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Encounters of Nothingness: Dilemmas of the Uncanny self

Stephen R. O'Sullivan

It is peculiar to accompany a film with so many words. Normally, if a film is selected for screening at a festival, I make a poster. It has become one of my favourite parts of the process. I enjoy the challenge of trying to visually capture the atmosphere of a film without negating it. The chapter qualifies content and extends themes in the film; it exposes additional conceptualisations unrepresentable within the film. Art-based research methodologies should be designed to have the maximum impact (Munari 2008). Thus, in order not to limit or close off opportunities for personal meaning-making (Duan, 2021; O'Sullivan and Kozinets 2020), it is intended that the film is watched *prior* to reading the chapter (link and QR code below). The film was produced specifically for inclusion in this book volume, with the intention of premiering at IndieCork Film Festival 2020. Here is the poster for the film:

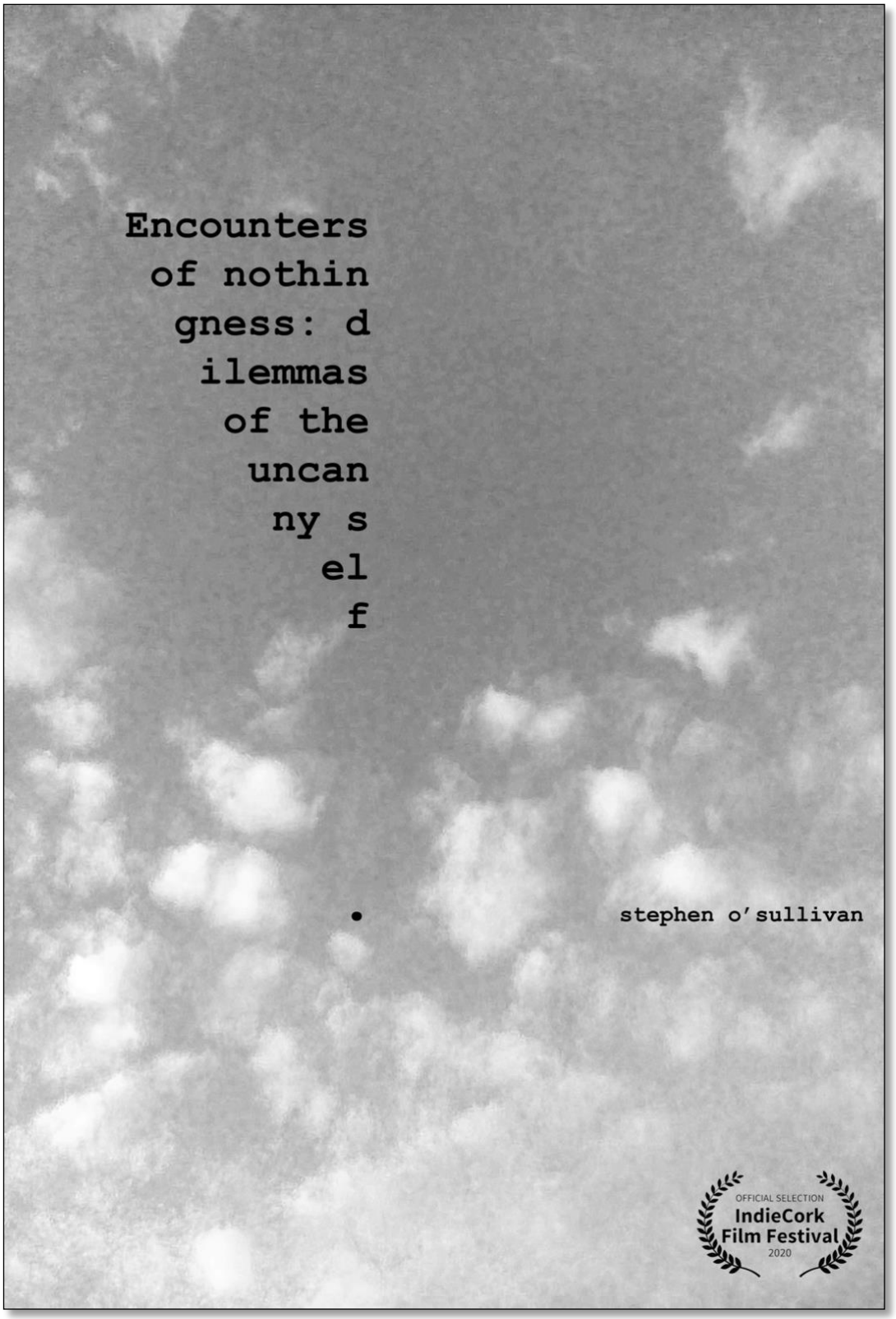


Figure 6.1. Encounters of Nothingness (Poster)

Here is the film:

Encounters of Nothingness: Dilemmas of the Uncanny self (11 min)

https://vimeo.com/626415904



Figure 6.2 QR Code to Encounters of Nothingness (Film)

Encounters of Nothingness screened at IndieCork Film Festival, Creative Cork, Gate Cinema, Screen1, 8.30pm, 5 October 2020 and streamed festival's online platform. The reduced capacity audience practiced social distancing and mask wearing. It was an ominous screening. Ireland entered another lockdown on 6 October 2020, which resulted in the remainder of the festival reverting to online screening only.

