

San Francisco Is Now Full Of Zombies

**Turns out the zombie apocalypse isn't as fun as they said it would be -
Rebecca Solnit on our dangerously disconnected world**

**A population numbed, dazed, present-but-not-present - had it
happened overnight it would be a sci-fi horror movie. And if you looked
up from your phone for long enough, you might notice it's started
already...**

Rebecca Solnit

Nobody's home. Not in the young woman with the big headphones cycling against the light. Not in the person in the middle of the crossing staring at their phone, or the person talking to someone who's not there and ignoring the one they're pushing in the baby carriage, or the distracted driver who doesn't seem to notice those cyclists and pedestrians. So I move through a world of people who are not all the way there and sometimes hardly there at all - and who don't seem to want anyone else to be there either.

Aversion to direct contact with others has become so normal in my home town - San Francisco, a city swallowed up by Silicon Valley - that I've become avoidant myself after too many encounters with people who seem to find it bafflingly transgressive to engage with any casual remark or question from a stranger, and mostly fail to respond. I wander in a city that feels ghostly, depopulated, even when bodies are on the street, and I feel like a ghost myself in the lack of acknowledgment, in others' blank reluctance to utter even those tiny "excuse me" negotiations to get around someone or warn someone.

The pandemic emptied out the streets, but this is another kind of emptiness - it often seems as though fewer people are out and about, but

also the people still present are a lot less present. Had this happened overnight it would be a sci-fi horror movie scenario – people seeming numbed, dazed, their attention captured and manipulated by the contents of tiny devices controlled by powerful corporations, a billion Manchurian candidates in a wifi-equipped Metropolis. A Night of the Living Dead to You. But it's happened so incrementally it's become normal for us all to be in that limbo, that bardo.

All of which is to say, welcome to my zombie movie, which I daresay is also yours to some extent. San Francisco still has its walkable, dense cityscape, but no longer the sense – especially among the young and affluent – that it is a place you belong to by connecting.

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Rightwing tech bros and conservative media have pushed hard at the idea that San Francisco is a scary, dangerous place to walk around in, so much so that when a friend came to the city, his Lyft driver repeated the idea that he – a tall, fit ex-New Yorker – should quail at the idea of traversing our streets. They are, in one way, a little more dangerous: if people out in public keep each other safe as potential witnesses and participants, the withdrawal from paying attention, the reluctance to intervene, makes us less safe. I am not confident a lot of the people I pass by would do anything more than take out their phones to record an assault, if they noticed and stopped at all. And, after decades of decline, pedestrian fatalities have risen nationwide at the hands of distracted drivers (the extent to which distracted pedestrians also play a role has been less studied and, of course, the arguments for the driverless cars now cruising around San Francisco could be that we need this technology because we've been captured by another one). So maybe it *is* less safe, not for the reasons they claim, but for reasons they're complicit in.

A lot of people seem to move through the streets as though they're somehow both hostile and boring, and they *are* more boring now that people around us are less engaged and more enterprises are outlets of corporate chains such as Starbucks and Walgreens, so there's nothing distinctive or local and no one lasting to get to know.

The desire to withdraw, to seek smoothness and avoid the potential friction of contact, arises from the view that nonparticipation is self-protection, in contrast to the older idea that being urban is a participatory sport.

Promenading, strolling to see and be seen, was a celebrated, desired part of urban life in the 19th and much of the 20th century, whether it meant showing off your Sunday finery on the boulevard or cruising the sidestreets under cover of darkness in search of erotic opportunities. The films of an earlier era feature jaunty boulevardiers or lady flaneurs moving from encounter to encounter. The detectives in classic film noir movies are masterful because they know cops, cabbies, bartenders, reporters, crooks, nightclub hat-check girls and everyone in between. They're love songs to cities that are made out of connections and circulation. It's true that after the golden age of such movies, we in the US had a few decades of high urban street crime, now long over; true that police have always been a menace to Black people, men to women – but the conviviality of the Black neighbourhood I lived in in the 80s, and the nearby gay neighbourhood I wandered through then, was real and, despite my own youthful experiences with street harassment, I have never stopped walking the city. Democracy itself is based in trust in strangers and a sense of having something in common with them (which is part of why xenophobia and fear of crime serve fascist agendas so well). Circulating freely among them – especially in the diverse places most cities are – helps inculcate this feeling; it gives you a sense of confidence, of being able to coexist with difference. It orients you, literally, and it's very useful knowledge in an emergency. That's what's celebrated in those old movies and shunned in the rhetoric and designs of the new technologies.

I suspect a lot of people are now if not outright disoriented, not really oriented to where they live. Unlike using a map to find your way, which gradually becomes superfluous as you internalise it, using an app means obeying instructions without grasping the underlying geography, so you never really learn where you are. As someone who learned to navigate several cities and regions before smartphones came in, I wonder about the spatial blur the phone-reliant inhabit, the lack of a mental picture of the terrain. As San Francisco awaits its next big earthquake, I also wonder how my most tech-dependent neighbours will cope when it comes and electricity, and likely cell phone towers, fail.

