**ANYTHING CAN CHANGE**

**SAM VAKNIN X SHOT MAGAZINE**

As the source of most of our problems is not the pollution or environmental degradation but rather the human being, Alex Amok, the founder of Shot Magazine, and creative director Erin Rizzato Devlin further discuss and explore the theme with the contribution of narcissist, professor and author Sam Vaknin.

**Alex Amok**: Hello, I'm the owner of Shot magazine we are here because in our next issue we're working to understand more about humans to understand the problem of our current situation. With us is Erin, the director of our magazine.

**Erin RD**: As Alex has said we'll be focusing on the themes of the human mind and introspection as a tool for change. We would like to start by asking you to introduce yourself to an audience who may not know you personally. How would you define yourself?

**Sam Vaknin**: I was born when the last dinosaurs were going extinct, so i had a lot of time to complete several doctorates in medicine, physics, philosophy et cetera. I also spent two decades as a venture capitalist, a businessman, an economic advisor to governments before I switched to psychology 26 years ago, and ever since I'm a professor of psychology in several universities and the author of books in every known discipline. The human mind is one of my favourite topics as it is by far the most complex system, far more complex than the universe itself. It's an endless, bottomless pit you could spend several lifetimes studying and know nothing about it by the end.

**ERD**: After all the experiences you've had in the past, what has led you in the

direction of psychology and why did you choose to focus on this field?

**SV**: I was diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder twice; this had destroyed my life several times and so at one point I said to myself: it's time to get to the bottom of the issue and try to understand what is malfunctioning. As I mentioned before, I was an economist and a physicist so the transition to psychology was in itself very traumatic because psychology is not a science: it's a form of glorified literature, a taxonomy very similar to the botany of Carl Linnaeus, so it's simply a series of classified observations about the human condition. When i entered this this field, I started to write fiction and poetry, discovering that I was disintegrating as a scientist and reappearing more and more as a human being. i was impressed by the transformative power of psychology and i decided to delve deeper. Now I'm still scuba diving in it.

**ERD**: You speak of this personal transition from ‘’scientist’’ to ‘’human’’: this internal journey that people have to undergo within themselves to spark some change is essential. What led you to change?

**SV**: I'm still hyper rational, self-interested and self-centered, it's just that the previous regime was not working. This is known today as ‘’Narcissistic Personality Disorder’’, an attempt to survive and extract favourable outcomes from the environment: narcissism is a little like a recipe on how to cook your life, so that the result is an excellent Italian dish. This however brought me down many, many times: i lost tens of millions of dollars, i lost my wife, i lost my life, i ended up in prison, so i thought there were strong indications that this was a problematic recipe. I began asking myself, what is the malfunction or glitch in the human code that allows such things to happen and develop? This is in complete defiance of evolutionary theory, where adaptations either lead to survival or extinction and are driven by mutations, so you can never have a lifelong malfunction or disease. Yet here we have an exception: human beings.

**ERD**: I like what you were saying about the human mind. There is a Norwegian philosopher called Peter Zafppe, who describes the human mind as antlers that weigh on us. Do you think that the human mind is something that ultimately condemns us or saves us?

**SV**: i think the human mind is a complex system that has emergent properties,

which are geared toward experimentation. Consequently, many of us are not going to procreate to pass on the outcomes of these bad experiments. There is a need for such experimentation on a massive scale because complex systems cannot be captured fully: there is no way to predict them. As Kurt Gödel said: if a complex system is complete, it's not perfect; if it's perfect, it's not complete: this is the human mind. The human mind had reached a level of complexity that far surpasses anything known in the universe, and the universe itself. Even if we were to mobilize every quark and every atom in the whole universe it would still not provide us with sufficient computing power to predict what you're going to do in the next minute, so the only way is heuristics, experimentation. Nature gave up on us: it's not an accident that we have wars, self-inflicted pandemics, mass killing.