Preserving COVID-19

I was in Amsterdam on a short holiday with friends as COVID-19 began to spread beyond northern Italy throughout the rest of Europe. During the trip Netherlands began introducing lockdown measures similar to most European countries. The restriction measures and conditions of lockdown increased in severity daily. Events planned for the trip were cancelled one by one. COVID-19 origin theories, metaphors, and associations dominated the uneasy mood which contrasted typical holiday mode. COVID-19 became all-consuming. Airlines even began waving fees for rearranging flights. The rest of the group left earlier than planned. I was isolating on arrival home regardless, so what was one more day away? On reflection, I simply wasn't prepared to face the escalating situation in Ireland as much as I wanted to explore the dissipative atmosphere in Amsterdam. Travelling during the early days of lockdown afforded access to many novel experiences, and feelings, that I may not have necessarily experienced or felt otherwise.

Unfortunately, I didn't predict all the bars and coffee shops closing as well as being denied a late check-out. Reality began to sink in as I wandered aimlessly around an unusually eerie Amsterdam for approximately 8 hours. Nowhere to go, nothing to do, nobody to see. The absence of people was severe. It had a 'lucid dream hyper-real' feeling to it (Kellogg 2016). It bordered sinister. I felt like a no-person in a no-place. I had the first of what I could only note then as "strange experiences". It occurred when I encountered a familiar metro exit usually bustling with people completely deserted. I had an immediate and peculiar awareness of the mechanism – the device. The rattling escalator was ongoing – undying –shouting its diabolical undeadness. Each rattle rattled deep in my stomach, echoing the sense of impending doom, unsettling me further and further. It materialised in an intense confrontation with existence I hadn't previously experienced. Awareness itself was magnified. Our threatened mortality was inescapable. People were dying, millions more would die. I was extremely worried for family and friends. I felt emptied – desolated – completely drained: in an instant disconnected strangely from past and future. I had experienced what Bergson (1998) terms 'consciousness-of-nothingness', an 'intuition of nothing' or an immediate identification with the 'void manifest' (Richmond 2008) – a brief encounter of nothingness. My encounter with the ongoing undying escalator initiated the process of 'experiencing the experience' of COVID-19, a state by which I was intensely aware of the presence of something deeper, something much more significant occurring (Rahimi 2013).

As I passed through a ghostly Schiphol airport home to Cork, Ireland, I noticed the presence of my reflection more so than usual. A feeling different to noticing one's reflection, more menacing. Many questions ran through my anxious mind the tense journey home. How will I be able to cope with quarantine, with lockdown, and "doing nothing"? How will the abrupt intervention of time and space impact our culture of busyness? What novel feelings of malaise will be engendered by this brush with the void? Without our usual social defences what crises of self will manifest? How will we maintain identity? I grew increasingly interested in unpacking the unsettling nature of my 'encounters of nothingness' with the aim of 'experiencing the experience' of COVID-19.

I was deeply disturbed by the lack of 'cultural memory' (Assmann 2011) surrounding the 1918 pandemic. It only happened 100 years ago. The ferocious 1918 pandemic is a huge cultural black spot in general (Bristow 2012, 56). How was this possible? I was disappointed in myself that I didn't know more about it. In an effort to ease my guilt, I started photographing and filming COVID-19 related experiences before I had the intention of creating a film for a public audience. I woke earlier and earlier to wander around my hometown streets in isolation, to explore further the "strange experience" of Amsterdam. I was asleep mostly by 11.00pm, wandering by 6.30am, home by 7.45am. I rarely saw darkness or experienced night-time during the initial lockdown. My general aim was to visually capture experiences, phenomena, and contexts that I found imposing, interesting, or entertaining in some way. The hundreds of photographs and video clips I collected function as my visual diary of "experiencing the experience" of the COVID-19 pandemic and initial lockdown. I enjoyed tremendously the benefits of walking as a research method (O'Neill and Roberts 2019). It kept me physically and mentally healthy. It allowed me to enter a state of 'depresentation', a state by which I could apprehended 'the empty space from which objects could potentially emerge' (Fink 1930); it characterises 'wordless' states of mind, such as the wandering and wondering I engaged in. As such, this research project lies within the parameters of an autoethnographic film and visual grounded theory study. Autoethnographic film comprises a researcher's experiences presented using self-aware, theoretically informed reflections layered with scientific narrative (Hay 2017). Visual grounded theory relies on visual data (film and photography predominately in this instance) for constructing categories, describing properties and generating/constructing theoretical hypotheses to understand behaviour, phenomena, social/psychological processes and generate social theory (Konecki 2011).

My aim was to preserve a phenomenological account of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in as raw as form as possible. I used as sparse equipment, technology, software as possible. The style of the film is intended to echo the experience of the research – the detachment, depresenation, and no-place-ness central to experience of initial lockdown. *Encounters of Nothingness* makes use of the film technique of the "empty shot" (Duan 2021). The empty shot technique is a shot comprised of nonhuman subjects in which scenes are filled with invisible

emotion, leaving space for the audience to *feel* idiosyncratically. It facilitates the feeling of air in the film, which aids narrative transportation and empathic transformation between the actual and virtual mediated experience of the film. The empty shot technique was employed to communicate *with* the audience, allowing for the suspension of everyday life, and separation between self and other, and a more personalized appreciation of nature and natural scenery to occur (Duan 2021). I'm much more interested in, and appreciate of, the types of emotional resonance generated when researchers resist over-producing, over-editing, and over-constructing the things that protect us from the natural rawness of experience as occurred (Goslinga 2013). The vast majority of content was filmed during the pandemic. Film data was collected from March to July 2020. I filmed with convenience in mind using a handheld iPhone 8 (12 MP). It was produced in iMovie using as minimal effects as necessary to establish a scientific narrative, audience engagement, and to meet standards for screening. The exploration of my encounters of nothingness was an interdisciplinary journey through theological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, psychological, anthropological, and sociological concepts and theories.

