



Always Late Capitalism: Quantity not Quality in the Age of Contentification

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Abstract:

When Albert Camus writes that ‘There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide,’ he is writing of a period freshly on the road toward meaninglessness—reflecting that Sisyphus *must* be happy in the routinization of his day’s labour, otherwise why else would anyone continue to get up and go to work? The question, however, has changed. In today’s streaming economy, everything is contentified. There are twitch feeds of streamers asleep, an atomisation of Big Brother’s night-cam forever-filmed content, blue-check Tweets, little thoughts, that now can be monetized. The question is not of whether or not to kill oneself, now, the concern is whether or not we should turn our life into content, *slop* as it is so called in Twitch corners. Now we must imagine Sisyphus as *quick*. As Gilles Deleuze outlined so long ago in ‘Postscript on Societies of Control’, the move from a disciplinarian society to this finely woven matrix of information has done more to reflect an ongoing kind of process, ‘one is never finished with everything’; it is Mark Fisher’s ‘business ontology’ of Capitalist Realism, where every thought, every whim, can be thought of as a product to be sold. By responding to the post-pandemic digitisation of the workplace, I will examine through this theoretical framework of ‘Always Late Capitalism’—while also arguing this is a departure from late capitalism—the recent trends in not only the content production sphere, like YouTube and Twitch, but also the increasing moves toward unfinished formats in popular media. The games economy is one example. With the advent of live service games and updates, games can be fixed over time, or launched in early access models; or in films, Marvel movies premiering with unfinished VFX made by underpaid workers, only to be fixed for the streaming release. In this push now toward an Always Late capitalism, a *fix-it-later* capitalism, the rapidity of Sisyphus is all that matters. We must imagine him rushing the boulder up the hill, so that the instant gratification of the next session arrives before we have ever felt the dopamine rush of that first cresting. The era of the infoglut means that if the trough is filled, consumers will eat whatever fills it, no matter the quality.

Keywords: Content, data analysis, cultural theory, digital spaces, Always Late Capitalism



One of the first problems that Frederic Jameson identifies with art in the age of late capitalism, is the postmodern response to the subject. With the liberation from the ‘centred subject’, there is a liberation ‘from anxiety’, and every ‘other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling’.¹ When unpacking the audiovisual sphere of art, he found that this new medium has a ‘mechanical depersonalisation’, where ‘helpless spectators of video time are then as immobilized and mechanically integrated and neutralised as the older photographic subjects’.² Jump forty years forward, and there is what Jeffrey Thomas Nealon calls a ‘movement of intensification’, one realises that ‘Postmodernism is not a thing of the past’, only ‘an intensified version of yesterday’.³ What better intensification of the television in the living room is there than a phone in a hand? Even the most bleeding edge technology wants the utter removal of that techne—the dissolution of the body as the consumer straps on their Apple Pro headset. As Nick Srnicek points out, the labour process now has become ‘increasingly immaterial’, creating a ‘cognitariat’, a class of workers dedicated to ‘Youtube and blogs’, and, recently, TikTok, InstaReels, and Reddit.⁴ This development—or intensification—comes to develop the main ontological development of Always Late Capitalism. Now, with the internet, everyone can be a content producer, and everyone can be consumed as content: this is the stage of Contentification. Welcome to the era of the self-facing camera -- the pervasive need to contentify one’s very own existence always has a supreme focus not on the self, but on how the self is perceived, how the self fits and plugs into the panoptic stage. Instead of finding meaning through action, meaning is now found through the perception not only of having consumed, but *being* consumed.

To introduce here Albert Camus’s work *The Myth of Sisyphus* probably sounds random. However, Camus’s project is the only thing that could be relevant to proposing how *Always Late Capitalism* exists. The famous opening words, ‘There is but one truly serious philosophical question and that is suicide’, prepares a host of problems Camus will come to reason with, those of existentialist angst, of the reasonless existence, of whether or not to strive *for* reason.⁵ Writing in 1942, Camus’s brutal reduction of all epistemological, ontological, ethical concerns of philosophy to that of whether or not life is worth living is an evocative, albeit necessary, one. It is easy to forget that Camus was writing in response to genocidal warmongering, when contemporary readers, trapped merely in the humdrum banal inferno of capitalism, can find so much meaning in it. When Camus was writing, it must have been torturous for anyone to get out of bed in a Nazi-occupied France, brown shirts filling the streets, bigots taking root as they burn books and cultures. Meaning can be impossible to find when



