

The Human Glitch: How Childhood Trauma Shatters Personality and Multiplies the Self

Abstract

A glitch is not a malfunction in any simple sense. It is what happens when a system is pushed beyond the conditions for which it was designed. When the input exceeds the architecture's capacity to process it, and the output becomes something unrecognisable, fractured, and strange. This essay argues that Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) is, in the most precise and non-reductive sense, the human version of this phenomenon: a psyche subjected to traumatic overload that does not crash but splinters, producing not one self but many, each complete, each distinct, each with their own voice, age, and embodied way of inhabiting the world. Drawing on structural dissociation theory, neuroscience, developmental psychology, and glitch theory, this essay examines how catastrophic early childhood trauma disrupts the normal synthesis of identity, giving rise to a multiplicity of selves that share a single body like simultaneous programmes running on hardware that was only ever designed to run one.

I. The Glitch as Metaphor, the Glitch as Fact

In information theory, a glitch occurs when a signal travelling from transmitter to receiver is corrupted by noise, so when the data the system was designed to carry cleanly becomes distorted, fragmented, or doubled. The output is not a clean version of the original signal, nor is it pure silence. It is something in between: familiar and alien at once, structured and broken, a message that arrived at its destination in pieces rather than whole.

What makes the glitch philosophically interesting and what has made it a productive concept in media theory, digital art, and cultural criticism, is that it does not merely represent failure. According to Michael Betancourt's work on glitch theory, glitches illuminate the unseen assumptions and hidden architecture of the systems they disrupt. A glitch on a screen does not simply show us corruption; it shows us how the image was constructed in the first place and what assumptions were built into the code, what the system was never designed to handle. The error, in this sense, is a revelation. It exposes the machinery underneath.

This essay borrows this framework not as decoration but as a structural analogy. A person living with Dissociative Identity Disorder is, in a very real sense, a human glitch: a self fractured by an input, a lot of times that being childhood trauma, that exceeded the architecture of the developing psyche. Like a digital file corrupted mid-transfer, the signal of

identity did not arrive whole. It arrived in fragments. And those fragments did not dissolve; they became autonomous. They persisted. They became people.

II. The Normal Programme: How Identity Is Supposed to Form

To understand what goes „wrong“, it is necessary first to understand what is supposed to go right. The human self does not arrive pre-formed. It is assembled across childhood through a process of neurological maturation, relational attunement, and narrative integration, this is a slow and exquisitely sensitive process of building, out of sensation, memory, emotion, and relationship, something coherent enough to be called a person.

Pierre Janet, writing in the late nineteenth century, described this process as "psychological synthesis": the active, ongoing work by which consciousness integrates disparate streams of experience, which can be sensory, emotional, temporal, relational, into a unified whole. This synthesis is not automatic. It requires specific conditions: safety, consistent attachment, a caregiving environment that co-regulates the child's affect and helps them metabolise experience rather than be overwhelmed by it.

The developing brain is exquisitely suited to this task, but only within a certain range of inputs. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for integrating memory and modulating emotion, is not fully mature until early adulthood. The hippocampus, which organises experience into coherent autobiographical narrative, is still forming its architecture throughout early childhood. The amygdala, which processes threat, is fully online from birth. This means the system for detecting and responding to danger is running long before the systems for understanding, contextualising, and resolving it are available.

In the language of systems theory: the hardware and software for processing ordinary experience develop together, in sequence, under ordinary conditions. The system is designed for a specific range of inputs. It is not designed for what trauma delivers.

III. The Overload Event: When the Input Exceeds the System

Trauma is, in its most precise technical sense, an experience that exceeds the organism's capacity to integrate it. Not merely an experience that is painful or frightening, but one that overwhelms the system's processing architecture, that arrives as signal too large, too fast, and too incoherent for the available mechanisms to handle. The child's developing nervous system encounters something it was never built to receive, and it does what any overloaded system does: it begins to fragment.

Research consistently demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of individuals diagnosed with DID, across multiple independent studies, over ninety percent, report severe, repeated childhood abuse beginning in the earliest years of life, including physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment. But the nature of this trauma is not only one of isolated incidents. It is typically sustained, relational, and paradoxical in the cruelest possible way: the source of

the danger is most often also the source of attachment. The caregiver who is supposed to be the child's safe harbour is also the one generating the storm.

This is the specific overload condition that produces structural dissociation. When the threat is external and the caregiver is safe, the child can run toward comfort, co-regulate, and process. When the caregiver is the threat, this circuit is broken. The child cannot approach and cannot flee. The system cannot resolve the contradiction. And so it does something extraordinary: it separates the inputs. It creates different processing environments for different categories of experience, routes the unbearable into sequestered partitions, and continues running, not as a single unified programme, but as several.