Encounters of nothingness: brushes with the void manifest

Put in its simplest: Being is and nothingness is not (Sartre 1958, 15). While 'nothing' is the total absence of everything – zero, cosmic oblivion, death, it has *no reality*, it is utter annihilation, 'nothingness' is the absence of something more specific (Richmond 2008). Nothingness then is not simply "nothing". Nothingness is simultaneously both nothing and something: It is the *felt* presence of absence (Green 2011). To this extent, 'there is absence only for being capable of remembering and expecting' (Bergson 1998, 281). We may remember an object and expect to encounter it again but when we instead encounter something else, we express our disappointment of the unfulfilled expectation by saying that we encounter "nothing". Sartre (1958) too finds that non-being, and nothingness, always appear within the limits of human memory and expectation. This implies that persisting on the subjective side is a *preference* and on the objective side a *substitution*: nothingness can be understood as the inference between the nullified preference and the imposition of the substitution (Bergson 1998, 282).

The Japanese philosopher Nishida outlines seven interrelated traits of absolute nothingness (Cestari 2010, 337-339). He argues that nothingness has (1) a *borderline* character that persists on the outer limits of self-awareness where conscious thinking ceases, allowing things to appear in their true reality. Nothingness is (2) *empty* like a mirror that reflects everything within itself by virtue of having no characteristics of its own – it is parasitical on consciousness. Nishida's nothingness is (3) *all-encompassing;* it is inclusive. It grounds all activities, dialects, and objects. He claims nothingness is (4) *beyond opposition* of being and non-being. But for Nishida, (5) *self-negation* is the principal activity of nothingness, it makes all other characteristics possible. Its emptiness and all-encompassing nature depend on this self-negation, which takes place as reflexive act, a self-subjected destruction of ego (Freud 1919). Nothingness is (6) *active* in that 'it sees without a seer' (Cestari 2010) or 'destroys without a destroyer', it reveals itself in a twisted hierophany: "things are what they are not" (Bang and Winter-Lindquist 2018). Finally, Nishida claims nothingness is (7) *reflexive*, that it opens a horizon wider than consciousness. This final character of Nishida's nothingness inspires its self-aware aspect, the resolved existential grappling, or dilemmas of self. As such, all creative acts of the self must be 'won from the void'.

The void is the 'domain of the non-existent'. Its experienced as an immensely hostile object, a terrifying space, or place of nameless dread. The void is an active tension, a constant orientation toward suffering/becoming/being. Its unbound, dimensionless, and unexpected (Barad 2012). Its undefined and its qualities cannot be fully known. Any experience with the void implies total annihilation, an overwhelming fear of annihilation, or an annihilating psychological withdrawal. The fear of the void is a catastrophic form of existential anxiety constantly itching beneath the façades of human existence. The verb to void means to evacuate, which echoes the experience of the state of void – when a totally emptying out, collapse, or depletion occurs (Emmanuel 2017). Bergson (1998) claims that the underlying meaning of phrases with the words 'nought' or 'void' is to capture the feelings of malaise underlying the subject's reaction to the substituted reality they now apprehend. Comparisons can be drawn here to the experiences and feelings accompanying the sudden existential jolt caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and initial lockdown.

All manifestations of human “reality”(existence) are threatened by contact with the void, necessitating the deployment of a variety of defences in day-to-day life. These defences include trying to search for a fixed sense of identity, distractions, and grandiosity (Kraft 1974). While Kraft (1974) was referring to the individual, this can be applied to understand the socio-psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The culture of busyness in industry, the hyperactivity underlying entertainment and leisure culture, and symbolic identities central to branding and consumer culture, have become our common defences from the feelings of malaise engendered by exposure to the void (Emanuel 2017).

Unsurprisingly, the language surrounding nothingness is for the most part negative – loneliness, aloneness, depression, anxiety, guilt, frustration, anger, boredom, apathy and anguish dominate. Ranasinghe (2019, 302) highlights what words like ennui can add to the ontology of nothingness. Ennui is a state of the modern human; boredom’s more dignified cousin *per se*. Ennui is an immediate consequence of an encounter of nothingness, triggering an instantaneous and universal dissatisfaction with immediate reality (Ranasinghe 2019, 306). Apparent to ennui is an emptiness that provokes an existential crisis about the meanings of life and being. The import here is that ennui not only captures the realisation of the loss in the meaningfulness of life but also the *immediate need to grapple with it*.

Nothingness then is far from meaningless, it is a psychic realm for each individual to access and explore to live a meaningful and authentic life (Kraft 1974). Nothingness is an significant ontological phenomenon – not to perform as meaningless nihilistic act but as means to access a hidden spring of potentialities and possibilities of the self. Nothingness can assist a developmental process of meaning-making, understanding, and self-experience (Solms 2021). Kraft (1974) claims that feelings of nothingness may not necessarily be symptoms of unhealthiness, in the correct contexts they can be indicators of health. Surprisingly, nothingness can be a creative, regenerative, and reproductive force, ultimately inspiring an existential renaissance, a re-birth of self of sorts (Caillois 2001). Understanding the interplay of nothingness and openness is vital to understanding the becoming-suffering process central to the human condition (Richmond 2008; Solms 2021). Encounters of

nothingness *force* new possibilities, and as a result generate novel perspectives on life and the meanings therein, thereof, and therefrom.

