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Subaltern, Supraaltern, and the Digitally Grievable Life

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[Disclaimer: This is a draft, please find a diagram of its intended structure at the end]

1. Introduction: Mourning (on) the Platform

The main idea behind this paper is to view the paradigm of digitalization in its current stage through a lens which has itself come into focus due to the COVID-19 pandemic: the phenomena of grief and mourning.

I try to show how grief can be utilized as a hermeneutical device for analyzing some of the more fundamental contradictions of digitalization and social media. In order to do so, two different ideas of mourning - those of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler - are being triangulated with Gayatri Spivak's theory of subalternity, which I am going to extend with the idea of supraalternity, using concepts from social psychology, Lacan and Baudrillard.

The core hypothesis of this paper is that the division of hidden labor and hypervisibility between subalternity and supraalternity ultimately prevents socially and politically relevant forms of mourning from happening.

I will use a number of examples from digital platform infrastructure in order to conclude with the question whether *lament* is a useful starting point for necessary changes of platform capitalism and the discourse it enables and incentivizes.

Terminology

This paper includes a number of terminological idiosyncracies for which I couldn't find a better place in the flow of the text, which is why I want to get them out of the way here.

First of all, I will refer to the whole of public discussion, social communication, hobby forums, or the sharing of cat pictures as "The Discourse". In fact, anything other than private peer-to-peer exchange, anything which could, potentially "go viral", or be the occasion of a "shitstorm", will be called The Discourse in capital letters within the confines of this paper. This special formatting shall not only indicate my divergent use of the term, but also that I have little use for a more differentiating definition of The Discourse, or what it actually is or wants to be, other than the "foam" connecting and separating all "bubbles". Instead, I am going to trust that anybody using the web and social media in particular, shares some overlap in his intuition with those of others.

Secondly, I am going to speak of "platform capitalism"¹ as the current stage of digitalization, which is dominated by the oligopoly of the very visible GAFAM group (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft) plus their almost completely hidden army of subcontractors.²

Third, this paper will introduce semantic differences between the synonyms "work" and "labor", as well as between "grief" and "mourning", which will be introduced and explained later.

2. Mourning with Derrida

Throughout a number of his works, Jacques Derrida provides a fragmented and distributed theory of mourning, which he always views as originary, as something so fundamental it is always present, and not dependent on the actual experience of loss. Such mourning is, just to give one example, the unspoken implication of friendship since every friendship implies the possibility that one will survive the other. In his book about Paul de Man, Derrida deconstructs especially Freud's theory of the "work of mourning", a concept he takes up again in *Specters of Marx*, where he also adds the notion of traces and mediality. I want to bring these two aspects into focus here.

"Every trace is in essence testamentary - which has always haunted me."³ Gestures, inscriptions, texts, names, are for Derrida traces testifying to their authors or originators. But they do so neither accidentally, nor disambiguated. Traces, Derrida claims, are as per their ontological structure representations of survival. They survive their authors even if those are still biologically alive by bearing witness to them, but also by being independent and functioning autonomously from them. It would be a misunderstanding to view this as some kind of mysticism about life or death - or as dependent on either of them. Derrida calls it a "rigorously originary dimension" that is "not derived from either living or dying"⁴.

The concept of trace is instead closely related to that third category of the spectral. Derrida famously coins the term "hauntology"⁵ for this theory, in which traces are phenomena linking absence and presence, being and non-being without being supplements or effects of either. Connected to the idea of the testamentary, the ontological-hauntological structure of the trace is "originary mourning"⁶, a mourning that is always already there, present, even when no actual loss can be grieved yet.

I'd like to interject here the thought that the COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps the first event in which almost the whole globe constantly produces data - and, thus, traces -

which are necessary for their tracking the pandemic in nearly realtime, for collaborating online from a chair in an home office, and so on. The negative side of this is that many of these traces remain without enough interpretative context, sparking conspiracy thinking and the "infodemic". And of course, the mass death the pandemic has caused also leaves us with myriads of traces which are not only structurally testamentary, but pertain to the deaths of actual individuals.

A large number of digital or media projects tries to somehow deal with this overwhelming mass not only of data, but of *traces*. Accounts on Instagram and Twitter try to turn mere names and data points into biographical stories, pages on Facebook and videos on youtube bear witness to the wish of sharing grief. Derrida writes

Mourning always follows a trauma. I have tried to show elsewhere that the work of mourning is not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general, the trait by means of which one ought perhaps to reconsider the very concept of production - in what links it to trauma, to mourning, to the idealizing iterability of exappropriation, thus to the spectral spiritualization that is at work in any *tekhne*.

The relevant term here is *tekhne*. Mourning is work, but as "work itself", it is dependent on a reduction of other functions. This is the knowledge-how of mourning, its *tekhne*. Mourning takes time, energy, and resources. It wastes these without delivering a "product" in the end. One infrastructural problem is that from their inception, computers themselves and the internet have been designed to be "universal machines", multitasking machines, who offer only a single function. Another infrastructural problem is that of location: where are those who mourn? Is it possible, during a global pandemic, to get together to a *tekhne* of mourning which does not result in just displaying *episteme* - "yes, we know who died, the names and number are right here"?

