

## Attention Economy in the novels of Michel Houellebecq

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*Loathing abounds in the novels of French author Michel Houellebecq, the greatest amount of which appears to be directed at women. All females in the Houellebecquien universe risk being insulted and labelled as 'sluts', 'tarts', and 'bimbos'. Misogyny in Houellebecq's writing has already been addressed by various scholars, associating it with the denunciation of feminism and modern masculinity, and linked to the cult of the body that is, in turn, linked to a critique of free-market capitalism. This paper suggests that the misogynistic comments in Houellebecq's novels also point to an alternative economic system at play in the Houellebecquien universe. In a world where money and material goods are abundant but time is finite and precious, the intangible commodity of attention becomes increasingly important. Drawing on the concept of attention economy, this paper explores the possibility that Houellebecq's lonely, attention-deprived male characters loathe the women they see because their unreciprocated gaze confirms their fears that they have no market value themselves.*

### Introduction

Loathing abounds in the novels of Michel Houellebecq. The narratives of his middle-aged male main characters are continuously peppered with remarks about people and things that fill them with disgust: women's magazines, psychologists, the human laugh, ageing, the male form, and even themselves. But the majority of the loathing throughout all but the most recent of his five novels is reserved for one group in particular, that is, women. The women encountered by Houellebecq's principal characters, be they young or old, attractive or ugly, are frequently labelled as sluts, tarts, and bitches.

Widely regarded as France's most famous living author, Houellebecq is arguably also the country's most infamous. He is no stranger to controversy.<sup>1</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that Houellebecq's treatment of women in his novels has led to the author being marked with a negative label of his own: a misogynist. The *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media* defines misogyny as 'the hatred, dislike of, or prejudice against women' and, indeed, the derogatory terms aimed at women by Houellebecq's dysfunctional men appear to indicate such an attitude in

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<sup>1</sup> D. Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013, p. 1. Houellebecq has been at the centre of a number of controversies throughout his writing career, i.e., pornography ('The Story of O', *The Times*, 18 January 2003, p. 34 and 'BBC Four turns to "fun and sex"', *The Times*, 13 June 2003, p. 8); anti-Islamic comments (D. Sénécal, 'Entretien: Michel Houellebecq', *Lire*, 1 September 2001, [http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/michel-houellebecq\\_804761.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/michel-houellebecq_804761.html) and T. Martin, 'The Michel Houellebecq Phenomenon', *The Telegraph*, 29 September 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8796739/The-Michel-Houellebecq-Phenomenon.html>); plagiarism (V. Glad, 'Houellebecq, la possibilité d'un plagiat', *Slate*, 1 September 2010, <http://www.slate.fr/story/26745/wikipedia-plagiat-michel-houellebecq-carte-territoire>). All Web sources accessed 10 November 2014.

his works.<sup>2</sup> This perceived attitude towards women has naturally resulted in criticism focusing on the misogyny prevalent in Houellebecq's works, in both popular culture and in academic scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Houellebecq himself is cognizant of his reputation as a misogynist (amongst other things), listing his negative qualities according to public perception in the opening letter of his correspondence with philosopher, Bernard-Henri Lévy: 'nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux' (nihilist, reactionary, cynic, racist, and shameful misogynist-my translation).<sup>4</sup> This article will offer an alternative reading of the loathing directed at women in Houellebecq's novels, suggesting that the anger displayed towards them is not merely the result of tension between the sexes, but a symptom of a wider issue at play in the Houellebecquien universe, that is, the very modern problem of being on the losing end of an unbalanced economy of attention.

The purpose of this article is to look beyond gender, treating the insults directed at women in these novels as signposts which point not to the vilification of women, but to a problematic change in behaviour in modern Western society-the breakdown of interaction between individuals, regardless of sex, due to an imbalance in the attention exchanged between people. I propose that this issue can be read in economic terms-not the sexual economy that Houellebecq presents in his first novel, but an even wider-reaching economy, particularly relevant to modern capitalist society: the attention economy.

This article begins with a review of the alternative economies explicit and implicit in Houellebecq's novels, followed by a discussion of this relatively recent concept of attention economy, pioneered by former theoretical physicist Michael Goldhaber, and its relevance not only in business and media, but also the humanities and everyday life. Next, anthropologist Marcel Mauss' theory of the gift will be used to understand the problematics of giving and receiving attention. Drawing on four of Houellebecq's novels to date-namely, *Whatever*, *Atomised*, *Platform*, and *The Possibility of an Island* the plots of which all revolve around depressive male anti-heroes-this article will suggest that the loathing directed at women in Houellebecq's novels points implicitly to an economy of attention at play in his contemporary capitalist universe.<sup>5</sup>

