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SHARING THE ABJECT IN DIGITAL CULTURE

Introduction

it is always a question of countering animal disorderliness with the principle of perfect humanity, for which the flesh and animality do not exist. Full social humanity radically excludes the disorder of the senses; it negates its natural principle; it rejects this given and allows only the clean space of a house, of polished floors. (Bataille, The Accursed Share, Vols. 2 and 3*, 55)*

Digital technologies, wearables, and self-tracking systems have placed the body in a larger exchange system. Bodily performances are quantified down to the last detail, and biometric data is exchanged between smartphones, databases, and various stakeholders. Our quantified self becomes a tool to better manage our life, but it also provides a method for harnessing previously 'wasted' excess energy. As walking, sleeping, and eating are turned into valuable data, the excess of the post-digital body is contested. As such, the neoliberal principle of exchange has established itself in our bodies and minds (Sützl).

One such example is how menstruation has been picked up lately by the 'tech' industry. Today millions of users track their period cycle using reproductive health apps, and menstruation tracking is an integrated feature in Apple's HealthKit software platform. Additionally, LOONCUP the recently developed menstruation cup automatically tracks and analyses menstruation data directly from the blood to the smartphone. Messy blood becomes clean data. Quantification of menstruation takes self-tracking to the extreme, and in a neoliberal rationality the digital managing of menstrual blood seems as the obvious next step in humans' effort to obliterate the very traces of nature. In a Bataillean

sense, it counters "animal disorderliness with the principle of perfect humanity, for which the flesh and animality do not exist" (Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Vols. 2 and 3*, 55). As such, menstruation trackers help us manage a (former) site of disgust.

The digitization of menstruation raises several questions about the cultural aspects of menstruation in an exchange economy. What happens to the cultural complexities of menstruation, and the body in general, when through digitization it changes value from excess to exchange? With this speculation I aim to investigate the relation between menstruation data as abject, taboo, and excess, in order to consider governed principles of subjectivity, intimacy, and sociality. Drawing on Georges Bataille's notion of excess, Mary Douglas' analysis of dirt, and Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, I will present a cultural analysis of menstruation tracking, including my own intervention *Periodshare*. Focusing on the relation between menstruation-as-dirt and data-as-purity, I will discuss complexities and ambiguities of data and the self-disciplined quantified self as cultural objects.

Menstration as dirt, data as purity

Tracking and datafying menstrual blood is an act of merging dirt and purity; messy blood is turned into clean, polished menstruation data. Thus, discussing the relation of menstruation blood as dirt and menstruation data as purity means to also consider menstruation as a culturally embedded phenomenon that includes self-discipline and subjectivation. Data is an object of purity; something you cannot touch or smell. At first sight menstruation quantified to data also seems pure and as something whose particular

details you would not know had it not been for the tracking. However, coming from the body's inside, menstruation data seems to be of a different and more intimate kind than comparable biometric data such as statistics from a physical workout. This changes the premises for sharing these data through a social network. One reason for this is found in the long cultural history of menstruation as taboo.

Menstruation as a matter out of order

> *Taboo is a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations. It threatens specific dangers if the code is not respected. (Douglas xiii)*

In a very literal sense, menstruation is an excess of the bodily system. On a biological level, menstruation is where the body sheds unfertilized eggs and the womb's unused 'reception committee'. It is associated with non-reproductive sex, but also with death, as menstruation has the impossible status of a dead being who never lived. In particular, menstruation belongs to what Julia Kristeva terms *the abject*; something that is neither me nor recognizable as a thing (Kristeva 2). The abjection of menstruation, Kristeva argues, points to the liminality of the subject itself as it comes from her own body, and consequently leads to the abjection of self. Abjection is "the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of socie-ties" (Kristeva 209). Kristeva has developed her own notion of Bataille's concept of ex-cess, and especially his writings of *informe*,

the formless, that resists the need to take shape and fit into a universal categorization system (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 31). To Bataille, the abject points to the poverty of prohibition constituting each social order. As prohibition is what is commonly understood as a thing separating human from animal, the weakness of prohibition as expressed by the abject is a powerful tool to underline the fragility of objectivity.

