

— Aiwen Yin

ON POST-TEMPORARINESS

THE CONTEMPORARY IS TEMPORARY

Ten years ago, I relocated to the Netherlands to study. During the first four years I moved to a new abode every six months, sometimes even more frequently. Each shift of a shelter implies a much longer process of adaptation; not only trying to fit all my belongings into a new space, my body and mind must also adjust to the new house rules, the new housemate relations and the new vibe. Too often, when I just began to feel comfortable navigating myself in the environment and making plans, I would have to move out and begin the whole process all over again. Eventually, I've learned to organise my life between the temporary blocks and the absolute basis so that my life is able to accommodate the expected unexpected challenges that fall upon my shoulders. I've learned to project and compartmentalise my emotional space for each relationship I encounter, in the hope that I will be ready when time calls that I have to move on. While making my life as portable as possible, my sense of self diminishes. The word 'future', became an intangible and meaningless concept to me.

My experience is hardly unusual in our time, when a temporary lifestyle has become the norm. From work contracts to personal relationships, the expectation of a remote semblance of permanence is near extinct. The gig economy has transformed the global market into a platform for temporary offers. Job-seekers who call themselves 'entrepreneurs' roam across continents for a temporary plug in and out, romantic adventures and friendships are forever until one relocates to another city.

All that remains is *a swipe left and right* for a barely satisfactory touch. We endure our lives rather than live them, passing the days in tiny rooms filled with cheap Ikea furniture, wondering who we could call if we fell sick.

In a previous era, the possibility to have non-permanent commitment implied emancipation; from a piece of land; from a factory; from a convention; from a ruined relationship; from a petrifying institution; from a decaying system. We have all, at least once in our lives, been inspired by cinema moment when a young person, decides to abandon the shackles of the manor, or a similar system, and seek a new life in the city. No longer confined to a life script intrinsic to a particular class, or the body one was born in, temporariness enabled infinite possibilities for one to reinvent oneself, connecting to and being in the world in completely new ways. The 'no-strings-attached' mode of engagement once signified liberation and a life of excitement, sensuality and adventure, a life fueled by one's own decisions. Temporariness had engendered possibility and privilege to our lives, until it ceased to be so.



Still from *Little Women* (2019)

Presently, temporariness is no longer an individual choice, nor does it provide a meaningful context for negotiation. If every relationship can be materialized in a contract, then all too often, an individual is not in a position to (co-)define the terms; neither the manner of engagement, nor the roles in which they can be playing, not to mention the potential future it can stem from. Sometimes not even how long engagements would have lasted. In the extreme case of food delivery platforms, which aggressively set up promised delivery time for the sake of competition, the takeout workers are not allowed sufficient time to wait for a green traffic light.¹ While the 'independent contractors' for food delivery have played a crucial role, feeding society throughout COVID-19 lockdowns, they themselves have not had the chance to speak a complete sentence to the people they serve, let alone to finish a proper meal themselves. There is hardly a support system: not from employment law, because they are 'independent contractors', nor from their personal lives, because they have little time to build relationships.² In this respect, food delivery workers foretell the conditions of all our lives in a neoliberal, globalised world. They are lives lived without context, without the prospect of personal development, and without those meaningful and sustained relationships through which people can come together to speculate on a future.

This is how the sense of future disappears from our contemporary life, in the midst of individual emancipation. People long to free themselves from a rigid structure – familial, cultural, institutional, economic or socio-political...from a place where all terms of engagement, social relations and guarantees of protection, are inherited without challenge. In order to do so, these people make progress by creating a new system in which they seem to be free to move and connect with whoever they wish. In exchange for this quasi freedom, the new system offers temporary connections and negligible security for individuals. The individual has little room to cultivate relationships on their own terms, and



Screenshot from Facebook page *Deliverance Milano*

every individual is replaceable.

In order to be a meaningful participant in any relationship, the most basic agreement should be that "who you are to me" – a relational position that goes beyond one's mere identity and practical skills – has to matter in every minutes of the experience in the relationship. For example, in the case of care work, it matters who is giving care and who is receiving care. The nature of the caring relationship is different if the carer is a family member or an agency employee, in the sense that different relationships lead to a distinct experience of care, and this experience is relatively independent from the carer's skill. When each party within a relationship is replaceable, no one can belong to that relationship. The power to develop a relationship with one another, or to be an indispensable contributor to that relationship, is repressed. Yet the sense of a future is ultimately social. We feel hopeful because we are able to imagine possible developments of ourselves in relation to others.

