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Distracted Present, Golden Past?

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Abstract

According to diverse recurrent cultural diagnoses, networked media is atrophying our affective, cognitive and somatic capacities through its distracting, rapid speeds. Echoing critiques of modernity and media technology voiced since the mid-nineteenth century, these accounts are broadly premised on loss in arguing that a general disenchantment is hollowing out our sociability and personal experiences alike. Building on Jane Bennett's critique of the modern narrative of disenchantment, this article explores ambiguity as a means of resisting totalising accounts of the present, as well as for accounting for the affective complexities involved in our engagements with devices, apps and platforms as these yield different rhythms and experiential horizons of possibility. In doing so, it asks what kinds of figures of the past narratives of loss evoke and what social hierarchies and contextual nuances are effaced when sketching out the mediated present.

Keywords

disenchantment, distraction, modernity, excitement, ambiguity, everyday life

Distracted present, golden past?

According to a plethora of diagnoses both academic and journalistic, networked devices, apps and social media services are atrophying our attention spans, eroding our capacity to think, addicting us, boring us and stopping us from engaging with

each other in meaningful ways. Stuck in the perpetual present and distracted by the constant anticipation of things to come – a WhatsApp message, a Tinder match, a killer TikTok video – we have arguably lost grip on time, memory and focus alike. The networked, media-saturated present is seen as steeped in loss and decline as its ever-accelerating speeds give rise to ‘data smog’ (Shenk, 1997) and ‘information overload’ (see Rosa, 2013) that render extended focus impossible to sustain (Andrejevic, 2013) and result in states of terminal and chronic distraction (Anderson, 2009; Hassan, 2012), ‘digital dementia’ (Carr, 2010; Spitzer, 2012) and ‘mass amnesia sustained by the culture of global capitalism’ (Crary, 2014: 34). Bernard Stiegler (2013: 96) sees social media in particular as destroying pre-digital social relations and paving way to disorientation and ill-being while Geert Lovink (2019: 35) argues that app culture results in us being ‘dead inside ... defeated, overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, nervous, stupid, silly, useless’.

While these diagnoses do not amount to a single, coherent discourse, they frame the present moment as one of cognitive and affective crisis brought forth by digital media, and describe how this *feels*. Working through, and questioning this figure of the networked present as one that is simultaneously too full and all too empty, this article explores the critical edge of ambiguity in theorisations of media technology and culture. Starting with Jane Bennett’s critique of the modern narrative of disenchantment and moving to the rhythms of everyday life and networked media, this article makes an argument for the importance of attending to the fundamental ambiguities in our engagements with devices, apps and platforms that yield different affective intensities and experiential horizons of possibility. If media theory is to examine the mediated present in its complexity, it needs to remain mindful of the heterogeneity of everyday life and quotidian routines that shape, delimit and affirm our potentialities to act.

Caught in the machine

Critiques of our current media-saturated, networked circumstances as giving rise to distracted and flattened forms of existence build on a much longer trajectory of thought where modernity and the technologies it has given rise to have been seen to disturb, transform and potentially destroy earlier ways of being in the world.

Nineteenth-century critics expressed distaste towards the electric telegraph, which Henry David Thoreau (1854) saw as both distracting and leading to the increasing trivialisation of communication. German physician and social critic Max Nordau (1892) similarly decried the negative impact of accelerating temporality on the human body and psyche, from the speed of the railroad car to the increase in the number of newspapers enabled by telegraphic information flows. The fast speeds of modern urban life, combined with urbanisation and mechanised forms of production and mediation, have been seen to feed distraction and boredom for well over a century: the more stimulus there is, the flatter things are seen to get, the more difficult it is to focus, and the more boring things get since nothing truly manages to stick (e.g. Simmel, [1903] 2002; Kracauer, 1995; 1998; Postman, 1985).

Contemporary critiques of networked media and its impact on human experience both owe and contribute to the influential trope of disenchanting modernity, as put forward by Max Weber. For Weber (1946: 139), disenchantment is fuelled by scientific advances and the increasing dominance of rational worldviews, leading to the general flattening of experience: ‘One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious power existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.’ Weber’s narrative of disenchantment is connected to the overruling principle of calculability that killed faith and magic characteristic of pre-modern life. Following this narrative path, Elizabeth Goodstein (2005: 420) argues that the rationalised world has abbreviated the present moment into oblivion, and that as ‘experience itself has atrophied’, we are caught in expansive boredom and dull nothingness where things do not excite, interest or matter.