Whereas Kristeva builds her analysis of menstruation on the psychoanalytic notion of the abject, Douglas' analysis is grounded in social anthropology and in a structuralist understanding of dirt. Here, menstruation as dirt is "a matter out of order" (Douglas 44). If the European culture understands menstrua-tion as dirt, it is not (only) as a symbol of bad hygiene, but rather, and more importantly, as a symbol of an inappropriate element in a systematic ordering and classification of matter. As such, the menstruating woman does not fit into a European conception of the female, as she neither equals sex, nor reproduction. In some primitive societies, e.g. the Mae Enga of Papua New Guinea, menstruation is seen as female pollution, and even married men fear menstrual blood, as "they believe that contact with it or with a menstruating woman will sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting" (Douglas 182). Although it could be argued that this fear of pollution relates to the symbolic order, something that does not fit with our rational Western ideas of dirt, Douglas argues that our Western ideas of dirt and hygiene are equally a question of the symbolic order. Building on Douglas, we see that also in Northern European visual culture, menstrua-tion is treated as something dirty, disgusting, and embarrassing, symbolized through blue gel in advertisements and hidden in small pink boxes in school. Rituals, in primitive and Western societies, control this 'danger'. In popular culture it has become a ritual to hide menstruation, to disguise it through

synonyms such as "the curse" or "Aunt Flo", and to reject its material status through jokes about Premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and so on. Through this cultural purification, we have learned to behave as if it did not exist. Menstruation exists in the margins of culture even if it is an important part of most women's lives.

Dirt in a larger infrastructure

Douglas argues, "where there is dirt there is system" (Douglas 44). Menstruation only exists as dirt due to religious, cultural, and political systems that, in striving for purity, categorize it as dirt. By engaging with dirt it is possible to analyse these systems, and their "powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body" (Douglas 142). What is dirt is often found to be a taboo. Taboos function to maintain cultural systems and reduce intellectual and social disorder. Consequently, a taboo acts as a ban or prohibition not to be transgressed. As uncomfortable facts, dirt as taboo is something we would rather ignore but, as Douglas argues, it is not always an unpleasant experience to confront taboos since they often involve an ambiguity that should be contested. Transgression of taboos is experienced when we enjoy works of art, or when the abject is used as a political tool to distort order.

This also holds true for menstruation. Especially young female artists use menstruation as an aesthetic and artistic material to provoke or distort the pure, clean system on social media(s) and in popular culture. This is seen in the works of artists Rupi Kaur, Arvida Byström and Casey Jenkins for instance. But lately menstruation has also been used widely as a political tool against governments or corporations in the fight for certain freedoms and equality. Some examples are the UK campaign #JustATampon, women bleeding in white pants to protest the tampon tax, Kiran Gandi who ran the London 2015 marathon without sanitary protection, and recently we have also seen the Indian campaign #HappyToBleed protesting against the Sabarimala temple that denies entry to menstruating women. Menstruating women have long been perceived as impure and polluting in Hindu culture, but this case adds an extra layer because the new chief of the Sabarimala temple aims to invent a machine that scans women to check for menstruation:

> *These days there are machines that can scan bodies and check for weapons. There will be a day when a machine is invented to scan if it is the 'right time' (not menstruating) for a woman to enter the temple. When that machine is invented, we will talk about letting women inside. (Varghese)*

The dystopian sci-fi future of automatically scanning impure bodies, tracking menstruation, and controlling access is not far away, in either religious or high-tech societies. Simultaneously with the speculations made by the Indian temple chief, San Francisco-based LOON lab have managed to fund the wireless menstruation cup LOONCUP through a Kickstarter campaign. Data is easy to datamine and sell, and in the future LOONCUP could potentially sign agreements with governments, global insurance companies, or even the Indian temple chief. In this type of example, conflicts of politics, religions, and economy intertwine to manage intimacy, subjectivity and sociability. LOONCUP demonstrates the power that follows in the transformation of matter into data; in attempting to transform the useless into something with use-value.