faced with mountainous terror, with Olympus, and a boulder to push up it. Camus's argument for that oft-quoted desire for happiness that Sisyphus has, is based on the central proposition that when faced 'with the irrational', humanity feels a 'longing for happiness and for reason', and so the absurd is 'born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world'.⁶ More precisely, the 'absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of [...] confrontation'.⁷ Herein lies the kernel: If the central problem of all philosophy was whether or not to kill one's self, then that has long since changed in societies ensnared by Always Late Capitalism. It is not about confrontation, no Hegelian dialectics that synthesise to cultivate history; no meaning is found in contrast, in the binary oppositions that muddle logocentric thought. No, Sisyphus does not find meaning in cresting the mountain. There is no meaning there—only in the next push up the hill, only in the delayed gratification that *is yet* to come, is there meaning.

Contentification has been a long time coming; its mechanics was already beginning to emerge with the arrival of mass media. Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality is instrumental to this idea, where the 'medium' collapses, when 'You no longer watch TV, it is TV that watches you (live)'.⁸ Baudrillard is exploring how, if the medium has collapsed, then where are the boundaries of what is considered real, and what is considered fiction. This component—the hyperreal—is key to how the very life a person lives is content to consume. 'There is no longer a medium in a literal sense: it is now intangible,' writes Baudrillard, 'diffused, and diffracted in the real, and one can no longer even say that the medium is altered by it'.⁹ Reality TV shows, Influencers—these are the hallmarks of the hyperreal, when the cultural content to consume begins to simply be ordinary life. Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* manages to capture this snare when he writes, 'capitalist realism has successfully installed a "business ontology" in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in a society [...] should be run as a business'.¹⁰ Twitch has some of the best examples of this business ontology when it comes to *reality*. Twitch is a streaming website primarily set around gamers to stream their sessions. The set-up originally favoured a lot of competitive games and esports channels—but, as with the influencer trends in social media, certain characters have arisen on these platforms and branched out into larger genres. In 2021, streamer Ludwig began a subathon that was predicated on him constantly streaming his life.¹¹ He would sleep, eat, and engage with chat the whole time during this period. While it can be considered entertainment, it is more that the entertainment here is based purely on simple acts of life: if *Truman Show* came out today, the



titular character would have known all along he was inside a TV show—and he'd have loved it.

This contentification, however, is based rather nefariously on declining contact that young people have with one another. Twitch already profits from poorer viewers who freely donate large sums of money to their favourite streamer, and very often, this is a revelation more about the epidemic of loneliness that has took many young peoples by storm. Twitch's 'Just Chatting' channels, for instance, began in 2018, having around 227,149 max viewers from November to December.¹² At the beginning of lockdown, March 2020, the viewing stats were largely the same—and then began to steadily rise as lockdown continued, ultimately ending the year with over 1,117,874 peak viewers at any time, a massive 289.1% increase.¹³ It is no mistake the numbers should correlate with one of the most globally effecting events for some time, when mental health is plummeting, when loneliness is at an all-time high. Just Chatting will have streams like Ludwig's (though he does game), but mostly others that would quite literally be a streamer talking to their chat. It is the gross commercialisation of friendship. In another article by Grayson, he writes in ecstasy 'It's basically a big, bleary-eyed slumber party where everyone's just vibing.'¹⁴ In this Always Late Capitalism, it is as though everything can be commoditized, in *all-ways*. It is simply seeking out what new markets emerge as a result of these worsening conditions brought on by unregulated financial disasters. Taylor Lorenz's article in the *New York Times* about creators commodifying their lives captures how atomised this content can be:

"Have you ever wanted to control my life?" Lev Cameron, 15, a TikToker with 3.3 million followers, asked in a recent video posted to NewNew. "Now is your time. You can actually control things I do throughout the day and vote on it and then I will show you if I end up doing the stuff you voted for"¹⁵

There is no longer even the autonomy of the person, no authorial nature in that content—the content *is* the agency that these creators no longer have. The power imbalances here are immediately apparent—a fifteen-year-old selling their agency for profit. Long have creators been beholden to culture industries, their products and creations having to fit market standards under the illusion of free will. But the libidinal desire to completely *control* another person, the capriciousness of it, as if a person is a character in a game, is the endpoint of Baudrillard's anxieties about an annihilated medium.