## Alternative economies

<sup>2</sup> M. Rodino-Colocino, 'Misogyny', in *Encyclopedia of Gender in Media*, Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, p. 234, available from eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), (accessed 14 September 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Reviews of Houellebecq's novels frequently mention misogyny as something to be expected. For examples, see D. Kennedy, 'This island is full of noises', *The Times*, 29 October 2005, p. 9 and J. Wood, 'Off the Map', *The New Yorker*, 23 January 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/01/23/off-the-map>, (accessed 12 September 2014). Academic scholarship on misogyny in Houellebecq's works has focused on anti-feminism. See M. Crowley, 'The Wreckage of Liberation', *Romance Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2002 and C. Sweeney, 'Natural Women? Anti-Feminism and Michel Houellebecq's *Plateforme*', *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> M. Houellebecq and B.-H. Lévy, *Ennemis publics*, Paris, Flammarion/Grasset, 2008, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> The titles given are the English translations, which will be used throughout this article. The corresponding titles in French are as follows: *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (*Whatever*), *Les Particules élémentaires* (*Atomised*), *Plateforme* (*Platform*), and *La Possibilité d'une île* (*The Possibility of an Island*).

Houellebecq employs an explicit alternative economy in his novels. This economy, the sexual economy, is introduced in Houellebecq's first novel, *Whatever*, which is a narrative of an unnamed man detailing his work assignment with a physically unattractive colleague, Raphaël Tisserand, and his descent into depression following Tisserand's death in a car accident. Introducing his theory of sexual economy, Houellebecq later claimed he wrote the novel as a call against the excessive importance placed on physical beauty. This economy, in which the prime commodity is sex, was summarised by Douglas Morrey as 'a system of social hierarchy, parallel to that of personal wealth, but based on sex', and is outlined by the narrator in this key passage:<sup>6</sup>

It's a fact, I mused to myself, that in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effects of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent, just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of absolute pauperization.<sup>7</sup>

Functioning independently of the money economy, Houellebecq's sexual economy is subject to the same pressures of supply and demand, and, as such, is presented as a source of great suffering. Houellebecq's male protagonists systematically fail to meet all the requirements necessary to attract sexual partners on a regular basis and, therefore, have very little sex, making them paupers in the sexual economy. This sexual pauperism features throughout Houellebecq's five novels, and is experienced by both main and secondary characters. Indeed, as pointed out by Morrey, despite all the sex scenes in Houellebecq's works, 'it is clear that these are novels, more than anything else, about people *not having sex*'.<sup>8</sup> It would, therefore, logically follow that the loathing expressed by Houellebecq's anti-heroes towards the women they encounter could be attributed to frustration resulting from their 'sexual poverty', that is, their failure to succeed on Houellebecq's explicit sexual economy.

However, while the sexual economy can be used to explain these attitudes, it is also restrictive. It confines the reader to the view that the anger harboured by Houellebecq's main characters arises solely from their inability to attract a satisfactory number of sexual partners. By using the attention economy framework, we access a wider lens through which to look at the issues that lead to such aforementioned insults. The attention economy *encompasses* the sexual economy, and in order to perform satisfactorily on the sexual economy, successful attention transactions need to take place.

Houellebecq acknowledges the desire for attention in his novels and one can find a dichotomy between the two economies where transactions on the one facilitate success on the other. Indeed, *Whatever* opens with the description of a drunk woman performing a strip-tease at a party, and despite the sexual connotations of such an

<sup>6</sup> D. Morrey, 'Sex and the Single Male: Houellebecq, Feminism and Hegemonic Masculinity', p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> M. Houellebecq, *Whatever*, trans. P. Hammond, London, Serpent's Tail, 1998, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath*, p. 22.

act, it is quickly made obvious that she is not looking for sex at all: having taken off her clothes while making 'the most incredible faces', she dances for a moment and then, at a loss for what to do next, puts her clothes back on.<sup>9</sup> The narrator remarks, 'She's a girl, what's more, who doesn't sleep with anyone. Which only underlines the absurdity of her behaviour'.<sup>10</sup> However, her behaviour is not really so absurd-the striptease has very little to do with sex and everything to do with attracting attention.

A similar situation occurs in *The Possibility of an Island*. This novel recounts the life story of a comedian named Daniel who is successful in his career, but a failure when it comes to relationships. Daniel becomes involved with a sect, seduced not by their religious teachings, but by their scientific approach to unlocking immortality by cloning. Attending the sect's summer session at their compound on Lanzarote, Daniel comes across a bikini competition on a beach wherein the competitors-all female adolescents-engage in provocative behaviour:

[O]ne after the other, the girls took to the stage, in their bikinis, to do a sort of erotic dance: they wiggled their bottoms, smeared themselves with suntan oil, played with their bra-straps, etc.<sup>11</sup>

It is implicit that these girls are not trying to attract partners, but attention, with the winner to take the largest share of all. Like the woman in the opening chapter of *Whatever*, they are employing seductive behaviour to earn attention, not sex. And even sexual encounters in Houellebecq's novels signal the importance of attention.

