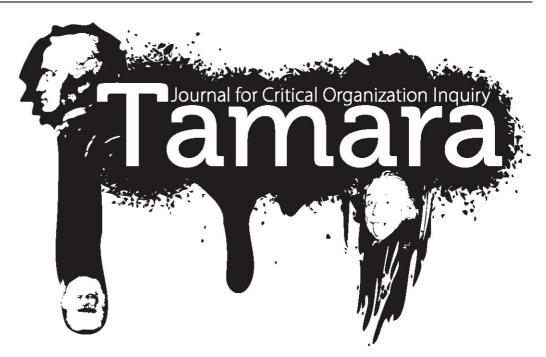
Volume 9 Issue 1-2 **03-06/2011**

tamarajournal.com



Rubik or Rubric: The Cube as Bridge

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Keywords

Discouraged Modernity Being

Abstract

Obsession/addiction may serve as bridges from Sartre's "being in itself", as epitomized by the discouraged worker effect of our ex-navy "cuber", through a cyber-island of "being for itself" where the obsession/addiction of the cube forces externalization (Sartre, 1943 (2003)). Ultimately the need to demonstrate proficiency causes the obsessed to journey across another bridge and identify with a "being for others". The discussion is situated in a modern world rendered liquid through change and the need to change. The illiquid being in a liquid modernity is insoluble and precipitates. The discouraged worker is such an illiquid being in itself.

Introduction

In a documentary entitled "Cubers" (LeBlanc, 2008) Rafael Algarin [in photo] (CBC, 2008) refers to cubing [the solving of the Rubik's cube in timed competition] as his bridge from a dark place back into society. His dark place is one of failure, and diagnosed depression holding interstitially from the world in that small space where one is and can be seen but does not participate and is therefore absent. He has been pushed into this small space by his inability to understand and/or cope in the world of modern management and organization. He was unable to participate in his high school social life, unable to comprehend the norms of military organization. He did not fit so he was moved aside, sent to his room by the working world. Solving the

cube and the quest to be officially recognized as able to do so in less than 60 seconds, liberated him from his room, baby-stepping back into the light of society. He fails to get back into society but does not retreat back into depression?

This image opens an ontological arena of hobby and obsession as a bridge in the multi-dimensional space which is society participated in or not. The Rubik's Cube exists in three dimensions, ultimately the Cuber competes in a four dimensional space. Solve the three dimensions of the cube in the fastest time possible. Metaphorically, this activity bridges many vectors and



conflicts. The obvious conflicts of path and choice in the solving of the cube in the competition for the fastest method of process

to go from a mix of colors to six monochrome sides and the conflict between hiding in the darkness of depression and the desire to demonstrate the skill with the cube. The loner is drawn to the solitude of the pursuit but their success draws them to our postmodern internet world. That world is facilitated by technological bridges (websites, advice, technique descriptions, videos, and finally chat-rooms where roadblocks and ideas are discussed). A solitary sole can participate through screen names, avatars and remain anonymous. If interest is peaked he/she may be enticed into face to face meeting, discussion and competition, public success and failure. This bridge takes the cuber from the safety of his room to a larger space but still a space where he can be hidden.

How does this bridge compare to Simmel's bridge (Simmel, 1994) or the bridge as we see it in the physical world. A bridge is also a destination. We say, "I am going down to the bridge". Perhaps we go there for the view, the fresh air, to think, or fish. The journey to the bridge may lead to crossing it. We are enticed by the idea of using the bridge. The cuber approaches the cube in the same way. A destination, he might think, "I want to solve this thing". Some end up crossing the metaphorical bridge of the cube, from the solitary obsession of solving – to the organization of solvers.

Most of us have picked up a 3x3 cube, tried it, some have solved a side, maybe two. We flirted with reading the pamphlet and learning the "trick". But, we moved on to other tasks. A select few have found the cube to be engrossing, obsessing. The World Championships features events including blindfolded solving of a 5x5 cube. A modern alchemy of spatial manipulation. These Cubers must be really obsessed, the need to demonstrate superiority has extended to extremely complex math and path analysis. However, they are not the attraction. The "Main Event" is solving the 3x3 classic cube in the fastest time [eyes wide open].

