

Hot Dogs in Digital Capitalism – Safe Conduct (2016) by Ed Atkins¹

by Charlotte Reuß

Situated inside a factory floor, one sees a homogenous, viscous and beige-colored mass pouring through a pipe into a metal container. The mass is enriched with various ingredients and is constantly stirred. Several factory workers in blue work clothes follow different steps in a production process which transforms the mass into edible hot dogs. The described footage is included in both the three-channel CGI-installation *Safe Conduct* (2016) by Ed Atkins and the artwork's trailer.² Originally, the footage appeared in the Canadian TV show *How It's Made*³, dealing with the production of hot dogs. In *Safe Conduct*, these excerpts are embedded into an otherwise solely computer-generated three-channel animation. Used as a connective window out of the CGI, the excerpts replace the visual output of two screens within the animation: First, the X-ray screen of a luggage scanner, that shows the hot dog mass. Second, the individual seat screens on an airplane, displaying the manufacturing process of the hot dogs. With regard to the interpretation of *Safe Conduct*, this observation already suggests the following: all that is X-rayed has the same matter – the hot dog mass – inside itself, plus the processing of this mass is shown in a context usually reserved for entertainment purposes.

I argue this footage is key in one of several potential analysis of *Safe Conduct*, which is anchored in the field of digital capitalism and the impact digital capitalism has on a subject living in or engaging with the digital presence. To illustrate this, I will review *Safe Conduct* through the lens of Shoshana Zuboff's *Surveillance Capitalism*. My analysis addresses the process of digitalization as I see it exemplified in *Safe Conduct* and the artwork's representation of the Western and/or privileged subject.⁴ Before setting up the background, I want to introduce the artwork via a broader description of its formal characteristics, its functions and its content.

The CGI-Installation *Safe Conduct* (09:05 min, looped) consists of three single animations.⁵ They are composed of numerous and sometimes overlapping scenes that show different areas of an airport: a space in which the baggage claim and the baggage screening are situated as well as the exterior and interior shots of a passenger aircraft. A reference to an airport is also created by the installation of the three screens. Hanging from the ceiling and forming a triangle when viewed from above, these screens mimic what is found in a departure hall. This reference links the exhibition space and the viewers to the artwork. The only person in this CGI-constructed airport is a white male avatar.⁶ The avatar is dressed in worn-out clothes and appears bodily violated. In the abandoned surroundings, the avatar performs various "activities": He sits behind the luggage scanner, looking at different items

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This text is the result of my research on several of Ed Atkins' CGI-installations and is based on my master's thesis on the same topic.

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Gavinbrown, Ed Atkins. *Safe Conduct Trailer*, in: Vimeo, 2016 (31.05.2020), URL: <https://vimeo.com/158534555>.

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Discovery UK, *Hot Dogs. How It's Made*, in: YouTube, 28.09.2018 (31.05.2020), URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4x09Z2v7tCc>.

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In my reading, both Atkins and Zuboff refer to a somehow privileged subject who acts foremost as a solvent user in the digital.

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Ed Atkins. *Safe Conduct*, 2016. Installation view, Kunsthau Bregenz, 2019.

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Atkins' animations are almost exclusively animated by white men, „[b]ecause I [Atkins] am a man and I am white and middle-class and Western. The category that need not be named. I am privilege.“ Timo Feldhaus, Ed Atkins: 'I am not an authority on who I am'. *Video Artist Ed Atkins Talks Post-Internet Identity*, n.p., in: SEENSE, 04.01.2019 (31.05.2020), URL: <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/art/i-am-not-an-authority-on-who-i-am>.

Privilege and discrimination are not the salient aspects of *Safe Conduct* but are always present through the white male avatar and find their way into the digital on a structural level. On CGI platforms, which are equipped with their own search masks and keywords, stereotypes and prejudices are often reproduced and reinforced, as the artist himself states. See Louise Steiwer, *Bowing before the authorities*. Interview with Ed Atkins, n.p., in: *Kopenhagen Magasin*, 19.04.2016 (24.04.2020), URL: <http://kopenhagen.dk/magasin/magazine-single/article/bowing-before-the-authorities-interview-with-ed-atkins/>.

