



LIVING ENOUGH IN AN AGE OF MORE: COGNITIVE ACCELERATION AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURES IN LISA GENOVA'S *MORE OR LESS MADDY*

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Abstract

This article examines Lisa Genova's novel, *More or Less Maddy*, as an accelerative cognitive narrative, questioning the sustainability of modern life of speed, excess, and productivity based on performance. The analysis is contextualized in terms of the critical discourse of sustainability in the digital age, referring to the theory of social acceleration by Hartmut Rosa (2013), the concept of achievement society by Byungul Han(2015), and the ethical concepts related to the slow culture and care ethics theories. Although the story does not touch directly on the aspect of artificial intelligence, it throws light on the allegory of bipolar disorder, specifically manic acceleration that is defined by cognitive overload, hyper-productivity, and affective excess, which reflects the accelerated tempos of late-capitalist and digitally mediated cultures. The purpose of the study is to analyze the way neuro-narrative by Genova reveals the boundaries of human thought in the circumstances of unstoping acceleration and to evaluate its ethical consequences in regard to a sustainable future. Through textual analysis, it validates *More or Less Maddy* as a counter-acceleration narrative that challenges the mainstream cultural imaginaries of infinite optimization, as well as the ones related to new AI-based productivity discourses. Furthermore, the article suggests that the definition of sustainability should also extend beyond the scope of environment and technology to encompass mental wellbeing, emotional harmony, moral discipline, and psychological resilience. In essence, the author asserts that "Genova's fiction offers a philosophy of 'living enough' rather than always aiming for more" and makes contributions to the field of medical humanities and sustainability scholarship.

Key Words: Cognitive Acceleration, Sustainable future, Neuro-Narratives, Slow Culture, Mental Health and Productivity.

In the 21st century, acceleration is the name of the game. Digital communication, digital connectivity, algorithmic productivity tools and digital economies have accelerated the human condition like never before. People are expected to engage in constant multi-tasking, to be emotionally flexible, to be productive and to engage in continuous self-improvement. In this regard, the ethos of "more" prevails in our contemporary culture: more success, more efficiency, more visibility, more performance, more achievement. This acceleration has dramatically

changed not only the world of work and social relations but also our neural and psychological experiences.

Recent theorists have suggested modernity is accelerated. In *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Hartmut Rosa proposes that late modern society is driven by technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change and the acceleration of the pace of life. According to Rosa, individuals experience chronic temporal pressure because modern institutions require constant movement and adaptation. Likewise, Byung-Chul Han's "achievement society" is one in which people internalise the demands of productivity and overwork themselves in search of infinite achievement. Here, fatigue, burnout, anxiety, depression and cognitive fatigue are pathologies of everyday life.

Contemporary Literature increasingly reflects these accelerated realities through narratives of psychological instability, emotional fragmentation, and neurological crisis. Famously known for contributing neuro-literary work, Lisa Genova's *More or Less Maddy* is one such novel that chronicles Maddy Banks, a young woman suffering from bipolar disorder as she grapples with academic, social, creative, and emotional state of mind. The novel, though centred around mental illness, has larger cultural implications. Maddy's manic speed reflects the frenetic pace of digital capitalism and performance culture.

This paper contends that *More or Less Maddy* is a counter-acceleration narrative that critiques the problem of unsustainable productivity. Genova uses Maddy's experiences to highlight the psychological problems of acceleration, while suggesting an alternative ethics of cognitive and emotional sustainability, relational responsibility, self-acceptance and neurological balance. The article also argues that sustainability must be understood beyond the natural environment to also include cognitive and emotional sustainability.

The paper answers the research questions:

1. What are the representations of cognitive acceleration in the novel *More or Less Maddy* through the story of bipolar disorder?
2. How does the novel critique the culture of productivity and success?
3. How can the novel be used to advance sustainability discourse in relation to slow culture, care ethics and psychological sustainability?
4. What is the novel's ethical model of sustainability?

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach that draws on literary, medical humanities, sustainability, and psychological theory. The paper uses close reading and theoretical analysis to show that Genova's neuro-narrative challenges hegemonic imaginaries of optimization, and proposes "living enough".

Lisa Genova's novels have attracted a considerable amount of academic attention in the fields of medical humanities, neuroscience and literature, disability studies and illness narrative studies. Scholars have primarily analysed Genova's novels for their complex depictions of neurodegenerative diseases, family caregiving and identity construction, such as *Still Alice* (2014), *Inside the O'Briens* (2015) and *Every Note Played* (2018). Scholars frequently praise Genova's ability to humanize neurological conditions by integrating scientific understanding with emotional storytelling.