However, despite the ontological, historical, and philosophical significance of nothingness, it remains a vastly underdeveloped concept in the social sciences (Scott 2020; Ranasinghe 2017). Social science instead explores anything from the entertaining esoterica to the universally droll provided it's within the parameters of a representable somethingness. Scott (2020), in order to develop a 'sociology of nothingness', explored negative social phenomenon: objects and experiences that do not exist, are empirically unreal, but yet hold significance and meaning. Obscured beneath the reality of things, bodies, events, and places, are no-things, no-bodies, non-events, and no-where places. Scott's (2020) related 'social nothingness' describes the total sum of these private symbolic universes, each of which contain a complex range of lost, unlived experiences of which a person is aware, something they have not done, has not happened, or is missing from their lives. Examples include "unpursued career paths, unformed relationships, unborn children, unspoken words, damaged bodies, surrendered roles, and abandoned routines" (Scott, 2020). Scott's (2020) non-selves operate as the "hungry ghosts" of past selves 'let go', unfulfilled figures of self, constantly roaming the memory unsatisfied, seeking satiation and validation to reconstitute (Epstein 1996). This can provoke unlocatable feelings of malaise, not only attributed to the shocking felt presence of absence but also to the sudden plenitude in the 'availability of openness' (Barad 2012). Encounters of nothingness interrupt our continuity-of-consciousness of *safe futurism* provoking dilemmas of self. However, while the concept of nothingness captures many elements of the ontological impact of the initial arrival of the COVID-19 existential threat, it does not capture the eeriness as lockdown unfolded.

The uncanny, the lockdown, and "I"

Lockdown dispirited people widely. It caused high rates of depression and anxiety across the globe (Sigdel 2020; Khubchandani et al. 2021). The rapid substitution of typical forms and features seeded a discomforting feeling of alienation. Reality began to manifest in a strange, familiar, yet unfamiliar way. Daily life was 'uncanny', a strange irreality. The uncanny is *unexpected.* An eerie blend of the familiar and unfamiliar (Freud 1919). Not only was society unfolding in and 'uncanny manner', but

I too felt an ‘uncanny version of myself’, I seemed known yet unknowable to myself. Encounters with the uncanny occur ‘sporadically in everyday life, punctuating the mundane with an unsettling doubling’ (Waskul and Waskul 2016). The concept of the ‘uncanny’ is constructed on this interplay of duplication and alikeness. Such doubling accounts for the common clinical phenomena coulrophobia (fear of clowns) and pedophobia (fear of dolls), given they appear *almost* human. It is unsurprising dolls, mannequins, ventriloquist dummies, human imposters, evil twins, robots, aliens, ghosts and possessed bodies dominate the horror genre (Wang et al. 2015). Things like doppelgangers, automatons and living dolls, moving statues, mirror images, shadows, phantoms, apparitions, looking-glass worlds, déjà vu, alter-egos, self-alienated or split personhoods, also belong to the realm of the uncanny: These share the basic dimensions of doubleness and an ocular genesis. Doubleness is conceptual common ground where selfhood, vision, and the uncanny converge. Freud (1919) claims that affinities of the double, such as shadows, reflections, belief in ghosts, the soul, and guardian angles, were originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego. They preserved and extended notions of the self. The ontology of the uncanny meanders the histories of madness and selfhood, folklore and literature frequently feature phantasmatic associations between the uncanny, the self, and eyes and vision (Royle 2002).

The introduction of the mirror influenced greatly the developmental process of modern human ego, which in turn inspired and intensified reports and experiences of the uncanny. The role the mirror played in the development of modern identity (and culture) sheds light on the ways that seeing the self could be experienced (Rahimi 2013). Shugger (1999) draws attention to inability of the ‘eye of the beholder’ of the time to reflect a solidified image of ‘the self’. Earlier mirrors even came with images of death and the horror of finitude; they had skulls drawn on their linings so the beholder could see a holographic death-head imposed on one’s image rather than a solidified whole own image. They offered beholders the “true knowledge of their souls” through recurrent references to the original and the sublime, expressed with carvings of skulls, skeletons and other ghastly symbols of decay or demise. Weber (1996) suggests “the principle of reflection” where the very idea of subjectivity was “mediated by specular reproduction, by process of reflection of and on the self” and where the world of reality, as such, was “always liable to be propelled into the

vertiginous wonderland of a galley of mirrors" (24). The emergence of a new notion of the 'individual' along with its uncanny 'double' and the epistemological impact of 'the visual' in art, science, and philosophy coincide. The mass production of mirrors inspired new conceptions of individuality in social, legal, and economic terms, as well as new representations of the individual in literary genres and artistic styles. The mirror, for Delany (1969), not only opened people's eyes but their minds. The use of mirrors, he elaborates, "signals the beginning of the introspective biography in the modern style: that is, not as a means of edification, but as a picture of the self" (Delany 1969, 129).

Revisiting Freud (1919), the double's primary function is insurance against destruction of the ego, which is associated with the moment of transition from primary narcissism to the broader realm of object relations. The doubling gains its uncanny effect due to, and only after, such transition. The mirror stage was proposed by Lacan (1949) as a turning point in the transition from primary narcissism to the state of being a 'human subject' (Lacan 1949, 75-81). According to Lacan (1949), the mirror stage establishes a relationship between an organism and its reality – between *innwelt* and *umwelt* (78). The ego that is born or confirmed at this 'mirror stage' has two significant dimensions: it is illusory, and its protective function comes at a cost. The visually perceived reflection of the body in the mirror stage functions as the placeholder for the imagined self: "the strange folly that estranges one's own self from one's self itself, which makes the personality able to cling to itself" (Peters 1991, 61). The image in the mirror offers the comfort of an identity, but it is an illusion, it is simultaneously 'the origin of and the double' of the ego, and thus a source of terror, alienation, and paranoia because it provides a glimpse into the uncanny spectre of non-being (Rahimi 2013). The double reverses from having an initial assurance of immortality to becoming an image of death (Freud 1919, 235) – the horror of substitution. The reflected image then is more constitutive than constituted. Constitutive of the 'I' and integral to an illusionary sense of identity. Anything that threatens the integrity of that illusionary image, or its uniqueness, will bring horror, disintegration, and an *annihilation of self*. The disruption to the illusionary coherences of self that stitches an individual's inner experience (innwelt) to the outside world (umwelt) will be terrifying in the uncanny sense of terror because

it reveals the ‘lie’ we original told ourselves regarding the ‘sameness’ of that (constitutive) image and the “I”.