IV. The Fractured Output: Structural Dissociation and the Architecture of the Self

Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele, building on Janet's foundational work, formalised this process in their theory of structural dissociation. Rather than understanding DID as a dramatic multiplication of distinct personalities, their framework describes it as a failure of integration: a situation in which the normal synthesis of identity into a unified self is disrupted at a structural level, leaving the psyche divided into functionally autonomous parts that operate in parallel rather than in concert.

In their model, two broad categories of personality state emerge from this division. The Apparently Normal Part (ANP) is the part oriented toward daily functioning, but maintaining surface social relationships, navigating the present, managing the ordinary demands of existence, but it is characterised by amnesia for traumatic material. The Emotional Part (EP) remains fixed on the traumatic past, carrying the unmetabolised sensory, emotional, and somatic content of what occurred, locked in a perpetual present-tense of what happened. In severe cases of DID, this binary division gives way to something far more complex: multiple EPs, each holding a different fragment of experience, each corresponding to a different category of threat, a different period of the child's history, a different survival function. Multiple ANPs may develop to manage different domains of daily life. The result is a system of identity states that share a body without sharing a continuous stream of consciousness.

This is the human glitch: not one person, but many. Not one signal, but the original signal received in fragments, each fragment developing independently, each becoming something complete in itself: an alter. A person.

V. Simultaneous Programmes: Voices, Ages, Bodies

What makes DID most viscerally strange and most revealing about the nature of selfhood is not its internal logic but its embodied phenomenology. A glitch on a screen is visible: you can see where the image breaks, where the pixels render in the wrong place, where two frames of video overlap and produce something impossible. The equivalent in a person with DID is equally visible to those who know what to observe, and equally disorienting.

Different identity states manifest not only psychologically but somatically. Clinicians have documented measurable differences in vocal register, handwriting style, postural stance, gait, and physiological reactivity across alters in the same individual. One state speaks in a child's voice, using a child's vocabulary, sitting with a child's posture. Another walks with the contained tension of someone always braced for impact. Another is flat, businesslike, older-seeming than the body's actual age. These are not performances. Research on physiological reactivity in DID has demonstrated that different identity states show genuinely different patterns of cortical activation and different somatic responses to identical stimuli consistent not with deliberate enactment but with distinct psychobiological states occupying the same body at different times.

Critically, many alters are age-fixed: frozen at the developmental moment of their creation. An alter formed during a trauma at age five is, in a meaningful functional sense, five years old. They may lack knowledge a child of five would lack, experience time as a five-year-old experiences it, and respond to the world with the emotional and cognitive repertoire available at that stage of development. This is because alters are understood to crystallise at specific points of crisis, formed in the moment, unable to mature naturally without specific therapeutic intervention. Research into alter phenomenology describes alters as potentially varying across a wide spectrum: younger than the body, older than the body, the same age, genderless, embodying different sexualities, presenting as non-human, or existing in an "ageless" state so disembodied from ordinary developmental categories that the concept of age does not apply.

The same body, therefore, may contain what amounts to a seven-year-old, a teenager, a calm adult manager, a furious protector, and a fragment so dissociated it has no name and no age, but they are all real, all present at different times, all expressing themselves through the same face, the same hands, the same throat. The body is the hardware. The alters are simultaneous programmes, entirely different people. The glitch is the moment when one stops and another starts, and neither programme has any record of what the other was doing.

VI. The Corrupted Archive: Memory, Amnesia, and the Broken Continuity of Self

In information theory, Menkman's analysis of glitch aesthetics draws on Shannon and Weaver's communication model: a signal travels from transmitter to receiver through a channel, and noise corrupts the transmission. What arrives is not what was sent. The receiver cannot reconstruct the original message from what it receives, because too much was lost or distorted in transit.

The memory architecture of DID operates on a structurally identical principle. Memories are encoded within specific psychobiological states, thus they are state-dependent and they are most reliably retrieved when the organism returns to the physiological condition in which encoding occurred. Each alter represents a distinct psychobiological state. Memories encoded within one state remain, to varying degrees, inaccessible to other states. The result is what clinical literature calls asymmetric inter-alter amnesia: one identity state may have vivid, complete memory of events that another has no knowledge of whatsoever.

The „host“, the identity state most frequently present in daily life, may experience enormous gaps: lost hours, lost days, inexplicable evidence of actions they have no memory of performing. The body has been somewhere; there are receipts, there are injuries, there are relationships. But the part of the system present now has no record of any of it. Like a corrupted file from which whole sections have been stripped, the self cannot read its own history. It contains the data, distributed across the system, but no single part of the system can access all of it, and the complete file, the whole person, can never be assembled by any single alter alone. It is worth mentioning here, that some people with a DID, do not realise the amnesia until the point of their diagnosis.