Would such a *tekhne* be globally available and would, therefore, mourning be "equally distributed" within a global community? I would like to ask: what happens if we look at it from another direction? Is there a global, equally shared, idea of "work in general"? Who experiences pure work and where?

3. The Underbelly of the Paradigm: Effortlessness

Since its beginnings, the "age of the computer" or later the "information super highway" have invoked powerful metaphors of non-work - at least for the much courted

audience of the "non-nerd" user.⁷

The central idea that "information" is "at your fingertips", just the push of a button, the click on a hashtag away - that it could be yours - is one of technological romanticism. The first stage in this romantic journey entails that you can benefit from "being connected" to a "higher intelligence" which means a reduction of workload for yourself.

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Figure 1

CompuServe Advertisement in an early computer magazine.

But the journey doesn't stop here. The second step is that you don't have to look at the machine doing the work for you, you are relieved of the whole idea of work as such. And instead of transparent machinery, things "just work seamlessly"⁸

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MAC, IT JUST WORKS

This pertains to what I believe is especially the Apple-ization of the digital era. Whereas other companies and vendors proudly presented their products as pragmatic, hardworking and as "doing the heavy lifting", Apple went to greater lengths than anybody else to hide the work that went into the perceived effortless on the end of the user.

Figure 2
Early Apple advertisement.

In fact, the brand actively distinguished itself from other machines designed for *work* as opposed to their products which *just work*.

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

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Of course, Apple is just one example and stands for many companies following the same strategy. One could argue that the whole development of *cloud computing* and of SaaS is not only about reducing costs for running and maintaining own servers and

software, but also to ease the minds of employees overwhelmed with running and maintaining the company's hardware on their own.

But of course, the aspect of work as a consumption of time, energy, resources, and "human capital" is not gone just because it has been veiled. One could argue that it is exactly because of this veiling that *work* in the context of digitalization has been moved to the unconsciousness of the collective and is consequently being put to work even more lavishly and excessively.⁹

In fact, the effortlessness of the "simultaneity of all functions"¹⁰ from accessing photos of relatives to watching a video to ordering food or a car ride produces expectations on the side of the consumer which are unrealistic if you account for the aspect of work. These expectations thus give rise to increasingly radical and radically alienating forms of labor wherein laborers are reduced to a subset of functions. The gig economy (Uber, Lyft, AirBnB, DoorDash, Deliveroo, and so on) is full of such examples, which become even more prominent in the gig and microtask economies¹¹, in adult content subscription services¹², and in fraudulent click farms.¹³

Figure 3
Woman working in a data center

With the hiddenness and intransparency of work in the digital realm, we might be witnessing a spillover effect where consumers are so used to instantaneous availability

they are no longer comparing the virtual world to the real world, but rather physical space to cyberspace. (We should ask ourselves if we have more in common with the child standing at the window, trying to "zoom in" to the bird behind it, than we think.)

We've come to expect things to "just work seamlessly", which - in my view - is one central aspect of the unspoken justifications of the (otherwise ethically hard to defend) forms of gig economy. But it is the very absence of effort, if we follow Derrida, which marks the exact *opposite* of mourning. A system designed for avoiding effort and alleviating the need to toil for its users necessarily has to hide both, work and mourning.

This hidden work is in fact a massive part of the regular structures and dynamics of platform capitalism. This is even more true for the field of content moderation.¹⁴

4. Subaltern Labor Force

In 2005 Amazon started its "Mechanical Turk"¹⁵ program, the first platform for so-called microtasks, calling it "a global, on-demand, 24x7 workforce"¹⁶ and the idea behind it "artificial artificial intelligence"¹⁷: a term describing not only the fact that "there are still many things that human beings can do much more effectively, such as moderating content (...)"¹⁸, but also implying that the result should, in fact, "feel like" the work of a computer, of artificial intelligence, or an algorithm (although a highly evolved one with "collective intelligence, skills, and insights").

Figure 4
Screenshot of the landing page of mturk.com

Derrida writes:

Work: that which makes for a work, for an oeuvre, indeed that which works-and works to open: opus and opening, oeuvre and overture: the work or labor of the oeuvre insofar as it engenders, produces, and brings to light, but also labor or travail as suffering, as the enduring of force (...).¹⁹

For an approach to the ramifications of content moderation, I want to introduce a terminological difference between productive *work*, which "brings to light", and *labor* as "suffering, as the enduring of force", but with an even more pronounced opposition to the idea of production as "opening". I want to understand labor as hidden, concealed, as too small to notice, or too volatile to take seriously: "microtasks" and "gig work/economy"²⁰. *Labor* is instead ultimately alienating work, not only because there is a distance between the laborer and "their" work, their product. But rather because its inherent goal is that no product whatsoever should and can exist in the end, and that the whole process which is needed to produce "nothing" has to be necessarily occluded and concealed, because any trace of *work* happening would lead the observer to infer the presence of a result, a product. The microtask labor force, is, in the terminology of Derrida, a spectral phenomenon: "ghost workers"²¹. This intentional invisible is an observation also made in other studies²² independently of Derrida's concept: "Ghost work marks the irony of doing a form of labor that is at the same time increasingly prevalent, but hidden away from view. In today's growing gig economy ghost workers sell their labor as tasks or services in platform-based marketplaces."²³