The uncanny reveals a hidden truth about the self that the symbolic system works to maintain – the illusoriness of the ego. As the relationship between the imagined and identified self becomes more reified, the awareness of the emptiness (or void) that lies between ‘the self’ and the ‘it-be-self’ become more denied and forgotten. Any disruption to this repression, or failure to dispel disbelief, will provoke an existential crisis. COVID-19 disrupted people’s ability to reinforce and maintain the illusionary “I”: the self paused still in an infinite line of reflections as if caught between parallel mirrors. The ability to identify with one’s external image is associated with the integrity of the ego on one hand (imaginary) and the meaningfulness of the external world on the other (symbolic) (Rahimi 2013, 466). During lockdown people were void on resources to affirm both these illusions (imaginary and symbolic). The uncanny lockdown revealed to the ego that even the most intimately familiar contains a window that opens directly to the horror of the real – ‘we are all haunted houses’ (Boyle 2019).

As Husserl (1913/2012) notes, we view ourselves by looking along ‘indicative lines’ forward and back. Located along these inner horizons we encounter alternate figures in the *folgewelt* (past or former worlds) and *vorwelt* (possible, imagined worlds). Non-selves stretch out for biographical review, extending to the past through negative retention (selves whom we may have not become) and the future through negative pretention (selves whom I cannot/will not become). Identity is thus mirrored, refracted, by its own negative self-image. Projecting forwards people conjure hypothetical selves whose futures are foreclosed (Superheroes, hope, protection from annihilation). The lockdown required a re-assessment along these lines, past and future, resulting in “a shrinkage of our personality, a partial conversion of ourselves to nothingness” (Bang and Winter-Lindquist 2018). Strategies to “fix” an existence and/or maintain a stable form of identity is fundamentally anti-life (Emanuel 2017): We are never really the same person from moment to moment, and this can be a terrifying idea. Any attachment to ideation, self-representation, or stable certainties possesses a narcissistic value, an attempt to hold onto a fiction of self. The fictions of self were unhinged during lockdown, freed from the roles and

symbolic system, debilitated facing an abundance of openness and existential uncertainty.

Without our usual ‘protective social skin’ to deflect the horror of the COVID-19 irreality from the ego (Freud 1919), even more vulnerable human subjects existed in an alternative empty space from which *any-thing* was possible, where any-body or any-self could emerge. A terrifying space where which anything could occur besides the nullified pre COVID-19 safe futurism. Momentarily caught beyond science, people were brought face-to-face with fundamental existential questions typically avoided in society: ‘Who am I?’ ‘What are we doing here?’ ‘What matters in life?’ Having to ponder these uneasy questions facing a complex and rapidly re-re-imaginable future (from the multitude of interplay between nothingness and potentialities) with diminished social-psychological defences (social affirmations) triggered dilemmas of self and caused novel feelings of malaise, which I attempted to preserve in the film.

Dimensions of COVID-19 malaise

Bergson (1998) argues we cannot represent ‘Nothing’ by means of an image: if we try, we find we are representing a particular suppressions to ourselves (Richmond 2008). Therefore, film itself arises as a communicative medium and art form precisely to fill the void, a defence from nothingness – to mask our true emptiness. Therefore, it would be absurd to claim that *Encounters of Nothingness* represented nothingness or claim that I captured the void. The film provides a phenomenological account of “experiencing the experience” of nothingness, the existential grappling, dilemmas of self, and malaises brought about on by the COVID-19 pandemic. I will now unpack these interrelated non-liner dimensions of malaise central to the hyper-real experience of COVID-19: the dearth futurism, inertia of the real, imposing irreality, potentialities, other-less-ness, and capitalism claustrum.

Dearth Futurism

Within modern society life has come to be conceive of as a “task”, with set goals, plans, benchmarks, and targets. We’ve begun denying ourselves the adequate rest-stops required for re-assessment. We live in constant anticipation of the future (Baudrillard 1988, 10); experiencing the present frequently as a preparation, a

transitional state, a continuum on which we are always on “our way”. According to Fink et al. (1930) this “curious futurism" of human life is intimately related to one of our fundamental characteristics: we seek meaning; we interpret our existence and aim to understand why we are in/of this world. Our quest for some kind of “hidden meaning” to existence contributes to some of humankind’s greatest achievements and horrendous atrocities. Fink et al. (1930) claims that ‘it is one of the profound paradoxes of human existence that in our never-ending pursuit of happiness we never attain it, and that strictly speaking no human can be reckoned to be happy before their death’. In full grandiosity, we are not content with the simple and straightforward mode of existence, and as such life assumes the existence of a meaningful "final goal". We safety ourselves with ‘personally innovative’ futures, in elaborate and unelaborate scenarios of self. Plans, budgets, calendars, architecture, engineering, and airlines all belong to realm of futurism. The dearth futurism and nullification of one’s *vorwelt* (imagined possible worlds and selves) caused by COVID-19 required an immediate re-engagement with the process of curious futurism to reconfigure and project the self.