This is not pathological failure in the moral sense. It is the precise, functional consequence of the system's original solution to an impossible input. The amnesia that makes daily life so disorienting is the same amnesia that made daily life possible in the first place: it allowed the child to go to school, to eat breakfast, to maintain the surface of ordinary existence, while another part of the system bore the unbearable in a partition the first part could not access.

VII. The Glitch Is Not the Damage

This is the point at which the glitch analogy must be handled with precision. In computing, glitches are typically understood as failures of the system, they are read as errors, bugs, malfunctions to be diagnosed and corrected. But glitch artists and theorists like Betancourt and Menkman have long argued for a more nuanced reading: that the glitch is not simply failure but revelation, not simply error but information. The glitch shows you what the system was built to hide. It surfaces the architecture. It makes visible the machinery underneath the smooth, seamless, apparently natural interface.

Applied to DID, this reading is not merely rhetorical - it is clinically significant. The fragmentation is not the original injury. The trauma is the original injury. The fragmentation is the response to the injury: the mind's adaptive solution to conditions under which a unified self could not have survived. Each alter that exists is evidence not of failure but of ingenuity. The alters are proof of a developing psyche that found, in the complete absence of external protection, a way to continue existing. One part carries the terror. Another carries the function. Another carries the rage. Another carries the childhood that was still needed, still being lived, even as other parts endured the unendurable.

The child who dissociates is not a child whose mind broke. They are a child whose mind improvised, at a level of complexity that most systems, biological or technological, are simply not capable of. They routed the unprocessable. They created partitions. They kept the lights on.

VIII. Nature's Own Glitches: Dissociation Beyond the Clinic

It is worth noting that the kind of structural response DID represents is fragmentation under overload, compartmentalisation as adaptive strategy is not unique to human psychology. Biological systems throughout nature deploy versions of the same logic. The immune system, confronted with a pathogen it cannot neutralise, may wall it off, encapsulating the threat in a protective barrier that prevents its spread while leaving the organism otherwise functional. Trauma responses in non-human animals the freeze response, the tonic immobility seen in prey animals under extreme predation pressure represent similarly extreme compartmentalisation: the suspension of normal processing in service of immediate survival.

Even at the neurological level, the dissociation seen in DID has analogues in the brain's ordinary response to overwhelming stress. The dorsal vagal shutdown described in polyvagal theory — the deepest, most primitive response to life threat, in which the nervous system effectively disconnects from ordinary engagement is a biological glitch of sorts: the body's last-resort programme, overriding all normal operations to do the one thing that might preserve life. DID, in this reading, is not an aberration from nature but an expression of nature's most fundamental logic: when the primary system cannot handle the load, run a secondary process. When the secondary process cannot handle it, run a third. Partition. Isolate. Survive.

The human glitch is, in this sense, the human animal doing exactly what evolution equipped it to do and doing it so effectively, under conditions so extreme, that the solution becomes a complexity that outlasts the original emergency, and that the person must then learn, sometimes decades later, to live with.

IX. Conclusion: The Error That Tells the Truth

Glitch theory argues that glitches do not simply represent malfunction, but that they expose the normally invisible assumptions on which systems depend. The visual corruption of a glitched image shows us how the image was assembled. The dropped frames of a corrupted video show us that what we experience as smooth, continuous motion is in fact a series of discrete still images, run fast enough to create the illusion of flow.

DID, understood as the human glitch, does the same thing. It exposes what the unified self is built from: integration, synthesis, narrative, memory, the continuous thread of experience across time. It shows us that these are not given facts of consciousness but constructed achievements, that require specific conditions to occur, that can fail when those conditions are catastrophically violated, and that, when they fail, do not leave nothing. They leave fragments. They leave parts. They leave, sharing a single body, multiple complete selves who each carry a different piece of what happened and what survived.

To encounter a person living with DID is to encounter something that challenges every assumption we carry about the unity of personhood and, at the same time, to encounter evidence of something almost impossible: a child who was given nothing to survive on, and who found a way to survive anyway. Who shattered, and in shattering, multiplied. Who became, in the truest sense, more than one.

The glitch, in the end, is not where the system failed. The glitch is where the system showed us what it is capable of.

References draw on research and theoretical work from: Pierre Janet (1889, psychological synthesis); Van der Hart, Nijenhuis & Steele (structural dissociation theory, ANP/EP model); Michael Betancourt (Glitch Theory: Art and Semiotics); Rosa Menkman (The Glitch Moment(um), Shannon/Weaver noise theory applied to digital glitch); Ross et al. (2008, prevalence of childhood abuse in DID); Sar et al. (neurobiological trauma impact, amygdala and hippocampus); Lebois et al. (2022) and Schmidová et al. (2021, brain region differences in dissociative disorders); Lewis et al. (1997, physiological differences across alter states); Stephen Porges (polyvagal theory, dorsal vagal shutdown); DSM-5-TR diagnostic criteria for DID.