passing the machine. There, he gives an incoherent monologue and states, amongst other things: “To be honest, this is making me a little uncomfortable.” The avatar lies down on a circling baggage carousel. He takes a seat on the airplane to watch the hot dog production line. While sitting in the cabin, he puts on a gas mask. In the security area, he performs different body postures that resemble a combination of dance exercises and iconic security check postures. In another more disturbing scene, the avatar pulls off his face, under which a new one reappears over and over again.⁷ In the same manner, he removes his hands, his ears, his eyes and his nose, leaving a neat, bloodless cut behind. Likewise, mutilated body parts appear in the luggage scanning site. In addition to teeth, hands, organs, or eyeballs, objects like a MacBook, weapons and food are X-rayed there, and yet no ordinary luggage bags in sight. Maurice Ravel’s classical ballet piece *Boléro* fads over the remaining audio tracks of the three animations. The piece of music increases in volume and tempo, occasionally drowning out the sound of the animations after about half of a loop; thus it determines the editing sequence. In addition, the avatar reacts to the music equally and starts to sing along making eye contact with the viewer.

All of the afore mentioned scenes are repeated several times, mixed within the animations and are appearing either exclusively on one or on at least two of all the channels. This three-channeled installation can, therefore, be pictured as a reversed and discontinuous panorama on which the channels’ output is visually overlapping, repetitive and supplementing. In short, *Safe Conduct* offers a dystopian airport scene in which a lone avatar is “travelling” without a clearly designated destination — a contemporary limbo. He is involved in a strange procedure, disassembling his body and being subject — or object — to an unmanned and unregulated security check.

But how does the production of hot dogs fit into this carefully constructed oeuvre? And for that matter, how does its inclusion impact the reading of the artwork? Understanding the functionality and in it the proposed meaning of the included footage, one has to revisit its localization.

As the X-rayed image, the hot dog mass is declared the basic substance of everything – literally of the food, the body parts and the technical devices – that passes through the luggage scanner. The avatar also represents this homogenization process. His talking head as well as his lifeless mini versions are moving through the X-ray process. In fact, there is one “mass” underlying all of the visual output of *Safe Conduct*: the unseen computer code building up the animations. Taking this detail into account, one can translate the hot dog mass as a metaphorical, visual manifestation of the computer code. Consequently, the X-raying is both the digitalization of objects and the emphasizing of this process by making it visible and accessible through the X-ray screen. Since the avatar has a representational function, he can be understood as the viewers’ limited surrogate⁸ in the CGI space. In a sense, the viewer becomes digitalized on a metaphorical level and, consequently, objectified, being related both to the avatar and the included hot dog mass inside of him. The avatar is a white

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Ed Atkins. *Safe Conduct*, 2016. 3 channel video with sound. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet Gallery, London, Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York, Rome and dépendance, Brussels.

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In his definition as a digital surrogate, I understand the use of this avatar as an emphasizing of his representative function, which conducts me to connect the avatar and the viewer in a more direct way. However, the representative function of the avatar is limited, since the immediate physical aspects are not translated into digital space. In contrast, the avatar is also a product acquired on an online platform such as TurboSquid, also working with tech companies like Google Atkins himself sees his “figures as surrogates rather than digital avatars”, highlighting their externally determined existence. See Toke Lykkeberg, *Hollywood Structuralism in a Collapsed Age*, n.p., in: *Kunstkritikk*, 23.03.2016 (31.05.2020), URL: <https://kunstkruttikk.com/hollywood-structuralism-in-a-collapsed-age/>. Thus, my interpretation of the avatar given in this article differs from that of the artist.

male, he stands in as “the protagonist of capitalism”⁹, a phrase Atkins himself has claimed in relation to his earlier works. With this in mind, I want to continue with the highest common denominator, i.e. the avatar as a fragmented representative of the viewer.

At this point in my analysis of *Safe Conduct*, the description of the avatar’s behavior and appearance as well as his environment needs to be further explained. There are roughly two kinds of emotional states in which the viewer encounters the avatar:¹⁰ on the one hand, he seems to face his situation from a neutral to an interested state of mind and finally to be enjoying himself, indicated by his grinning into the virtual camera.¹¹ On the other hand, he appears introverted and disturbed when he watches the hot dog fabrication in the aircraft. While following the footage, his face turns from a rather neutral expression to an astonished one. This change in behavior, arguably, reflects the unusual circumstances in which the avatar finds himself. Being in the restricted areas of an airport, the avatar is subject to a control apparatus that insists on analysing and transferring his body to enable his travel. The control mechanism is present in the automatic operating sequence of the airport as well as in the hot dog fabrication. Thus, compared to a regular airport, the mechanism is amplified. By including the hot dog sequence into the security check, suggests that industrial production processes are linked to procedures associated with security checks. The avatar’s uneasiness seems to be a direct reaction to this system as well as the realization of his own position in it. Coming back to his function as a surrogate, his emotional state can be brought into connection with us, the viewers. So why does one might feel uncomfortable but at times quite pleasant?