In the novel *Platform*, which argues that western sexuality has been damaged by feminism and capitalism, and proposes sexual tourism as a means to redress the sexual and economic balance between East and West, the main character and narrator, Michel, visits brothels on two occasions during his holiday in Thailand, engaging the services of Oôn, and then, Sin. The act of sex, described in graphic detail, is undeniably pleasurable for Michel, but the time spent in the prostitutes' company immediately afterwards is given equal importance and depicted with surprising tenderness. After bringing Michel to climax, neither woman rushes to end the encounter, instead taking the time to talk to Michel, which appears to do him a lot of good. Oôn lies on the bed with him and they chat, their bodies wrapped around each other, and when she says he seems quiet, he tells the reader that she did, indeed, calm him down.<sup>12</sup> Whether he is referring to the sex or the intimacy afterwards is not entirely clear, but I suggest it is a combination of the two. Also, Sin rests in Michel's arms for ten minutes after they both achieve orgasm, helps him shower, drying him as gently as one would a baby, and then shares a cigarette with him while they talk before she sees him out. A loner who appears to keep interaction with others to a bare minimum, Michel not only addresses a void in his sex life with these visits, but also benefits from this contact with another human being.

While one could argue that this interweaving between sex and attention is bound up solely in the sexual economy, such a view suggests that the attention in

<sup>9</sup> Houellebecq, *Whatever*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> M. Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, trans. G. Bowd, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005, p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> M. Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, Paris, Flammarion, 2001, p. 51.

Houellebecq's novels is always linked to sex, which is very restrictive and does not account for the benefits of non-sexual interaction. One such example can be found in *Atomised*, the story of half-brothers, Michel and Bruno, who have been irrevocably damaged due to their abandonment by their hippie mother. Both struggle emotionally, socially and sexually as adults, with Bruno ending up in psychiatric hospital while Michel is believed to have committed suicide, but not before he invents a process for cloning, which will free humankind from the agonies and competition of sexual reproduction. Bruno, a sex-addict, takes deep comfort from embraces with the nurses at the psychiatric clinic, despite being drugged up on antipsychotics that suppress his libido completely. Furthermore, the sexual economy does not account for the psychological damage done to certain characters due to being deprived of attention by their parents (unless one is taking a Freudian view), which affects their ability to socialise as adults in *Atomised*.<sup>13</sup>

In short, the concept of attention economy allows us to take a wider look at the social issues at hand, while also allowing us to keep the sexual economy intact. As modern society changes the nature of human interaction, factors which are not necessarily sexual in nature come into play: the cult of the individual, celebrity culture, increasing work pressure, the encroachment of capitalism on private life, all combined with increasing distractions, such as television and the internet. These lead to isolation and a failure to meet basic requirements for attention from other people, making an attention economy analysis more far-reaching than is permitted with the sexual economy.

### Attention Economy

An economy of attention is a relatively recent concept and describes a situation where attention is a finite and sought-after commodity. Conceptualised by Goldhaber in 1983<sup>14</sup> when excitement about the information revolution was growing, it gained momentum in the 1990s as use of computers and the internet became increasingly widespread.<sup>15</sup> In his article, 'The Attention Economy and the Net'-adapted from a paper presented at a conference on Economics of Digital Information in 1997 and published in the online journal *First Monday* later that year-Goldhaber suggests that if the world wide web and the internet are to be spaces in which humans increasingly live their lives, economic laws will adapt to this new environment. Consequently, money will cease to be the principal form of currency and a new economy, functioning around accessible and endless information and the attention needed to process it will emerge.<sup>16</sup> Goldhaber's vision for the concept was, and still is, not merely a parallel or complementary economy to run alongside the money economy, which has dominated exchange since feudal times, but that

<sup>13</sup> M. Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. F. Wynne, London, William Heinemann, 2000, p. 238.

<sup>14</sup> Goldhaber claims this in response to a question on his blog, published 2 June 2014. See <http://goldhaber.org/q-and-a-with-annika-jannsen/>, (accessed 15 August 2014).

<sup>15</sup> M. H. Goldhaber, 'How did I first hit on the Attention Ec. Idea?', *Michael H. Goldhaber*, [web blog], 12 July 2006, <http://goldhaber.org/how-did-i-first-hit-on-the-attention-ec-idea/>, (accessed 15 August 2014).

<sup>16</sup> M. H. Goldhaber, 'Attention Economy and the Net', *First Monday*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1997, <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/519/440>, (accessed 30 April 2014).

attention would become more important than money, eventually becoming the dominant economy in the years to come.

With the prevalence of celebrity culture in the developed world today and the proliferation of social media sites, which can serve as platforms from which to make money off the attention of others, the notion of an economy of attention is not so farfetched. The birth of the concept, however, can be traced to a different, less superficial development, that is, the rise of the information society. As noted above, Goldhaber cites his observations on the information revolution of the eighties as the inspiration for his theories on attention economy. The increasing dominance of the tertiary sector over the primary and secondary sectors in developed societies reflects the shift from working with tangible products to working with information. This shift resulted in the use of terms such as 'information society' and even 'information economy', both of which are far more recognisable than 'attention economy'. Goldhaber insists, however, that these expressions are, in fact, misnomers:

Information, however, would be an impossible basis for an economy, for one simple reason: economies are governed by what is scarce, and information, especially on the Net, is not only abundant, but overflowing.<sup>17</sup>

What is needed to process all that information is the scarce and finite resource that is human attention. In a more recent book on attention economy, Richard A. Lanham agrees:

Information is not in short supply in the new information economy. We're drowning in it. What we lack is the human attention needed to make sense of it all. It will be easier to find our place in the new regime if we think of it as an economics of attention. Attention is the commodity in short supply.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to note that Houellebecq is acutely aware of the abundance of information in developed societies, made clear in his first novel, *Whatever*. Working in information technology, the narrator is particularly well-suited to critique the modern abundance of information, lambasting it with undisguised loathing:

The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke. My entire work as a computer expert consists of adding to the data, the cross-referencing, the criteria of rational decision-making. It has no meaning. To tell the truth, it is even negative up to a point; a useless encumbering of the neurons. This world has need of many things, bar more information.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Goldhaber, 'Attention Economy and the Net'.

<sup>18</sup> R. A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. xi.

<sup>19</sup> Houellebecq, *Whatever*, p. 82.

This issue with information is taken up in subsequent novels. Both Bruno in *Atomised* and Michel in *Platform* talk about their inability to be genuinely useful due to their lack of true productivity as tertiary sector employees. While Bruno reduces his work to writing 'dubious articles on outdated cultural issues', Michel specifically identifies information as central to his work. Whilst on holiday in Thailand, Michel reflects that he has produced very little in his forty years, only organising information (and occasionally transferring money).<sup>20</sup> Later in *Platform*, he echoes the disdain of the narrator of *Whatever* towards the information sector with the comment, 'I was perfectly adapted to the age of information, that is, to nothing' (my translation).<sup>21</sup> This post-industrialist shift from 'stuff' to 'fluff' is a recurring theme in Houellebecq's works, and he depicts not only the normality of working in the tertiary sector, but also the unease that comes with the realisation that information-much of it having very little meaning to us, yet requiring so much of our attention-has become a major part of our lives.<sup>22</sup>

The concept of attention economy has been picked up and expanded by other thinkers, but mainly in the context of business and the internet, as, indeed, has been Goldhaber's focus. The nature of publications on the subject reflects the commercial nature of the economy, and, in some cases, the opportunities it presents. Goldhaber ends 'The Attention Economy and the Net' with suggestions on how businesses might prepare for the transition from money economy to a dominant attention economy, while *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* by Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck is, essentially, a guide for entrepreneurs wishing to increase their exposure to clients in their fields in order to improve their businesses. More recently, books have been published linking attention economy to the humanities: Jonathan Beller's *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* proposes that the advent of cinema in the twentieth century turned the act of looking into a form of labour, while Lanham documents the shift from 'economy of things' to 'economy of attention' in *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, suggesting that the arts and humanities have an important role to play in studying the allocation of human attention. Lanham's suggestion has merit: as demands on our time and attention continue to proliferate in this age of information, it is time to turn our attention to how this plays out in literature, especially socially critical literature like that of Houellebecq.

However, in 2014, Goldhaber publicly responded on his blog to a suggestion that the concept of attention economy might have become obsolete when he agreed that his initial prediction has not played out and conceded that 'the basic view of a new kind of economic system has never gone mainstream'.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, he was also able to defend the concept by pointing out the lengths people go to in this second decade of the twenty-first century to get attention:

Today people seek attention and stardom largely through the web or smartphone apps, ranging from self-published books, through

<sup>20</sup> Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>22</sup> Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> M. H. Goldhaber, 'Q and A with Annika Janssen', *Michael H. Goldhaber*, [web blog], 2 June 2014, <http://goldhaber.org/q-and-a-with-annika-janssen/>, (accessed 15 June 2014).

YouTube videos, Instagram photos, Facebook postings, Twitter tweets, blogs, and many other similar forms. [...] At the same time, older paths of attention-seeking still certainly exist: regular publication, becoming a star chef, a sports star, writing for or acting in TV (broadcast or cable) series or theatrical movies, poetry slams and on and on. The audience is becoming ever-more global. [...] A larger-than-ever fraction of many or most people's time is spent in paying or seeking attention through all these means and more. Altogether, the competition for attention is more intense than ever.<sup>24</sup>

While Goldhaber states that people seek both attention and fame-acknowledging that the two are not one and the same-he goes on to focus on attention-getting as a way to become well-known or to make a living. This corresponds with the line of thinking that the attention economy is a complement of, if not a successor to, the money economy: a system which drives the exchange of tangible wealth between people. But not all attention transactions are sought after as part of a quest for fame and riches. People need a certain amount of attention from other people in order to be happy, and so, they attempt to make attention transactions with the people they encounter from day to day in order to fulfil this need. That said, Goldhaber has touched on this idea of attention as a basic human need in past articles, pointing out that 'even if you do not especially make a point of reaching for attention, even if you are very shy and reclusive, you still probably cannot do without some minimum'.<sup>25</sup> Even Davenport and Beck, whose book focuses on business improvement, acknowledge that an attention deficit has an effect outside of professional life. It is clear that attention transactions take place regularly outside the context of business and the internet, but this is an area which is under-explored.