Readings of *Still Alice* tend to explore Alzheimer's disease from the perspectives of Narrative Medicine and identity theory. Some argue that Genova challenges standard illness

narratives by emphasising subjective experiences of cognitive impairment rather than symptom presentation. Likewise, *Inside the O'Briens* has been analysed through family systems theory and genetic ethics, while *Every Note Played* has attracted discourse about ALS narratives, care relations, and vulnerability. Yet, academic discussions of *More or Less Maddy* are scarce, as it is a new book. Current analysis mostly engages with bipolar disorder portrayal, stigma alleviation, and mental health awareness. There is a lack of research that engages the novel in relation to themes of acceleration, sustainability, and productivity in the digital age. This paper thus fills an important gap in research by looking at the novel in terms of cognitive acceleration and sustainable futures.

Social acceleration, as proposed by Hartmut Rosa, is a growing idea in cultural studies. Rosa suggests that our societies are structured by acceleration, creating an experience of time that is always lacking, despite technological facilitators of time-saving. Acceleration is an auto-reinforcing process because economies require growth, innovation and ongoing development. Byung-Chul Han's achievement society builds on this analysis. In neoliberal societies, individuals become subjects of self-optimization who compete against themselves. Achievement societies are not disciplinary societies where control is externalised, but create exhaustion through internalised positivity and self-improvement.

These theoretical frameworks are particularly relevant for analyzing bipolar disorder narratives. Mania with its increased activity, racing ideas, impulsivity and reduced sleep requirements can metaphorically represent accelerated capitalism. Depression, conversely, exposes the collapse produced by unsustainable acceleration. The article draws on slow culture and ethics of care. Slow culture movements promote slowing down, presence, mindfulness, and challenge hyper-productivity. The ethics of care (Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings) stress relational connection, empathy, and care as opposed to neoliberal individualization. Drawing on these theories, the current study offers an interdisciplinary analysis of *More or Less Maddy* as a neuro-narrative and critique of accelerated modernity.

Hartmut Rosa distinguishes three types of acceleration in contemporary society: technological, social, and the acceleration of life-world. The acceleration of technology leads to greater efficiency and communication speeds, but paradoxically to higher demands for productivity. Social acceleration undermines the stability of long-term social forms, relationships and identities due to changing cultural norms. Acceleration of life leads to felt deficits and exhaustion. Rosa suggests that people increasingly feel caught up in a system that requires constant motion. Even stability becomes dynamic, so people have to continuously change to stay in place. This leads to alienation since people lose connection with themselves, each other, and the world.

This societal acceleration occurs in *More or Less Maddy's* manic state. Maddy's accelerated thinking, impulsive creativity, lack of sleep and obsessive goals reflect societal compulsions to be busy. In her manic state in Las Vegas, she envisions herself as a Grammy award-winning artist, working without sleep and engaging in endless productivity, only to end up emotionally exhausted. The text draws connections between mental instability and fast living, particularly overstimulation, hyperactivity, insomnia, and mental agility. Dr. Weaver explicitly notes that a lack of sleep, stress, travelling and instability can lead to mania, citing the perils of accelerated life. Byung-Chul Han sees neoliberal society as an achievement culture

where people become their own entrepreneurs. Rather than being forced, subjects work excessively and optimise themselves. The imperative "You must" transforms into the imperative "You can" and results in self-exploitation. Depression and burnout are not caused by deprivation but by super-positivity and super-productivity. Self-blame for failure occurs because success ideology conditions all limitations as personal shortcomings.

Maddy experiences these pressures in the novel. She compares herself to ideals of achievement, productivity, and normalcy. Her academic failure, joblessness, and mental illness compound her feelings of failure. Her need to "figure out" her life is symptomatic of the self-improving ethos of achievement culture. This pressure is intensified during her manic periods, as she thinks she can become a comedy star, songwriter, and celebrity at the same time. Han's theory of self-exploitation is evident in Maddy's comedic aspirations and desire for fame. Her family, too, equates ambition with illness and productivity. Her mother repeatedly equates comedy with instability, and fears that Maddy's dreams are a symptom of mania, not talent. The novel therefore critiques achievement culture by highlighting the emotional and neurological effects of self-supremacy.