Potentialities: Pasts and projections

To fill the inescapable dearth futurism, the reality of emptiness, we project to the future. As a means not to suffer the malaise of nothingness for too long, we hypothesise answers to the self-subjected dilemmas of self. We call forth Superhero selves – *vorwelt* heroes of hope are conjured to find a way to continue. The new hobbies, new professions, new relationships, new passions, and new modes of being that materialised during COVID-19 can be explained by this. The disruption to the integrity of the illusion of the safety in the social system, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, inspired a re-assessment, a re-organisation, a re-imagination of superhero selves and the reconstitution of the hungry ghosts of past selves (Epstein 1997). The re-familiarization with the selves underlying past hobbies, photographs, foods, skills, talents, friends, and even human history itself, become absorbed into the potentialities of the emerging self. It occurs as an intense revision of one’s *folgewelt* (past worlds/selves) in light of one’s imaginable *vorwelt* (future) and visa versa, a constant ricochet of self. A kaleidoscopic journey across memory and imagination was required to re-establish the self and persist in the context of the COVID-19 irreality.

Inertia of the real: Imposing irreality

People associated the empty spaces, deserted streets, and widespread lack of activity, as “creepy and weird”, comparing the irreality to scenes in *Twin Peaks* (1990), *The Twilight Zone* (1959), *28 Days later* (2002), *Black Mirror* (2004), *I am Legend* (2007), and *Stalker* (1979), films and TV shows able to ‘elicit feelings of eeriness’ in audiences (Wang et al. 2015). People could identify the eeriness in the transition from their usual mode of reality. The unexpected lapse in structured reality and re-adjustment of one’s symbolic universe triggered by COVID-19 provided an immediate abundance of not only potentialities of self, but also the presence of physical space. The imposing irreality of space as a result of teleworking, diminished the need for complex transportation newtorks, public places, work routines, and shopping centres etc. Places designed to facilitate human activity became meaningless without the interactions of people to supply them with meaning (Baudrillard 1988, p 68). The most imposing and dispiriting of these being the empty playground – the potential utter annihilation of the human species. The openness of additional space on the familiar transformed familiar places into unfamiliar spaces, where the uncanny dilemmas of self could be projected and played out. To achieve a state of existential resolve the hungry ghosts of past selves and superhero projected selves negotiated the emerging irreality. Similar to what Epstein discusses as the ‘knowledge of appearance as terror’ an awareness that ‘past formations have ceased, present one’s are ceasing’ (Epstein 1996, 133). The altered societal structure provided the emotional and physical space required for change and social reform (Baudrillard 1988, 131) (for protesting, what Black Lives Matter achieved for example). The imposing irreality of COVID-19 (and the handling of it) brought about a sense of brutalism-awareness, a distain for grandiosity, and wasted resources in society. Existential anger was evident in the widespread unpleasantness and misdirection of rioting (and looting) central to COVID-19 protests across the globe. Such extreme and deviant forms of group behaviour and aggression can be read as a means to express the extent of the turmoil underlying the crises of self (O’Sullivan 2016).

Other-less-ness

COVID-19 introduced society to novel terminology. We became more of aware our existential threat from viruses (and other scientific oddities), our biological system, our vulnerabilities, and capabilities (wash your hands, don't touch your face, avoid everyone!). During the first few weeks of lockdown, I developed a 'grim reaper complex', I had an acute awareness of the power of my body to do harm and potentially kill. How everybody was a potential weapon, with the ability to cause significant deaths, and mental, physical, emotional, and economic harm to society (Dingley and Mollica 2007). Society developed a form of hyper-embodiment with regards the movement of the self. The body became something too powerful to possess. Strangely now our bodies became a reason to stop – *to detach*. The body became an obstacle rather than resource for action: 'I can't rather than I can' (Scott 2020). This sense of psychological *other-less-ness* and lack of authentic encounters with other people, not being able to hold, touch, or care for loved ones, contributed greatly to the felt malaise. The societal-wide emphasis placed on practices of routine hand-washing, while raising hygiene standards as necessary also worked as a form of dis-embodiment. A form of alienation of the body, an awareness of the body as a functioning mechanism, resulting in the *inability to detach*. The crises of self which occurred during lockdown, the intermingling of hungry ghosts and superheroes, required a moulding of mental models and a de-embodiment of self, similar to how post-performance actors 'let go' of a character (Haarhoff 2018). Hair styles, body transformations, and tattoos are part of this process and mark the 'letting go of'– the symbolic death of a now redundant self – locked beneath the trapdoor in the haunted house of self.

Capitalism as claustrum, consumerism as claustrum

People assumed much positive societal and political reform would occur as a result of COVID-19, it is still relatively early but I do not share the optimism. During the societal pause of lockdown there was a greater societal appreciation of nature. Videos of curious sheep, ducks, birds, cows, exploring towns and playing were unavoidable on news and social media. The birds were calmer and heard louder than usual. People began noticing, and as such, *identifying* with nature more so than pre-COVID-19. During the research, nature became more apparent, vibrantly imposing itself on the irreality of nothingness. Nature provided additional degrees of hope and spirituality, it provided a necessary identity and narrative resource, which

protected the self during the sharp decent into other-less-ness. With the invisible walls of the capitalist maze ineffective – the work routines, managed relationships, consumer identities, and rituals paused – the self could (re)turn to nature. This newfound identification with nature, the acknowledgment of the need to improve our relationship with it, was a positive aspect of lockdown. We grew closer to closing to problematic subject/object gap with regards our identification with nature. It provided time and space for alternative relationships with nature to emerge (Haraway 2003). Along with the hungry ghost and superheroes, the quest of self during lockdown was supported by phantasmatic nature, the re-constitutive "I", never so close to nature, saw the self in nature, and the nature in the self: A re-engagement with the mythic properties of nature and the awareness of human identity in deep time shared with other species. Without the usual human/social support to maintain the self and its defences (Freud 1919), we (re)turned to nature in novel metaphysical and physical manners. The nature of science and the science of nature was required to support the self during the COVID-19 hyper-structure. As Fink (1995) states "the lack in identity (of the self as well as the Other) causes a deep uncertainty, an anxiety that is alleviated to some degree by fantasy. Fantasy projects meaning onto the Other and offers the promise of a return to an imaginary wholeness".