The structure of *labor* as opposed to *work* is thus hauntologically charged as invisible and pure work, something it has in common with, again, Derrida's concept of mourning: "Mourning always follows a trauma. I have tried to show elsewhere that the work of mourning is not one kind of work among others. It is work itself, work in general, the trait by means of which one ought perhaps to reconsider the very concept of production"²⁴ What makes labor here different from mourning is the aspect of intentionality and profit. Labor is not just invisible, it is intentionally concealed and occluded for the benefit of those running the platform.²⁵

The spread of hateful, abusive, illegal or copyrighted content is as old as the web itself. But in recent years with live-streamed killing sprees and their imitators, with the spread of fake news and astroturfing, with conspiracy cults like QAnon quickly radicalizing people, the problem has long become important enough to hold social media corporations accountable. And with the COVID-19 pandemic, the secondary

problem of an outright "infodemic" was apparent already from the beginning, and has already become official disease-related terminology²⁶.

The quickly growing market dealing with these issues is the area of "content moderation", which means the manual intervention of laborers into the flow of information on digital platforms, aided by algorithms and user reports.²⁷ Content moderation has become an almost ubiquitous phenomenon of this stage of digitalization, which might be best described as "platform capitalism"²⁸, a digital infrastructure providing "platforms", which can be anything from search engines to marketplaces, from media streaming to fitness apps, from dating sites to social media. These services are in turn also dependent on different other platforms for their functional infrastructure.²⁹ It is estimated that in 2027, the market for content moderation will reach a volume of almost \$12 billion.

Figure 5
Source: CNBC

For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus only on content moderation of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, TikTok, Twitter, Reddit, or Snapchat.

Most of these platforms give little to no actual numbers on how many people they employ as moderators, nor any statistics on what kind of content they are mostly

removing. However, it is public knowledge, that they all heavily rely on subcontractors primarily located in the Global South who do the majority of content moderation, and who paid significantly less than regular employees of the platform.

Figure 6
Source: CNBC

But what is more important: the psychological side-effects and long-term collateral damage³⁰ of doing content moderation labor are not being compensated or even recognized and accounted for, which is the only reason this labor is - despite the large costs for the platforms themselves - comparably cheap. However, these costs are going to increase, because with better connectivity, content moderation will have to supervise audio and video live streams (on growing apps like Twitch or Clubhouse).³¹

There are a small number of documentaries on content moderation available, but *The Cleaners*³² from 2018 is perhaps the most significant.³³ In this and other documentaries, the people interviewed are severely mentally affected by their job. They have to fulfill quotas of 20.000 pictures per day, giving them 8 seconds per image. These contain nudity and violence, but also deaths and executions, animal cruelty, child abuse and suicides.

Figure 7
The Cleaners (2018)

The moderators cannot have more than three classification mistakes per month, and they internalize the message that their work is indispensable, without any alternative, and of ultimate importance as literally the survival of a society or humanity as a whole depend on it.

"I find my work morally important. I'm filtering videos so others don't have to watch them"³⁴

Figure 8
The Cleaners (2018)

It is this dialectic of utmost importance and complete invisibility which interests me, in combination with what Gayatri Spivak calls the "international division of labor": "The contemporary international division of labor is a displacement of the divided field of nineteenth-century territorial imperialism. Put simply, a group of countries, generally first-world, are in the position of investing capital; another group, generally third-world, provide the field for investment (...) through their ill-protected and shifting labor force."^{[35](#)}

For Spivak, the colonial frame remains intact in postcolonial context through globalized capitalism and the lack of political will to intervene on both sides. Mary Gray and Siddharth Suri call the offshoring of content moderation a "New Global Underclass"^{[36](#)}, but I believe that Spivak's concept of the subaltern comes closest to describing this level of disenfranchisement.

The globalized digital world certainly - and against the original intentions of the creators of the internet - produces hierarchies. These hierarchies are also paralleled and represented on social media platforms. But since all members of these hierarchies are, in fact, participants in The Discourse, even those less privileged are, in Spivak's terminology, not subaltern, but the opposition to the privileged hegemony. Subalternity

is by contrast marked by a fundamental inability to "speak", or to "be heard" without ambiguity by The Discourse.³⁷ I believe that it is the intentional, profitable concealment, enabled by nondisclosure agreements, offshoring, and the convenience of users in the Global North, which goes even beyond Spivak's view of subalternity.

The disenfranchisement of content moderators goes beyond what she renders as the condition of subalternity as outside the already asymmetrical exchange between hegemonial and oppositional powers within colonial and postcolonial societies. It is not only the case that the subaltern labor force has no means of "participating" in The Discourse without getting fired or into league trouble. No, the final irony here is that if you were to discuss the fate of content moderators within The Discourse - or if they were to raise their own voices and testify to their labor conditions - they themselves would have to moderate even this debate, thus only adding to their burden.

Any broader discussion or outrage would end up in a recursive loop, which is the possible maximum of subalternity. It is not just that content moderators deal with traumatic, lamentable images and mental fallout every day, their labor is "algorithmic", reduced to seeing, judging, and clicking. The euphemism of "artificial artificial intelligence" leaves little doubt: not the computer is an extension of the human individual, but the other way round, implying highly monotonous yet indispensable, heroic labor: unbearably abstract and at the same time unbearably concrete.