This navigational withdrawal, like the others, is egged on by the new technologies, in part because it's useful to them if everything we do is mediated by a product they're selling, either directly because we bought the phone or paid for the service plan, or indirectly because, as the tech adage goes, "if it's free, you're the product". When you're on social media or using a search engine, it's harvesting your data and collecting revenue from pushing targeted ads at you, unless you went through the acrobatics of opting out.

Some of the old points of connection have disappeared – automatic toll machines replace the people in booths, self-checkout replaces the cash register, renewing your car registration, bill-paying and banking can be done online, as can buying almost anything. Other connection points are still there, but shunned. There's a Middle Eastern deli run by a really nice guy I go to sometimes – the first time I went in he gave me some free falafel while I waited; he's greeted me warmly every time since, but these days on the tables are signs for "contactless ordering", in case you want to scan the QR code right there because walking the few steps up to the counter and speaking would be too much. Many restaurants have put their menus online and offer a QR code to access it even when you're there in person, a dismal way to find out what's on offer; a San Francisco mall has signs on its entrances offering a QR code to find out its hours, rather than

simply putting them on the signs; sometimes filtering things through phones seems reflexive, even when direct information is easy to come by. Of course, you can just order takeaway and avoid contact almost entirely. I had a startling experience last year in a Mexican restaurant here – it was half-empty when we sat down and ordered dinner; an hour later it turned out our food hadn't come because our order came in after dozens of online orders, which were being filled first. The kitchen was very busy, but not for those there in person. The takeaway boom, which works by pressuring restaurants to cut prices for the tech companies running the services carried out by underpaid workers, has created its own in-between, in which neither the creative labour of cooking your own dinner nor the gregariousness of eating out occurs.

In between the wholly public space of city streets and parks and the entirely private space of home are the workplaces, cafes, restaurants and other social spaces in decline in various ways. For example, Silicon Valley has provided both the technology and the arguments for working from home, which has emptied out San Francisco's centre and made it something of a ghost town, with the ripple effect of bankrupting sandwich shops and retail establishments there. (Cafes in this city had too often become de facto workplaces in which freelancers were silently absorbed in their screens, which prompted some to stop offering wifi and others to stop offering anything but takeaway drinks.) I recognise the benefits of being spared some of the lousy aspects of in-person work, including time-consuming commutes and related emissions, office attire, workplace sexual harassment. But it's happened without much discussion of what else occurs in the workplace besides work, including friendships, mentorships, conversations, human contact and informal and formal worker solidarity. This is part of a larger shift towards pursuing the quantifiable – productivity, efficiency, profitability – while overlooking or devaluing the unquantifiable. The science journalist [Victoria Atkinson](#) wrote recently in praise of the coffee break. She states that in the labs she used to work in as a chemist,

“from the very beginning of my time to now, years after leaving, I have found these pauses from work one of the most productive uses of my time”. This is because in the conversations around her when she was starting out, “I began to pick up the little bits and pieces of knowledge that make lab work quicker and easier – the kind of advice and information you’d never find in a paper or a departmental handbook.” She adds that “more than once, a suggestion over coffee led to an important breakthrough” and as she became more experienced, she became one of the participants offering, as well as receiving, guidance and took pleasure in that.

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Illustration: The Red Dress/The Guardian

It’s a small jump from there to the fact that the workplace once featured prominently among the ways couples used to meet. In the 80s, according to one study, the second most common way couples met was through work.

Of course, now it’s primarily through online means, notably dating apps (and most of them are harvesting your data for sale to third parties). I’m all for love, but the rise of online services reflects the decline of other means of connecting. As unmediated in-person places and experiences get undermined by technology, we become yet more dependent on the technology, and that’s part of the horror movie.

At the gym a few months ago, I spent at least 15 minutes waiting for a guy to get off the weight machine I wanted to use, a guy who would do a desultory short set of reps, then sit on the device scrolling through Grindr. The annoyance wasn’t so much that he was shopping for sex as that, for an exceptionally long stretch, he was doing something a lot of people in this gym do: use their phones to distract themselves between sets, but also to stay in the bubble that justifies their obliviousness to the people waiting for them to be finished. The mobile phone is not only a device offering you things to pay attention to but also offers you a way *not* to pay attention to other things.

I could have forced Grindr guy to shake out of his trance and let me take a turn, but it would have been so unwelcome an act that I gave up instead. It was not my job to make someone who was wilfully anywhere-but-here show up. I suspect all these things are worse because I live in a city annexed by Silicon Valley, and I've lately found more civic joy in New York City and in Querétaro, Mexico. But the affliction is worldwide, and you're in it, too.

Vampires have devoured our attention and left us the ghosts of public and civic and community life. Tech has sold us not only the capacity to withdraw but the logic of it, with the rhetoric – at least since the late 90s dotcom boom and the birth of online shopping and banking – that insists leaving the house, milling around, talking to strangers, going to your bank or the post office, or even eating out in a restaurant is inconvenient, unpleasant, unnecessary and possibly dangerous.