And yet, it is this aspect of the attention economy-the transacting between people in everyday life, not necessarily for stuff or for fame, but for that small amount of precious attention needed to ensure happiness and wellbeing-that is more important and more relevant to the general population. Lanham has stated that in this new economy, the arts and letters come to the fore as 'the disciplines that study how attention is allocated, how cultural capital is created',<sup>26</sup> and have taken precedence over the disciplines that stand at the centre in what he calls an economy of stuff. Attention transactions can not only generate wealth in the material sense of the word, but also capital, which is not tangible, but has value nonetheless, the results of which could be fame, social standing or simply emotional wellbeing, that is, that minimum of needed attention mentioned by Goldhaber. The quest for attention is explicit in Houellebecq's novels, particularly in his most recent two-*The Possibility of an Island* and *The Map and the Territory* (2010)-which feature main characters in positions of celebrity. Implicit throughout all five novels, however, is this subtler, yet more fundamental aspect of the attention economy-the attention sought and paid by individuals, not for fame, but to meet a basic human need. Failure to complete attention transactions on this individual level results in both fear

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<sup>24</sup> Goldhaber, 'Q and A with Annika Janssen'.

<sup>25</sup> Goldhaber, 'Attention Economy and the Net'.

<sup>26</sup> Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*, p. xii.

and loathing: fear of failure and continuing to fail, and thus, being deprived and alone, as well as loathing towards those who refuse to engage and therefore perpetuate the cycle.

At this point, one might wonder whether the concept of attention economy is truly applicable to everyday life and, specifically, the Houellebecquien universe. After all, the action takes place in the 'real' world rather than on the internet, and his characters seek attention on a personal level rather than for business reasons. Furthermore, spending and receiving attention is in no way unique to modern times. Indeed, people have always had to make decisions about how they will spend their attention, and to whom. What makes this a modern problem is the issue of information glut. Consider what Davenport and Beck have to say on the topic:

Previous generations of citizens didn't have an attention problem, at least not compared to ours. They didn't have the Internet with its ever-increasing number of Web sites. At most, they had a few channels of broadcast television, a local newspaper, and a few magazines-*Life*, perhaps, which was mostly pictures, or *Time* or even *Reader's Digest* if they were particularly ambitious. Given the explosion of information sources since then, these previous objects of our attention seem rather paltry.<sup>27</sup>

To put it simply, nowadays, we have more resources competing for our attention than we used to, even more than Davenport and Beck mention here, many of which can be found in Houellebecq's novels. At our disposal, we have more reading material; an ever-increasing number of television channels; more films being produced; more pornography (which is greater in quantity than before and also more easily accessible in the form of print, films, peepshows and, of course, the internet); more advertising, which we see on television, on screens in malls or in print which clogs our mailboxes; not to mention the internet, which provides not just endless material for reading or watching, but also the opportunity to communicate with other, disembodied people-sometimes, for a price. These are all examples of what Goldhaber calls 'illusory attention', that is, the various forms of media people turn to when they are not getting the right kind of attention-attention, that is, from other people-that generate the semblance of being paid attention to.<sup>28</sup>

This information glut and the shortage of attention that it begets, by skewing our priorities when spending our attention, is ever present in Houellebecq's novels. His main characters frequently resort to pornography: the narrator of *Whatever* and Bruno from *Atomised* both visit adult cinemas; Bruno purchases pornographic magazines and frequents peepshows, as does Michel from *Platform*. Bruno also reveals to his new girlfriend, Christiane, in *Atomised* that he once spent thousands of francs on Minitel-an online service-which he undoubtedly used for its adult chat services and to access pornography.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, they are bombarded with, and

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<sup>27</sup> T.H. Davenport and J.C. Beck, 'The Attention Economy', *Ubiquity*, May 2001, <http://ubiquity.acm.org/article.cfm?id=376626>, (accessed 1 May 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Goldhaber, 'Attention Economy and the Net'.

<sup>29</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 210.

sometimes, enthralled by, advertising: Michel in *Atomised* is struck by the insight on European society offered by his recently-delivered 3 Suisses catalogue;<sup>30</sup> and the narrator of *Whatever* even describes a pack of vagrants taking shelter overnight in a shopping centre, standing 'in front of the video monitors, blankly absorbing the advertising images'.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that the Houellebecquien male misfit is dependent on illusory attention to fill the need unmet by unreciprocated or unattempted attention transactions, but it is also evident that this illusory attention is not completely adequate either. Too little attention leads to deprivation, which, in turn, leads to feelings of both fear and loathing in the attention-deprived.