There is drama and seduction to narratives of disenchantment resulting in both distracted hyper-stimulation and the lingering terror of boredom, from Georg Simmel to Weber and contemporary retellings. For Rasmus Johnsen (2011: 487), they communicate ‘a kind of subjective malaise, where the romantic longing for an authentic reunification of the meaningfulness of the world is no longer an option’. Disenchantment, then, comprises a story of loss premised on richer and fuller forms of existence that we no longer have access to.

Jane Bennett (2001: 3, 63–64) forcefully critiques the narrative of disenchantment for discouraging affective attachments to the contemporary world while positioning itself against a lost age of magic that, ‘under the haze of nostalgia’, becomes an object of desire. In contrast, Bennett (2001: 4) theorises modern enchantment as mundane somatic moments of being ‘struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday’. Challenging narratives of loss, she explores the captivating aspects of modernity’s rhythms, diversions and urban environments instead. Bennett’s (2001: 4–5) focus on everyday marvel, wonder, and ‘shocked surprise’ helps to outline different stories on the effects of media technology on our somatic, affective and cognitive capacities. The mundane enchantments she addresses need not be understood as matters of exquisite rapture. They can just as well come in minor scales of fascination and interest when something grabs attention and, in instances of affective resonance, moves bodies from one state to another. For Bennett (2001: 5), ‘To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be both caught up and carried away – enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic effects’. Captivation, then, involves inherent ambiguity in that one is simultaneously held hostage and moved by that which enchants.

Minor enchantments are the stuff of everyday life, the patterns of which take shape through routines and habits repeated (as well as varying) over time. In studies of everyday life, the perpetual presence, or haunting spectre of boredom and anxiety, have been seen to oscillate with micro experiences of affective release that increase one’s sense of aliveness and interest (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 146, 169–170). Just as routines yield ‘boredom, monotony, tedium, despair’, the ‘interludes, temporary breaks, skirmishes, glimpses of other realities’ afforded by daydreaming, social media, sex, drugs or art allow for momentary escapes (Cohen and Taylor, 1992: 45, 50–51). Such ‘momentary slips through the fabric’ may well be banal, yet they hold value in stressing ‘*relief, risk and movement*’ in lives that may otherwise feel stuck, or as going around in a predictable, dull circle (Cohen and Taylor, 1992: 171, 197, emphasis in the original).

Ben Highmore (2004: 307) further argues that while routines weigh people down, they are also enjoyable in adding rhythms and patterns to everyday life. In other words, there is ambiguity to routine as it brings both comfort and creates constraint,

both shapes the everyday and unmarks it ‘by dedifferentiating it, leaving us temporally adrift’ (Highmore, 2004: 308). Routines, repeated as they are over time, involve degrees of inattention, or attention directed elsewhere. Simultaneously distracted and concentrated, drawn out and compressed in their temporalities, routines are heterogeneous assemblages of affect, sensation and cognition (Highmore, 2004: 310, 321). Highmore suggests attending to the ‘non-events’ of everyday life without simply turning them into ‘events’, namely by respecting the complexity of their habitual ordinariness. Such micro registers of sensation are not generally foregrounded in affect inquiry as it veers toward instances of peak intensity and events of drama rather than the humdrum, the minor and the repetitive – or that which Greg Seigworth and Michael Gardiner (2004: 141) poetically identify as ‘the polyrhythmical fluctuations of the everyday’s contingent eventfulness and overdetermined uneventfulness’. Considered in their ambiguity, the distractions catered by networked media can be part of the routines of everyday life that bore and frustrate, just as they can offer tiny instances of affective intensity of the enlivening kind, possibly both at once.

For Silvan S. Tomkins, affect is that which propels people forward, motivates their actions, and makes things matter while being aroused in ways impossible to control or manage. Excitement, in particular, invests things with a sense of magic and shapes the self, even as it remains mercurial, oscillates in intensity and weakens with repetition and familiarity (Tomkins, 2008: 191, 193). Following this line of thought, routine dampens excitement yet excitement can be sought and found by browsing a Tinder, Grindr or Bumble profile; Jodel, Instagram, FetLife, Snapchat or Pornhub – even as such browsing is habitual and potentially dull in its repetitiveness. As the affective fuel of user actions, excitement can remain a promise unfulfilled, it can be experienced in milder hues of interest, or it can give rise to momentary incidents of captivated enchantment. To argue that affect fuels and drives the uses of social media is nothing novel (e.g. Dean, 2010; Paasonen et al., 2015). My argument here is for attending to the minor keys of affect, the ambiguities of everyday life, as well as the unpredictability and multiplicity of experience that are easily eclipsed by larger-scale analyses on the reordering and manipulation of thought, habit and feeling within affective (Karppi et al., 2016) and cognitive capitalism (Stiegler, 2013: 102).