The internet once had a utopian fever to it. When Michel Foucault formulated the idea of the heterotopic space, a place of play, one could not help but think of the internet. When



Foucault writes, ‘we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another’, he is exploring how certain places evoke in us structures of feeling, certain identities, and the internet’s early conception, of forums and YouTube’s early catalog of creatives enjoying themselves, was once this heterotopic space, one of becoming and self-actualisation.¹⁶ In Legacy Russel’s *Glitch Feminism*, the incorporeality of the internet is a freedom from the ‘middle school heteronormativity’, of having to be buried in a body ‘systematically erased, edited out, ignored’ by white patriarchal forces.¹⁷ The internet is a place of ‘play’, a play to ‘perform, explore’ away from the entrapments of the form.¹⁸ Twitch, however, has collapsed this exploration with the introduction of contentification. There is now an imbalance when chat will donate to a Twitch streamer just so that they can have their contribution read out by the streamer. There is even a website called EPals that is predicated on paying for someone to simply ‘e-chat’ or play different games with you, offering ‘Like Service’ that is simply them going through your socials and liking your pictures, or ‘Emotional Support’, ‘Relationship Advice’, and ‘Off My Chest’. When compared with a world before the death of the third space, there was no commodification of friendship. There was no gigapp to pay someone to do groceries, no way to offload any and all aspects of a life well lived so as to be reduced to a dopamine-seeking infoglut that feels only desire to fire off synapses and not develop memories, connections, and community. Instead of confronting the ‘silence of the world’ as Camus would want, contentifiers and the contentified ignore it.

Being able to buy friendship in this ‘business ontology’-ridden society leads to one of the biggest issues of contentification. Byung-Chul Han writes, ‘today we live in an infosphere’, where ‘The human being is no longer a “Dasein” but an “inforg” who communicates and exchanges information’.¹⁹ A vital part of that information has long abandoned the essence of self and worldliness of that Heideggerian being-in-the-world, and instead has changed, become being-*seen*-in-the-world. It is a Vlodology of self where what matters most is the self-facing camera. This formulation is not panoptic—the panoptic role would be to know the surveillance one is under and to condition the self to that. The self-facing camera has become the image par excellence for Always Late capitalism, because contentification relies on the constant anxiety of perception through the filmic lens, the informatisation of the self and how best to *appear* in order to comply to certain aesthetic and memefied standards. Dr Kamna Singh and Dr Archana Verma Singh, for instance, write that through the constant editing of the self in images, in this case an image of Khloe Kardashian, there is ‘pluripotent negative effect on the self-esteem of



individuals' in a society based on the dictum 'I show, therefore I am'.²⁰ In a contentified lifestyle, it is vital to constantly appear as the idealised form of the self that the internet allows. There is yet again a utopian component of the internet and digitisation that has been co-opted by capitalist logic, and both Dr Singhs capture this distortion when writing that the digital space is a 'Great Equaliser', and anyone with access to the online space can 'manifest and promote his/her idealised self without any economic, social, political, historic, geographic or biological constraint'.²¹

The cultural signifier of any event, then, is fundamentally whether or not it has been viewed. Take MrBeast's videos that sparked outrage recently when he proposed to *cure* the blindness of over a thousand people. There is a kind of sickness to content like this, where the spectacle of the video is the very transgressions of a capitalist single payer system, where healthcare in America has failed. As Steven Aquino points out, this is 'inspiration porn', and MrBeast's video is reliant on enjoying not only a failed healthcare system, but an underlying faux pas that to be disabled is to be inferior, to be corrected.²² The conundrum for this supposed philanthropy is that MrBeast relies on the garish displays of charity so as to generate funds for further actions like these. The unknowing component of this, though, is that the audience is performing a kind of labour that will undoubtedly be profiting MrBeast, if not in capital then in social capital as well. After all, YouTube is finding ways to 'monopolise, extract, analyse, and use the increasingly large amounts of data' to improve the algorithm for adverts.²³ Byung-Hul Chan identifies this suspicion a little more closely, that

In our society, however, in which things, having all become commodities, must be exhibited in order even to *be*, exhibition value becomes an absolute value. Everything that rests in itself, stays within itself, ceases to have value. Things only acquire a value if they are exhibited and seen. Human beings also behave like commodities; they exhibit themselves, produce themselves, in order to increase their exhibition value.²⁴

MrBeast's philanthropy relying on the very system that demands spectacle problematizes the supposed charitable cause of the entire effort. 'Things only acquire a value if they are exhibited and seen' not only means the cultural signification of *seeing* the event, of posting about a good deed someone has done, but it also means that views equate to monetary value, that the attention economy makes products of those who are taking part in it. Every post on Twitter, now X, is a cultural product—every picture, every like, all of it is to take part in the grand spectacle of the self, of the self-turned-commodity, the self-turned-inwards, the *mise en abyme* of the self-facing camera reflecting back the content that creators slowly become in their informatisation.