Excess and the accursed share

From the start, the introduction of labour into the world replaced intimacy, the depth of desire and its free outbreaks, with rational progression, where what matters is no longer the truth of the present moment, but, rather, the subsequent results of operations. (Bataille, The Accursed Share *57)*

In *The Accursed Share* Bataille presents a utopian society where human activity should not only be judged by its use-value. Rather, uselessness should be considered an important, sovereign form of human life, in erotic as well as economic systems. Bataille's notion of excess confronts the traditional idea of exchange as the only valid system by highlighting the fact that every system has expenditure; waste, which can only be spent on unproductive activities, the so called luxuries of nature. These, Bataille argues, are the greatest enemy of capitalism, as capitalism cannot monetize excess. As such, excess is what cannot be comprehended in well-known systems as money, or more abstractly under the phenomenon of exchange. Bataille saw this present in the luxuries of eating, death, sexual reproduction, and sacrifice among others. The 'accursed share' expresses this excess as a gift-giving that, in opposition to exchange, does not have restricted economic interests but is a question of a general economy, where giving becomes an act of acquiring power.

Wolfgang Sützl points to Bataille's notion of excess as a potential critique of today's "sharing economy", and argues that sharing as we know it from e.g. Uber and Airbnb has more in common with capitalist, rational notions of exchange than with the principle of the gift (Sützl). Sharing is an everyday, intimate experience, whereas exchange is a systemized, fixed infrastructure. Exchange problematizes the phenomenology of 'being-with' (the Other), as Otherness gets charged with the violence of competition. In an exchange economy we do not see other people as citizens but merely as customers or competitors. Furthermore, exchange seeks to govern the ungoverned nature of excess, as it is seen in digital rights management in terms of the excess of file sharing. To Sützl, Bataille's anti-economic notion of sharing might be a possible alternative to neoliberal society, as sharing questions the only possible nature of an economic system build on exchange.

In the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille develops his notion of excess in the realm of eroticism, as "the essence of humanity emerges from this excess" (57). Instead of regarding humans as inherently rational beings and believing that reason was what separated the human from animal, Bataille argues that the arrangement of "the gift" (also at the basis of sexual activity) is part of the transition from animal to human. Unlike animals, human beings place prohibition on excessive behaviour, his/her animal needs, and the human body. Bataille criticises the idea of prohibition as natural, and does so by pointing to the instability of the obscene and taboos. One such example is the fear of menstrual blood. As this is experienced in both primitive and civilized societies, he rejects that our civilized "sanitary installations" (66) separates us anymore from animality. To Bataille this is not the fear of animality, but "the disgust with being *human*, which increased from the contact with a civilization so meticulous that it often seems sick" (66). Consequently, Bataille argues that with an increasing process of civilization more prohibitions and taboos are organized in order to govern excess.

Following this, the purpose of inviting menstruation into the smartphone is not to transgress the menstruation taboo by embracing more diverse biometric data. Rather, it is a way to further deepen our disgust with being human by civilizing and disciplining ourselves. In the process of changing menstruation from seemingly useless excess, the waste of the bodily system, to useful, exchangeable data, menstruation suddenly seems to have become a new sort of value. Statistics could be made. Diseases might be tracked. It might even be possible to compete in menstruation! Following these theorisations about dirt and purity, excess and exchange, and in order to explore the ambiguity in the taboo of menstruation having an exchangeable value, I devised the speculative design project *Periodshare* (2015).

Figure 1: Still from *Periodshare*'s Kickstarter campaign video, 2015: https://www.kickstarter.com/ projects/752149579/periodshare-push-your-cycle-to-the-world?ref=nav_search.

tech industry invites menstruation into new operating systems, *Periodshare* is situated as an ironic critique inside consumer culture to highlight the tension between taboo and monetization. It comprises a speculative prototype, a Kickstarter campaign, and a performative intervention at an Internet fair.

