediated realm of illusion, we enter instead a chemical/biological realm of illusion to censor our state of consciousness. We don't engage with alcohol as some other cultures do, we use it to disengage from reality.

Leisure is amusement. Drink more, think less, the unspoken maxim of the times. It's for filtering the intensity of human experience, and for avoiding its abrasive questions. It's for diluting the vulnerability of honest interaction with other people. It is to help us forget, or to help us not to remember in the first place. We couldn't cope with life to the full, so we muted it. Transferring ourselves from one method of disengagement to the next, one way or another, we distracted ourselves.



And why did we do it? We at this time and this place are richer than almost any people ever have been. Our freedoms, our possibilities and our potential are greater than ever. Is this not it? Have we not arrived? Are we not the apex of civilization? Why are we so desperate to be distracted?

It's true to say that there is money to be made from our constant desire for escape and amusement. It's a sustainable market. It's also true to say that passive consumers make a better market than critical ones. And of course it's true to say that huge industries, funneling huge amounts of money though volatile economies will fall apart altogether if the market ceases to be interested in being distracted by products related to an illusory realm. So for one thing, the realm of illusion is big business, and the powerful few have an interest in it. The fact that distraction is everywhere you go is no accident.

On the other hand, the consumers and the tycoons alike, the powerful and the powerless are all doing the same things. Those who profit need constant distraction just like those who consume. We have it all, right here, but we still want to imagine ourselves somewhere else, someone else. We need distraction from our own state. When we examine ourselves, we know that we're crooked and we need forgiveness, and we're not sure that we believe in forgiveness anymore. When we engage with actuality, we know that we need to live differently, and we're not sure that we're able to change anymore.

We said we wanted to live life to the full, but we preferred the realm of illusion and distraction to life itself. People used to say that life is short, but no one says that now. Now we find ways of passing the time without really experiencing it. And nobody uses anaesthetics when they're living life to the full. We use them when we're being horribly mutilated for whatever reason.

