The hand that touch the cradle is the hand that rules the world

A masked logo, black against an orange background, a grid, displaying individual photographs. The first: "me." The photograph immediately next to me is one of a torso in a mirror. The light is green, coloring his skin. He is also the one who is closest to me in actual physical distance: 440 feet away, 33, married. He´s a Daddy type, a discreet sub guy who loves to bottom for dominant guys. Smiley face for poppers. Next to him is another torso, a tighter crop, a small part of the phone is visible on the right side, and it's either an I-Phone or a kind of Android. The next three photos are faces; all have beards and smiles. The further I go through the photographs the farther away they are. "Sugar rush" is 1213 feet away. "Andres" is 2102 feet away. A redheaded man with butterfly tattoos is 3257 feet away. "Matt" has a photograph together with a friend that is sitting on his back, online 47 minutes ago, 24 years old. I can message any of them. As distance decreases, I can block the average man with glasses, flag "Israel" as interesting, and star them as favorites. I can keep scrolling like this for quite some time. Jock, Nerd, Latino, Average, Sub, Top, Star, Ignore, Message, Ignore etc.

After some reflection, piecing together opposing thoughts about several unrelated subjects and their possible affects, a connection between them and their relation to the subject at hand has developed. At the intersection of these thoughts I would like to try to speak of the imagined closeness, the destruction, and to some degree the reduction of the self and other people to thingdom on the Grindr App. A gay I-Phone and Android App. and its straight counterpart, Tinder, for «hook ups», dating, and friendship through GPS location.

The hook-up-Apps have never held a great appeal to me, as they seem like ephemeral social phenomena, but a realization came when I made the connection between

the Apps and Georges Bataille's 1986 work *Erotism: Death and Sensuality.*[1] In it Bataille speaks

of the essentiality of violence and death to eroticism. Bataille asks, «What does physical

erotism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners? - a violation

bordering on death, bordering on murder?» This is an eloquent point, but the eroticism

experienced through the hook-up-Apps complicates this reading. What if the apps have

more to do with alienation, boredom, and the reduction of the self to thingdom? Bataille

continues: "The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate

entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only:

it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree

of dissolution". This last quote might seem to go against my first thought, but the common

dissolution of both partners—male and female— creates a connection, the cliché of melting

together and equalizing, something which the reduction to thingdom denies. An apt promise:

you will always be kept at a distance.

The hook-up-apps and their affect on the consciousness of those who use them is

perhaps closer to what Bataille talks of in *Humanity and the Profane World, The Eaten Animal,*

the Corps, and the Thing.[2] There Bataille says that for us to be able to eat an animal, it is

essential that we reduce it to an object, a thing. Bataille continues to say that the human

corpse, its death, is the most complete affirmation of the spirit, and as a parallel to this essay

and the Apps, the experience of someone on the Grindr app is in many ways the reduction

of the person to thingdom, a death without the affirmation of spirit, simply a reduction of

people and the self to thingdom, a reduction, as Bataille says at the end of the essay, to «a

utility of the same nature as canvas, iron or lumber.» And with thingdom, with utility, there

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[1] George Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality, (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986), 11-25.

[2] George Bataille, "The Eaten Animal , the Corpse, and the Thing", in Theory of Religion, (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 39-40.

comes into play an aspect of power, as a utility is something you can master, control, and as a craftsman, shape as you wish.

In Canetti´s 1984 work *Crowds and Power*[3] he talks of a fundamental part of power and violence in the act of eating, as well as exposing one's teeth. These are observations on rather mundane actions that reveal the basic nature of power and violence in humans. And a rather mundane parallel is found in the Apps as well, where the teeth are exchanged with sex, torsos, and the image of beauty. But in the essay Canetti also talks of seizing, and how the act of seizing is one of the fundamental forms of power—both executing and manifesting power. If we carry Canetti´s thoughts into our present cultural moment, this aspect of power is emphasized, especially when it comes to dating apps like Grindr and Tindr, through the seizing of the ephemerality of imagined personas; however, the self, or user, is protected by the tool of the Smartphone.

Later reflections on the subject at hand have led me to conclude that the question of the Apps and their effect is not only about the Apps themselves, but also the apparatus and the user. A comment that the tool shapes the hand of the craftsman leads to the question of whether the Smartphone would shape the hand of the user. A hammer can build; it can demolish; and it can in some instances kill. How it is shaped and used in the hand of it´s user is what determines its effect on the world around the user, as well as on the user himself.