**ERD**: If we export this argument to our modern society, is technology a positive or a negative thing in your opinion?

**SV**: Technology is a big word, of course. We are undergoing so many unprecedented unparalleled transitions that it's no wonder that we are falling apart individually and collectively, because there's too much happening. Take for example technology: for the first 50 000 years, the aim of technology was to extend the human body and the human mind, nothing else. Then in the 1990s somewhat of a tectonic shift had happened: technologies were focused not on extending the human mind or the human body, but on escaping from reality. The organizing principle of technology today is to evade reality, to reframe it, to falsify it, to flee it. Of course a smartphone or a laptop extends your mind, but it extends your mind mainly to allow you to escape reality. No need to tell you that the forthcoming metaverse is absolutely about an alternative reality.

**ERD**: What are we escaping?

**SV**: It is not the first time that we are transitioning from reality to less-than-reality.

The first time was about 10 000 years ago, when we transitioned from agriculture to cities. The process of organization in the city is a virtual artificial space, it's less real than the land or the farm or the village; it's constructed according to fantasy and imagination on a planet which is entirely inside the human mind. In other words, the city is an extension of an image in the human mind. It’s not the same with a farm, where the land is the constraining factor, you are much closer to reality. The city was the first time that we started to escape reality: people did not produce their own food, they only engaged in administration and entertainment, the two main functions of the city. In a way the metaverse is a similar transition from more reality to less reality. i don't think we are escaping from, i think we are running towards. We are creatures of limitless potential, even the most stupid among us. The human being is a fabric of dreams. You can take away food, drink, air and even freedom from a human being, and they will survive. You can torture them and they will survive. But you take away their dreams, and they will die by their own hand or just naturally. We are made of dreams, we are stardust.

**AA**: In a way, the internet is a new religion. The metaverse is the new paradise.

**SV**: Yes, in a way we are in a process of going inwards: the internet, social media and so on are about realizing the fantasies of the mind, playing with the imagination and with what the mind has to offer. By comparison to our imagination, our fantasies and the capabilities of our mind, reality looks very dull and limited. i think that's the overriding sentiment of this age. People are mostly bored: now they call it entertainment, but it's not that. If you think about it, what are you doing when you're watching a netflix movie? You're consuming another person's mind. We are creating exchanges of minds, big marketplaces where we are trading the products of the mind and this is why it's irresistible. That's why people get seriously addicted, because the mind is infinite.

**ERD**: So would you say that all these mechanisms that we've found to explore the mind, are excuses for making connections with other people and their minds?

**SV**: Until the 1990s we were under the illusion that if we want to explore our mind and the minds of other people, we would have to somehow socialize, pay the price of being with another person in order to enjoy the fruits of that person's mind. No one liked it, no one wanted to be with other people, as other people are annoying, boring, demanding. It's not pleasant to be with other people, that's the dirty secret of psychology, the taboo that no one dares to break. Then we discovered that technology was enabling self-sufficiency, as we can exchange the products of the mind without suffering the consequences of having to be with other people. That's exactly the reason why people don't want to return to the office after the pandemic, they want to stay at home alone because they don't want to be with their colleagues anymore as it was a highly unpleasant experience. Aristotle was seriously wrong about this when he coined the phrase ‘zoon politikon’: we are not social animals, we were coerced into social structure and cooperation by the exigencies of the very difficult environments we found ourselves in, but no one ever liked this. So we have constructed technologies which allow us to do exactly this: to remain at home, cocooned, atomized, self-sufficient, never leaving this cell and still having access to the theme park attractions of all the other minds. Is it an accident that when we have finally gained access to the minds of all humanity through the internet, suddenly we started to isolate ourselves physically? The two trends are coincident but it's not a coincidence.

**ERD**: In an age of individualism, of being atomized, separated from others, what are the costs of not living with other people as much? Does this not come at the cost of empathy?