## Reciprocity

If the loathing directed at women by Houellebecq's male protagonists is a symptom of their failure to perform on the attention economy, a lack of reciprocity is the crux of the issue. The male characters pay attention to the women-often involuntarily-while they themselves receive a very lukewarm response, if, indeed, they are lucky enough to be noticed at all. This situation represents a most unsatisfactory transaction wherein the person paying attention has spent some of their finite commodity for no return. Anger resulting from this situation is particularly apparent in *Atomised* through the character of Bruno, who spends his summer holidays at a New Age camping ground, the Lieu du Changement, in the hope of meeting women. Bruno frequently notices women and girls, but is rarely seen by them or fails to extract a positive response-with, of course, the exception of his eventual girlfriend, Christiane. On his arrival at the camping ground, he notices two teenage girls walking up a path and wearing nothing beneath their T-shirts. Despite having no interaction with them whatsoever, the girls are instantly labelled 'sluts'.<sup>32</sup> The next day, Bruno attends a creative writing workshop and decides that the woman leading the class is beautiful, but also deemed a 'slut'. Once again, no prior interaction has taken place.<sup>33</sup> He later makes an attempt to engage two women in conversation-one is referred to as the Catholic, the other, the Swiss-Californian. Initially, he manages to join in their conversation about health food, but fails to impress when the discussion turns to religion. The women are polite enough to him, but the Catholic shows no interest in staying to talk. As she leaves to get to a personal development workshop on time, the Swiss-Californian gets up to leave as well. Bruno, heading back to his tent, tells himself he hasn't done too badly, but also thinks, 'Talking to morons like that is like pissing in a urinal full of cigarette butts, like shitting in a bog full of Tampax: everything starts to stink'.<sup>34</sup> In this instance, although Bruno had at least managed to earn a small amount of attention in return for his efforts, the end result is less than satisfactory. Frustrated at his invisibility, bereft of attention, Bruno's anger is evident in the insults he silently directs at the women who ignore him or fail to pay him an adequate amount of attention.

<sup>30</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> Houellebecq, *Whatever*, p. 130.

<sup>32</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

The same phenomenon presents itself on multiple occasions in *Platform*. Having arrived in Thailand to participate in a package group tour organised by a tourism company, the main character, Michel, merely observes his fellow travellers without speaking to anyone. Two young women, Babette and Léa, are assessed as 'not bad-looking' and are instantly called bimbos. Later that evening in the hotel dining room, the insult changes to 'tarts'.<sup>35</sup> Michel's invective is not reserved for Babette and Léa though. At a later point in the novel, towards the end of Michel's holiday in Thailand, a group of Russian teenagers dancing on the beach are described as 'sordid little suckers' (my translation).<sup>36</sup> The comedian, Daniel, of *The Possibility of an Island* reacts in a similar fashion when he witnesses the group of teenagers participating in a bikini contest at a beach on Lanzarote: the girls are all sluts, with one curvaceous Russian teenager labelled a tart.<sup>37</sup>

In all these cases, attention is paid-often only by a glance-but little to none is reciprocated, resulting in misogynistic insults. The women who respond favourably to attention and contact, such as the respective girlfriends of each character, are spared this treatment, as are the women who show the men kindness in a non-sexual context, as Bruno's nurses in the psychiatric ward and Michel's colleague, Marie-Jeanne, in *Platform* do. Reciprocity is not a new idea in economic discourse. In his 1925 publication *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss analyses gift giving in a number of so-called primitive civilisations, showing that the practice is a common feature of their economic behaviour. In the societies studied, gift-giving not only enabled the transfer of wealth and goods, but also facilitated good relations between families, tribes, and clans. The practice was accompanied by protocols on how and how much to reciprocate, which enabled both the givers and the receivers to behave appropriately, allowing peaceful exchange and societal stability. Already, similarities between the attention economy and the gift economy can be identified, namely, the transfer of valuable commodities and also their function in moderating behaviour between people. Further observations suggest that reciprocity has a long-established economic role not just in the so-called primitive societies studied, but in all human societies.

Mauss notes that exchanges took place between people in the economic and legal systems that preceded the current models in the West, and that these changes tended to happen between groups of people-'clans, tribes and families'-rather than individuals.<sup>38</sup> (This is at odds with the very personal nature of attention economy, but will be addressed very shortly.) Gifting, however, was not limited to material goods, but also included favours and courtesies, some of which were more abstract, less tangible. Mauss also notes in *The Gift* that exchanges in economic systems studied prior to the modern Western model were not limited to property, goods and wealth, but also included 'acts of politeness', such as food, military assistance, entertainment, and even women and children.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, these gifts-material or not-entailed something in return:

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<sup>35</sup> Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, pp. 47, 53.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>37</sup> Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> M. Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. W. D. Halls, Abingdon, Routledge, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

[T]hese total services and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare.<sup>40</sup>

A favour then, whether it involved a gift or a less tangible act, demanded reciprocity from the receiver, who would otherwise risk retribution from the 'out of pocket' giver or a judgemental audience. In other words, in order to restore balance to the economy, reciprocity was essential.

Mauss describes an economic framework that could be summarised as follows: Gifts of either money, goods, property or acts are given from a person or a group of people to another, who must then reciprocate appropriately; failure to do so would hold negative consequences for both the giver and receiver, wherein the giver is now, effectively, out of pocket whilst the receiver risks losing favour, friendship or respect. This framework can be similarly applied to the attention economy, which could, in fact, be seen as a descendant and particularly modern version of the gift economy that Mauss argues still has an effect in modern Western society today. He writes that '[a] considerable part of our morality and our lives themselves are still permeated with this same atmosphere of the gift, where obligation and liberty intermingle'.<sup>41</sup> In the age of Western modernity where material goods and wealth are highly abundant, but the demands on time and, thus, attention are much higher, paying attention to another person becomes valuable and, in doing so, we expect, or at the very least, hope, that we will receive some attention in return. Furthermore, the shift from exchanges taking place on a collective scale to between individuals also makes sense when tracing the evolution of gifting practices prior to the rise of the money economy to the present, where an individualistic culture reigns supreme.

