

Tristan Garcia
**The Intense
Life: An Ethical
Ideal**

01/08

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Tristan Garcia
The Intense Life: An Ethical Ideal

Against the Gentrification of Intensities

As a moral ideal, the intense outlook of the libertine or the romantic could still be opposed to the non-intense. However, when intensity became an ethical ideal for all, even what was least intense began to be experienced, perceived, and represented in an electrifying fashion. Even a feeble person could exist strongly.

For a long time, the ideal of intensity had been bolstered by its opposition to figures epitomizing the negation of vital intensity. The libertine, the romantic, the electric youth braved social norms and challenged pillars of the established order such as the priest, the magistrate, or the professor. These establishment figures, serving as foils to the intense person, were regularly the butt of satire in the margins of official culture, in the poems of Bohemian society or the fantasies of the Cercle des Poètes Zutiques.¹ They were fodder for the tracts, pamphlets, and insolent manifestoes of Russian or German avant-gardes, surrealism, and situationism. Visceral opposition to the non-intensity of the social order was the engine of the daring avant-gardist spirit. Artists and revolutionaries excoriated the predictable life that was not grounded in the elemental intensity of the world.

As long as they remained attached to a particular moral content, the intense person could find anything worthwhile, except the ennui of people who are not fully alive. To be more precise, even this ennui could be of interest, provided it was strongly felt, a kind of fabulous ennui, the extraordinary neurasthenia of a Bartleby or Oblomov, the idleness portrayed by the aesthetics of “incommunicability” of the 1960s, in the novels of Moravia or the films of Antonioni.

The opposite of the intense person is not primarily a life of low intensity, for such an experience can give rise to an intense transmutation, through an alchemy characteristic of modernity, transforming weak into strong, small into big, the existential void into aesthetic depth, and idleness into an oeuvre. No, the opposite of the intense person is above all the *dimly feeble*, that is to say the average. The tepid person.

In lovers', poetic, or political discourse, tepidity is virtually always considered unworthy. Often, the language of joyous exaltation is reserved for those on our side. To describe our worst enemies, we draw on an abusive but spirited vocabulary. Yet only terms expressing disgust and disgrace are used to label those who do not choose, who are a *little bit of everything* but *nothing very intensely*. “What is one to make of the paucity of desire, the paucity of



Michael Haneke, *The Seventh Continent* [*Der siebente Kontinent*], 1989. 1h 44 min.

convictions and appetites that define tepidity,” Philippe Garnier asks in his essay *La Tiédeur*. The tepid is also the neutral. Scorned for his lack of engagement, a byword for cowardice, the person perched midstream maintains affinities with everyone, waiting for history to make a decision. A potential traitor to all sides, the neutral evades contradictions. The neutral therefore pretends not to be charged with a high intensity towards either side. Discharged, it is not pure but low energy. It is what it is in a mediocre fashion.

Far from embodying the *aurea mediocritas* (the “middle ground”) celebrated by the Latin poet Horace, mediocrity has come to designate in modern poetry, novels, and films the irremediable flaw of average man, the “flat” human being. A high intensity of anything, including suffering, is better than a mediocre truth, beauty, or life.

Perhaps this conviction is a remnant of an aristocratic ethic in democratic times: one no longer judges the substance of a behavior, instead preferring to accentuate the excellence of its style and to evaluate its intensity. True nobility resides in the manner, not the name. Whether a fascist, a revolutionary, a conservative, a petty bourgeois, a dandy, a good man, a crook, or a gangster, be it with panache.

03/08

What matters is not to be *the* intense human being, but to be who you are with intensity. The term has taken a democratic turn.

Thus, the ideal of intensity is capacious enough to wrap itself around its opposite. More and more often, triteness, neutrality, and depression are rendered with unusual force. In this case, the intense person duly acknowledges the potential value of mediocrity. Separate mediocrity from the lackluster, and triteness from the uninspired, and both can be turned into stimulating experiences. Houellebecq's first novels provide a good example. Modernity has cherished powerful evocations of existential weariness, dull moments, low-intensity feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. Captivating accounts that probe the mystery of the ordinary life and the emotional profundity of existences – often mistakenly read surfaces reminiscent of still water – can be found in the novellas of Chekhov, Carver, or Munro. As literature advanced into zones previously cast into the darkness of democratic everyday life, everything that had proved resistant to intensity henceforth fell under its sway. Ennui, mediocrity, and provincial existence have been enlivened by a kind of aesthetic electricity, a drab flamboyance, the seeds for which were planted in Flaubert's



Le Charivari magazine's caricature of the French King Louis Philippe, as drawn by Honoré Daumier and published on 27 February 1834.

novels.

