Infinite Distraction

Dominic Pettman

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Paying Attention to Social Media

Dominic Pettman

polity

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Theory Redux

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Srećko Horvat, The Radicality of Love

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Preface:
There Is Nothing Outside the Texting

This book began its life as a humble Facebook update. In terms of media ecology and technological evolution, this is a bit like starting with a bird and ending up with a dinosaur. Despite being a professor of culture and media—that is, a professional skeptic of technological promises and practices—I certainly surrender an inordinate amount of my time interacting online in social media spaces. For fellow critic Jonathan Crary, this is no doubt in part because I—like everyone else—am obliged to submit to "mandatory techniques of digital personalization and self-administration" (43). But I would be lying if I pretended that mediated socialization doesn't bring me many micro-pleasures, along with

generous infusions of exasperation, boredom, and spleen. Moreover, I would have trouble denying the fact that for every intellectual observation I post or link to, I upload several more frivolous or trivial info-morsels, designed more to distract than instruct or edify. If accused of wasting time or procrastinating, I can certainly use my job as an alibi. "Know your enemy." But the truth is that having a critical-theoretical perspective on something does not necessarily make you immune to it. An intellectual understanding of a problem does not prevent an affective investment in the same (as we all know, from our romantic histories as much as from our credit card receipts).

The following pages explore some of the more troubling effects of what we might call "the digitalization of distraction," along with its luminous shadow: attention. This book therefore touches upon some of the specific technological, cultural, social, and political constellations that solicit these two intimately connected phenomena. From anecdotes concerning common or garden-variety distractions to official reports of acute clinical cases of ADHD, there is a strong tendency to blame technology for a perceived pandemic of preoccupation. Indeed, "the media" has often

been painted as little more than a distraction machine, engineered for what the curmudgeonly critic Theodor Adorno rather patronizingly called "the cross-eyed transfixion with amusement." For teachers like myself, distraction is our nemesis, just as attention is our lifeblood. Given the disheartening state of the world today, however—from terrorism to disease to corruption to exploitation to injustice to inequality to ecological catastrophe—we are likely to feel a pang of conscience at *obliging* young people to pay attention. The more we notice about the way the world works, the more we are likely to feel a crippling combination of fury, resentment, depression, shame, and helplessness. This is certainly one reason why social media is so addictive: the new opium of the masses. It dulls the pain. It screens out the screams of those suffering just outside our personal experience (or indeed the screams in our own head, on a particularly bad day). Certainly, a lot of our problems are not necessarily curable by better economic or social policies. Much of the trauma comes with being human, and thus being burdened with the awareness of mortality and other miserable fates that await us. "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance," wrote

Pascal, "we have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things." Social media helps us *not* to think about such things. So there is already an irony in trying to think through and about social media.

Something else to note from the outset: social media is not a thing, or a place, or a new medium. It is a constellation, a concept. It is a virtual, evolving assemblage of elements, including—and especially—older forms of media, now diagrammed in novel articulations. We should thus not make the mistake of reifying "it" into a stable object, even as it seeks to reify us in many ways, as well as our interactions. Just as Guy Debord's notion of the Spectacle did not simply denote the sum total of images circling in the postwar mediascape, but also expressed the ways in which we now think in and relate via images embedded deep in our heads, "social media" names the simultaneously limitless and circumscribed ways we interact via newly enmeshed communications and entertainment technologies. *Limitless* because no two people will navigate the same branching pathways social media affords in the same way (we all have a unique combination of interests and interactions), and *circumscribed* because these

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are all conducted within the vectors provided by those (increasingly few) entities that own the cables, the satellites, the channels, the sites, the providers, and the applications that funnel us all toward each other, so that we may congregate in the bright light of voluntary and compliant commerce. (Today we find a strong preference for economic commerce over the social kind—although marketers have recently realized that you can stimulate the former by simulating the latter.)

To be clear, there is no sense in simply demonizing social media, because there is no single *there* there. What I want to do, however, is focus on a troubling tendency within new modes of communication, which often goes under the name of social media. As a consequence, this is not a critique of social media, which would be akin to a critique of society *qua* technology. Rather, it is a critique of "social media" in the sense that very many companies would like to trademark that term. That is, in its narrow, shorthand sense, which points offstage to a whole industry of meshing mechanisms carefully calibrated to narrow our focus, clip our capacity for sustained attention, and shepherd as many of us as possible into the interactive sphere of reflexive consumption.

The sheer, asymptotic, never-delivered promise of the media flow demands a compulsive refresh of our screens. Real time is the new temporal standard. Enormous amounts of energy are expended for everything to be streaming live, so that we are not stranded in the past, in history, in the archive, where we might gather dust (or actually learn something). If you dare lift your eyes from the screen even for a moment, you might miss the tweet or the post or the update that promises to change your life. Links are assumed to have a lifespan of only a few days, if that. Everything is in flux. And yet each day feels the same as the one before.

These days, to adapt Heraclitus, you never step in the same live stream twice.

And yet the digital river is tediously familiar.

"You shall know them by their fruits," Jesus says in Matthew 7:16. From the point of view of the world we share in common, the fruits in question are altogether tasteless. I have seen young teenagers who just yesterday were ebullient, verbal, interactive, and full of personality turn into aphasic zombies within three months of getting a smart phone or an iPad. The new wine is dying on the vine, and Dionysos, the telluric god of ecstasy, is nowhere in sight. It is unlikely that the next big digital innovation will lure him back.

Robert Pogue Harrison, "The Children of Silicon Valley"

Let us avoid making a Gothic novel, as well as a romance, out of information technology.

Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*

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Introduction

I Know Why the Caged Bird Tweets

> We will have to suffer this new state of things, this forced extroversion of all interiority, this forced injection of all exteriority.
>
> Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication"

In the waning days of 2014, Instagram purged its accounts of billions of bots—automated, fake user accounts—so that a slew of celebrities woke up with several million fewer followers than they had when they went to sleep. It was a vicious purge, under the cover of darkness. No doubt tears were shed that same morning, and some agents started looking for a new high-profile client. Were we ourselves not flawed humans but

particularly sympathetic bots, this code-induced holocaust may have sounded like the destruction of the planet Alderaan to Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*: "I felt a great disturbance in the Force, as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror, and were suddenly silenced. I fear something terrible has happened." In my own case, however, I noticed no difference, since I have an Instagram account with zero followers. I use this account to post selfies for the exclusive pleasure of the network's blind, unblinking eye. Why? Because I am amused by the very existence of a social media account with no followers whatsoever, no actual *social* component. And yet, as the existence of bots makes clear, once uploaded to the network, no posting goes "unread" or "unseen," in some form or another, even if only under the obscure heading of "metadata."

Which leads to the question: to what degree are humans different from bots when it comes to the various metrics concerning online behavior? To what extent have our own routines become fully preempted *sub*routines, or apparently algorithmic? From a certain angle—say, the angle of Target's commercial recommendation engine—a woman can now be assumed to be pregnant on

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