The importance of ambiguity

According to the broad narrative of loss and disenchantment that frames this article, the media technologies we develop and use render us empty, amnesiac and distracted. Running in different variations through popular accounts and academic inquiry, this narrative identifies microevents catered by the media as causes for distracted boredom: 'Print, film, television and electronic media have accordingly shortened and accelerated [... people's] units of stimulation in an effort to plug the ever-reappearing holes from which boredom issues. Sound bites and rapid image projection ensure a fickle attentiveness' (Thiele, 1997: 495.) Within digital media, attention is seen as split and oriented towards the immediate yet slippery present, trapping people in perpetual nowness (e.g. Rushkoff, 2013: 14).

Both repetitive and generalising, this line of argumentation too easily equates cultural pessimism with critical insight. Like most broad yet firm diagnoses of culture, it holds appeal as 'strong theory' of wide generality 'capable of accounting for a wide spectrum of phenomena' (Tomkins, 2008: 519). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 134–135) notes, strong theories are strong for the virtue of both producing and necessitating unambiguous results. Firm in their premises, they also tend to be totalising in their outcomes (these perhaps being very similar to the premises). Despite differences in how the narrative of the present moment in crisis is told – some strands emphasising the role of capitalism, others focusing on the nefarious impact of media technology, and yet others combining these lines of inquiry – it results in accounts of contemporary disenchantment, boredom and flatness. As disjointed yet strong theory, it does away with contextual nuance and diversity of experience, thus failing to capture or acknowledge the complexities that quotidian life entails.

While sharing the general premise that media technologies are not mere instrumental tools for communication but shape our ways of sensing, being present in, and making sense of the world, I find it crucial to steer clear from generalised accounts of their impact on everyday practices and experiences. I find it equally important to resist cultural pessimism and dystopian romanticism lamenting things assumedly lost, and to refuse the fixity and firmness of analytical templates that strong theories offer. It is my argument that cultural inquiry needs to be able to hold seemingly

contradictory things together in dynamic tension, if it is to understand that which it studies with sufficient degrees of granularity. In other words, inquiry needs to zoom in on, and to account for, the fundamental ambiguities within the phenomena studied.

Ambiguity refers to uncertainty where mixed and contradictory ideas and meanings are simultaneously present. Ambiguity is the very stuff of everyday life, even if not easy to accommodate in academic inquiry preferring more unequivocal analyses on the meaning of things. Writing on contemporary dominant aesthetic categories, Sianne Ngai (2012: 19, 23) sees the interesting as feeding boredom, aggression and tenderness as intermingling in cuteness, and playfulness as fusing with desperation in zaniness. Ngai's conceptualisation helps to see mundane microevents as made of mixed feelings, and as requiring forms of analysis capable of accommodating their ambiguity. Ambiguity makes it possible to move away from strong narratives where the effects of media are seen to operate in uniform, predictable ways across populations. It also helps in framing affect less as a theatre of positive and negative, enlivening and flattening intensities, than as complex fabrics where these coexist, and the patterns and rhythms of which remain in flux.

Holding on to irreconcilable tensions without the aim of resolving them means seeing how things appearing to be diametrically opposed and mutually contradicting coexist, are co-dependent and possibly generate one another (also Bem, 2019: 3, 22). One way to approach this is through Jacques Derrida's discussion of the *pharmakon*, namely objects that can operate as both the poison and the cure, and which are fundamentally ambivalent in their potentialities, meanings and uses. The *pharmakon* undoes binary division such as good or bad, the inside and the outside, pointing to complexity, cohabitation and simultaneity instead (Derrida, 1981: 125). A *pharmakon*, for Derrida (1981: 70), involves 'this power of fascination, [that] can be – alternatively or simultaneously – beneficial or maleficent'. Examined as a *pharmakon*, networked media, specific devices, apps and sites both enliven and flatten, enchant and dull. In concerns voiced on digital dementia, mass amnesia and pervasive distraction, they equally operate as *pharmakos*, or scapegoat: symbols of corruption that are seen to threaten societal order and well-being (Derrida, 1981: 130; Stiegler, 2013, 20).