What was left to withstand this aesthetic intensity? The social incarnation of the *middling mediocrity*. The name given to this incarnation – the bourgeois – greatly exercised the modern mind. “Mediocrity is bourgeois,” Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. All those who, for more than a century, desperately desired intensity in life and thought hated this intermediate social class, which was neither the aristocracy – the custodian of the past – nor the proletariat to which the future seemed to belong. There is no worse insult to modern individuals than being called a bourgeois. What does it mean? It means you are without intensity. As Honoré Daumier’s caricature depicting the French king Louis-Philippe as a pear intimidated, to be bourgeois is to be languid. Pleased with himself, the bourgeois eats when he is hungry, and not only then. Flaubert immortalized him in the figure of Homais, Rimbaud’s sarcasm took aim at him, and the young people in Jacques Brel’s songs insult him (“the bourgeois are like pigs”). He is “a young man of means, a botanist, potbellied,” Verlaine writes in an amusing verse of “Monsieur Prudhomme.” From Borel, Baudelaire, Daumier, and Courbet to Bob Dylan (think of the figure of Mr. Jones in “Ballad of a Thin Man”), the bourgeois is the person that passively resists the intensification of their senses. Sitting in the light of their living room lamp, their inner life is anything but electric.

They are well established, settled, married, their life course charted in advance. They are concerned with material security, endowed with a narrow and formatted mind, appreciative of love – but within limits – and know what they must about science. Calculating and business-savvy, they are a stabilizing force for society. Yet the bourgeois was also the last to put up social resistance against ethical intensity. This resistance paradoxically allowed intensity to persist. Faced with bourgeois adversity, the idea of living intensely retained a transgressive and electrifying meaning. Even more so than the priest or the pontificating philosopher, the bourgeois undoubtedly represented the last *antipode* of intensity. The bourgeois is a person of neither danger nor wagers, a stranger to thrills unless they have been assured of their safety. Gentrification designates the risk for the mind of an absence of risks: “The annihilation in the soul of all transcendent anguish paves the way for bourgeois banality,” Nikolai Berdyaev wrote in 1934 in *The Fate of Man in the Modern Age*.

But the bourgeois, too, intensely wanted what they were: to be comfortable and to feel a frisson in their lounge chair, experiencing minor stimulations in their everyday life. [...] The

spectacle and the consumption of intensities coalesced in the promise of a leisure society, with the arrival of the nickelodeon, the movie theater, and the theme park. Everywhere merchandise enticed those making a living to spend their money in order to feel alive. The last moral bulwark resisting the universalization of ethical intensity fell.

This leads us back to the shared condition described at the beginning of our inquiry. Since intensity is no longer determined as a substance but only as a way of being, each and every one can search out the means to spice up their insipid life: receiving a kind of minor electric shock provides stimulation and jolts us out of our day-to-day routine. Nevertheless, as the ethical principle of intensity becomes generalized, the intense person is condemned to invent *ruses* in order to avoid the gentrification that incessantly imperils the feeling of being alive.

First Ruse: Variation

The first of these stratagems to foil the bourgeois normalization of life is to interpret intensity as *variation*. Overthrowing the values of classical thought, the intense person realizes that their sensations allow them a better grasp, not of what remains in the same state, but of the passage from one state to another. The principles of variation can therefore be regarded as a way of rejecting the domestication of feeling: exclusively and faithfully loving only one person is tantamount to blunting the sharp edge of love. Change is necessary to arouse and galvanize our desire: explore various passions, experiment with all sorts of love, find out what distinguishes them, venture into the unknown; genuine human experience takes shape only when its object varies permanently. From this vantage point, the identical tends to weaken the sentiment, whereas difference reinforces it.