**SV**: First of all, no one says that you should have empathy. No one says you should have anything at all: human traits and behaviours are functional, goal-oriented and

adapted to highly specific environments. For example, if you are cast alone on an

island, you don't really need empathy, it’s a learned thing. In the world of the future, we're going to need a lot less of these qualities. Empathy, intimacy, the ability to communicate, compromise and negotiate: all of these will be much less needed. They were good for the first 50 000 years of homo sapiens but these are now not necessary for survival or adaptation. We are entering ‘’homo sapiens 2.0’’ and ‘’homo sapiens 2.0’’ is a very fancy way of saying ‘’narcissist’’. The men and women of the future are going to be narcissists and a small minority of them are going to be psychopaths. This is the positive adaptation of the future that will allow these people to survive, prevail, accomplish and rule. i know this is a very dystopian view, but it's dystopian only because you have a memory of the past. To the members of these generations it would look totally normal. The paradigm of mental health in the future will be narcissism and psychopathy: there is no such thing as mentally healthy and mentally ill, there's only adapted and not adapted, functional and dysfunctional, happy (ego syntonic) and not happy (ego dystonic). So what today is narcissism, tomorrow will be the new normal. Today's empathic people will be treated in clinics, because empathy would be a negative adaptation.

**ERD**: In such a world that you envision, where is the space for intimacy and should we find spaces for intimacy in the first place?

**SV**: Why do you need intimacy? The problem is that you're borrowing organizing principles, structures and concepts from a period in history that is dying and that will have no place within 10 years. For instance, 31% of adults in the West are lifelong singles: they don't have intimacy nor a single relationship all their lives. Already half the human species in industrialized developed countries have opted for a lack of intimacy as a ruling principle of their lives. They organize themselves around a lack of intimacy and they seem to survive. What replaces intimacy is now consumerism, self-indulgence, entitlement, making love to yourself. Intimacy was a way to bond with other people because if you did not bond with other people you were dead, but it’s no longer needed. Everything you need you have at home, it is delivered to you. Why do you need anyone else? And if you don't need anyone else, why would you

invest your energy in intimacy? That would be against evolution: if you don't need other people, investing energy in intimacy is contrary to survival. It's easier for me i think, because i'm a narcissist: i have never had empathy or access to emotions so i roam this world much better, more self-efficaciously. i have been in this future world long before anyone else so i grasp it and i see clearly where it's going. The statistics are absolutely unequivocal now. Intimacy is not a part of anyone's identity, it's a learned behavioural skill, therefore it can be unlearned.

**ERD**: i think this view stands quite in contradiction with human experience, because there is no such thing as an existence in complete isolation. In order to fulfil very basic needs, we need to interact with people. i think it's quite impossible to avoid intimacy. The moment we're born, we're in a in a space of intimacy, even if we don’t want to.

**SV**: Let me give you two statistics: 60 years ago a typical child was raised by 4.3 adults including grandmothers, grandfathers and parents. Today a typical child is

raised by 0.7 adults: 43% of children are raised in single parent families. In 1980 a typical person had 10 friends. The average list in 2020 went down from 10 to 0.9. The signs are clear and indisputable, you can't argue with data. I've been to Canada where I spent two weeks, i ate well, i laundered my clothes, i watched movies, i had a very busy time yet I didn’t come across a single human being. Actually, I saw one person in these two weeks and that was the neighbour: he came out with his dog and when he saw me, he apologized profusely and ran back into his apartment and slammed the door. He thought he was invading my space. This is where it's going: young professionals live like that all over the world, alone in 30 square meter apartments with netflix and two cats. Cats and dogs: that's the face of the future.

**ERD**: What is happiness then?

**SV**: i think happiness has been largely replaced with gratification, so when people are gratified they say that they're happy. Most people are gratified by consuming goods and services and by consuming the bodies and mind of other people who they objectify. Consumption is the new source of happiness. The reason why it was so easy to replace happiness with gratification is because happiness had never been defined adequately. Gratification is clear-cut: you buy a new television, you're gratified. The great thing about gratification is that to be happy you need other people, to be gratified you need only yourself. It's another example of self-sufficiency.

**ERD**: On the same line of thought, is there not something within this mentality of consuming that makes us realize there's a difference between ‘having’ something and ‘being’ something?