The competition is global, competitors are from every populated continent, most religions and include many who lead isolated lives. The cube in three dimensions reaches across ethnic boundaries, forces tribal representatives to respect one another. The fourth dimension creates respect across time and success, the speed of the solve is compared to past speeds. The trajectory of best time is replaced by the trimmed mean as the competition approaches zenith. The discourse of the world record is supplanted by one of consistency. The boy who solves the cube in 12.7 seconds finishes eighth to an average time of 15.1. Average time has replaced the fastest time as the standard. Its no longer who solves the puzzle the fastest but who solves it the fastest on average over five tries. The obsession must move from the risky strategy which either pays off or fails miserably to the strategy which always works and may work very fast.

This paper examines the idea of obsession as bridge through the specific example of the Rubik's cube. The concept of obsession as a bridge from discouraged worker to membership of a community reflects the instrumentality of addiction as a motivator (Boje & Rosile, 2006). Beyond the surface of documentary enticement, we will bridge into the world of internet discussion groups and other forms of empirical material for examination of the themes of passage from isolation to association; addiction and obsession as the bridge transited for that passage. The discussion group and other internet conveyances become a bridge from the world inside the bedroom to a world which exists both within the room and a social world.

Bridge as commuter, destination, pilgrim, migrant, escape

I cross a bridge almost every day, as do many modern citizens of dormitory communities. I go from a place of leisure to a place of work. The direction of my crossing impacts my mental state. In one direction I prepare for a day of student meetings, classes and research. In the other direction, I prepare for my parental, spousal and volunteer duties. In the modern cyber-era these locations of culture blur and mix, but the primacy of activities on either side of that bridge remain constant.

Simmel described a bridge as a crossing point or vehicle which opened the ideas from either side, "...it makes no difference in meaning which way one crosses a bridge..." (Simmel, 1994). There are issues with this point of view. The bridge may be a destination for some members of society. They travel down to view the bridge or perhaps journey to the centre of the bridge to gaze upon their home or drop a line into the water. The bridge for them is a destination. Others may see the bridge as a door to possibilities and go to it to consider the options presented on the other side. The chasm, water or other obstruction crossed by the bridge may represent a fence beyond which a greener pasture may be found. As fences prevent access to opportunities, for both cows and people, so do bodies of water. Water prevents people from experiencing that which is on the other side. Bridges must be constructed to open up those possibilities. In this was a bridge is similar to a gate which permits passage to a greener pasture. Contemplation of these options may take place at the bridge and like livestock who test the fence before committing to climbing it, citizens survey the bridge before crossing.

Some crossings cannot be retraced. One who crossed from a totalitarian country to a neighboring country may not return. The soldier who crosses the Ambassador Bridge from Detroit USA to Windsor, Ontario, Canada in order to avoid redeployment, must consider the possibility that he will not be able to return. His experience is similar to a cold war refugee who leaves East Germany for West and must consider the possibility that friends left behind will not be seen again. This type of bridge requires a choice in the existentialist sense (Yue & Mills, 2008). The direction of crossing these bridges is very salient to the decision. To

those individuals, the bridge becomes at once an avenue for escape and a barrier to the past. A bridge becomes a door. When one bridges via obsession or addiction; retracing the steps becomes virtually impossible. The fear of possibility must be overcome.

Some bridges can be retraced, but are only crossed twice in a lifetime. These could be described as bridges of pilgrimage. In some cases the bridge of pilgrimage is the same bridge as the one which became a door. A migrant worker family may see the bridge across which escape was achieved as the bridge to a familial Mecca, the hajj of their culture is achieved by opening that door and crossing that bridge. For the North American the bridge may take the form of an airplane to the home country. For the East German whose parent escaped to the West, the bridge may actually be crossed to visit abandoned family. The bridge may be crossed in old age by the migrant who wishes to die in her homeland.

Unlike Simmelin "Bridge and Door" (Simmel, 1994) I see a bridge as possibly a door, possibly an opportunity and sometimes as a destination. I do not dispute his analysis but see it as extendable and plural.

What rivers are we crossing and why?

"All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Bauman, 2001; Marx, 1848 (1969)). This idea of the melted or perhaps sublimated man required to flex and bend in the stream of modernity until he himself becomes liquid, is the central thesis in the concept of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2001, 2007). At issue for our hero is what becomes of the man who cannot melt let alone evaporate into the air of modernity? If he cannot melt into the stream he must cross over it and find a larger solid space in which he may participate

Society around him has dissolved into a fast moving stream of changing trends and fads. He has been cast aside and discouraged from re-entering. New ideas of management, supervision and inter-relation pass him by like the submerged rock he has become. Can he be pushed from the stream by a modern Sisyphus and if so will he roll back to the depths? In the illiquidity of the non-participant there is an absurdity worthy of Camus comparison (Camus, 1942).