Some of the justification for the withdrawal seems to be efficiency – the capitalist sense that time is money and you need to hoard the former so you can work incessantly to earn the latter. Another piece of it is the idea that the activities of daily life are so tedious and burdensome that you should try to avoid them. There are upscale counter-narratives that sometimes penetrate – think of baking sourdough bread during the pandemic, or knitting, or growing tomatoes, things that are not about getting ahead economically, but are about reconnecting to manual skills and activities, to seeing a process through rather than just getting the product, to slowing down rather than speeding up. In Zen training, just sweeping or washing the dishes can be an occasion for mindfulness, and being fully present – just doing that one thing with full attention, not being half there and half elsewhere – is an important part of the practice. Tech, by contrast, promotes ghosting your own embodied life and the systems that support it (though it also offers mindfulness apps you can install on your phone).

The people designing and promoting and profiting off those technologies genuinely seem to both shun the turbulent, unpredictable world out there and to believe substitutes for direct and authentic human contact and experience are as good as the real thing – all the way down to virtual reality, virtual girlfriends and AI therapists. There is no shortage of actual human beings, but society is increasingly organised – in no small part by these merchants of withdrawal – to make it harder to connect, which becomes the justification for pushing these substitutes. We're now in the midst of an international loneliness pandemic whose impact on mental – and even physical – health, as well as happiness, is now a subject of medical concern. If you object that we're not in a zombie movie because there are no brain-eating cannibals, let me reassure you, there are. The corporations are devouring our attention, and chewing our lives down to the bone to get at our data. They have shown their ruthlessness in what they offer as long as they capture us and extract our attention, information and other assets from us. And the harm is real.

Mark Zuckerberg's Meta (parent company of Facebook and Instagram) turned a blind eye to Facebook Messenger being used for the Rohingya genocide a few years back or for organising extremist militias on Facebook now. Meta's Instagram is clearly fine with teenage body issues, social anxiety and suicides as long as the profits roll in, and the same goes for X and TikTok when it comes to misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, or YouTube with algorithms pushing extremist content. All these sites have been used to corrupt elections, and X owner Elon Musk himself promoted extremist content and misinformation as he toiled to elect Donald Trump.

It's not nearly well-enough known that Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right Brazilian president from 2019-23, rose to power and prominence thanks to his YouTube videos and the algorithm's promotion of them. This means the destruction of the Amazon and attacks on indigenous groups during

Bolsanaro's time in office can be traced back in part to YouTube's parent company Google/Alphabet in Silicon Valley.

At the far end of this nightmare is China's Orwellian surveillance society, in which few activities are free of government oversight and violation of the rules leads to dire consequences. The new technologies have created a whole realm of new vulnerabilities. Identity theft, hacking, stalkerware and revenge porn are among the more literal kinds. Russian troll farms and manosphere influencers, conspiracy theorists and incels have found ways to warp minds and instil corrosive beliefs.

I hear stories of young people rejecting smart phones and online life – but they're salmon swimming upstream

Young people are particularly vulnerable, and what happens to them when they're sucked into the online world is widely linked to rises in bullying, sleep disorders, depression, loneliness, suicide, the intake of misinformation, the recruitment of white boys in particular into rightwing, racist and misogynist online spaces, and the decline of real face-to-face friendships. Some studies suggest youths' susceptibility is tied to parental neglect due to the same causes, notably to parental "phubbing", a word coined to describe the snubbing that occurs when someone is technically present but ignoring others by being absorbed in phone use. In a 2024 Pew study, 46% of American teenagers surveyed "say their parent is at least sometimes distracted by their phone when they're trying to talk to them, including 8% who say this happens often".

Online social media and search engines, notably Google, cannibalise actual news-producing organisations and siphon off their ad revenue, notably that of newspapers, which are dying in the US at the rate of about two a week. That is, the very local ones are really dying out and even many of the big ones are gutting their staff, partly to stay afloat and partly because some of them now belong to investors who are stripping them for parts.

With less local news there's less local knowledge and civic participation, more room for corruption and unaccountable institutions (and while there are local news sites and blogs, podcasts and other online information sources that do a great job, they're not reaching people the way a local newspaper once did or, for the most part, doing the kind of reporting newspapers do). Local news advocate Steven Waldman writes, "One study of toxic emissions at 40,000 plants found that when newspapers reported on pollution, emissions declined by 29% compared with plants that were not covered." In a famous incident in 2002, a train derailed in a small North Dakota town and "five tank cars carrying anhydrous ammonia ruptured, filling the area with a poisonous gas cloud. But a public warning over radio wasn't broadcast for nearly 90 minutes. One person died, and more than 300 were injured." The problem was there was no longer a local radio station or other local means of raising the alarm, only corporate stations playing automated programmes. No one was home.

I hear stories of young people consciously rejecting smart phones and online life, and finding ways to connect in person – but they're salmon swimming upstream. Their resistance is valiant, but individual will is far from adequate to escape the grasp of these corporations and recommit to the fading world of the here and now and embodied and gregarious. I don't have a sweeping solution, but I think recognising that one of our deepest human desires is to connect, to belong, to be at home, and that doing so is made up of innumerable small in-person acts, might be a start.