Periodshare

Periodshare is a critical and ironic speculation on the future value of body fluids. The 'speculative design' (Dunne and Raby), or 'research-through-design' project, features a wearable, wireless menstruation cup connected to an app. The system automatically tracks the period in real-time and shares it on social networks, hereby making it easy for the subject to inform others such as her partner, boss, and friends about her period. She can even live-tweet her menstruation data, hereby making something very private a public issue. *Periodshare* explores the boundaries of inside-outside, private-public, and material-representational data. More importantly, *Periodshare* questions the status quo of menstruation, asking what is the value of menstruation in a post-digital age? In a context where artists argue against the censorship of this body fluid and the
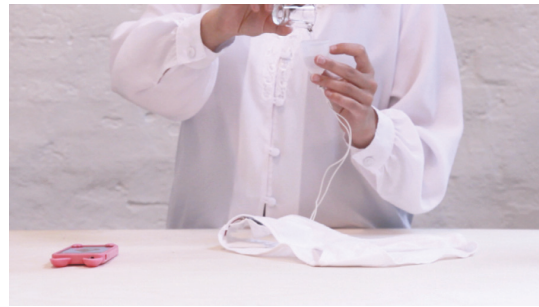
Sharing the abject

Periodshare points to interesting ways of engaging with menstruation and datafication in the near future, and seeks to raise awareness of the cultural and social stigmas and taboos underlying the larger phenomenon of menstruation trackers. It does so by using the common cultural language of innovative, scientific technology development; it is clean, white, and seemingly empowering – but at the same time it distorts the cultural expectations by introducing irony, criticism, and amateurism. The prototype possesses an ambiguity in its rhetoric. It is polished and clean though unpleasing in its concept and technical incompleteness. Compared to sleek black boxes, *Periodshare*'s DIY-character makes people slightly uncomfortable when imagining wearing something slightly unfinished inside the vagina. Examining the hardware and software of *Periodshare*, several ambiguous

questions arise. One of them concerns the development of the prototype; the careful hand stitching of an ESP8266 WiFi module into white panties with conductive yarn contrasts the mechanic character of most wearables, and questions the relations of feminine and masculine creative labour and technological development. The software, which makes it possible to share the menstruation data in real-time, serves to question when data is deemed too private to share in a public network, and the objectivity of menstruation data, as the software clearly is not capable of tracking complex, personal biometrics but only simple standard values defined by the designer.

When it comes to the Kickstarter campaign, *Periodshare* uses and exploits the cultural rhetoric and codes of 'start-ups' and innovation labs. The ambiguity in the (visual) language makes it slightly difficult to estimate the credibility of the project; is this serious or just a joke? Using a DIY-rhetoric, amateurism, and somewhat hysterical expression as seen in the video, *Periodshare* takes advantage of the privileged site of Kickstarter to reflect on the inherent values of an increasingly corporate organization (where private enterprise is supported), and where creative projects lose out to the those who manage to speak the language. I used similar tactics in the performative intervention at a technology fair celebrating the Internet. Assisted by the prototype, the Kickstarter campaign, and a petition for potential users, I performed being a start-up looking for funding. But as *Periodshare* circumvented the rational logic of innovation by not claiming to solve a simple design problem, the intervention lingered in the space between critical design and art, innovation and criticism. It steered the conversation away from business models and efficiency towards discussions about the larger systems in which menstruation exists, e.g. the institutional systems, taboo

systems, and tracking systems. *Periodshare* has no clear use-value, as the excess of sharing menstruation data points further than the machine itself. The matter concerns the apparent conflict between the taboo of impure menstruation and the logic of pure data. Contrary to common understandings of menstruation trackers, *Periodshare* points to how the combination of these results in ambiguities when the data is shared with a wider public.

Ambiguous data: Data as abjection

We could not reach the final object of knowledge without the dissolution of knowledge, which aims to reduce its objects to the condition of subordinated and managed things. (Bataille, The Accursed Share, Vols. 2 and 3 *74)*

The quantification of menstruation leaves several concerns related to its somehow still excessive character. Firstly, subjectivity is problematized, since the embodied phenomenological experience of how your period feels is lost in quantification, which potentially also loses any subjective knowledge of the workings of your inner body. You might know more about when and how much you menstruate, but less about the texture, smell, feeling, and social dynamics of menstruating. Secondly, menstruation is in many ways still a taboo, and the numerical representation of menstrual blood does not change the attitude that material blood is disgusting and something we would rather hide. The data produced by *Periodshare*, despite its apparent quantification, is somehow always 'too much' for its rational absorption into commercial streams, also on social networks that are built on the principle of sharing social life.

