Introduction
Media Presents
Rebecca Coleman & Susanna Paasonen

Articles
Distracted Present, Golden Past?
Susanna Paasonen

Im/possible Boredom: Rethinking the Present of the Gamer Subject
Liu Xin

Refresh: On the Temporalities of Digital Media “Re’s”
Rebecca Coleman

Connecting Present Moments and Present Eras with Interactive Documentary
Ella Harris

The Present as Platform
Chris Ingraham

Horizonless Worlds: Navigating the Persistent Present of the Border Regime
Nishat Awan

Figurations of Timely Extraction
Helen Pritchard, Jara Rocha and Femke Snelting

Spatiotemporal Zones of Neosomnambulism
Tony D. Sampson
Introduction:

Mediating Presents

REBECCA COLEMAN
Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

SUSANNA PAASONEN
University of Turku, Finland

Abstract

This introduction to a special issue of Media Theory on Mediating Presents contextualises the thematic focus and outlines the central arguments of the contributions. It suggests it is both productive and necessary to think together ‘the present’ and mediation to understand how various interlocking aspects of socio-cultural life are currently produced, organised and arranged, embodied and affectively experienced. The contributions to the special issue see time not as a neutral backdrop to, but as actively constituted by and constitutive of, (digital) media, and develop broad understandings of both media and the temporality of the present/present temporalities. The special issue develops theoretically informed and engaged understandings of digital media presents, drawing from and expanding a range of theoretical traditions, including feminist, queer and anti-racist theory, science and technology studies, media theory, philosophy and cultural theory. They similarly take seriously an array of objects, practices and processes, extending from public and academic debates and figurations, mundane and routinised activities, the affordances of specific platforms and computational and data-driven software.

Keywords

Media, digital media, mediation, the present, time, temporality, affect

As the experiential horizon between that which has been and that which is yet to become, the present moment involves zones of transition where life takes shape. The present can seem to fly by or be standing still in the lethargies of boredom (Ben Anderson, 2004); it may seem much like the moment’s past or is acutely registered...
through instances of rupture and crisis as one of transformation; or it can be that which is constantly taking shape through updates, notifications, refreshes, live feeds and breaking news. Conceptualised as both fleeting and perpetual, the present actualizes between the space of history and that of the future while simultaneously folding into both. In Lauren Berlant’s (2008: 857) terms, it involves ‘world-making in the just now’. The present is simultaneously supple, flexible and processual, contracting and stretching, and paced through a plethora of human-technology entanglements.

Digital media are commonly described as live, real-time, instantaneous and always-on, here and now (Coleman, 2020). Taking such definitions seriously but not at face value, this special issue explores the role of digital media in the making of the present, as well as the significance of a present or ‘now’ temporality to how digital media function, how they are produced, experienced and conceptualised. It is our premise that thinking together ‘the present’ and mediation is both productive and necessary for understanding how various interlocking aspects of socio-cultural life are currently organised and patterned. Indeed, from what Berlant (2011) calls the ‘impasse’ of contemporary liberal capitalism where crises are ongoing and ordinary to debates about the cultures of distraction and sleeplessness that digital media are seen to feed and cause (e.g. Hassan, 2012; Crary, 2014), mediated presents play a crucial role in the making and re-making of power and politics on levels micro, macro and many things in-between.

This special issue sees time not as a neutral backdrop to, but as actively constituted by – and as constitutive of – (digital) media. In doing so, it develops a broad understanding of media and attends to what Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) describe as the all-encompassing and indivisible mediatisation of life. With ‘mediated presents’, we are then simultaneously addressing the experiences, implications and politics of lives lived in media saturated environments in cohabitation with networked devices, apps and screens, and the ways of making sense of the mediated present in academic inquiry and practices of everyday life. Taking cue from Berlant’s (2008: 845-846) discussion of affect as entailing ‘the body’s active presence to the intensities of the present’ that ‘embeds the subject in an
This entanglement has grown strikingly manifest in the course of the global COVID-19 pandemic during which large parts of this special issue were written. Stepping into an extended time of exception enveloping the globe at different speeds, waves and intensities, we have been pulled away from established mundane routines towards socially distanced sociability that takes shape largely through networked means. The historical field encompassing the present moment within the pandemic is one of anxiety perhaps and improvisation for sure, where limited physical mobility meets high increases in data traffic in social media, news sites, streaming media services, Zoom and Microsoft Teams sessions, and where future horizons are clouded by mists of uncertainty. As digital, data-driven technologies and their embedding within our everyday lives have grown ubiquitous and routine, it is necessary to ask how their rhythms shape the sense of time and, especially, how the sense of the very now takes shape.