How do some people become rocks?

The other in our society travels in a different space than the mainstream. In American society there are mainstream cultures which participate in varying degrees in the liquidity of culture, the white man and to a lesser extent the white woman form the central fast moving stream eroding the path of consumerism and logoism. In the slower moving waters to the sides are the black Americans and the Hispanic Americans, their liquidity has a different viscosity and mixes intermittently with the mainstream, but can be seen to move and mix in much like a brackish stream, the same yet different. Other large cultural groups have their opportunities to intermingle in many different ways. Raphael reports from his high school and navy experiences that he did not fit. As a Chicagoan, he did not sound like a Hispanic but he did not look like any other group. The central American Hispanics did not accept him as one of them nor did the whites or blacks.

Culture is located for each of these groups in either the mainstream through assimilation or a hybridity of culture between theirs and the host (Bhabha, 1994; 2004b). The true other is unable or unwilling to dissolve or join, he becomes a rock. Regardless of the central role of the Puerto Ricans in Westside Story, this group is largely ignored as Hispanic, but not included by that group. They are lost in the debate of Mexican migration as an othered group without cause. The Hispanic in this discourse is the undocumented worker or the descendant of one. Puerto Ricans are citizens.

Rafael, as the central character, is such an 'other'. In the cubing competition he attempts to register himself as Puerto Rican, but that category is rejected by the organizers and he becomes just another American lost in the mainstream, yet not. He is not white, he is not black, he does not feel he should be included as American.

Rafael has had this experience before. He joined the US Army after High School and immersed himself in a culture of duty and friendship. However he did not fit. He participated in "lots of fights and drinking," ultimately he "couldn't find (his) place" and "got kicked out." As an other for more reasons than unsuccessful hybridity, he became a rock in the liquidity of the modern armed forces. His vision of participation was dysfunctional.

He then became unemployed. He did not participate in the workforce. Studies have shown a relationship between becoming unemployed and a myriad of health issues including mortality from a factor described as the discouraged worker effect (Bjørnstad, 2006). In Canada (HRDC, 1999) approximately 35% of working aged persons do not participate in the workforce. There are a wide variety of reasons cited, but the discouraged worker effect is central to the function of able-bodied persons who are not parents of young children failing to reenter the workforce. The worker who is fired or otherwise involuntarily loses his/her job begins to feel that there is no place for him/her in the workforce. They stop looking for work. In employment statistics they stop (Archambault, 1999) being counted. They do not have a job but they are also not included in the unemployed. They have become discouraged from the workforce (Bjørnstad, 2006).

The discouragement of the worker takes many forms. Raphael had been othered within his schools and community by his racial separation from the mainstream groups. Within the army he would find a cohort of barracks friends who would include each other in the sameness of basic training "grunt". His otherness would be submerged and dissolved in the sameness they each felt through the pressure to overcome the challenges and oppression of the program. When he was "kicked out" he was disassociated from the network and othered even more than prior to the experience. The network of the workplace becomes a community and in the incidence of the military barracks the exclusiveness of interaction strengthens this loss (Ahl, 2006).

The loss of network has been shown to contribute to disinterest in society and failure to participate in the workforce. A Swiss study of working mothers found that a mother's network played a statistically significant role in her participation in the workforce (Stahli *et al.*, 2009). It is reasonable to assume that a lack of a network plays a role in many forms of disassociation.

Raphael and others like him are important to organizations in a tight labor market. In the 1990's and early 2000's when American unemployment dipped to 5% and lower, there was a shortage of willing workers and many jobs went unfilled. Even in a higher unemployment epoch, potential workers such as Raphael with the mathematical ability and mental flexibility to solve the Rubik's cube in under sixty seconds are a valuable commodity. As a rule they are needed in the workforce. However, in the cycles of boom and bust, these workers because they have failed to conform with the organizational norms (Prasad, 2008) are among the first to go. If these workers become discouraged and leave the workforce, the inventory of available talented workers is depleted.