In *Periodshare* the material status of menstruation does not only change status from something inside me to outside me, it also changes status from something outside me to something inside my smartphone and my social network. Menstruation data, and biometric data in general, is in a transitional state between being an extension of my body and being representational, incorporeal. In this sense, data can also be seen as abjection, whereas we have come to understand data as pure. Contrary to menstruation, there is no shame or disgust in data and there seems to be no ambiguity either, even if both can clearly be contested. However, information in menstruation data is a matter out of order; it is dirt on social media, still haunted by the symbolic value of menstruation itself – as excessive information. When shared, menstruation data becomes very explicit, and the act of sharing it becomes an act of oversharing. As 'too much information', this excess is inappropriate and a non-productive act. It has no use-value, and unless the system of menstruation as dirt is changed, the concept of menstruation data does not fit into an exchange system based on rationality and order.

Although a number of companies behind contemporary menstruation trackers claim that their product breaks the menstruation taboo, it might be relevant to question if they do not merely ignore the taboo by hiding menstruation data inside the smartphone. Rather than breaking the taboo, menstruation trackers might reinforce it. According to Douglas, culture can treat anomalies negatively by ignoring them, or positively by deliberately confronting them and trying to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place. Approaching menstruation data from a cultural perspective lets us shed light on its ambiguity. It is pure to track menstruation, but impure to share it. Menstruation data in private is pure, whereas menstruation data in public is impure. Corporations have taken advantage of this by monetizing the private sphere of intimate data, but instead of empowering women, menstruation trackers might surveil, self-discipline, and alienate women by inducing a fear of soaking through or having irregular periods, or even by imposing on them a value system in which women's most essential social role is to reproduce.

The intimacy and complexities of self-tracking

If we wish to understand the complexities of humanity, we should, according to Bataille, treat the world of eroticism equally important to the world of thought. As such, a 'feeling' technology, an object of desire and excess, would supplement a 'seeing' technology of intellectual reasoning (Rettberg 69). In "To save Everything Click Here", Evgeny Morozov critiques self-tracking technologies for its seemingly apolitical simplification of human bodies (246). Larger systems of solutionist quantification is reproduced in small detail on the human body, and when we track and analyse – e.g. menstruation data based on generalised, scientific parameters, assuming that the human body is an abstract function – we forget that the human body is also an embodied subject influenced by sociocultural and political situations and experiences. These are harder to monitor, but Morozov argues that we should acknowledge these micro-complexities, and, in referring to Jane Jacobs, treat bodies as a problem of organized complexity. This involves dealing with complexities and ambiguities of the "intangibles" (245), not by reducing them to simple problems, that need simple solutions, but by deliberately confronting them and trying to create a new pattern of reality in which they have a place.

As an extreme example, menstruation tracking lets us see the quantified self in a new perspective. If we accept that Bataille's notion of excess is a nature of waste, something that somewhat escapes capitalism, the commercialisation of excess as seen in the quantified self is indeed a victory for capitalist, rationalised society and a defeat for Bataille's utopian anti-capitalist dream. When menstruation is tracked this bodily excess becomes a commodity, pointing to how Taylorism has invaded every sphere of private life. 100 years ago, Lillian Gilbreth, the mother of household management, moved optimization into the private sphere (Lepore), and automatic menstruation tracking might be the last thing that women need in order to fully optimize living. As a phenomenon, self-tracking is a commercialisation of intimacy, establishing the capitalist principle of exchange in our intimate life and social relations. If intimacy is increasingly exercised in the pursuit of commercialised profit, then what happens to the excessive character of intimacy? As Melissa Gregg argues, "we face the prospect of being unable to appreciate the benefits of intimacy for unprofitable purposes" (6).

The intimacy and emotions of our post-digital bodies have come to work (Berardi). In menstruation tracking this it exemplified by the managing of PMS, sex and so on, into everyday life. But the present ideology of 'dataism' (Dijck), the belief in data as the objective truth, forgets that data is social and networked, more complex and ambiguous than simply easily measured. Understood through the notion of excess, *Periodshare* investigates and reflects upon the cultural value of menstruation in an exchange economy, and in a wider context the monetization of intimacy, subjectivity and cultural taboos.

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