To re-examine the broad narrative where media technology (as a ‘bad pharmakon’) is seen to distract us to boredom and undo our cognitive and affective capacities through the lens of ambiguity means considering the dynamics of distraction as inseparable from those of attention as other than a matter of speed, intensity and temporality, just as it means framing the flatness of boredom as playing with excitement and enchantment. This play need not be understood in binary terms of ‘either/or’, or as a spectrum of sensation where things move smoothly from one end to another – from flatness to fullness, from anxiety to calmness, or from shattered attention spans to deep focus. It is better conceptualised as the copresence of mutually conflicting and intermeshing intensities that animate and give shape to the present. In encounters with networked media, boredom, as flatness of feeling, may yield excitement inasmuch as stupor, just as distractions can simultaneously bore, fascinate, irritate and enchant. A routine that delimits agency also affords comfort, and social media practices that frustrate and evoke anxiety also entail minor enchantments and excitements that (re)make the self.

Qualities and rhythms of encounter

Mediated microevents such as random memes, news items, casual game sessions or tweets all come with their specific speeds and intensities of interest, attention and excitement that resist confinement in a single narrative of how focus and meaning come about or become transformed. Over-arching diagnoses of neurological rewiring and the erosion of cognitive capacity are not sensitive to contextual nuance, or to how the rhythms of engagement, perception and focus alter both across media platforms and according to people’s degrees of engagement. Commenting on popular diagnoses of eroded attention, psychologist Emma Biggs argues that the notion of an “average attention span” is pretty meaningless. “It’s very much task-dependent. How much attention we apply to a task will vary depending on what the task demand is” (in Maybin, 2017). If attention is situational and connected to a person’s expectations, investments and attachments, then no average attention span can be measured, or corroded by excessive stimuli. Rather, it can be argued that within the fast and manifold rhythms of mediated lives, attention has become more demanding to gain and maintain as aims at grabbing it have grown ever more ambitious, multiple and fine-tuned (Paasonen, 2016).

Addressing the persistent focus paid on distraction in cultural theory, Kristin Veel (2011: 310) argues that ‘it is only with the advent of ubiquitous digital information technology that the concept of attention takes on its present form, in which the ability to focus on more than one thing at the same time becomes so habitual that it can be regarded as a prerequisite of concentration rather than its opposite.’ Consequently, ‘we often thrive with multiple inputs at a fast pace, whereas less input potentially results in distraction and boredom’ (Veel, 2011: 308). Contra to Simmel’s (2002: 12, 14) argument that the fast tempo and violent sensory disruptions of modern life contribute to a sense of indifference resulting in the inability to truly react and engage, Veel argues that attention and meaning become distributed selectively and differently toward multiple objects at once, and that the mass and diversity of currently available media content adds to, rather than flattens, richness of experience.

The qualities of encounter vary from one moment and context to another as we engage with smartphones, tablets and laptops, apps and sites, and as the content involved ranges from long reads to slowly unwinding ASMR videos or fast looping GIFs. The one and the same person can be highly mindful or pay no attention whatsoever; be transient or immersed in her focus; deeply engaged in interaction or remain a detached lurker as she browses, skims, reads, edits and publishes across platforms. Radio, television or podcasts can be turned on for ambient background noise for a session of laptop labour so that they aid a sense of focus; one can acutely pay attention to the programming, or shift in and out of focus while fiddling with apps and searches. The one and the same person can restlessly skim Snapchat for something to momentarily alleviate boredom, enjoy marathon-like sprees binge-watching entire seasons of series on Netflix (Coleman, 2018; Pilipets, 2019) or engage in online multi-player gaming sessions requiring hours of sustained attention. Degrees and qualities of attention vary according to media content, platform and form of communication, from one moment to the next, distraction marking shifts and dispersions of interest and focus.