But most importantly: the recursivity of The Discourse robs them *structurally* of their voice. There is no #hashtagstoo hashtag and there most likely cannot be one within platform capitalism. Their grievances remain fundamentally ungrievable.

But we would miss the point of this paper if we left it here. Mourning and work are intertwined, but so are images and grievability, as well as subalternity and supraalternity.

5. Grieving with Butler

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard coins the expression "a hyperreality, a simultaneity of all the functions, without a past, without a future"³⁸. Without diving deeper into Baudrillard's theory of mass media, I want to take the idea of the *simultaneity of all functions* as perhaps the central element of platform capitalism, or perhaps more precisely: as the central element of the *frame* in which platform capitalism operates.

Someday, in the comfort of your home, you'll be able to shop and bank electronically, read instantly updated newswires, analyze the performance of a stock that interests you, send electronic mail across the country, then play Bridge with three strangers in LA, Chicago and Dallas.

The image shows a man and a woman in white, form-fitting, futuristic suits. The man is seated on a white plastic chair, holding a small device. The woman stands next to him, pointing at a computer monitor on a white desk. The monitor displays a line graph. The setting is a minimalist, modern home with a white sofa, a white shelving unit with various decorative objects, and a white trash can. The overall aesthetic is clean and futuristic.

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Figure 9
CompuServe Advertisement in an early computer magazine.

"Someday, *in the comfort* of your home, you'll be able to...". (Notice how in this advertisement not only any notion of work is absent, but also also the future is "bright" to the point of being contourless and sterile.) This utopian promise, which is now an everyday expectation, or rather mundane givenness of "simultaneity" is a tacit, implicit framing somewhere between convenience and consumerism, but also between carelessness - regarding our own privacy and data autonomy, as well as carelessness about "how it all works". We seem to simply assume that the effortlessness we experience is somehow a universal feature of digitalization. This frame is the whole *modus operandi* of the current stage of digitalization, of platform capitalism, and it is due to and within this frame (which we all support) that subalternity is not only accepted, but the subaltern labor force of ghost workers is summoned, *conjured*. The offers of absolute simultaneity are only accessible thanks to *artificial artificial intelligence*.

Social media platforms have this inherent tendency to be not just one offer among many, but to become themselves manifestations of this very simultaneity, delivering "everything but the kitchen sink".³⁹ Over time, almost all major platforms acquire new features for creating, connecting, presenting, and sharing content. However, all of them seem to converge on similar sets of functions. For the last decade or so, this has been pictures and videos, whereas the next decade might be dominated by video live streams. In any case, the paradigm of viscosity is not going to disappear.

In her book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler discusses the implications of a media heavily reliant on and uncritically trusting of images (and therefore also their frames). Butler quotes Susan Sontag's statement "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people."⁴⁰ Even though neither Sontag nor Butler refer to him, this thought is very similar to Derrida's notion of the testamentarity of the trace.

In fact, if we combine our thoughts on the testamentarity of the trace and the enormous amounts of data generated by and with the resources of digitalization, which have again been much more concentrated during the Corona pandemic, we are looking at an incomprehensible amount of traces - most of them of a visual nature - all containing trace amounts of mourning. We have already discussed how subaltern and quasi-colonial content moderation is tasked with the aspect of Derrida's "work in general". But the other aspect of grief - the question of grievability - the implications of these quantities of visual traces have not yet been brought into focus.

I believe that Butler's discussion of frames and framing, especially regarding photography, can provide a good approach to these issues. I think it is justified to state that with still fast growing amounts of pictures taken each year, what really is being established apart from visual fashions such as grammars, styles, color palettes, filter effects and so on, are "fields of perceptible reality"⁴¹, which, in turn, inform all framings.

Butler writes: "whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established."⁴²

The pictures from Abu Ghraib, taken seven years before the widespread of smartphones, but during a point in time where digital cameras were already cheap and ubiquitous, have a selfie-like quality to them. The smiling faces and thumbs-up gestures next to tortured or dead bodies establish a frame containing clear statements and judgments on the (un)grievability of them. But even more is going on - back then and even more so today.

If we accept that (theory-informing) visibility increasingly cannot but look at the "big picture", which means: at no single one picture, but at *pictures* as a statistical factor, we might arrive at the conclusion that this meta picture *still comes with a frame*.

This frame is not only defined by fashions or the fact that there are selfie sticks or emoji filters in the picture, but also by the absence of the millions of moderated pictures, as well as the gravity of the supraaltern as *regular objects* within the frame. They define the lower and upper bounds of what can be shown or shared. This *shared frame* is the result of billions of decisions about grievability, made both within The Discourse and outside of it, and it tacitly reiterates these decisions.

And another aspect is part of this *shared frame*. The "innocence of lives heading toward their own destruction" present in photos of people has become mainly ungrievable due to the sheer quantity of pictures taken each second. And, ironically, even in cases of actual, pictured destruction, any grievability is inverted by a twisted version of the "work of mourning". The split-second decisions of content moderators are indeed "work in general". But beyond that, they have nothing to do with mourning. Their labor aims at causing absences, it is without a "work", without any product or archive. In the documentaries mentioned earlier, most moderators said they don't remember anything besides those few images they cannot stop to remember, which is

an almost clinical description of trauma. In this sense, the myriad visual traces of platform capitalism, have traded their testamentary for a traumatic dimension.