To avoid gentrification we must *modulate* our experiences. The intense person is caught in a race against every form of identification with what they are, what they know, and what they feel. Insofar as perception is essentially about understanding relations, the intense person never perceives the thing itself, apprehending rather what differentiates one thing from another, the invisible link between two moments, two beings. What a sentient being can do can only be done in contact with others, and in passing from one relation to the next all the potentialities of its nature can be actualized. The intense person, it should be added, tires quickly. They always want to be someone else. Fearing gentrification, they grow bored. Anything thought might hold up as a definitive ideal is quickly spoilt, and the intense person feels the urgent need to move on. What is invariable might

04/08

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Tristan Garcia
The Intense Life: An Ethical Ideal

embody truth, but it is not alive. What remains simple, certain, and immutable might surely satisfy the intellect – the “dead” part of our body – but it degrades the feeling of being alive, which is only really exalted in us when its affective variations can shine and sparkle, as if vitality was water or changing skies, following a rhythm of its own. Distrustful of thought, knowledge, and language, which make the world unlivable by reducing living variations to stable entities and quantities, the intense person uses cunning and seeks to confront their own thinking with an original metaphor for what escapes its grasp. It seems preferable to offer both the mind and perception a glistening object, a perpetual variation of being, a movement without motif. Since it is imperative to combat the settling down and the petrification of vitality, this ruse frequently proceeds by comparing real life to music. From romanticism to rock, music has furnished the most faithful representation of everything in us that refuses to bow to language, concepts, and immobility. “Movement without support,” according to the composer André Boucourechliev’s felicitous formula, music underpins a free ethics, for “nothing in the musical process can stand still and remain identical; simply lengthening a note in time, let alone repeating it, is already a production of differences,” as Bernard Sève, a specialist of aesthetics, has argued in *L’altération musicale*.

Infused with an adverbial ideal of acting, feeling, and thinking modeled on the experience of an electric shock, the modern individual who struggles to escape gentrification is indeed no longer moved by what remains the same. They have lost their interest in fixed identities; what does not vary receives scant notice: an indefinitely repeated act, typical of the standardized world of work, seems intolerable to them. The very idea of eternity makes them yawn; marble leaves them cold. Everything that denies life and the musical variations that compose it breeds impatience: perfection and the absolute appear to them like an ontological flaw, an inability to become something else, the result of a serious intensity deficiency. The supreme objects of religious contemplation and wisdom strike them as extraordinarily flimsy. They love music for the changes, with repetition a taste of hell to come. Like Kierkegaard’s hero, they demand the possible or else they suffocate, and not only then; as soon as they are forced to recognize what they know, they gasp for air. What stays the same makes no difference to them. They need either *less* or *more*. They would rather change their mind even if the outcome is uncertain than stick to established certainties. Endlessly curious, they are ready to taste pain just as much as pleasure, as long as there is

some change and movement, and the sound of being alive – melodious or dissonant – can be heard.

Second Ruse: Acceleration

Yet a way of being can rapidly turn into substantial content; every ethics is at risk of being little more than a form of morality: to do everything out of a desire for *variation* amounts to doing nothing but *varying*. Variation as immutability. The troubling result is well known: those who live by subversion and insolence end up converting transgression into a norm, becoming bourgeois despite themselves. No matter how vague, this prospect haunts the intense creatures of the modern age hoping to maintain their own intensity while simultaneously preventing it from collapsing into a norm.

They have to devise a new ruse of thought to thwart the onset of gentrification. Refusing to become ensconced within their own sensations, modern individuals conceive of intensity not just in terms of *variation* but also as continuously *increasing*: it is not enough for intensities to vary; they should also expand. In order not to stall, everything must become stronger and stronger. I get accustomed to the change of the internal seasons, from pain to pleasure, joy to sadness, and darkness to light: it is yet another established order, reassuring and procuring tranquility. The calm comes after the storm, as they say. Against this familiarization of intensities, pain must hit harder and strike like lightning, enjoyment must take possession of every single limb, provocations must produce unimaginable shock, guiding principles must be radicalized; even the night must appear darker, noise shriller, and love all-conquering. The intense person will seek to enhance all the signs and effects of their vitality, in the hope that this might keep the looming comfortable existential settlement at bay and stave off the entropy of desire. There can be no end to this necessary increase in intensity. The infinite intensification merges into a vital effort informing various hopes, whether it is the progress of science, the forward march of history, the growth of economic prosperity – all of them spur on intense individuals who know that they can maintain their own intensity only on the condition of making everything else brisk and fast-paced. The intense libertine or romantic soon morphed into the exaltation of avant-garde movements such as surrealism, futurism, and constructivism, which announced the arrival of a new humanity. “Hold to the step you have gained,” as Rimbaud famously put it. Each generation is to accomplish an advance, a decisive breakthrough in poetry, thought, the visual arts, politics, or

05/08

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017
Tristan Garcia
The Intense Life: An Ethical Ideal

social mentalities. Forward and onward! What accelerates continuously, moving forward with the velocity of cars, trains, and planes, takes us far away from a prehistoric and mythical world where repetition was one of the highest cultural values.