The notion of reciprocity, then, is central to the attention economy, just as it was (and still is) to the gift economy, and helps explain the reactions of Houellebecq's characters when they pay attention for no return. Not only is it upsetting to be ignored, but there is the added frustration that the other party is not playing by the rules. According to Mauss, 'the unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it'.<sup>42</sup> Applied to the intangible attention economy, the rules of acceptance become indistinct. Indeed, sometimes, the recipient of the attention does not know that they are being paid attention. Thus, it is unfair to accuse them of not responding appropriately when they are unaware they have been given something in the first place. Nevertheless, the spender-for our purposes, Houellebecq's main characters-spends attention and receives nothing in return for his currency. As such, coupled with a lifetime of failed attention transactions and, perhaps, a fear of all the failures to come, frustration expressed through loathing is not merely expected, but inevitable.

Equally unfair, but less ambiguous, is the culpability of the women who respond negatively or with little interest, for example, the two women engaged in

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

conversation with Bruno at the Lieu du Changement in *Atomised*, where, in the spender's mind, an injustice has most certainly occurred. Mauss is clear about the expectations for the recipient when he clarifies that when accepting a gift, 'we must give back more than we have received'.<sup>43</sup> Failing to respond with at least the same interest or enthusiasm when it is clear that attention has been paid is to mock the currency of the instigator of the transaction. Failure to reciprocate adequately, if at all, results in unbalanced attention transactions, putting the paying party into attention deficit.

Appropriately, gift theory has already been linked to Houellebecq's works in the extant research. Bruno Viard poses the question as to why there is so much sadness, despair and loathing in Houellebecq's novels, and suggests that this is due to a gifting crisis. Viard uses Mauss to argue that gifting has been supplanted by political economy in the West, resulting in the social and psychological damage depicted by Houellebecq. Claiming Houellebecq's main characters are bad givers because they themselves have received nothing, Viard shows how a lifetime of deprivation has long-term psychological effects on Houellebecq's characters:

Tout le problème de Michel Houellebecq et de ses personnages, c'est que n'ayant pas reçu, ils sont de mauvais donateurs. Le premier don, c'est l'amour maternel, les héros de Michel Houellebecq en ont tous été frustrés. N'ayant pas été aimés par leur mère ni par leur père, ils se sont convaincus qu'ils n'étaient pas aimables. Ils n'ont rien à donner, puisqu'ils n'ont rien reçu, et se trouvent incapables d'amorcer la moindre dialectique du don.<sup>44</sup>

(For Michel Houellebecq and his characters, the problem is that, having received nothing, they are bad givers. The first gift is that of maternal love, of which all Houellebecq's heroes have been deprived. Loved by neither their mothers, nor their fathers, they have convinced themselves that they are not lovable. They have nothing to give for they have received nothing, and thus find themselves incapable of initiating the merest suggestion of gifting – my translation).

For Viard, therefore, this gift crisis is merciless in the Houellebecquien universe. Partners who become old or ill and children are cruelly cast aside by the anti-heroes, who were similarly abandoned by their parents. As Viard correctly shows, deprivation suffered by Houellebecq's characters has far-reaching effects.

## Deprivation

The effect of deprivation on the ongoing behaviour of the attention-seeking individual has similar ramifications when applied to attention economy. Unsuccessful attention transactions are not simply one-off occurrences in

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>44</sup> B. Viard, 'Faut-il en rire ou en pleurer? Michel Houellebecq du côté de Marcel Mauss et du côté de Balzac', in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2007, p. 34.

Houellebecq's novels. Rather, a chronic shortage of attention has been a factor throughout the lives of Houellebecq's main characters and this deprivation has an ongoing influence on their behaviour and attitude towards others. In *Whatever*, the narrator discusses the women he has been with over the years:

I have had many women, but for limited periods. [...] I've always felt a kind of slight reticence with those women who were opening their organs to me. Basically all I represented for them was a last resort.<sup>45</sup>

As seen here, his exchanges with women have clearly been unbalanced. We might assume that attention paid to certain women was not reciprocated, but paid, instead, to other men, teaching the narrator that stock more desirable than him is on the market. As such, he has been unable to fully enjoy the experiences that he has managed to obtain and the deprivation suffered throughout his life has had a lasting effect. In such circumstances, it is small wonder that the narrator is also guilty of misogynistic outbursts against women.