As speeds, intensities, and lengths of attention are situational, the rhythms of using an app, for example, cannot be extended to broader diagnoses of the temporalities of media or the ways of living in and experiencing the mediated present. Those clicking

and swiping away in search of potentially fascinating nuggets of data at high speeds may become immersed in best-selling novels, the lengths of which have not exactly collapsed: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels (1997–2007) topping the sales charts with some 500 million sold copies, E.L. James's *50 Shades of Grey* trilogy (2011–2012); Stephanie Meyer's four *Twilight* books (2005–2008) and Karl Ove Knausgård's critically acclaimed six-volume *My Struggle* (2009–2011), for example, are 1,700 to 3,600 pages long and take as long as five and a half days straight, 24/7, to listen through as audiobooks. Meanwhile, the lengths of Hollywood blockbusters have not shortened either: *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the highest grossing film before *Joker* (2019, 121 minutes), runs for 181 minutes; the second runner-up, *Avatar* (2009), for 161.

Even as the rhythms of media range in drastic ways, they are more than easily conflated in the figure of speedy and distracted glancing. As Dominic Pettman (2016: 95) points out, online attention economy tends to be addressed as a monolith when the issue is rather one of diverse attention ecologies, 'each with its own ecosystem and microclimate'. Such multifariousness more than easily slips from view in generalising diagnoses of contemporary media, making media studies inquiry strong in its theory but weak in its capacity to actually account for that which it seeks to untangle.

The conceptual framework of ambiguity, again, refuses totalising accounts of the impact of media on levels both individual and collective, remaining open to complexity and multiplicity instead. Mundane enchantments in networked settings involve corporate plans to captivate, to attract and to mine and sell user data, just as they encompass microevents of fleeting wonder, bafflement, surprise and interest that make things matter (Coleman, 2020: 31, 76). We enjoy things that bore us, become fascinated by things that make us furious and disgusted, desire that which keeps us from thriving, and are amused by things that have the power to bring forth personal shame.

Affective ambiguity cuts through everyday life, our relations with apps and devices being no exception. Data economy plays with such ambiguity and the affective stickiness that it fosters, yet it remains crucial not to generalise this economy as a coherent system or apparatus capable of generating uniformity of experience,

thought or action. It is possible to analyse how this economy designs and aims at certain impact, but not to prove that this impact becomes registered as planned in uniform manner, unless falling back on mechanistic media effects models. There is obviously no ‘outside’ to the economy and culture in which we live. Just as obviously, there are multiple ways of experiencing, doing and resisting these economies and cultures. As Sharif Mowlabocus (2016) points out, networked media are ‘products of our environment, and they are the method by which we cope with that environment’ – they both fuel cognitive capitalism and generate alternative modes of social existence and exchange (Stiegler, 2013).

Mediated micro-events are about operations of power just as they are about resistance, momentary escapes and affective ambiguity resistant to capture. Michel Foucault (1995: 26) identified the seemingly dispersed ‘micro-physics of power’ as composing a plane where the powers of social organization meet individual bodies ‘with their materiality and their force’ and produce uniformity of being in practices of everyday life. Micropower entails a cluster of relations and, while facilitating variation and resistance, basically operates from the top down, and through the force of repetition (Foucault, 1980: 190, 201). Applied to mediated microevents, such microphysical, habitual operations of power have been identified as the mass-scale reordering of focus and attention that serve the ends of neoliberal governance within data capitalism (e.g., Lovink, 2019; Pettman, 2016). In the analytical perspective proposed in this article, the potentiality of networked encounters cannot however be categorically known, anticipated or generalised, nor are these simply seen as operating from the top down. Space is left for contextual specificity and unpredictability in how everyday lives are diversely lived in cohabitation with digital devices (for an extended discussion, see Paasonen, 2021).

The allure of nostalgia

As the lives of many of us have shifted to online platforms in unprecedented ways in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, mundane dependencies on networked media have grown increasingly manifest, from endless Zoom work meetings to online cocktail hours, to attempts to maintain social ties via email, direct messaging and social media, and to experiments in networked sex. Such pervasive mediation is not

something that people simply or wholeheartedly enjoy, yet it is central to how everyday life takes shape as physical mobility is cut short. This makes evident the dependence of both individual and collective agency on a range of nonhuman actors that impact our capacity to act (e.g. Latour, 2011; Kember and Zylińska, 2012). The present moment of exception then pushes us to consider the infrastructural roles of media technologies in everyday life – much less as add-ons to, than as active components in, how we make sense of the world and operate within it (Paasonen, 2018).