Somehow the rubric of nausea needs to be undone. That rule which has forced a worker to become discouraged, depressed, nauseous. Twisted back, so that the colors are in the right places. Put life in order so that discouraged workers return to service.

Where has the discouraged worker gone when he exits the workforce? Our man Raphael retreated to his room and television. He entered his 'Darkest Hour', laid in bed did nothing, saw no-one, self absorbed, father ill, mother working multiple jobs and looking after both of them. Did not see the burden he had become. In Sartre's words, "I exist, that is all, and I find it nauseating" (Sartre, 1938/1959). Raphael only existed. In Sartre's view his was a being in itself, solely for the purpose of existence nothing more. He simply was.

He was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate; to marry, to give up the game, to drag this death weight about with him for years to come. He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good or Evil unless he thought them into being (Sartre, 1945).

When his mother speaks to him, he acknowledges but does not seem to hear. We worry for his father, sick in bed; the mother is heading out to work at one on the many jobs and the disassociated son is charged with the responsibility for the father's medicative needs. At this point Raphael has not even viewed the bridge, he is stuck occasionally glancing at the liquid modernity flowing around him isolating him from society, othering him in the most absurd way. Unlike the existentialist heroes of Sartre, Camus and their fellows, Raphael does not choose; choice is taken from him in his absurd world. He only exists.

In his bored, nausea he discovers a cube, the Rubik's cube. We aren't told where it comes from, perhaps its left from childhood or abandoned by a visitor to his parents. He tries it; opens his eyes to see the stream.

Looking at the bridge

When he discovers the cube, he becomes obsessed. To quote Raphael, "I'm not really addicted, I could stop at any time but everyone that's addicted says the same thing." Where his life had focused on the nausea and absurdity of being in itself; that existence had been replaced by being for the cube. A being for it which evolves into a being for itself (Sartre, 1943/2003) in that the self of being is the self with the cube. Not much light is shining into his bedroom but some shapes could be made out on the walls of his cave. Those shapes are squares on a cube. Again, he does not choose the cube, it chooses him. He becomes addicted (Boje & Rosile, 2006; Yue, in press-a, in press-b), and looses the ability to resist the bridges that follow.

Not out of the darkness but forgets the darkness. Raphael, "I didn't give up when I was in my darkest hour (because of the cube)". He is achieving beyond existence for the sake of existence. The cube doesn't give the existence meaning but does give it purpose, a role. So Raphael transcends from an existence of nothingness to a quest for the cube. He has not entered any community, unless the dyadic of him and the cube was considered an organization. He now sits in 'Subway' by himself, doesn't talk to people, barely communicates with his Mother, but works the cube constantly.

At some point he realizes that there are others like him. Pursuing the cube; some ahead of him; they have found ways of solving the cube and solving it faster. The days of the "How to Solve the Rubik's Cube" pamphlet sold for \$6.99 at Wal-Mart have been replaced by a myriad of web-pages dedicated to the various methods of faster and faster solving. These range from the beginner "Cube Solver" to speedcubing.com one can see world records in the various forms of cubing and watch videos of those attempts as well as learn the most sophisticated algorithms and chat online.

"I'm a loner... I didn't go to the internet to find a community but when I did, then it was like I have to be a part of this if ever I was in a group this is where I start", marks Raphael's transit across a the short bridge to a cyber-island in the midst of the liquidity of the modern world. He can travel back and forth across this bridge, the toll is low. He does not have to give much of himself. He can lurk, read postings, see their explanations, watch their videos without giving anything to them. As such the bridge from his lonely room to the cubing website community is the traditional bridge of Simmel, (1994) the places are separate yet ambiguous in our consciousness and we can travel across the bridge and return at will. The bridge is transitory, can be crossed either way (Simmel, 1994).

This island is an island of hybridity. Nationality comes to the island but only becomes a focus when a compatriot of Rubik is accused of cheating in blindfolded cubing. When a Hungarian appears to peak, other Hungarians come to his defense against the compatriots of those whose records he has broken. The language of the cube is English regardless of the first language of the webmaster. These attacks and defenses are in English, ideas are in English, chat is in English. Each cuber brings his/her ideas, problems and solutions from their culture to the cyber-island in English. Many cubers come from a love of mathematics and use nomenclatures of the cartesian world such as permutations and acronyms (ZB F2L | OLL | PLL | COLL). Language in the form of jargon and acronyms extends English and forms the essence of the community, its separateness from others. In the location of this culture, all form hybrids as described by Bhabha (1994). In the same vein, cubers adopt a transitory identity which expands and adapts from their in-person identity, to a being for the cubing world. The transitory nature of the World Wide Web is the epitome of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2001). Rather than the same hotels, restaurants and limousines described by Bauman (Bauman, 2007) as liquid, the cyberworld uses the same language, icons, emoticons and avatars regardless of the cuber cyberspace.