**SV**: Not anymore. Of course there used to be such a distinction but even then, you couldn't be unless you had. Having was a precondition for being. Not only having property, but having academic qualifications, having a belief in god, et cetera. You needed to have in order to be, so the transition was easy. Today we identify being with having so to be is to be seen. We all need to be seen as we realize that we exist through the gaze of others. We have learned to identify being with having and today if you don't have you are not and i give the example of the homeless: the homeless doesn't have, so he's not seen. Now you need to be seen because if you're not seen you're dead. If the organizing principle of society is consumption then if you do not consume then you are not. Your very identity crucially depends on a perpetual act of consumption, it is a ritual, it's an affirmation of belonging, it's an integration into a collective spirit, it's being accepted. It fulfills all the functions of mothering and all the functions of religion and of course this consumerism is a religion, as Amok said. All this ties into narcissism because as i said, gratification and consumption can be practiced without other people, in isolation so you could be your own god. Superiority is not needing other people because you have more than they do.

**AA**: I am a little bit more optimistic. i travel a lot and i have seen a lot of changes. i don't think the final destination is psychopathy for all, what you say is specifically referring to this present post-covid moment, where war, fear, manipulation, media are prolific. Intimacy is a benefit, in my opinion. We have to start with intimacy with oneself, for example, not necessarily with others. If i find intimacy with myself, maybe i can learn to look at others from a different point of view and perhaps reverse this process. Maybe the greater travel is not inside the universe, but inside our mind, our soul, our childhood.

**SV**: Unfortunately the data don't support what you're saying. There is clear picture in the past 40 years, long before the pandemic. Intimacy is a benefit, of course. In some environments everything can be a benefit: in Nazi Germany for example, it was a benefit to be a psychopath, so everything is context dependent. In July 2016. the famous magazine ‘New Scientist’ had a cover story telling parents to teach their children to be narcissists, because the world rewards narcissism. If you look around and you see that narcissists make more money and are more gratified, travel more, study more, occupy all the positions of power, then the positive adaptation would be narcissism. It's a social process. When the environment changes, we luckily change too. i don't know what empathy is, but i would prefer to have intimacy in my relationships, to have long relationships. But i have an obligation as a social scientist to the truth and to the facts regardless of my preferences. Only a bad scientist mixes his opinion and his preferences with the science. Maybe the whole conversation is mistaken if you're talking to me, Sam Vaknin, as a human being, then of course i may give you totally different answers, but if you're talking to me as a social scientist then the picture is so overwhelmingly clear that there is no way for me to say otherwise unless i'm seriously misleading.

**AA**: I see that new generations are growing differently, they use social media in a different way, they even look totally different. What are your thoughts on this?

**SV**: The problem is that the studies of younger generations are not supportive of your optimism. i see that you're very distressed and it's understandable. i'm older than you, I live in a world which feels like an alien planet and i'm a narcissist. Imagine, the world today looks dystopian even to an old narcissist! i think the main problem with younger generations is that they look at the older generations and they see that relationships are a bad idea, they look at the rate of divorce, at the rates of cheating and extramarital affairs, at the betrayal and the pain and the hurting. These generations have witnessed the utter failure of all the strategies of earlier generations and their reaction is to avoid them. They're saying, we are going to avoid relationships; relationships are really bad and guaranteed to fail so we're going to shun them. We're going to work from home, we're going to fit into the gig economy. Members of these generations refuse most of the job offers they receive, they prefer to work in McDonald's, flipping hamburgers. They're looking for gigs, they have far less sex than my generation, and far fewer sexual partners. There's an epic pandemic of sexlessness among these young generations which is an exceedingly bad sign because, exactly as Freud said, sex is a prime barometer, an indicator the force of life, the eros in the libido. These people don't have sex anymore, they engage in activities like video games, which are escapist, not goal oriented activities, just numbing. So what i'm trying to say is that yes, you're right: the younger generation has witnessed all the failures of the previous generations and they are not likely to repeat these failures, but that's because they gave up on life.