For their part, broad, eclectic and compelling narratives of disenchantment identify less mediated and less technology saturated ways of life as leading to better, more authentic and substantial forms of experience. This logic is present in digital detoxes, purges and fasts offered as the means of discovering less distracted, bored and unhappy modes of living, for crafting more meaningful social relations and for reconnecting with one's authentic self. Analysing the discourse of digital detox, Trine Syvertsen and Gunn Enli (2019) see it as premised on a quest for authenticity connected to 'a longing for a less complicated time, when people lived authentically in the moment', and as casting networked media as external and potentially harmful to our ways of being and relating.

It is a narrative rule that a bleak present (or, indeed, a grim future) outlined necessitates a better state of affairs to be defined against. In narratives of loss, a time when things currently in crisis were still available is a past one, so that the past – be it remote or more recent – is positioned as simpler, better, fuller and more authentic than the present (Sundén, 2015: 135). Just as the narrative of disenchantment requires a preceding state of enchantment, the flat, bored and empty lives outlined in critiques of the mediated present only make sense in relation to something much fuller, and distracted forms of attention presume lost sustained clarity of focus of the kind that may not have ever existed. When outlining that which has been lost, some may turn to their memories of how life was in the 1980s, or before broadband connections and smartphones took hold – for others, a better life may entail more distant pre-modern, agrarian and communitarian ways of life.

As Syvertsen and Enli (2019) note, authenticity connected to digital detox 'is often used as a synonym of originality, and nostalgia for a historic past before

commercialisation and mass-production culture'. Nostalgia's temporary orientation can nevertheless be ephemeral, geared not only toward the past but equally to the present or an imagined future. As Katharina Niemeyer (2014: 2) points out, nostalgia 'is related to a way of living, imagining and sometimes exploiting or (re)inventing the past, present and future'. In doing so, it operates as a mood and a mode – as a feeling and a style cut through by negative and positive associations (Grainge, 2000: 29; Niemeyer, 2014: 6). Understood in this vein, nostalgia entails affective management that coins distances and proximities between the past and the present, the objects lost and those now available, the person feeling the loss and the world as it is and as it previously was, or as it could have been. Nostalgia can be ephemeral in its temporal orientation and obscure in its objects in turning away from the current moments toward something else – just something other than *this*. While nostalgia can be many things, it is not inherently progressive.

A key problem with backward-looking nostalgia – as implied in any narrative of loss – is that, as the culture critic Mary McNamara (2019) sharply argues: 'Unless you were a member of the white, male, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, culturally conforming, non-addicted, mentally well, moneyed elite, there was literally no time in history that was simpler, better, easier, or greater. For most people, history is the story of original oppression gradually lessened through a series of struggles and setbacks.' The figure of a more meaningful past needed for outlining a flat present then raises questions of how we understand and mobilise history for selective ends, and whose voices and perspectives are foregrounded in the process. Unfocused longing risks ignoring social hierarchies and imagining forms of experience that we can have no access to.

Reconsidering the figure of enchanted pre-modernity upon which retellings of contemporary disenchantment build, this was a period preceding the invention of human rights. Social and physical mobility was highly limited, few had physical autonomy, many were serfs and slaves, and lives were conditioned by social caste and normative heterosexuality governed through matrimonial ties. Wars were common, the scarcity of nourishment ubiquitous, and little pharmacological relief existed for physical ailments and pains. People died young and rarely saw much of the world beyond their own village. The enchanted world of magic, religion, community and

fullness of meaning, as evoked by Weber, can just as well be defined as one of stratified stuckness where people lived in constant fear of superhuman powers, hunger, sickness and the natural elements. All this depends on what kinds of pasts we choose to imagine and deploy as rhetorical figures in making sense of the present.

To argue this is not to advance a neoliberal paean for rampant individualism. It is simply to argue for including civic and human rights in considerations of social and cultural transformation, and for distinguishing between an assumption, or fantasy, of life as it once was and the lived realities as they have (or have not) been historically documented. As Walter Benjamin (1996: 391) once asked, ‘With whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor.’ If history is written from the perspective of the ones in power, as Benjamin suggests, it remains crucial to question any generalisation concerning past experiences of everyday life as these are used to frame or critique the present, not least since these experiences may well be hypothetical, and hence necessarily fictitious. It may also be the case that generalising accounts of the present are outlined from the perspective of the victor.