Figure 10
The Cleaners (2018)

Judith Butler, who doesn't talk about trillions of photographs but maybe dozens, remains cautiously optimistic:

"to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. The frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things."⁴³

It is, at least for me, how this "self-subversive" or "self-regulating" excess of the frame can continue to function in a world where deepfakes and increasingly better *artificial artificial intelligence* exist. For Butler, the idea of social recognition and

public grievability is linked to the idea of an image as an interruption⁴⁴, as something which can break out of its framing. I'd like to add that in order to do that, any image first has to break out of the *shared frame* as the tacit framing determining how large parts of the globe actually look at, take, and share pictures.

6. Supraaltern Enjoyment

The societal framings of which life is grievable and which is not do not only depend on censorship or guidelines for content moderators, but also beyond the other side of The Discourse: the supraaltern. But before we can give a definition of supraalternity, I want to recapitulate one important point.

Grief or mourning cannot exist within the simultaneity of all functions, it is not an option to choose from, or an offer you "have access to". In fact, grief is not only not part of this simultaneity, it is intolerant of them. Grief demands exclusivity and functionless. Yet, within the context of digitalization, a (temporary) reduction of simultaneity and the reestablishing of something like grief might be desirable for the individual. Such an reestablishing of mourning has, however and more importantly, social functions and effects. Contrary to both, the popular panopticon metaphor where everybody watches and performs for everybody else, and to Butler, who believes that basic forms of solidarity depend on the common experience of loss, my hypothesis is that a community⁴⁵ actually needs centers of gravity that reduce the simultaneity of all functions for everybody (at the same time and in similar ways). In the digital realm it is less relevant that everybody has lost somebody, grieves someone, but that everybody mourns *the same person*. In other words, it is not so much that the communal discourse on what is grievable informs levels of recognition communities afford individuals. Rather, the actual practice of grieving is what establishes a community in the first place - and questions of grievability are only later reflections. This actual grieving has to fulfill some requirements on the identity of time, reference, and even place. This function is performed by the supraaltern.

Supraalternity is the late capitalist/platform capitalist mode of celebrity, which is defined by three characteristics. 1) Similar to the subaltern, the supraaltern cannot "participate" in The Discourse. 2) The parasocial interactions of the audience with the supraaltern revolve around grievability. 3) The justification for the status of supraalternity are largely tautological and best explained by Lacan's notion of *jouissance/enjoyment*.

Before the advent of platform capitalism celebrity was linked to talent and gift⁴⁶. Celebrity figures would perform as actors, musicians, athletes, TV hosts, and so on, and once they had reached a certain level of popularity and recognition, they - as a less glamorous and honorable by-product of their fame - would advertise something or appear in magazines and talk shows.

These by-products seem excessive and like they would be detrimental to fame and status of a celebrity. But with Lacan's notion of enjoyment, we can argue that these excesses are vital for the experience and image of celebrity as celebrity. A "pure Artist" might, in contrast, be respected or venerated, but they probably won't be counted as a "celebrity".

Within platform capitalism, the requirements for a "celebrity" have become more complicated, which is why I won't offer a complete typology of streamers, Youtubers, or absurdist accounts on twitter. Rather, I want to focus only on the figure of the *influencer*⁴⁷. The phenomenon of influencer is a reversal of the classic hierarchy of "claim to fame" plus capitalist enjoyment in the form of promotional work. In the case of influencers, the justification for their fame *is* the enjoyment of advertising.

At this point in the argument, the temptation to turn this into a general critique of digitalization and online culture ahas to be resisted. This division of labor between the subaltern and the supraaltern, as well as the resulting framing of The Discourse is ultimately not something exclusive to the digital world, even if it becomes pronounced and visible in ways it wasn't elsewhere. These developments have very little to do with the unsophisticated tastes of teenagers and other "digital natives", and a lot with capitalist structures put in place and exploited by people older and more powerful than them.

The glaring excesses of enjoyment and the tautologies of fame which make the influencer are dependent on more intensive forms of parasocial interaction. Contrary to traditional celebrity culture, parasocial interactions of and with the supraaltern are not only establishing a simulated intimacy (sharing pictures of their vegan, organic breakfast), but also occluding their extradiscursive status by asking mundane but non-rhetorical questions and prompting their followers to comment ("where are you going for summer vacation? Tell me in the comments!"⁴⁸).

We might object that all of celebrity culture depends on parasocial interaction, on the simulation of intimacy and friendship. And what home stories in magazines or advertisements where you can watch a celebrity working in their kitchen used to

perform is now being done - perhaps much more effectively - by social media. And such and assessment would not be wrong at all. But I believe it would still not fully capture the shift from celebrity culture and default parasocial interaction to the implicit and explicit negotiation of grief and mourning within supraaltern imagery. Supraalternity works as a gravitational point of attention because it much more often spurs debate and discussion about them than communication with them.