What has been said so far leaves three main subject areas — digitalization, production and control — that still need to be described in relation to each other in order to gain access to a potential understanding of the artwork. To connect these three topics, I will briefly summarize Zuboff’s characterization of surveillance capitalism. This will serve as an ideological lynchpin to justify the triangulation of seemingly loosely connected themes in *Safe Conduct*.

In her book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the Frontier of Power*, Zuboff analyses the development of capitalism through the increasing commercialization of digital technologies. She places special emphasis on the transformations of the Internet from the 1990s to the present, which she argues was marked by an increasing digital, capitalist need for surveillance. Zuboff defines surveillance capitalism as a new economic order in which human experience is used as raw material. In this way, the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new infrastructure of behavioral modification, which provides a framework for a surveillance economy dominating society and challenging the market democracy.

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Allese Thomson, Interviews. Ed Atkins discusses Ribbons, in: Artforum, 18.08.2014 (31.05.2020), URL: <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/ed-atkins-discusses-ribbons-47876>, n.p.

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Ed Atkins. *Safe Conduct*, 2016. 3 channel video with sound. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet Gallery, London, Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York, Rome and dépendance, Brussels.

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An actual filming camera doesn’t exist but a virtual camera being the point of reference for the rendering and calculation of the CGI.

A collective order based on complete security is to be generated. From this perspective, Zuboff concludes that substantial human rights are deprived from society and the sovereignty of the people is overthrown.¹²

According to Zuboff, the discovery and exploitation of surplus data is the basis of this still growing form of capitalism. In the past, user data was only deployed to improve a product, e. g. a search engine. Today data is evaluated and tactically used, for instance in the advertising sector to generate profit. However, behavioral patterns based on the user data are read and translated into predictions that are economically relevant for companies. As a result of this newly acquired user data the roles of the consumers and the companies are shifting:

We are no longer the subjects of value realization. Nor are we, as some have insisted, the ‘product’ of Google’s sales. Instead, we are the objects from which raw materials are extracted and expropriated for Google’s prediction factories. Predictions about our behavior are Google’s products, and they are sold to its actual customers but not to us. We are the means to others’ end.¹³

Not only is the shifting of roles occurring, but also the user as a subject is objectified and becomes the raw material of production, that in turn will be consumed by another. The raw material is formed by human experiences and is extracted from them as data.¹⁴ Thus, under the extraction imperative that companies have established and follow, it is stated that “raw-material supplies [surplus data] must be procured at an ever-expanding scale.”¹⁵ This assertion suggests that there is no limit scale and no area where the promotion of data does not apply.¹⁶ The extraction architecture used for this purpose is the digital network formed by computers, the Internet and the Internet of things. One consequence of the mass acquisition of user data and their possession is the division of learning, which is based on the increasing asymmetry with regard to the power and to the knowledge economy.¹⁷ According to Zuboff, this inequality is caused by “the problem of the two texts”¹⁸: data consists of a visible text, whose author and reader is the user, and a second text, the shadow text, aka the surplus data, which is “hidden from our view”.¹⁹ The second text concerns the user but is not accessible to them. Hence, we the users become “the objects of its [Surveillance Capitalism] narratives, from whose lessons we are excluded.”²⁰ This disproportion is also expressed in the comparatively small number of companies and specialists who have access to this data and their capacity to use it.²¹ Via the prediction imperative (the requirement of the profitable conversion of surplus data into economically relevant predictions)²² “the things that we have [are transformed] into things that have us in order that it might render the range and richness of our world, our homes, and our bodies as behaving objects for its calculations and fabrications on the path to profit[.]”²³ The circulation of data coming full circle, ultimately leading the user to modify their behavior according to this mechanism.

In Safe Conduct, the proposed structure of surveillance capitalism can be detected on several levels. Functioning both as a visual representation and as an explicit surrogate, the avatar’s body is transferred, figuratively speaking, into the digital. This translation offers two inter-

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See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the Frontier of Power*, London 2019, p. VII.