Our phantasmatic relationship with nature is embedded deep in human culture. From our communications through cave paintings, mythical appreciation of ravens and wolves, shamanic rituals, cultural appropriations in the form of brands, we cherish their otherness, in the form of pet relationships and wild friendships (Gupta 2019; O'Sullivan 2019). Freed from the boundaries of consumerism (grooming products reducing in sales for instance), people could explore our long-suppressed need for a more meaningful relationship with nature. Ecological and biodiversity concerns have become more apparent – our concerns have been placed alongside other species: a broader consideration of human life than pre-COVID-19 flickers in the sun. COVID-19 interrupted the consumerism system, the machine projecting the lies (Baudrillard 1988, 88-92), revealing the true horror and severity of our detachment from nature, the unnecessary sadness and suffering embedded, the pollution, over-production, and over-consumption. We are on the road to nothing – total oblivion. Once society began vaccinating and 'opening back up', as if social recidivists, unskilled to persist in increased solitude, resulted in a quick re-vert back to the (old new) system, with

familiar consumerism, familiar politics, materialised like a societal-wide *psychic retreat.* A mindless return to the safer illusion capitalism provides. Back to ignoring once again the reality of the Anthropocene and multitude of dangers ahead threatening human existence.

Won from the void: The transition of self during COVID-19

The underlying dimensions of malaise discussed offer an insight into the depth of the existential grappling, a glimpse into the novel crises of self-provoked by COVID-19. But also, the lockdown offered a liberation – a transition of self – an opportunity for existential renaissance (Caillois, 2001). Creative acts of self, such as modern identity projects, must be 'won' from the void. If the anxiety caused by the potentialities can be contained without disrupting an individual, then optimism can be nurtured and development possible. As the self is re-imagined and receives increasing social affirmation it establishes integrity, strengthening the bond between one's innwelt and umwelt. An enlightening process occurs to achieve a state of existential resolve: "It is the uncanny experience of nothingness that sheds light on being, which sheds further light on being" (Raingshe 2019). Feelings of nothingness can function as ontological (Fink et al. 1930) and biological indicators (Solms 2021) inspiring a re-assessment of potentialities and highlighting the need to re-establish the self within a broader horizon of consciousness. Encounters of nothingness can be creative in that they, similarly to anti-structure play, generate new formulations of 'as if' reality (Anchor, 1978).

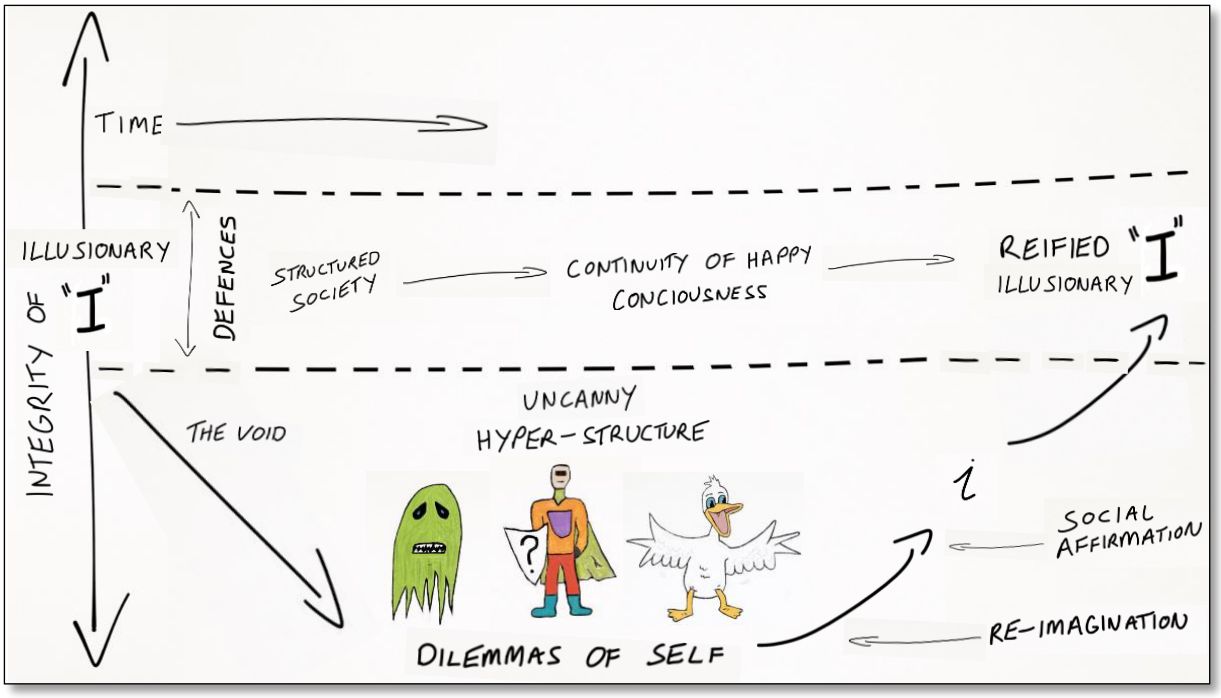


Figure 6.3. Won from the void: Identity Transition during COVID-19

I ask you to revisit Figure 6.1, the poster for *Encounters of Nothingness*, Figure 6.3, 'won from the void', the illustrated model of identity transition, is a more detailed version of the process represented within the poster. Figure 6.3 fills in the black spot in the poster, which represents the cultural black spot surrounding other pandemics.