They do not only "share" details about their glamorous lives, but also finely tuned incidents of negative emotions and reasons for mourning. From minor mundane inconveniences or personal "drama", to social issues and large public grievances - from disappointment to consternation, shock and outrage: the parasocial interactions of successful influencers keep up a dialectic of "grievability negotiation" between the "ostentatiously (thus obviously) good life" and parasocial expressions of grief. Especially popular is the dynamic of causing a (minor) "scandal", only to post tearful apologies afterwards.⁴⁹ Another token in this currency of mourning is, for instance, the format of "helping the homeless", which consist of more than just distasteful performances of empathy. They are enacted framings of the (un)grievable life. The gravitational pull of the supraaltern, thus, lies in their mastery of parasocial mourning as the enjoyment to their originary enjoyment.

Followers and Non-Followers alike are pulled into this dynamic of mourning. They are encouraged to share and pledge loyalty via hashtags, to take sides and position themselves, and so on. We could go through a list of all forms of parasocial interaction and map them onto the different types of supraaltern persona, but this might not be the right place for it. I just want to pick out one important example which does not fall into the categories of verballity or imagery: crowdfunding. The world of (personal) crowdfunding or donation platforms is an entire microcosm of mourning on its own.

7. Unshared Frames of Lamentability

What I called The Discourse is at best a vague term, and at worst an inconsistent one. But if we focus on the aspect of exchange, we happen across a huge domain of social and parasocial exchange which is usually not associated with discursivity because it is neither verbal nor visual. I am referring to crowdfunding, especially the crowdsourcing of donations for personal issues. Personal crowdfunding platforms like gofundme.com, which have started out with campaigns for funding hobbies, concert tickets, or vacations, are full of pleas for donations for funeral costs, cancer treatment, mortgage payments, or school pens.

The predominant negotiations of grievability are either hyper-visible in outrage, or invisible in silently grieving acceptance of the sociopolitical status quo. It is, ironically, in this realm of monetary exchange, where neither language nor speech nor images are the "key difference"⁵⁰ of communication, where Derrida's extrapolation of the concept of *hauntology* from the constant blurring and displacement of the border between the private and the public becomes ever more relevant:

...where this frontier between the public and the private is constantly being displaced, remaining less assured than ever, as the limit that would permit one to identify the political. And if this important frontier is being displaced, it is because the medium in which it is instituted, namely, the medium of the media themselves (news, the press, telecommunications, techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele-iconicity, that which in general assures and determines the spacing of public space, the very possibility of the *res publica* and the phenomenality of the political), this element itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word, *hauntology*.

What is haunted here in the example of crowdfunding, is its *shared frame*. GoFundMe has over the course of a few years shifted from a platform for leisure and non-essential "fun" projects to a form of privately run social security system or welfare regime. Which is probably the maximum of blending of the private and the public a platform can achieve. GoFundMe not only functions as a public utility, it is also politics in quite a pure form.

At this point it is necessary to introduce a late terminological shift. Although Butler mostly speaks of "grief" - and Derrida (in translation) only of "mourning" - for my own concept, I want to understand *grief* as personal sorrow, as an emotional state of individuals. *Mourning*, however, is supposed to pertain to the social dimension, the shared grief, which in turn forms a community of mourners. As the attentive reader will recognize: this usage is pretty much the opposite of how Butler and Derrida use them. But this distinction between grief and mourning now becomes more salient due to the addition of lament. Whereas grief pertains to the individual dimension, and mourning to the social dynamics of a community of mourners, lament is the public, interventionist, and solidarity-demanding form of grief. In contrast to outrage as the supraaltern mode of directing grief, lament insists on both, on the singularity of function (of grieving), as well as the public addressability of mourning. Lament

forcefully co-opts people into a community of mourners, exactly by reaffirming the perichoresis of the private and the public.

The tragedy of platform capitalism is now that neither The Discourse in its verbal-visual form, nor in its tacit-monetary form seem to be able to formulate addressable and inclusive lament instead of mere outrage or acceptance of the status quo.

Lament in action is irritating, unsettling, but mostly: embarrassing. And it might be this readiness to lament which is needed in order to leave not only individual framings, but the *shared frame*.

Grieving, Mourning, Lamenting: A Topology.

+++DRAFT+++

Exploring contradictions in platform capitalism through the lens of grief, mourning, and lament.

Question caused by the pandemic (online projects of mourning the dead) & my work on subliminality/supraliminality as a starting point for grasping diaconia as an independent form of theology in its own right.

(How) does digital community "work" -for the individual/toward a public?

Footnotes

1. A term I borrow from [Srnicek, Nick. Platform Capitalism. 1. Edition. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2016.](#) [↗](#)

2. I will also explain a bit more [later](#). [↗](#)

3. „[Dialogue entre Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe et Jean-Luc Nancy](#)“. [Rue Descartes 52, Nr. 2 \(2006\): 86–99. https://doi.org/10.3917/rdes.052.0086.](#) 93.
My translation. [↗](#)

4. [Derrida, Jacques. Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview. Übersetzt von Pascal-Anne Brault und Michael Naas. Hoboken, N.J: Melville House, 2007.](#) 26. [↗](#)

5. [Derrida, Jacques. Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International. 1. publ. Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2006.](#) 10. [↗](#)

6. Derrida, Jacques. Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview. Übersetzt von Pascal-Anne Brault und Michael Naas. Hoboken, N.J: Melville House, 2007.]] 26. [↗](#)
7.