Modernisation, urbanisation and the rise of media culture have all led to late or advanced capitalism that is actively destroying the planet through climate change and the mass-extinction of species – a fact worthy of lament if ever there was one. At the same time, they have played a role in the democratisation of society from one built on caste distinctions to one acknowledging human rights. When outlining losses in a historical perspective, it is clear that these have been unequally registered and interpreted. Postcolonial, anti-racist, feminist and queer scholars, for example, have seldom premised their critiques of the present on an assumedly better past: LGBTQ+ communities or non-white people in North America or Europe have rarely recalled most past decades as being just great, any more than feminist commentators have articulated longing for the good old days preceding social suffrage, possibilities for women’s financial independence and rights to education or profession.

Crucial differences among human subjects, their technological and social networks, bodily abilities, embodied identity markers, social attachments and political passions disappear in overarching analyses of the current socio-technological moment (Wajcman, 2015). If we are to take to heart the media ecological argument that

transformations in media technology – always tied to economic and political frameworks – are intimately connected to available ways of acting in, understanding and feeling out the world, then we need to acknowledge that these transformations shape different lives differently, and that their impact is not the same for all involved. The multiplicity of perspectives available in contemporary media is unparalleled, as are available information resources and options for social relating at a distance. This is of specific importance to those whose voices have been unheard in more traditional media publics: the queer, the racialised, the trans, the neurodiverse, and beyond. Affective publics emerge and wither on, collective action becomes organised through, and intimate ties are founded, maintained and severed via, platforms affording access to diverse stories told, opinions debated and archives opened up for access (e.g. Papacharissi, 2014; Steinbock, 2019), just as the devices and services used in all this build on and fuel monetisation, exploitation and commodification within data capitalism (Fuchs & Chandler, 2019; West, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Like any preceding form of capitalism, this one is not a particularly happy place. The point is that there never was a happy place; that a happy place for some can be a living hell for others; and that happier places, especially when imagined as being in the past, are not productive rhetorical tools for critical inquiry. Critiques of the contemporary, for which there is acute need, have to start from somewhere else than expansive diagnoses of deterioration and be mindful of whose pasts, presents and futures are being laid out, whose losses are being articulated, presumed or counted, and what or whose concerns, attachments and experiences become ignored and effaced in the process. The present is never singular as it actualises in and for bodies differently situated in networks composed of actors both human and not, just as experience – simultaneously affective, cognitive and somatic – is a composite unfolding in multiple registers at once.

The complex present

My suggestion is to push media inquiry toward considerations of ambiguity where enchantment plays with the flat notes of boredom, where distraction marks the reorientation of attention, where affective richness, flatness and disinterest intermesh, and where the ripples of grassroots political organisation emerge within the

exploitative practices of data capitalism. This means turning toward the complexity of mundane routines and experiences, as opposed to broad accounts of mass dementia, epidemic sadness and pandemic distraction that are seen to grip all subjects – the expansive yet homogenised ‘us’ or ‘we’ – in equal and uniform ways. A focus on the habitual yet also unpredictable practices of everyday life helps to account for the micro in analyses of datafied societies that largely focus on the macro-structural.

Attending to the enchantments of networked media does not efface or dull the critical edge of cultural inquiry but rather affords it with depth and nuance: for to focus only on the toxic impact of any pharmakon is a partial, dissatisfactory solution at best. Ubiquitous and geared towards diversion, recurrent microevents are easily dismissed as meaningless and banal – this, after all, being precisely what they are, in their ‘low, often hard-to-register flicker of affect’ (Ngai, 2012: 18). Such flicker makes life more liveable as tiny nuggets of enchantment that orient attention, interest and action, just as they frustrate and bore, enrage and engage, connect and violently separate different bodies. In affecting the capacity to act and by reorienting attention, they shape our ways of being in the world both individually and collectively: this makes them rife with political potential.

All this necessitates telling ambivalent stories of the media-saturated present that refuse facile gestures of undifferentiated nostalgia, foreground social equality in considerations of cultural and historical transformation and account for how techniques of monetisation and exploitation run parallel to, and play into, mundane enchantments and captivations that matter, animate and disrupt. As the legacy of cultural studies informs us, the micro and the everyday matter, as this is where politics take shape, from the bottom up. These shapes and their impact cannot be predicted or generalised, just as the mediated presents we live in are rife with contradiction, complexity and ambiguity that media theory neglects at its own loss.

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