**AA**: What's the solution for this, in your opinion?

**SV**: In economic societies, there is no way to treat the individual efficaciously, so we need to look at societal solutions and here the message is a lot more optimistic compared to what I said in the very beginning: nothing in human nature is cast in stone, so if you reshape the environment, everything can change dramatically. The things that need to be done require a lot of political will and courage, a lot of social mobilization. Then we will see an increase in mental health, a restoration of intimacy, the functioning of relationships, a precipitous decline in anxiety, depression and suicide. While i'm very optimistic that if we re-engineer society minimally we will have disproportional good outcomes, i'm very pessimistic that these changes will actually be implemented. The recipe is known, yet the will is not there because there are too many business interests involved. The nexus between politics and money has become totally corrupt and pernicious. i think two things need to be done: first, we need to accept that some forms of speech are toxic and some ideologies are dangerous and we need to act against them either by banning them outright or at the very least by countering them. These ideologies are detrimental to people’s mental health. We need to suppress some kinds of pernicious speech, some ideologies (as we do today with fascism, Nazism, white supremacy, and racism). Example: third wave feminism, advertising (Althusser’s interpellation). The second step is to limit the usage of technology and to ban certain technologies. Technologies are already banned all the time, for example you're not allowed to clone a human being although that's utterly possible.

**AA**: Yes, i think the solution is to verify all actions by users on the internet, so that you would do the same things you do in normal life because you are responsible of your action.

**SV:** Absolutely, internet verification is essential. In fact, i have quite a few highly specific ideas in mind. For example, i would limit the use of social media to two hours a day, i would not allow you to be friends on social media with someone you don't know or haven't met in real life, i would force you to verify your identity either by submitting documentation or via blockchain technology, we should criminalize the use of pseudonyms, i would ban the use of likes, which create envy, competition, anxiety. We need to ban relative positioning practices, i would not allow twitter to limit speech to 140 characters, because there are studies that show that if i limit your speech you become much more aggressive. Overall, i mean regulating and limiting the features and force of the internet so it conforms much more closely to reality, to become an extension of reality, not an escape from reality. The minute people feel that the air is clear ideologically and they cannot use technology to escape reality, they will be forced into reality and into each other and the social fabric which had disintegrated completely will reintegrate. It's like a wound: humanity is wounded, we need to let it heal. i am a firm believer in the potential for healing and for going back to a functional situation between people. What i don't believe in is the will to make this happen.

Sometimes, civilizations reach a point where the only way out is a reset and starting from scratch. I fully believe that we are at such an inflection or tipping point. What more needs to happen? We need to transition from cities back to nature - both mentally and physically; We need to force people back into families and communities by monetarily penalizing certain asocial and antisocial behaviors; We need to redesign and reform the workplace by seamlessly integrating it with the community and the home. But it should be obligatory to work with other people face to face. Workplace intrusions into private time should be criminalized; We need to ban certain types of immersive technologies (the way we ban cloning, for example); We need to certify people to use certain kinds of technology the same way we run background checks on people who use guns today; We need to educate children regarding sex and its physiological, medical, and mental implications. Example: We know that compulsive casual sex and sexting have deleterious outcomes later in life. We need to share this info widely. Sex positivity is a seriously bad idea. Similarly, we need to inculcate in children the importance and benefits of intimacy and long term relationships; We need to license parenting. Prospective parents would be required to complete a curriculum in child psychology, relationship management, age-appropriate technology use and so on; We need to enforce age-related restrictions on entertainment venues such as nightclubs, the use of alcohol in campuses, and other measures; Education is a public good. We need to DEprivatize it. We need to reorient education around the twin concepts of phronetics and eudaimonia - as well as life skilling (including how to manage relationships, for example); Finally: psychology should become an obligatory subject starting in middle school. Lifelong self-auditing and journaling should be taught and encouraged as ways to obtain insight and secure introspection.

**AA**: i think metaverse is going to die quickly, and i hope this starts a new era called ‘’the inverse’’. We shall see.

**SV**: We have to wait, many things can change. Anything can change. But i can tell you one thing: if there is any hope, it's not in the west. Some parts of the world are still far more human and far more connected than the west, these are the centers where transformation can begin and spread. Sorry i couldn't give you light and hope, but i'm committed to the truth.