Always Late Capitalism has bottlenecked cultural production—and, as proven, cultural production no longer solely means something a person makes. A *person* is made; a person is a



product. There is no break down now between what is work, what is labour, and what is rest. Labour *is* rest if Ludwig sleeps on stream; labour is *being seen* whenever a selfie goes online. If contentification is the cultural mode of being, it is also a rewriting of selfhood-as-defined-by-being-seen, and so is illustrative of how Always Late Capitalism has completely cornered the subject into an addiction economy. The proliferation of vape pens, the easy-to-use and easy-to-lose plastics that fill the streets, has arrived in time for what Cory Doctorow calls the ‘Enshittification’. He defines this process as such:

HERE IS HOW platforms die: First, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die.²⁵

Contentification directly causes this enshittification in that the many services of the digital space that have rewired nervous systems, disrupted dopamine secretions, eroded senses of self, now know that there is no going back. The reward of a like, of a well-retweeted tweet, of a streamer mentioning a user’s name—all of this is the only kind of happiness accessible. Spotify knows that physical media is difficult to operate and so, through convenience, cornered the market (using, of course, the Napster model). They know they can continually up their prices and that users will continue to be strung along, like the nascent smoker with a vape pen pressed to their lips, that high always so close. But this enshittification has infected all subscription models. Uber now has risen prices, and is looking to be the ‘Amazon’ of ‘motion’, there was even a moment when BMW were trying to charge a monthly fee for heated seats.²⁶ Gaming companies have live service models, actively alienating developers who want to make more invigorating games, and not empty, contentified experiences that come with *Destiny 2*, or the recent *Suicide Squad*.²⁷

With Always Late Capitalism, there is always a rush. There is only a constant stream of marketing pushes, of demanding more and more from users, promising to always deliver the next time round, ensuring that the first thing on a user’s mind is some kind of product that they can contribute data to. As Gilles Deleuze would write in ‘Postscript on the Control Society’, ‘in societies of control one is never finished with anything’, and the only importance of subjectivity is a kind of codification, where ‘Individuals have become “*dividuals*”, and masses, samples, data, markets, or “*banks*”’²⁸). The contentified are nodes of contentification, of what is being consumed and what is doing the consuming—and so there is no moment of cessation, no entertaining of a quietude. He even writes, ‘Repressive forces don’t stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. [...] What we’re plagued by these days isn’t any blocking of communication, but pointless statements’.²⁹ In the contentified existence



of Always Late Capitalism, there is no confrontation with the quiet of Mount Olympus, of the boulder rolling down; there is only the rush back down to do it again, to be *seen* doing it again. Always late, never early; always rushed, never sated.

It maps out to addiction so perniciously. As Srnicek points out in 2017, ‘Google, for instance, provides services like email for free in order to get users on board, but raises money through its advertising arm’, except now, emails technically *do* charge the user.³⁰ There is a limited amount of space across the entire google account now, which is largely because Google offered infinite space for photo, and so the user naturally let their files add up, only to now be restricted to 15gb. Contentification: whenever you try to stop, you are hit with that withdrawal. It is more convenient for the body to walk to a shop and buy another than deal with the psychical pain of nicotine not releasing that sweet serotonin.

There are many ideations or developments of capitalism that preoccupy this modern era. Yanis Varoufakis’s *Technofeudalism* follows on from Mackenzie Wark’s *Capital is Dead* in proposing that both content creators and consumers thereof (prosumers) are digital serfs. These are true. Data is extracted from thoughts and feelings, rage and despair at increasing wealth disparity, inequality and failing welfare resold to the world in shows that evoke the spectre of consumerist rebellion (like *The Boys*, *Mr Robot*, *Fallout*), that propose communes at the end of the world (*The Last of Us*). What pervades, however, is this rewiring of culture through the business ontologies of technofeudalist spaces. It is always worth remembering how quick and receptive these platforms are. The hit show, *Stranger Things*, was a success story for algorithmic data collection, developing complex and sophisticated amounts of data including behavioural patterns, products, interests, social media links, all of which helped toward developing a show that matched as much of that data as possible.³¹ Always Late Capitalism never lets its subjects leave—a user can log off, but they will not be offline. A user is always being used—lest we forget the terminology for an addict *is* a user—and they have been predicted and *calculated*. Mark Fisher, when teaching his students, noticed that they would sit with their headphones on, without it playing any music, and he could only speculate they did this to be reassured the ‘matrix was *still there*, within reach’, their personal own ‘OediPod’ to assail their constant ‘twitchy, agitated interpassivity’, their ‘inability to concentrate or focus’.³² Even fifteen years ago Fisher was spotting the *Twitch*—is it any accident the streaming service is called this?—the fever of *more*, the needle-sickness of a quick dopamine hit, of friendship that is paid for, of content that is basically a fundamental, human right. In a contentified world, Sisyphus *likes* pushing the boulder up the hill—that much has already been asserted. He likes