Slow culture promotes resistance to acceleration through mindful, emotional and ethical slowing. Slow culture builds upon some of the ideas of the Slow Food movement and critiques capitalist time that privileges efficiency over human wellbeing. The notion of ethical slowing is crucial to this work because Genova's novel privileges balance, care and self-acceptance over productivity. Dr. Weaver stresses the importance of sleep, routine, emotional regulation and stress management for stability. Indeed, slowing down is a survival technique. Maddy increasingly learns to slow down and pace herself. Maddy's rituals, therapy, journal, pills and tracking her emotions exemplify ethical slowing down. The narrative finally favours balance over excess and extremity, and slow culture rejects forced productivity.

Ethics of care scholars like Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings see humans as developing through relational dependence rather than independence. Ethics of care prioritise vulnerabilities, empathy, feeling and responsibility. In *More or Less Maddy*, relationships are essential for emotional survival. Maddy does not heal herself through individual efforts, but through relational communities with her mother, Emily, Sofia, and Dr. Weaver. The novel shows us time and again that psychological survival relies on attentiveness, compassion and relationships. Even after bouts of family disputes, Maddy's family is highly invested in her healing. Dr. Weaver emphasises that treatment is a team effort that needs "strategy and support". Likewise, Emily encourages Maddy that healing is a matter of patience, balance and support, not perfectionism. Thus, care in the novel stands against neoliberalism and the ethic of success.

The most interesting feature of *More or Less Maddy* is its portrayal of bipolar disorder as a neurological disorder, and a cultural metaphor. Genova's mania is not simply a symptom of pathology, but also a metaphor for modern forms of capitalism. Maddy experiences accelerated thinking, hyperactivity, impulsivity, emotional volatility and unrelenting creativity. In manic episodes she feels super-productive and sociable. In Las Vegas, she believes she can write a Grammy-winning album despite being musically illiterate. She also feels pressured to speak and experiences grandiosity and ambition, all of which are symptomatic of hyperactive neoliberalism. The story continually links mania with hyperstimulation. Maddy's mind runs faster than her ability to feel. Her speedy mind mirrors the tempo of digital culture, where

staying connected and productive requires constant engagement. Maddy's emotional "speed limit" thus becomes a metaphor for mental illness. The novel thus turns bipolar disorder into a neuro-cultural metaphor. Mania represents the pressure to be constantly active in achievement-oriented society, whereas depressive crises reveal the psychic consequences of excessive speed. Genova convincingly describes depression as emotional and cognitive stagnation.

Genova refuses to romanticise mental disorder. Maddy notes the alluring productivity and creativity of hypomania, but also its deadliness. The mania and depression is a metaphor for the instability of late capitalist society, in which hyper-productivity leads to burnout. The world of neoliberalism is preoccupied with the ideology of "more". People should be as productive, visible, emotionally stable and self-improving as possible. Progress is linked to constant growth. In *More or Less Maddy*, Maddy finds this difficult. Success in education, self-control, career and social competence become markers of self-value. Inability to meet these expectations leads to shame and self-disgust. Here, Byung-Chul Han's idea of self-exploitation is pertinent. Maddy internalises social messages and holds herself to unrealistically normal and productive standards. Even when she is recovering, she is caught between success and threat. Her aspirations for success are constantly scrutinised. The novel critiques this culture by showing how hyper-productivity disrupts mental health. Far from satisfying, over-achievement divides identity and disrupts emotions. Maddy's manic states show ambitious striving can be psychologically corrosive when uncoupled from emotional wellbeing. Genova also explores the performative nature of identity. Technology, emotional repression, and public image-building heighten expectations of apparent success and stability. Maddy's bipolar disorder undermines these role performances, exposing the possibilities of normative social life. The novel thus raises questions about whether contemporary societies require kinds of productivity that are neurologically and emotionally unsustainable.

According to narrative identity theory, people construct narratives to sustain their identity. Trauma can destabilise these stories, forcing identity reconstruction. Maddy's illness initially disrupts her identity. She feels forced to accept bipolar disorder as an identity that threatens her old identity. Yet, the novel progressively illustrates the fluid nature of identity. Telling stories is essential to Maddy's recovery. Using comedy, humour, therapy, journals and dialogue with others, she starts to reframe her experiences, rather than constraining her understanding of herself to diagnostic labels. Her comedy routines become places for vulnerability to become power. Humour is a key theme in this novel. Laughter is both coping mechanism, cathartic and subversive. Through the process of converting pain into art, Maddy asserts narrative dominance. This is an example of narrative healing, as medical humanities scholars call it. Through the creation of narrative, people make meaning and reintegrate their fractured selves. Genova foregoes cure narratives. Maddy doesn't achieve stable cure or permanent transformation. Rather, it celebrates flexibility, consciousness and sustaining life in limitation.