I will now offer an explanation of 'won from the void'. The integrity of the illusionary "I" is decreasing from top to bottom, as time moves from left to right. The dotted lines above and beneath the illusionary "I", are the typical boundaries, the capacity of our usual defences, or social skin, within structured society. Our defence's work to maintain the integrity of the ego, it has duress and stability within this established parameter. During typical daily life in structured society, we move safely in time between these parameters. Our happy consciousness continues without disruption, reifying the "I" with safe futurism relative to societal *ceteris paribus*.

However, COVID-19 life was not usual times, not typical structure, it was uncanny, a *hyper* form of structure. Hyper due to the intensified threat of mortality, and the interconnective and shared nature of COVID-19. The virus too possessed a physical hyper-structure under microscope (COVID-19 spike protein, for example). Roles

within society were heightened, social relationships became more detached, and a blurring of home/work boundaries occurred. COVID-19 life was hyper also in the sense that there was the anxiety anything could emerge from the uncertain reality: it had no delineated beginning nor ending. Hyper also as typically before people access sates of significant psychological change, a number of rites of passage, or clear stages, are involved to aid the separation of self (Van Gennep 2019). Separation typically occurs in successive stages to minimise psychological disruption (funerals, weddings, carnivals) (Turner 1969). Much of COVID-19's devastation was its sudden and unexpected nature, and uncertain beginning and ending. It's initial detachment from modern science was other-worldly – a novel *hyper* threat.

This brush with the void provoked, existential crises, dilemmas of self, and promoted widespread feelings of malaise. The suddenness of the drop in the integrity of the "I", and the limited defence resources to deal with it, contributed to the depth of and intensity these felt dimensions of malaise. While anti-structure experiences are associated with flow and peak experiences (Turner 1969), hyper-structure was associated with *depresentation and detachment*. It was timeless, uncertain, unknowable. *Weight* rather than flow states characterised the COVID-19 experience: Rather than offering the symbolic eternity anti-structure play offers (Anchor 1978), it imposed the existential dread and reflection, a glimpse into the horror of the real. In order not to suffer the weight of existential pain too long, to protect the ego, hungry ghosts, superheroes, and phantasmatic nature fill the void to negotiate the irreality and beginning the 'as if' quest to re-imagine the self and world. They provide an identity resolve during the uncanny hyper-structure. The self is re-imagined in stages, first as a precious timid child-like "i", gaining integrity through universal affirmations, parallel to the easing of lockdown conditions, vaccinations, and society opening up. These served as the post-liminal rites accommodating the return to a sense of (old new) normal and structure. The newly reified illusionary "I" was 'won from the void', the ego was re-established within a broader horizon of consciousness in order to 'go on' being in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unsatisfying incompleteness(es)

This art-based research exploration draws attention to the underdeveloped notion of nothingness across the social sciences. It highlights the importance of exploring the ontology of nothingness to understanding the suffering-becoming-suffering cycles of the human condition. The film, which explored 'experiencing the experience' of COVID-19, illustrates the ontological overlap in experiences of nothingness, the uncanny and identity transition. The terror in nothingness is the felt fear of loss, the absence, the manifestation of a void – unknowable annihilation. The terror in the uncanny is the fear of a substitution, being replaced – experienced annihilation. Each conjure the threatening spectre of non-being. Both reveal the lie in the illusory "I" and deny a symbolic system, thus forcing a paroxysm – a re-imagination of self, and world, a transformation of self alike other liminal experiences (Turner 1969). *Encounters of Nothingness* contributes to our understanding of the ontology of nothingness. The film provides an autoethnographic insight into the dimensions of malaises underlying the dilemmas of self, triggered by COVID-19 hyper-structure. It provides an account of 'experiencing the experience' of COVID-19, the existential grappling that is likely to accompany other potential pandemics, or other existential threats in order to persist and 'go on'. The chapter offers a discussion on the felt COVID-19 malaise and offers an illustrated model of the identity transition process, which should be considered as part of a broader timeline of existential ups (anti-structure peaks) and downs (hyper-structure detachment). Won from the void, and its novel conceptualisation could be used to aid our understand of the rapid changing of forms and identity transition in other contexts. Future pandemics, natural disasters, terrorism, emigration or displacement for example, particularly when void of native tongue or basic cultural understandings could be explored using hyper-structure and hungry ghosts, superheroes and phantasmatic nature could be adopted to understand, and ease, existential crises.

As such, most importantly operates as a form of 'cultural memory' in preparation for future pandemics. I have filled a potential 'cultural black spot' surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The preservation of my uncanny COVID-19 experiences, the dilemmas of self, represented in film for re-experience, absorption, re-interpret has been transformative. *Encounters of Nothingness* and 'won from the void', organised in a neat illusionary double narrative – a somethingness from nothingness– in many

ways an illusionary narrative with an illusionary double “I”– a double defence from the void. The film originally a defence from the void, and the chapter a scientific defence from the openness of the film. As such, the film, the research, reveals the unsatisfying incompleteness of researching and representing human experience: things are what they are not.

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