it because it is a #Grindset, he has an audience in Olympus watching him on, and so he perceives himself *as* that indomitable hero burdened with injustice—he may not overtly *enjoy* such a task, but in a Lyotardian way, he likes being *seen* doing it. Only, when he gets to the top, he does not watch the sunrise: that is not the reward, for the reward is delayed, forestalled. He lets the boulder roll down the mountain and sprints down as fast as he can in a panic. He has to. He is already late for his next ascent.

Notes

- ¹ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 14.
- ² *Ibid.*, 73-74.
- ³ Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 16.
- ⁴ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 30.
- ⁵ Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin Random House, 2005), 1.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 4.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: zer0 books, 2009), 19.
- ¹¹ Nathan Grayson, “Twitch Streamer Behind ‘Never-Ending’ Marathon Says He’ll Only Make a Fraction of \$470,000 Haul”, *Kotaku*, March 25th 2021a <<https://kotaku.com/twitch-streamer-behind-never-ending-marathon-says-hell-1846554595>>
- ¹² No Author, ‘Just Chatting: Twitch Stats’, *Sullygnome*, 16th April 2024, <<https://sullygnome.com/>>.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Grayson, “Twitch Star's 'Never-Ending' Stream Shows No Signs Of Stopping, Despite Need To Eat, Sleep”, *Kotaku*, March 21st 2021b, <<https://kotaku.com/twitch-stars-never-ending-stream-shows-no-signs-of-stop-1846488273>>.
- ¹⁵ Taylor Lorenz, “For Creators, Everything is for Sale”, *New York Times*, March 10 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/10/style/creators-selling-selves.html>>.
- ¹⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Neil Leach, (London: Routledge, 1997), 330.
- ¹⁷ Legacy Russel *Glitch Feminism* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2022), 5.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ¹⁹ Byung-Chul Han, *Non-Things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld*, translated by Daniel Steuer. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 15

- ²⁰ Dr Kamna Singh and Dr Archana Verma Singh, 'Enchantments of Self-Camera: A Critical Study of Hyperreal Social Media', *Dialog*. no. 37. 288-304, 289.
- ²¹ Ibid., 296.
- ²² Stephen Aquino, 'MrBeast's blindness video puts systemic ableism on display', *TechCrunch*. 10th February 2023, <<https://techcrunch.com/2023/02/10/mrbeasts-blindness-video-puts-systemic-ableism-on-display/?guccounter=1>>
- ²³ Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 32.
- ²⁴ Han, 50.
- ²⁵ Cory Doctorow, 'The "Enshittification" of TikTok', *Wired*, 23rd January 2023, <<https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/>>
- ²⁶ Steven Levy. 'Uber's CEO Says He'll Always Find a Reason to Say His Company Sucks', *Wired*, 1st August 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/uber-ceo-will-always-say-his-company-sucks/>; Hawkins, Andrew J. 'BMW drops plan to charge a monthly fee for heated seats', *The Verge*. 7th September 2023. <<https://www.theverge.com/2023/9/7/23863258/bmw-cancel-heated-seat-subscription-microtransaction>>
- ²⁷ Justin Carter, "70 percent of devs unsure of live-service games sustainability", *Game Developer*, 16th April 2024, <<https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/70-percent-of-devs-wary-of-live-service-games-being-sustainable>>.
- ²⁸ Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscripts on the Societies of Control', *October*, Winter, 1992, pp. 3 – 7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>, 5.
- ²⁹ Ibid., *Negotiations: 1972 – 1990*, trans. By Martin Joughin, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 129.
- ³⁰ Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, 37.
- ³¹ Shailesh Mallya, 'Stranger Things, a success story born out of data analytics', *Acrotrend*, 20th March 2019. <<https://acrotrend.com/stranger-things-a-success-story-born-out-of-data-analytics/>>
- ³² Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 24.

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