Exhibiting a pronounced lassitude vis-à-vis the old world, poets including Apollinaire, Marinetti, and Pessoa longed for a modern life that would amplify our perceptions to tear us away from our old ideas and the routine of studying the classical texts. As far as the mind is concerned, modernism is the hardest drug: it holds out the promise of an unimaginable over-excitation of a humanity stripped of all banality. It cannot be denied that even this drug produces habituation. But this is not a problem: just increase the dose, put your mind to work, and accelerate the process.

As soon as we have discerned the outlines of the historical process, Jean Baudrillard once remarked, our minds will try to get ahead of history. “And this mutation is due to an acceleration: trying to go faster and faster, one has already arrived at the end. Virtually! But you’re still there.” Both the singularity theories and the accelerationist movement associated with Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have taken

06/08

up this modernist ruse. The high-speed modernity beloved by poets no longer suffices, and half a century later, the old cars seem pretty slow. The speed at which cars travel today surely is exciting, but it is safe to guess that they are slower than the automobiles of the future. It is a bad idea to stop halfway. Instead, we must go *faster* than we currently do. The singularity represents an acceleration of technological progress to the point when machine thinking will overtake human intelligence. The *Accelerationist Manifesto* published in 2013 has no truck with a timorous critique of neoliberalism and repudiates the critique of technological progress put forward by the old left. The text calls on progressive forces to accelerate: emancipation does not mean to lessen the intensity of progress, but to overtake progress itself with the help of thought and to imagine a “future that is more modern.” Giving new sense to modernity requires outperforming a version that has become all too familiar. This is no time to acquiesce into conservative fatigue; instead, we must invent more and lay the foundations for genuine emancipation. If we pursue progress as we did before, we will stand still and regress in the near future. In other words, we will become reactionaries. We must step up the pace; it is



“When is the last time you did something for the first time?” the rapper Drake wondered.”

very much necessary to *get ahead of ourselves*. Accelerating “the process of technological evolution” is the price to pay for progress.

The pleasure of acceleration obviously follows a logic of addiction. This affirmation of progress can be likened to the heightened contentment induced by morphine. “Every organism which has received morphine for some time feels the need to receive it at increasing doses: it is a somatic necessity,” the physician Georges Pichon wrote in *Le morphinisme* (1889). “There is no man, we believe, regardless of how well tempered he is, and no matter how literate or energetic he may be, who stands as an exception to this rule.” The effects of morphine and opium, which Thomas de Quincey extolled as “angelic poison” as early as 1822, are paradoxical: the increase (in pleasure) diminishes if it endures, and it only endures if it is increased. De Quincey, in particular in Baudelaire’s French translation, was among the first to intuit this paradox: what remains equal decreases, so that a regular increase eventually feels like stagnation. With every progress, the intense person realizes that their thirst for intensification can only be slaked by doubling the effect. They have a confused inkling that the stronger their feeling grows, the more difficult it will be to heighten it in the future. Then a third and last ruse comes into view.

Third Ruse: “Primaverism”

As a sense of progress becomes harder to sustain, the intense person conjures an experience that will remain memorable and does not need to be heightened in order to endure. “It is because it is the first time, Madam, and the best,” a verse by the French author Paul-Jean Toulet reads. In “Morning of Drunkenness,” Rimbaud exclaims, “Hurrah for the wonderful work and the marvelous body, for the first time!” Unlike De Quincey’s “angelic poison,” the effect of which diminishes as doses are increased, the first time is, according to Rimbaud, a poison that “will remain in all our veins even when, the fanfare turning, we shall be given back to the old disharmony.” With age, the sheer promise inherent in experiencing something for the first time gives way to repetition, habit, and the erosion of sensations. In the struggle against gentrification, the intense person pictures treasured innocence as maximum intensity and the source of experience. This image offers respite from an addiction to progress that becomes increasingly painful to maintain. Nostalgia is the balm that alleviates the pain of breakneck progress. However, nostalgia is an ancient disposition, whereas the intense person of modernity, who wants to obviate the difficulties of having to abide by an accelerating

progress, has invented perhaps a more subtle but any rate deeply paradoxical ruse: a state of mind yearning for innocence. The intense experience leads to the recognition that there is nothing more intense than the first time.