It seems that from early on, digital technological progress was advertised with semantics emphasizing "work" to those interested in the technology itself, while the same products were marketed to the larger audience of easily scared users by decidedly hiding any aspect that resembled "work": "machinery", "number of lines of code", and so on. This is not necessarily the same as adhering to principles of convenience or luxury. In fact, other convenient technologies - like expensive watches - go to great lengths to have their products *present* that and how their technology is working. The same phenomenon is at play when you compare gaming PCs in transparent cases and their hardware showcased by lighting to all-in-one desktop computers which have - unnecessarily - become as thin as laptops (in the case of Apple's models). My suspicion is that in this case and even with portable computers, "convenience" to carry something slightly lighter and thinner isn't really the point anymore. Rather, mere thinness, a minimum of occupation of physical space, gets associated with the non-threatening absence of "machinery" and "tech". The same principle is at play in the semantics of "cloud" vs. "servers".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtyjbmoDx-I> [↗](#)

8. Which was a phrase very often used by Steve Jobs in his keynotes. [↗](#)

9. A specifically crass example are cryptocurrencies that rely on proof-of-work FFF principles like Bitcoin, devouring the energy equivalent of small countries. FFF [↗](#)
10. [Baudrillard, Jean, und Sheila F. Glaser. Baudrillard, J: Simulacra and Simulation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Pr, 1994. ↗](#)
11. Amazon Mechanical Turk, Taskrabbit. [↗](#)
12. It would be interesting to analyze platforms like [onlyfans.com](#) within the framework of digital gig economical work, especially since the service has grown significantly in 2020 due to the massive rise in unemployment. Cf. [López, Canela. „People Are Turning to OnlyFans to Earn Money after Losing Their Jobs during the Pandemic“. Insider. Zugegriffen 18. April 2021. https://www.insider.com/people-are-creating-onlyfans-accounts-after-losing-jobs-during-pandemic-2020-6. ↗](#)
13. The Discourse is *always almost* aware of this, though. "Work" as a "pure" experience, as Lacanian jouissance, enjoyment, is present at the surface not only in watching livestreams of other people playing games, or in the form of idle/incremental/clicker games like [Cookie Clicker](#) (one of the first games in this category) or [Universal Paperclips](#) (a kind of self-aware clicker game), which represent a large category of games especially in the mobile market (I was unable to find actual numbers). [↗](#)
14. The following argument could be made in a similar fashion for other aspects of the platform capitalist phase of digitalization like dating platforms, or online sex work/pornography, but apart from the example of crowdfunding later on, I am going to focus here on the "traditional" model of social media which relies on a "prosumer" ecosystem. [↗](#)
15. "Amazon Mechanical Turk": <https://www.mturk.com>. One immediately notices the orientalist overtones of the image of the "mechanical turk" (and subsequently the name "turkers" for these microtask laborers), but also its career within the works of Walter Benjamin ([Benjamin, Walter. On the Concept of History. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.](#)) and Slavoj Žižek ([Žižek, Slavoj. The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity. Short Circuits. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003.](#)). [↗](#)
16. [„Amazon Mechanical Turk“. Zugegriffen 18. April 2021. https://www.mturk.com/. ↗](#)

17. „Artificial artificial intelligence“. *The Economist*, 10. Juni 2006.
https://www.economist.com/technology-quarterly/2006/06/10/artificial-artificial-intelligence?story_id=7001738. ☞
18. „Amazon Mechanical Turk“. Zugriffen 18. April 2021. <https://www.mturk.com/>. ☞
19. Derrida, Jacques. *The Work of Mourning*. Herausgegeben von Pascale-Anne Brault und Michael Naas. 1. Edition. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001.
142. ☞
20. For an extensive critique of precarity and the gig economy cf. Crouch, Colin. *Gig Economy: Prekäre Arbeit im Zeitalter von Uber, Minijobs & Co*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019. and Woodcock, Jamie, und Mark Graham. *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge ; Medford, MA: Polity, 2020. The iLabour project tracks developments in online gig economy with a specifically developed index: Kässi, Otto, Charlie Hadley, und Vili Lehdonvirta. „Online Labour Index: Measuring the Online Gig Economy for Policy and Research“. figshare, 2021.
<https://doi.org/10.6084/M9.FIGSHARE.3761562>. ☞
21. Cf. the semantics in Moreschi, Bruno, Gabriel Pereira, und Fabio G. Cozman. „The Brazilian Workers in Amazon Mechanical Turk: Dreams and Realities of Ghost Workers“. *Revista Contracampo* 39, Nr. 1 (17. April 2020).
<https://doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v39i1.38252>. ☞
22. Notably, Gray, Mary L., und Siddharth Suri. *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019. ☞
23. Moreschi, Bruno, Gabriel Pereira, und Fabio G. Cozman. „The Brazilian Workers in Amazon Mechanical Turk: Dreams and Realities of Ghost Workers“. *Revista Contracampo* 39, Nr. 1 (17. April 2020).
<https://doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v39i1.38252>. 46. ☞
24. Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. 1. publ. Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2006.
121. ☞
25. We could ask if these conditions should better be described not simply as capitalism, but, with Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? Zero Books*. Winchester: O Books, 2009. as "capitalist realism" or "post-Fordism". ☞