The relational nature of personal development is expressed by the concept of 'individuation'³. If selfhood begins at a pre-individual, individuation is a process through which one moves

towards differentiating oneself from a group, in order to return with a better perspective on the world.⁴ Even more importantly, individuation necessitates positioning oneself in relation to others. This, in turn, fosters a disposition towards collaboration and togetherness. It is distinctively different from individualism, a mode of personal development that is encouraged in capitalism, which requires one to distinguish oneself through aggressive competition, and which corrodes one's ability to connect or collaborate. The sense of a collective future disappears from such individualized selves – from the globalised, mechanised gig worker who shuffles from temp job to temp job, to the app-user trapped inside a social bubble by their algorithms. The sense of belonging becomes a sparse resource. When we loses our connections with others, we loses the ability to individuate ourselves by being in the world. In other words, the sense of self becomes smaller and smaller. It is no surprise, then, that many people seek to reclaim stable relationships from conventional frameworks such as nation, race, gender, or cultural background. These frames are inherited. It is almost impossible to change or to deny them by a sheer effort of will.

Some people believe that technology has brought us to this state. To others, our condition is merely a depressing outcome of capitalism. I would like to turn to the role of design: how it has been complicit in this process, and to propose that we can envision the world functioning otherwise by imagining a fundamentally different design logic.

DESIGN AS POLITICAL QUESTION

A man in a suit looks down into his screen and tells the idle operator: 'Section 5, give it a limit'. As the operator pulls the engine of the machine, three workers are screwing in greasy nuts at the side of an assembly line. One of the workers, desperately trying to keep up with the accelerating speed of production, is sucked into the machine. Somehow, delightfully, he fits perfectly between the gears while continuing to screw, even as the giant gears grind him over.



Still from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936)

This iconic scene from Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* is an evergreen metaphor for life under capitalism. What is less obvious, though, is that it also illustrates the procedure and foundational logic of design. A designer (the operator) receives orders from a man in a suit (the client), and begins to spin the wheel. Every message, every object, every experience, and every potential consumer, is broken down into reproducible modules. These deconstructed and replicated pieces will be reassembled within a new order, and so become simulacra of their initial state. This logic refers to what Bernard Stiegler called 'grammatization'⁵. Depending on the available technologies and the fields of application, grammatization can take the shape of a written text, an assembly line, a grid system, an algorithm, a set of user experiences inside software, a city⁶, or another medium through which we structure our lives.

We may seem to have moved far from the Fordist era.⁷ We have progressed through mass customisation, big data, algorithmic regulation, machine vision, and more. However, grammatization as a foundational logic of design, or more precisely, capitalistic logic *within* design, persists. The logic is so overbearing that it not only grammatizes products, but also human beings.

Grammatization is brought about in three ways. First, as workers under capitalism, we organise our lives and thoughts around the ever-accelerating vehicles of labour and of individual entrepreneurship. Second, as users or buying publics in a consumption economy,

we are trained to desire products and services. Third, as products, our identities and behaviors are processed and packaged to sell.⁸ In essence, these are the three ways through which human life is shaped and valued in contemporary capitalism. It doesn't require an enormous leap of the imagination to realise that we are every character in the factory scene of Modern Times, including the modularised nuts on the conveyor belt.

The modularised nuts are essential to the machine's function. They are identical and therefore replaceable. They are produced as body parts from a supposedly complete and universal model, in an environment without context. These parts are designed to affix to or detach from one another other with no time – immediately and infinitely. Universal junctures dictate that the disconnections between these modules are fixed, although it also means that none of these modules are special to one another. Each functional component facilitates the endless expansion of production in a never-ending machine. It also reduces the cost of innovation by driving exponential recombinations of the same set of modules. This is how temporariness comes to rule, and it is how alienation ripens into a living condition. It is becoming increasingly clear that the so-called freedom enabled by gig economy is no such thing. It is only a kind of managerial liberation which benefits those who own the means of production. For the individuals who live inside the matrix – real human beings, navigating life in relationship with one another and with the world – this so-called freedom is deprivation and repression.

Here is a counter-intuitive but crucial verdict. The problem with the Anthropocene is not that it's too human-centric, but that it is not human enough. Industrial capitalism's fundamental mode of design has become anti-human at heart. This mode of design disassembles human beings and their experiences so that they can become disconnected modules. It reduces relationships to mere junctures in order to create space for endless growth. Today,

it is crucial to divorce design from capitalism and to imagine an alternative design logic. A new approach to design which is supportive of the continuous and organic development of relationships, which embraces the multifaceted self and, indeed, its limitations. This is the only way that temporariness will again become a condition of emancipation. A non-Luddite route to a post-capitalist world.

POST-TEMPORARINESS AS FUTURE

Temporariness has created a situation in which a sense of future is experienced as a privilege. It is no longer possible to ignore our collective exhaustion, or to pretend that we can proceed with further rounds of business-as-usual, transacted with vacuous and futile design. We urgently need to move beyond the condition of temporariness and to repair our society, so that we can connect to our humanity again. We need to create new conditions that will nurture life, so that futures can begin to emerge.

I would like to put forward a third option between temporariness and permanence: the long-term. The long-term is a mindset that is opposed to temporariness and to permanence. To illustrate the difference, let's think about romance. At the beginning of a romance, it's common to become extremely enthusiastic, romantic, attentive and quick to forgive. This attitude lasts for as long as the relationship feels temporary. But at some point, when it becomes apparent that it might stick around, questions arise. Are the current modes of interaction sustainable; what limitations will they have; what are all possible futures for this relationship? Such questions would lead to pattern changes in the engagements, as we begin to think about the long-term effects of our actions.