Here, there is no question of "denying one's roots' – there are no roots to be denied. More importantly still, there is no question of denying responsibility to the weak –there are no weak on this side of the closely guarded gates, let alone responsibility for their fate. As a matter of fact, there are no hard and fast structures, no class origins one cannot leave behind and no past that cannot be thrown overboard (Bauman, 2001).

Bauman in the passage quoted is referring to a modern elite, however, his description also fits the cyber-cuber. They hurdle the gates of cyberspace to enter an elite world of cubers guarded by a language and skill set which keeps others out. In their cyberworld they do not have a past, present and possibly a future. They exist in the moment of access. If they interact they can construct any identity they wish, that identity can be fact or fiction and may as easily be abandoned as it is created. They owe noone and their status is determined by their skill. From that island they may travel to the next space or not.

The organization is a community and each community has a culture (Ahl, 2006). In Bhabha's terms the World Wide Web is a third space (Bhabha, 1994; 2004a). Those who have no place in the concrete world may find their culture in the cyberworld. Actors travel in that space and negotiate a reality that is somewhere between their existence and the existence of others. A new order is created which is a hybrid of real and unreal, cultured and cultureless. The shorthand of internet messaging and cell phone text messaging hybridizes language. The shorthand of the task (solve the cube) creates community through a sameness superimposed over the difference. Each identity assumed within the website has the potential to be anonymous yet open. This post,

"I am using CFOP method (I am really bad at doing cross, I am pretty good at doing f2l, I use 2 look OLL and I already know all my PLL's) and I average about 1 min and 20 sec. My friend uses LBL method and averages 58 secs. this makes me feel really slow. Am I really slow? thanks, Sahid" elicited the response, "yes, you are really slow". Subsequent responses did offer help but continued the teasing thread of slowness (WCA, 2008).

This cyberparticipation in the external reality, teases the cubers into more overt participation. The bridge to cyber-island is crossed more and more often in the pursuit of ever faster solutions. The cost becomes less and less significant until the crossing becomes as regular as taking the subway. The newly accessed space becomes a familiar space. It is interstitial between the real world of depression in his bedroom and the real world of outside society, community but real in its unrealness.

In cyberspace the obsessed cuber experiences the next step in speedcubing. He sees posts such as:

I just had my FIRST proper competition yesterday (26/10/2008) I usually get ~27 ish but in the competition i get ~37 ish. Is there any way to prevent nervousness. I know about practicing (sic) in front of family, friends etc... but is there another way. Its not only for me but others who are new in competitions as well. I would recommend not facing the audience (boon pek, 2008).

Reading these posts raises the idea of competing. Raphael has managed his time to below one minute for solving the cube. He realizes that one minute is a respectable competitive time. He has entered the world enough to want others to see him. He no longer just lurks in the world, he wants to be seen. He researches competition and enters the world championship. His comment, "I want to be able to say officially that I broke the 60 second barrier".

This is the enunciation of a nascent interest in interaction with a world outside of himself. An interest in "being for others" (Sartre, 1943/2003, 1945) he maintains a distance from the outside world by sitting alone at the pool and declaring himself as the lone representative of Puerto Rico, rather than a member of the US contingent. He 'others' himself by attempting to receive the award for the fastest time for a person from his country. He makes sense of this othering by offering the rationale of the award, but it is a declaration of his personal isolation. The isolation from school mates, barracks mates and the world. In the stepping into the warm light of Florida he cloaks himself in the protection of his difference.

Like Camus' Meursault, Raphael sees his place in Chicago society as absurd (Camus, 1942, 1943). Sisyphus pushed his rock and Raphael twists his cube. But unlike Camus' hypothetical heroes, Raphael does not consider suicide. As Sisyphus did not view the task as absurd, neither does Raphael. The cube is solved only to be cast back down the mountain, scrambled, the task to be begun yet again. Turn the rock or the cube. The journey is the process, get to the top of the mountain, all colors returned to simplicity. Then, begin again (Camus, 1942, 1943).