The idea that using tools shapes the user prompts me to ask if there really is a question of the object in this equation, because it seems to me that the object is gone. This is a dissolving of not just the person, but the object itself, to thingdom, a thingdom without

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[3] Elias Canetti, "Seizing and Incorporation", from *Crowds and Power*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 204-224.

materiality, usability or objecthood. Through the Smartphone and its App we make use of the lesser known aspect of power that Canetti speaks of in *The Entrails of Power;* «to avoid being seized». As Canetti explained it, we, like the emperor that builds room upon room to hide himself, creating spaces around him so that he cannot be seized but can seize others before they are even close to him, so does this App create a multitude of rooms for us, rooms of photos, in which you believe you are hidden, but can see everyone else. The tool of the Smartphone shapes our hands in our creation of space and distance in relation to other people, so that we might not be seized, but nevertheless can seize the image of others. In this, a duality is created, between hiding, avoiding being seized, and wielding power, the seizing of the others, all through the tool of the Smartphone. We seize the utility of others, as we saw in Bataille´s essay, but at the same time we use the tool of the Smartphone to construct a hiding place in plain sight, using not canvas, iron or lumber, but rather the images of others. To paraphrase Canetti and Bataille, we create an imagined aspect of power where the seizing leads to each person building his digital castle, room upon room to avoid being seized. Until we sit on the throne, building the rooms out of the utility of people, and in this scenario the thingdom of people is a very useful tool for construction, power, and safety.

After further meditation on this subject, specifically on the tool, control, and power, I realized that complete control, in both wielding power, hiding, and construction is somewhat impossible. I came to think of this, when the image of children banging with a hammer came to mind, banging with the hammer not to build, not to kill, not to destroy, but simply to create sound. And inherit in this action is an aspect of magic, magic as it is understood by Agamben when he quotes Benjamin in the essay *Magic and Happiness,* saying that the child´s first realization of the world does not come by seeing that adults are stronger, but that they themselves cannot do magic. Magic would then disappear if a child—

while creating sound— is relieved of the hammer by an adult, for then to be given it back with instructions of how to use it properly, and this in turn would demand choices be made, choices regarding how to use the tool; to either build, destroy, or kill. Given the utilities of Bataille—canvas, iron, or lumber—understood in this text as the utilities of others, the child becomes aware of his adulthood through the choices he must make. The tool does then not become the loss of magic, but rather the independent choices made that determine if one loses magic, or gains magic. If there is an inherit aspect of magic in the Smartphone and its Apps, the adult must make a choice when faced with magic, or rather something that makes possible a certain magical feeling. In his essay, Agamben says that magic is happiness, or rather the concept of magic enables us to feel happiness, there is no deserved happiness. The child knows this, and, as Agamben states: "happiness can be ours only through magic. At that point, when we have wrenched it away from fate, happiness coincides entirely with our knowing ourselves to be capable of magic, with the gesture we use to banish that childhood sadness once and for all". The magic gained through the Smartphone and the Apps are obviously different at some points from the magic Agamben speaks of, as we are presented with a tool that introduces magic into our adult lives. And this appearance of magic is not unproblematic, as the adult, believed to have made his choices in life, is suddenly faced with a brand new set of choices, choices that will inevitably affect him, shape his sense of self, and his perception of others as utility, that through magic can be utilized as canvas, iron, or lumber.

The tools—both the Smartphones and the Apps—with their magical qualities and accompanying affect, gain another quality, or rather dimension. The Smartphone and Apps become the realization of an outside world, in Sigmund Freud´s term: an elongating of the

breast. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*[4] Freud states that the first time children become aware of an outside world is when they are laid to the breast and understand the pleasure and nourishment that can be derived from an object outside themselves. And the Smartphone and Apps seem to me to inherit both Agamben's conception of magic, as well as the realization of an outside world of which Freud speaks. Our tools—the Smartphone and Apps—become the hammer in the hand of a child, banging at all in sight to magically produce sound; destruction comes as a side effect, but rarely intended. Furthermore, it emphasizes an outside world of both pleasure and pain, which is, according to Freud, the objective of life, to maximize the amount of pleasure, and to avoid pain. So when magically producing sound with the tool given to us, utilizing the other as canvas, iron, or lumber, the magic maximizing of pleasure, without any fear of displeasure, is exactly what our tools provide us with now.

I realize now how far from the original subject I have moved. Although, in my defense, I believe that this is the essence of the subject at hand: the loss of both subject and object to a state of imagined thingdom. What we choose to do with the utilities given to us through the Smartphone and Apps, are in the last instance what determines how it shapes us, our relation to other people, and the world we wish to occupy. For both the tools and the utilities are under the craftsman´s authority, you can build with lumber; you can choose to destroy it; you can even kill the merchant distributing the lumber. But given the tools we have, we could, like Gepetto, choose to create something that amounts to more than material and utility, a someone. A Pinocchio learning to be human, acknowledging the human qualities, both within himself and in others. We could, as Pinocchio, light a candle in the

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[4] Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1961), 13.

belly of a shark, create a fire, which in turn would pave the way for escape, not from or to somewhere, but an escape from utility and tool as such.