The novel's most significant contribution is its focus on care ethics. In contemporary neoliberalism, the world is seen as an individual, competitive marketplace. The novel highlights the value of interdependence. Maddy's family, friends and psychotherapist help her to survive. Care is not authoritarian, but emotional and ethical support. Her mother, despite her anxieties and concerns, helps Maddy through the difficulties. Sofia's friendship too is emotionally

regenerative. Carol Gilligan's ethics of care is relevant here. For Gilligan, ethical life springs from paying attention to relationships and vulnerability. Maddy's struggles show that psychological sustainability relies on relationships. The novel also explores stigma in mental illness. Stigma, secrecy and lack of understanding compound psychological distress, while compassion and acceptance promote recovery. Lisa Genova discusses these challenges in the author's note, noting the challenges of "stigma, shame, judgment, fear, alienation, desperation, and misinformation" for people with bipolar disorder. Care is thus an alternative to achievement ideology. Instead of seeking to produce the best, care asserts limits and imperfections as natural to human existence.

The most revolutionary aspect of the novel is its critique of ceaseless ambition. Our culture often equates success with more and more. But Genova offers an alternative ethic of "enoughness". Maddy eventually prioritises emotional stability, relationships and self-acceptance over success. This is an example of slow culture values. Her final balance is achieved not through perfection but moderation, mindfulness and sustainable living. Slow culture is neither passive nor apathetic. It urges people to counter speed addiction and reconnect with their embodied, emotional, and moral selves. The novel implies that slowing down is essential for mental well-being. Sleep, meditation, emotional regulation, therapy and relationships are all acts of defiance against overwork. Dr. Weaver recommends Maddy to work on her sleep routines which emphasises on the importance of implications for sustainability. Environmental sustainability cannot solve problems of acceleration if the mind and heart are overloaded. Genova thus extends the concept of sustainability to neuro-psycho-emotional contexts. Sustainable futures require life rhythms suitable for human emotions.

While *More or Less Maddy* is not specifically about artificial intelligence and algorithms, it definitely has a lot to say about cognitive sustainability. The digital accelerates through constant connectedness, information overload and efficiency. People feel more distracted, fatigued, self-regulatory, and competitive. Maddy's manic overstimulation is a symbolic representation of these. Her whirling thoughts, social networking, emotional extremes and ambitious compulsions parallel the cognitive fracturing of digitally sped-up times. Her reliance on social media and phone-based emotional monitoring also reflect the challenges of modern digital life. The novel thus adds to growing debates about cognitive sustainability. While sustainability typically relates to the environment, cognitive sustainability relates to the preservation of emotional attention, mental stability and psychological resilience. Genova's novel implicitly raises the question of whether human cognition can keep up with the pace of today's world. The story implies that emotional and neurological processes have limits that technological and capitalist processes often disregard. This issue is becoming increasingly salient in AI-oriented productivity cultures that celebrate multitasking, optimization and continuous connectivity.

Finally, *More or Less Maddy* offers an alternative notion of well-being. Rather than equating value with accomplishment and productivity, the novel values authenticity, resilience and connection. The ethical approach of "living enough" disrupts capitalist imaginaries of endless growth. Enoughness does not mean failure or lack; it acknowledges our finitude and vulnerability as central to human existence. This ethos resonates with critiques of acceleration and neoliberalism. Sustainability implies accepting emotional limits, avoiding the pull of

optimization, and embracing care. Thus, the novel speaks to interdisciplinary sustainability, medical humanities, and neuro-literary studies. Crucially, Genova illustrates that mental health depends on cultural and economic factors. Mental illness arises not just from individual disease but also from unsustainable lifestyles. By emphasising emotional resilience, self-reflection and social responsibility, the novel offers more balanced futures through increased humane care.

More or Less Maddy by Lisa Genova is a contemporary neuro-narrative that offers an important critique of the accelerated society of late modernity. The novel's depiction of bipolar disorder highlights the neurological and psychological effects of hyper-productivity, cognitive accelerated and achievement society. Based on Hartmut Rosa's acceleration theory, Byung-Chul Han's notion of achievement society, slow culture, and ethics of care, we have suggested in this article that the novel conceptualises sustainability as psychological and relational sustainability rather than environmental sustainability. Maddy's retreat shows that sustainability depends on breaking the impetus to accelerate and balancing emotional stability with relational and self-care. Genova thus critiques the mainstream cultural fantasies of infinite optimisation and offers a philosophy of "enough living". In an increasingly digital and AI-driven world of ever-increasing productivity, *More or Less Maddy* provides an ethically decisive reminder that human flourishing is not based upon endless productivity but on sustaining emotional life.

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