“When is the last time you did something for the first time?” the rapper Drake wondered. The intense person covets variation, progress, acceleration, but also holds out for all these first times – gestures and encounters – convinced that ever more intense experiences inexorably pull them away from the point where these experiences made their initial impact on their sensibility and the intensity coefficient was highest. Roberta Flack conveyed this feeling in her song “The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face,” with the lyrics enumerating various other instances: “The first time ever I kissed your mouth,” “The first time ever I lay with you.” The singer, to be sure, hopes this love will last forever but she also makes apparent that the first time will leave the deepest mark and an emotional trace that undergirds everything that follows. The first time I drank, the first time I smoked, the first time I loved, the first time I kissed, the first time I had a child. The second time certainly allows for enhancements, refinement, adjustment, a deepening of the first-time experience. Yet only during the first time does the feeling disclose itself *in its entirety*. Everything that occurs to us for a second time diminishes in intensity in precisely this sense: the first time only happens once. The second time is no longer a unique experience.

In reference to the word *primavera*, which in Italian means “spring,” and *verismo*, a late nineteenth-century Italian literary movement combing through reality in search of truth, I shall call “primaverism” the tendency of the intense person who, dissatisfied with variation and progress, attaches supreme value to first experiences, and by extension to childhood, puberty, and early history. The primaverist is one who believes that nothing is more powerful than a beginning, and that everything that progresses, grows, and develops can only decrease in intensity. Pop culture’s fetish for adolescence as the true seat of human emotions is a prime example of primaverism. Since the sensations of the young organism roused by the possibilities of existence are considered the most vigorous, the springtime of life receives a huge premium. This also helps explain the penchant for cultural revivals, which bank on a return to the songs and images of one’s youth. The same principle holds for the primitivist tendencies in modern art, including tribal art, art brut, but also those artists who, like André Breton, toppled the idol of progress, replacing it with a “primitive vision” untainted by haggard rationalism and modern

07/08

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Tristan Garcia
The Intense Life: An Ethical Ideal

consciousness. They are distant echoes of Rousseau's conception of the alienation of natural sentiment. The libertine tradition playfully eroticized primaverism. In the epistolary novel *Les liaisons dangereuses*, the Marquise de Merteuil is delighted and amused by the original innocence of the younger Cécile de Volanges because such vernal emotions are forbidden to her, given the advancement of her mind's faculties. In Alfred de Musset's play *Lorenzaccio*, the eponymous protagonist relishes seeing "in a child of fifteen the courtesan of the future," for contained in youthful innocence is the coming corruption of sensibility.

It is easy to see how this ruse works: intensity remains the idea but, instead of situating it in the future as a goal, it is displaced into the past as an origin or source.

In the end, the three ruses concocted to make possible a life of constant intensity – through variation, acceleration, or by ascribing maximum intensity to a (much-lamented) first time – threaten to neutralize one another. To rely on ever more frantic variations is to give up on the continued pursuit of an idea or a feeling. To accelerate an idea or to enhance a feeling is to draw away from a first-time experience often held to be vital. To consider that nothing is able to surpass the shock felt when doing something for the first time is to disavow the possibility of a force that will be all the stronger for being the result of a combination and variation of other experiences.

It appears then that the ideal of intensity is undermined by its own contradictions and the conflicting ways of realizing it. One style of intensity seems to vitiate another. The more cunning individuals employ in defending life's intensities against the dangers of identification and neutralization, the more they surrender them to these very same dangers. Wanting to shield intensities, modern individuals expose them. Wanting to multiply intensities, they atomize them. Wanting to add one intensity to another, they end up subtracting from both. The more they enhance intensities, the more they weaken them. The more variation they introduce, the more uniformity they engender.

x

Translated from the French by Danilo Scholz.

1

This loose grouping of poets met in Paris from 1871, included Verlaine and Rimbaud, and shocked bourgeois sensibilities with their obscene literary productions.

08/08

e-flux journal #87 — december 2017 Tristan Garcia
The Intense Life: An Ethical Ideal