26. Cf. the WHO on „Infodemic“. Zugegriffen 18. April 2021.
<https://www.who.int/westernpacific/health-topics/infodemic>. –
27. For an overview on what content moderation entails, this report is useful: [CNBC. Why Content Moderation Costs Social Media Companies Billions, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBZoVpmbwPk](#). Cf. also [Roberts, Sarah T. Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. 33-72. Gillespie, Tarleton. Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.](#) –
28. Cf. [Srnicek, Nick. Platform Capitalism. 1. Edition. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2016.](#) –
29. A large portion of the web uses Amazon Web Services (AWS), Google's DNS servers, or content delivery networks like Cloudflare for their technical functionality.
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30. Cf. [Dwoskin, Elizabeth, Jeanne Whalen, und Regine Cabato. „Content Moderators at YouTube, Facebook and Twitter See the Worst of the Web — and Suffer Silently“. Washington Post. Zugegriffen 18. April 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/07/25/social-media-companies-are-outsourcing-their-dirty-work-philippines-generation-workers-is-paying-price/](#). –
31. Producers and consumers of child pornography, for instance, are switching away from asynchronous pictures and videos to less traceable live streams. Cf. [Vowinkel, Heike. „Sexueller Kindesmissbrauch: Missbrauch auf Anweisung, Tausende Kilometer entfernt“. Die Zeit. 14. April 2021, Abschn. Gesellschaft. https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2021-04/sexueller-kindesmissbrauch-livestream-internet-kinderpornographie-chat-philippinen](#). –
32. [Block, Hans, und Moritz Riesewieck. The Cleaners. Documentary. Gebrüder Beetz Filmproduktion, Grifa Filmes, Westdeutscher Rundfunk \(WDR\), 2018.](#) It can be viewed for free at Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung here: <https://www.bpb.de/mediathek/273199/the-cleaners>. –
33. Others include: [Field of Vision. Field of Vision - The Moderators, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9m0axUDpro](#); [The Verge. Inside the traumatic life of a Facebook moderator, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDnjiNCtFk4&list=PLGLa7WI6NCz8udUsWlUiVjfV98glTQC2t&index=4](#); [The](#)

Verge. Google and YouTube moderators speak out, 2019.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqP-gde4M-Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqP-gde4M-Q;); Y-Kollektiv. Content

Moderator*innen: Sie löschen die Videos auf Social Media, die Du nicht sehen sollst, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umafqnmvRsY>.

34. Y-Kollektiv. Content Moderator*innen: Sie löschen die Videos auf Social Media, die Du nicht sehen sollst, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umafqnmvRsY>.

35. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. „Can the Subaltern Speak?\": revised edition, from the “History” chapter of Critique of Postcolonial Reason“. In Can the subaltern speak?: Reflections on the history of an idea, 21–78. Columbia University Press, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morr14384.5>. 83.

36. Gray, Mary L., und Siddharth Suri. Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.

37. Spivak gives an example for the unreadable gesture of the subaltern ("The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read", Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. „Can the Subaltern Speak?\": revised edition, from the “History” chapter of Critique of Postcolonial Reason“. In Can the subaltern speak?: Reflections on the history of an idea, 21–78. Columbia University Press, 2010.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morr14384.5>.] 104), a secret resistance fighter unable to carry out an assassination (i.e. unable to "do her job") hanging herself. She waited for her menstruation to start in order to make the interpretation of an illegitimate pregnancy impossible. In a very similar way, a Philippino woman in *The Cleaners* recounts the suicide of an co-worker who hanged himself in his apartment in front of his opened laptop after being denied a referral to a less mentally demanding department of content moderation multiple times.

38. Baudrillard, Jean, und Sheila F. Glaser. Baudrillard, J.: Simulacra and Simulation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Pr, 1994. 78.

39. Cf.

40. Susan Sontag, On Photography, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, 64, cited in Butler, Judith. Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? London ; New York: Verso, 2009. 63.

41. Butler, Judith. Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? London ; New York: Verso, 2009. 64.

42. [Butler, Judith. Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? London ; New York: Verso, 2009. 64. ↵](#)
43. [Butler, Judith. Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? London ; New York: Verso, 2009. 9. ↵](#)
44. [↵](#)
45. Due to the constraints of this paper, I won't go into the ramifications of the term community here. [↵](#)
46. A term whose etymology goes back to the *charismata*, of course. [↵](#)
47. Cf. [Nymoen, Ole, und Wolfgang M. Schmitt. Influencer: Die Ideologie der Werbekörper. 1. Edition. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2021. ↵](#)
48. [Nymoen, Ole, und Wolfgang M. Schmitt. Influencer: Die Ideologie der Werbekörper. 1. Edition. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2021. 132-133. Translation mine. ↵](#)
49. This format is so formulaic that it has been parodied a number of times. Cf. [Gus Johnson. my apology., 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN-rQSwi24. ↵](#)
50. [Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty., "Can the Subaltern Speak?": revised edition, from the "History" chapter of Critique of Postcolonial Reason". In Can the subaltern speak?: Reflections on the history of an idea, 21-78. Columbia University Press, 2010. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morr14384.5. ↵](#)