Raphael did not see the absurdity of drinking and fighting while in the army, he did not see absurdity in sitting in his bed, he does not see the absurdity of the cube. Meursault did not see existence in the telegram, he saw only absurdity, he was caught or lost in the absurdity and therefore he was compelled to end it, suicide by jury (Camus, 1943). Sisyphus in the alternative continues to push the rock in hope of having it stay at the top of the mountain or assuaging the gods. Raphael, like Sisyphus pursues recognition of his achievement. However, we do not know who he seeks to recognize him. Are the referees of the competition the gods?

Meursault rose from his absurdity to act. His act could not be understood by the surrounding culture and therefore he solidified his otherness as not only culturally different but located in a space separate from all others. In his otherness he is unique. We can relate to Sisyphus, his absurdity is echoed in almost every life, however, we cannot fathom the act of murder and punish it with suicide. As a form of discouraged worker, Muersault does not return to any community. He becomes obsessed with his own situation and therefore does not transcend Sartre's being in itself. Raphael is provided a tool with which to bridge the gap from his illiquidity to a new position, closer to liquidity in a community.

The lesson of Raphael (in contrast to Meursault) is that obsession can be a bridge. The pursuit of a public performance in under 60 seconds forces the nauseous into the light. They must swallow their bile, and accept the rules of a community in order to feed their need. By doing so, they cross a bridge into the light. This bridge has a high toll, but obsession forces its payment. The pre-crossing self is denied and replaced with a post-crossing self (Boje, 2001). Boje describes the nihilistic repudiation of Dave to become David, by giving up himself, the cuber must break with the solitary self in order to cross the bridge to the self of the cubing contestant.

The culture of the cuber is located in a cyberworld and reified in the real world through the convention/competition. Lacking traditional forms of community, the cuber creates a form of community suitable to his/her obsession and hybridizes a form of culture (Bhabha, 1994).

The whole Klostengarden and our corridor in Delphi have decided to sum up our strains to give life to the most outstanding party ever!! "We'll host all of you all night long to play the live Rubik's game!! Basically everyone needs to wear a shirt, a bottom of some sort, and socks of different the rubik's cube colours, which are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and white. By the end of the night you need to be in ONE of the colours" (Gilles, 2008).

The community of the cuber is framed by the obsession with the cube and its spectrum. The transition from the polychromatic to the monochromatic represents a bridge from otherness to conformity within a new culture. The cuber who is compelled to organize contests and parties has stepped even further from the existentialist nothingness to forays into a being for others (Sartre, 1943/2003, 1945).

Within that community a bridge forms from cyber-island to a new place, a place beyond the competition to a social interaction. The discouraged worker is enticed into a physical network, no longer able to mask in cyberspace nor able to hide behind otherness at the competition but compelled to interact. In this intimate interaction of clothes sharing to achieve monochromatic regularity, the other becomes same.

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, we have considered the issues of those who leave society: sometimes gradually through an othering of process in the community of public school or institutions; at other times the othering is punctuated by a breech, being kicked out, downsized, ostracized. As Meursault and Raphael were exited from the armed forces, the current economic times are leading to massive layoffs and downsizing. Wars end, soldiers are sent home. Industries reengineer or collapse, workers are sent away. Both forms undermine the identity and discourage the being. The meaning of existence disappears. A person with a role, a being for others, loses that role and spirals to a being in itself.

Organizations as communities will reform, workers are needed and society needs contributions from these discouraged beings. Therefore, means of transit from the nauseous absurdity of the discouraged worker effect to a participation in culture are necessary. Bridges from illiquidity to liquidity at the individual level so that contribution can occur are necessary. Obsession/addiction may be an enticing bridge.

In the postmodern world, anonymous participation is possible through the cyberworld. This anonymity provides a bridge which in Simmel's form may be crossed in either direction. By feeding the obsession in the cyberworld we can encourage further travel. Cross one bridge and one may come to a second. That second bridge in our case is a bridge to a concrete community where the other may disguise himself but he must attend to participate.

Many of the characters in the documentary "Cubers" participate in larger society in roles which employ their cubing mind, such as education (Mathematics) or programming (problem solving). Had they not explored their obsession and taken those first trips across a bridge their contribution to society may not have occurred.

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