A more extreme example of how deprivation can affect a person is found in the same novel, though this time, in the case of the narrator's colleague, Raphaël Tisserand. A horrendously ugly, twenty-eight year old virgin, Tisserand makes numerous attempts to talk to women, only to be rebuffed each time due to his appearance. His plight reaches its climax in a nightclub, when the young woman he has tried to seduce chooses another partner. The narrator, having sized up the situation, informs Tisserand that:

It's already too late in any case. The sexual failure you've known since your adolescence, Raphaël, the frustration that has followed you since the age of thirteen, will leave their indelible mark. Even supposing you have women in the future [...], this will not be enough, nothing will ever be enough. [...] In you the wound is already deep; it will get deeper and deeper.<sup>46</sup>

The message here is bleak: the deprivation Tisserand has suffered since the onset of puberty has left damage that is irreversible. No amount of successful encounters with women from this point onwards will heal Tisserand's injuries. He will always be bitter from the deprivation already endured. This deprivation is sexual deprivation-notably, this is, indeed, the novel in which Houellebecq launched his sexual economy theory-but it stems from Tisserand's inability to secure positive attention from women. Furthermore, we are swiftly shown in the same conversation between the narrator and Tisserand that attention does, indeed, trump sex. Having informed Tisserand that the years of deprivation will never heal the damage, the narrator encourages Tisserand to start murdering women, claiming it as the only way to negate the deprivation suffered and the deprivation still to come: 'When you feel these women trembling at the end of your knife, and begging for their young

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<sup>45</sup> Houellebecq, *Whatever*, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116.

lives, then will you truly be the master'.<sup>47</sup> If he were to follow the narrator's advice, Tisserand would not only hold power over the women who had treated him with loathing, but also, in the moments leading up to their deaths, he would hold their total attention as well when in their fear, they would be forced to look at him.

But not all attention deprivation in Houellebecq's novels occurs in a sexual context. Parental ambivalence and even abandonment is a common theme. This is particularly evident in *Atomised*, where Bruno and Michel are both abandoned by their parents and sent to live with their grandmothers. Unwilling to give up her freedom in order to be a parent, their mother, Janine, chooses to spend her attention on her various lovers and her liberated lifestyle rather than on her sons, resulting in lasting damage to both men. Bruno binge eats for comfort, perhaps to make up for the attention withheld by his mother, and becomes obese. His insecurity about his looks and his lack of parental attention during his formative years result in sex addiction and mental instability. Attracted to girls, but unable to interact with them, he resorts to illusory attention, such as pornography and prostitutes. Additionally, he engages in public masturbation while staring at the girls who pay him no attention in return and is eventually admitted to a psychiatric clinic when he exposes himself to one of his students. At the novel's end, he returns to the clinic, with no sign of being discharged—there is, it seems, no hope that Bruno will recover from the attention deprivation suffered as a child.

Similarly, though less dramatically, his half-brother, Michel, also suffers lasting consequences from the absence of his parents during his childhood. He grows up to be asexual with difficulty relating to other people, only showing affection for the one person who gave him attention unsparingly—his grandmother. In his forties, he is persuaded by his high-school sweetheart to undertake a relationship, and though he derives little pleasure from sex with her, he finds incredible comfort in holding her close. Eventually, Michel becomes aware that despite his compassion for her, 'he simply could not love'.<sup>48</sup> Like his brother, Michel is permanently damaged by the selfish actions of his parents who deprived him of the attention he required as a child.

Such deprivation—be it from potential sexual partners or absentee parents—highlights the fundamental human need not just for sex, but for attention. When attention is restricted, especially at a young age, people fail to thrive emotionally and mentally, and the damage can be cumulative, permanently affecting their ability to interact with others. Fear and loathing both result: fear that future attempts at attention transactions will fail, and loathing towards the people who reject or ignore such transactions.

## Conclusion

As Mauss showed in *The Gift*, exchange between humans continues to be a complex economic practice, further complicated in modern Western society by the increase in intangible commodities—wealth and material goods are becoming ever more abundant, but the one thing we cannot replicate is our time. The 'domain of the

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>48</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, p. 285.

struggle' in *Whatever* refers to the grind and isolation of modern life in the West. It also perfectly describes the unforgiving marketplace negotiated by Houellebecq's characters.<sup>49</sup> As a new economy, the protocols that would keep the system balanced are not clear-cut, nor are they followed by everyone on the market. The basic courtesy of reciprocity is not always met, which may then lead to the deprivation so harmful to the individual and to the lashing out at the people perceived to be guilty of not holding up their end of attention transactions.

A socially critical writer, Houellebecq depicts modern Western society as one in a state of disintegration where people are losing the ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships. The anger directed at women by Houellebecq's lonely male protagonists, when considered in the context of this disintegrating society, need not be confined to the narrow view that the loathing stems from misogyny. If we broaden our view to accept that Houellebecq is attempting to show that human interaction is breaking down in modern Western society, rather than confining discussion to interaction between the sexes, we make the consideration of different social issues possible. By looking beyond the label of misogyny, we permit discussion of facets of modern Western society that are changing human behaviour, one of which is increased demands on our attention. It should come as no surprise, then, that Houellebecq, a master of provocation, might use expressions of loathing to draw our attention to his writing and the messages therein.

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<sup>49</sup> Houellebecq, *Whatever*, p. 12.