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Zuboff 2019, p. 94.

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See Zuboff 2019, p. 65. See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, in: Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Werke*. Band 23, Berlin 1962, p. 193.

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Zuboff 2019, p. 87.

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See Zuboff 2019, p. 128.

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See Zuboff 2019, p. 185f.

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Zuboff 2019, p. 186..

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Zuboff 2019, p. 186.

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Zuboff 2019, p. 187.

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Zuboff 2019, p. 190.

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See Zuboff 2019, p. 200f.

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Zuboff 2019, p. 254.

pretations: first, it symbolizes the inherent media reflexivity revealed in the computer code as the immanent mass of the avatar. Second, it represents the digitalization of the avatar's metaphorical body and, within his role as a surrogate, the metaphoric digitalization of the viewer's body.²⁴

In the animations, the translated bodies and objects enter a production process that functions much like the hot dog manufacture thereby proposing the avatar's body as a type of raw material. The reification of the avatar,²⁵ represented in the artwork, can be thought of in the context of Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism. As stated by her, the market-oriented siphoning off of digitized, personal data and the associated extraction of raw material causes the reification of the subject to which the data belongs. In the wake of the rise of surveillance capitalism, the objectification of the subject — observed repeatedly in the history of capitalism — is undergoing a shift. It is no longer only labor as such that objectifies the subject in digital capitalism, but the subject, through their accumulation of data, becomes the raw material. This digitized personal data becomes a commodity. Although the source of this data, the subject does not share in the profits. According to this reading, the hot dog mass, i.e., the raw material appears as a digitized copy of the avatar, which in turn ontologically refers back to the described state of the reified, digitized subject. The avatar turns into code, the raw material of the digital commodity, represented by the hot dog mass. He is being digitally processed and at the same time, as a traveler the object of control. He passes through security and is declared a raw material, used in a production that is not visible to him. This invisible production is based on his surplus data, which need not necessarily serve to generate security, but is nevertheless collected. Within this context, there are no longer subjects of economic value generation, but objects from which the raw material is extracted in the form of personal data.

Having this in mind, the avatar has to reveal more than expected and needed in order to travel. Not only his body is captured but it is also fragmented and analyzed as well as controlled. This bodily violation serves as a rendering of the surplus data. The extraction is an advanced security measure, but leads to the use of the data for other purposes; namely an economic production process concealed by the promise of the greatest possible safety.

The procedure culminates in the manufacturing of the hot dogs. The avatar watches their production on the screens in the airplane cabin. What he is actually witnessing is his own realization in a product, after successfully passing the security check. In the animations, this scene is accompanied by a smiling then abstracted looking avatar, who seems to realize the extraction of his body (data) and the analysis of him. The different accessibility of collected data, emphasized by Zuboff as the division of learning, is partly disclosed. The avatar is able to see at least the whole hot dog production process as well as his own processing. Connecting this moment with the postures the avatar does, his self-fragmentation, or his unease, he appears not merely as the victim of the extraction structure but also as a participant. In the scenes fragmenting himself while humming happily, he actively takes part in his

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The exhibition space becomes an extended image space in the installation of *Safe Conduct*, connecting the viewer's position with the airport scenario. As a result, the viewer is indirectly included into the avatar's reification.

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Obviously, the avatar as such already is an object. The readings of the avatar as a surrogate, a visual extension of the body, a digital image, or simply an object run parallel.

decomposition. Hence, the avatar's fear on the plane can be understood as a reaction to his own behavior and its consequences. The film displayed in front of him isn't for entertainment but shows him the bigger picture of what is behind the control, namely the data extraction. The sausage mass is pressed into the cellulose casings, put into the hot dog mould and is being regularly checked by a worker. New sausage mass pours into the large container. In the background, the filled hotdogs disappear in an opening where they are cooked. The avatar dislikes what he sees. He puts on a protective gas mask and fastens his seat belt. He realizes that the production of hotdogs is similar to the security checkpoint he has passed. Too much personal information and data has been extracted and excessive control has been exercised over one's body by an unknown force. Since there is no linear narrative but repetitions of the scenes, the avatar is forced to undergo the control over and over again. The contradiction of the avatar both partaking and being pressured into the security check is a direct reflection of the situation, a contemporary subject experiences, in regard to their personal data and its transmission via the internet.