The temporary mode of exchange is extreme and unsustainable because one's behavior will be hardly consequential afterwards. The permanent mode of exchange is equally problematic in that it disregards the changing nature of each individual and each relationship

– commitment becomes a repression. The long-term offers a third way. It is a mind-set which offers a logic of individuation, that is, it makes it possible to position oneself in relation to others. It recognises each party's ability to affect the nature of a relationship, and it encourages the individual to reflect on their own limitations in their relationships with others. It provides attentive support and protection as a making a sustainable life.

I would like to argue that long-termism can be an antidote to a society that is suffering from a persistent case of temporariness. This temporariness is shadowed by tiers of dark clouds, political polarisation, and the protracted COVID-19 shitshow, as well as ongoing environmental degradation and climate crisis. Each of these phenomena is crafted or amplified by short-sighted thinking and by toxic individualism. We badly need to (re)introduce long-termism to the character of our society. And it is design that must shoulder this responsibility, because it is the practice which codes ideological messages in banal daily exchanges. What is at stake for design? A shift away from a logic that isolates individuals for the sake of endless capitalist growth, towards one that focuses on relationships and human growth, in the form of individual and collective development. With such a shift, the vision of a responsible, sustainable, non-monolithic, post-capitalist society, will no longer be that of a utopia. It may well become the future.



Illustration by Graeme MacKay, *The Hamilton Spectator*, 11 March 2020

Note: This text was written in the context of two projects by Yin Aiwen: ReUnion Network (2017-present) and Urbanizing the digital (2018-present). These projects operate under Yin's long-term design theory research, *The Reversed Tandem: A Theory for Relationship-focused Design* (2012-present).

REFERENCES

1. After viral exposé, China's takeout platforms vow to 'do better': <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006158/after-viral-expos%C3%A9%2C-chinas-takeout-platforms-vow-to-do-better>.
2. Further analysis of contemporary gig economies and broken safety nets can be read here: <https://docs.reunionnetwork.org/part-ii-1/social-discrepancies-at-stake>.
3. Individuation is a concept commonly used in psychoanalysis. It which describes the psychological process through which a person becomes a social individual. This concept is also applied in other fields including media theory, philosophy, and

social science. Notable scholars of individuation include Carl Jung, Gilbert Simondon and Bernard Stiegler.

4. McKenzie Wark summarises the ways in which our media environment have disputed this process by referring to the work of Bernard Stiegler and Yves Citton: 'The media ecology is too impoverished to enable us to individuate ourselves from it. We don't go through Freud's stage of primary narcissism, from which one might return and get some perspective on the world. Instead, we remain within an undifferentiated and pre-individual state, a group narcissism. In which state we get a bit crazy, trying to both belong and be separate without a primary separation to secure either.' Wark, M. (2017) TL;DR: This Attention Economy Needs Work... <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3366-tl-dr-this-attention-economy-needs-work>.
5. Stiegler, B. (2013), *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Cambridge: Polity.
6. Easterling, K. (2016), *Extrastatecraft*, Verso Books. Architect Keller Esterling suggests that metropolitan areas are increasingly planned and built using identikit formulas to generate identical urban life, thus synchronising the global economy. Examples of this trend include special economic zones and art biennales.
7. The Fordist era is the period of popular mass production and consumption that was characteristic of highly developed economies during the 1940s-60s. It is named after Ford Motor Company, the company that was said to have introduced these productive mechanisms and socio-economic models. Online at: http://www.willamette.edu/~fthomпсо/MgmtCon/Fordism_&_Postfordism.html.
8. Zuboff, S. (2019), *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Profile Books. Zuboff describes 'surveillance capitalism' as a form of advanced capitalism that uses digital technology to turn user data (she calls this 'behavioural surplus') into a source of economic profit.

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Aiwen Yin is a practicing designer, design theorist and project developer, who uses writing, speculative design and time-based art to examine the social impact of planetary communication technologies. She advocates relationship-focused design as a strategy to redesign, re-engineer and reimagine the relationship between technology and the society. Aiwen holds a BFA in Visual Communication from Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, and an MFA in Design from Sandberg Institute Amsterdam. She was a researcher in The New Normal in Strelka Institute, Moscow in 2017, a fellow in Art Center South Florida, Miami in 2017, and a resident in ZK/U Berlin in 2019. Aiwen is the recipient of INFORM prize for Conceptual Design in 2019. Aiwen currently works at the Master Institute of Visual Cultures in Den Bosch. She connects her theoretical research *Urbanising the digital* at the Centre of Applied Research for Art, Design and Technology (Caradt) with the development of MIVC's digital presentation platform for graduates in COVID-19 time. She coaches the graduates to professionalise their studio practice, especially in a digital-first environment. Aiwen's work has been discussed and shown at renowned venues such as Shanghai Biennale 2020, re:publica, Transmediale, Het Nieuwe Instituut, Art Basel Miami, among others.