## Love of the Same

Mainstream reflects the cultural taste of a large majority, the tastes of mass culture in contrast to that of a subculture or counterculture. Used or accepted broadly—rather than by small portions of a population or market—mainstream is the antithesis of individuality. In its origin, mainstream is highly connected to terms like popular culture or mass culture. While mass culture has dominated the twentieth century with its journals and magazines, its radio and TV, the phenomenon of mass culture does not seem very contemporary in a (post)digital everyday life. Perhaps this is because network culture, with its various modes of communication, is the structural present and pivotally calls into question the meaning of mainstream. The notion of mass culture as mass deception reads as a relic of another episteme. With so many channels online that people can move through, a main stream can hardly be decoded. When everything is published immediately, when everything that is happening spreads the moment it is happening and immediately becomes content, news really can come out of nowhere. People formerly known as the audience are now playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, and disseminating information. Phenomena such as participatory content production, social media communication, instant messaging services, and blogs have made sociability one of the most important cultural techniques of the day. The sheer mass of information being produced over these communication platforms creates a pluralism that completely contradicts the meaning of mainstream. As Caitlin Jones describes: "It [the web] is an imprecise system that embraces the web in all its imprecise and inconsistent glory—news, opinion, comedy, and conspiracy intertwine and undermine any sense of objective truth."[1]

Within this huge amount of information, algorithms serve as useful if not problematic tools; they are presorting information for individual use, while at the same time enacting a radical reduction of complexity. For example, since 2009, Google's algorithm has decided what is presented to each person during their internet searches based on his or her user behavior, which creates a fragmentary and insidious regime.[2] Anonymous search engines like the German Unbubble are seldom used thus far, so their influence on the regime is minor, even if they represent an alternative to monoliths like Google. As Erika Balsom writes in her 2016 essay "After Mass Culture", "[D]igital networks that solicit user participation, blur distinctions between formal and informal forms of circulation, and carve up publics into smaller and smaller self-selecting enclaves. Customization has reached such heights that even two individuals entering the same Google search terms will receive different results depending on algorithmic filters that attempt to anticipate preferences based on past searches and assumed demographic information."[3] So what role does the term mainstream play in this context, when everybody is trapped in his or her own filtered bubble?

The relationships of people to each other and to the world around them generate the data pool from which trends and forecasts are drawn. Correlation is the basis for those relationships. Echo chambers and filter bubbles produce a growing fragmentation and segregation; they create incompatible public spheres. Instead of networking people with each other, digital filter bubbles cause a ghettoization of thought. Invisibly, filter bubbles are controlling access to reality. But while the personalization of our information feeds leads us to believe a very subjective image of the world, network analyses rest on and perpetuate a reductive identity politics, which posits race and gender as immutable categories and love as inherently "love of the same." To understand how network algorithms fragment, it is necessary to have a look at this fundamental axiom of network science, a principle that breeds connection. The fact that networks produce segregation should not surprise anyone, because segregation via homophily forms the core of the current conception of networks. Media theorist Wendy Chun uses the term homophily to describe the principle that similarity breeds connection.[4] The same only comes upon the same, while irritating and friction-generating content is blocked out. As a result, users become separated from information that disagrees with their calculated viewpoints, effectively isolating them in their own cultural or ideological sphere. They only receive news that fits their perception, and is why the love of the same is also described as a form of sleekness. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes this phenomenon in his book *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*: "The time in which there was such a thing as the *Other* is over. The *Other* as a secret, the *Other* as a temptation, the *Other* as eros, the *Other* as desire, the *Other* as hell and the *Other* as pain disappear. The negativity of the *Other* now gives way to the positivity of the Same. The proliferation of the Same constitutes the pathological changes that afflict the social body. It is made sick not by denial and prohibition, but by over-communication and over-consumption; not by suppression and negation, but by permissiveness and affirmation."[5]

With this intellectual isolation comes a lack of orientation. The pure positivism yields a wide criticlessness; one could say that the love of the same provokes blindness—a blindness that can hardly be questioned, especially since the choices made by the algorithms are non-transparent. There is no information about how these algorithms work, and therefore nobody knows which information is filtered and which is not. As such, one cannot say for sure if society forms itself actively or is instead formed. The isolation of micropublics attenuates any sense of an identification that would be broadly shared. So, what is the meaning of mainstream in a time when living, thinking, and acting is informed by hyper-individualism? What happens to a term or a phenomenon when its basic requirements no longer exist, or have changed fundamentally? As Balsom mentions in her essay, "Though important residuals persist, both the massness of mass culture and attitudes toward it have changed in significant ways. Certainly, commodification remains in full force. But after major shifts in the technical infrastructures by which we consume popular media and a global reorganization of capital and labor according to the distributed networks of the control society, the monolithic character of mass culture is less assured—to say nothing of its distinction from what was once called 'high' culture."[6]

In the past, mainstream was often used in a derogatory sense to connote that which was common, usual, widespread, or conventional. It summed up a cultural pessimism and appeared as the opposite of the avant-garde, a term which describes people or works that are experimental, radical, or unorthodox with respect to art, culture, or society. In the meantime, mainstream has taken on a normative role, which was formerly played by traditions and moral laws; one tends to condemn non-mainstream opinions as immoral. Mainstream is now congruent with the term 'establishment'. At the same time, it still describes the easy way of floating with the current. In politics, this has serious consequences, especially in a moment when the establishment no longer mutually controls itself, and when democratic political factions no longer illuminate each other's blind spots. If the corridor of opinions in the establishment becomes narrower, if political decision-makers present their actions without any alternative and as mere executions of constraints and are not challenged by strong opposition, if party programs converge, and wide parts of society are trapped in their very own filter bubble, a representational crisis will ensue.

1) Caitlin Jones, *All and Everything. The Mutable, Fluid and Tangential Webs of Aleksandra Domanović*, in Ars Viva 2014/15. Aleksandra Domanović, Yngve Holen, James Richards, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Bonner Kunstverein, Kunstverein Graz, Ostfildern 2014, pp. 25–28, p. 25.

2) Google is certainly the most promininet example in the context of filter bubbles and is mentioned here representatively, other well-known companies that work with filter bubbles are Amazon, Facebook, Instagram, Spotify, YouTube …

3) Erika Balsom, *After Mass Culture*, in: Ulrike Groos and Carolin Wurzbacher (eds.), Candice Breitz. Love Story exh.-cat. Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Bielefeld 2016, pp. 86–91, p. 86.

4) See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Queerying Homophily. Muster der Netzwerkanalyse*, in: Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft 18, 1/2018, pp. 131–148.

5) Byung-Chul Han, *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today* (2016), Cambridge 2018, p. 7.

6) Erika Balsom, After Mass Culture, p. 86.