In the cosmos of the airport, the objectifying processes through digitalization and control are already in place but are highlighted through the exaggeration within the animation. Using this spectacle, the airport is a symbolization of digital, capitalist processes and the subjects living in them. The superimpositions make the interpretation multi-layered and sometimes relatable to the real airport, the viewer and the user.

The pressures that security checks at airports cause are often masked by animated security films that "not only poorly camouflage anxiety, risk and paranoia behind their cartoonish cheerfulness, they also veil the fact that you are submitting to a code of behavior that is essentially violent",²⁶ Atkins states. In *Safe Conduct*, the concealment of the control mechanism is counteracted by its evident illustration.²⁷ The proposed behavioral modification reaches the level where the invisible control instance influences the avatar. He completely submits to the control mechanisms and anatomizes his own body in sync with the Boléro in order to be able to continue his journey.

Although the title *Safe Conduct* assures the avatar of crossing national borders without danger to life and limb, this promise turns out to be an euphemistic gesture. The previously hurt body of the avatar is decomposing in the loop and forced to submit to control. Usually safe conduct implies an exceptional situation, which is above all relevant under international law. *Safe Conduct* refers to an exceptional situation in two ways. On the one hand, it is shown literally in the title. On the other hand, the security check represents an exception, an effect which is further intensified in the animation. The avatar seems to move in a lawless space, in which he turns from subject to object. This objectification through a higher authority has likewise been mentioned by the artist: "We all know what it's like to be turned into an object upon conspicuous contact with the authorities [...]."²⁸

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Steiwer 2016, n.p.

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Ed Atkins. *Safe Conduct*, 2016. 3 channel video with sound. Courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet Gallery, London, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, Rome and dépendance, Brussels.

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Lykkeberg 2016, n.p.

On their computer's monitors, internet users are able to watch the trailer of Safe Conduct, uploaded by the New York based gallery Gavin Brown's enterprise. The trailer is a characteristic mean of advertising a cinema or television production. In it the film excerpts, which in reality are only granted little space within the artwork's actual setting, are marked and visible. As a user one sees the avatar pulling off his face and humming the Boléro, followed by the continuous film clip of the hot dog production. The avatar sitting in the plane, looking at the screen and the internet users in front of their screens mirror each other. While the trailer is being watched, surplus user data is extracted in the background.²⁹

Our willingness to share personal data finds its symbolic equivalent in the avatar's acceptance of his own fragmentation. While sitting at the luggage X-ray machine, he expresses his unease but makes no serious attempt to resist the procedure. In the end, by actualizing the decomposition of his body, he participates in its capture. The avatar's horror repeatedly tips over into a satisfied facial expression and him humming along to the music. The airplane seat is comfortable as is the seat in front of the computer screen. Hal Varian, chief economist of Google Inc. predicts that "[e]veryone will expect to be tracked and monitored, since the advantages, in terms of convenience, safety, and services, will be so great ... continuous monitoring will be the norm."³⁰

In the preceding analysis of Safe Conduct, I highlighted the junctures of the artwork with the concept of surveillance capitalism, specifically in the context of digitalization. Summarized, I read the avatar as a hyperbolic reflection on a digital subject whose objectification is caused by the economic exploitation of the digital. This process doesn't solely take place through digital devices and the digitalization per se, but also happens through the engagement of the users themselves. It becomes apparent that digitalization has a non-transparent impact on subjects beyond the digital realm.

However large parts of society participate more willingly in the digital continuation of capitalism, leading to changes in their economic function and their scope of action. Within Safe Conduct, behind the baggage X-ray machine, which certifies the uniformity of all bodies and objects, of all living and inanimate, there is a luminous sign quoting Margaret Meade³¹: "Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else."

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In 2015 researchers at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven found evidence that Facebook uses cookies to track users who have never visited the Facebook website themselves through plug-ins on other websites, to name one example.

See Güneş Acar/Brendan Van Alsenoy/Frank Piessens/Claudia Diaz/Bart Preneel, Facebook Tracking Through Social Plug-ins. Technical report prepared for the Belgian Privacy Commission, Leuven 2015, p. 12.

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Zuboff 2019, p. 257.

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The origin of the quotation is not certain and is most likely associated with Margaret Mead by mistake.

See Quote Investigator, Always Remember That You Are Absolutely Unique. Just Like Everyone Else, in: Quote Investigator, 2014 (31.05.2020), URL: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/11/10/you-unique/>.