The extent to and the acuteness with which our ways of sensing and making sense of the present come wrapped up with the cultures of data may make the current moment seem exceptional. The close relationship between developments in media and communication technologies and the organisation and perception of time has nevertheless long been documented and examined as an academic concern: from the emergence of the Gutenberg Press and its gradual role in creating the ‘imagined community’ of the nation state (Benedict Anderson, 1983) to the speeding up of communication and perception with the wireless telegraph, radio and television (Kracauer, 1995; Postman, 1985) to video recorder ‘time shifting’ in the 1980s leading to debates about the fragmentation of audiences and the mediated formation of social bonds, attitudes and belonging (e.g. Van der Bulck, 1999).

Both tapping into and disconnected from these long-standing concerns, a fast-expanding field of scholarship is exploring how digital media are involved in organizing our sense of the present and the past. In what Judy Wajcman (2014: 4) identifies as ‘a time-pressure paradox’, people have more leisure time than ever, yet a general feeling of harriedness leads to a sense of time accelerating or even running out – a development countered with ‘slow media’ and digital detoxes aimed to aid
one’s fuller presence in the here and the now (Syvertsen and Enli, 2019). Digital media shapes the ways of perceiving the memory and the past (e.g. Hoskins, 2017; Neiger et al., 2011) and gives rise to plural mediated temporalities by speeding up time, fixing it in data storage and retrieval, and stretching and jamming it in lags and delays both perceptible and not (Lohmeier et al., 2020: 1522). Contributing to the heterogeneous body of work on temporality and digital media, this special issue focuses especially on the present; indeed, it is the first edited collection to make the present its main concern. If data capitalism operates through immediacy, archival and predictive time, as Veronica Barassi (2020) proposes, then the present moment is where these temporalities intermesh, actualize and become registered.

**Contributions to the special issue**

The complex intermeshing of attention and distraction, boredom and liveliness are of concern in Susanna Paasonen’s investigation of minor mundane enchantments and pervasive affective ambiguities connected to them. ‘Distracted Present, Golden Past?’ examines generalizing diagnoses in both academia and journalism where the present, in its media-saturated forms, is seen as giving rise to ubiquitous distraction, boredom and flatness. Paasonen questions the figures of lost pasts that these narratives evoke and argues for a more complicated understanding of the present as cut through by diverse rhythms of media that become differently registered and lived. In doing so, Paasonen attends to ambiguity, enchantment and heterogeneity, mapping out an approach for media theory to examine the multiplicity of the mediated present that remains captivated by networked connectivity.

In ‘Im/possible Boredom: Rethinking the Present of the Gamer Subject’, Liu Xin challenges the juxtaposition of presence and boredom and examines the active dis/engagement of gaming, where boredom is anticipated, desired and maintained by and through hyper-casual gaming. Writing in the context of shrunk space and paused time of COVID-19 lockdown in China, Xin focuses on bodies stalled in motion and examines the intersections of boredom and care in how gamer subjects live out and make sense of time. She argues that such boredom functions through a multi-layered extensive present, whereby multiple temporalities are felt and displaced at the same time, for example in terms of the rhythms of the fall, bounce and death of the ball in
the game, the adverts that interrupt play, and of her fingers and breath as she swipes across the screen, as well as the ‘repetitious timeless time of the game itself’. Thinking through the resonances between the affective value of gaming boredom and that experienced by many of those who stay at home or in hospital or care homes in China – and elsewhere – under the conditions of the pandemic, Xin formulates an understanding of care where the temporality of boredom is central to the mundane but extraordinary manifestations of living in this present.

Drawing on empirical research with digital media professionals and school students about the times of digital media, Rebecca Coleman investigates another mundane but ubiquitous digital media activity – refreshing – drawing out its involvement in the production of a present temporality. The article, ‘Refresh: On the Temporalities of Digital Media “Re’s”’, examines what the prefix ‘re’ might have to offer an understanding of the present temporalities of the refresh, arguing that it highlights the multiplicity and suppleness of the present, which is, at once, understood and experienced by the participants in her study as creating anew, going back, being behind or after, as well as repeating, again and again. Building on this latter definition of ‘the re’ as again and again, Coleman moves across differing scales of embodiment, experience and culture to posit that the temporalities of refreshing be understood in terms of what Raymond Williams (1977) terms a structure of feeling; an ‘active’, ‘flexible’, ‘temporal present’, composed of ordinary mediated practices, that characterises the qualities of experience at a specific historical moment.

Ella Harris also thinks with the concept of structures of feeling in her paper, ‘Connecting Present Moments and Present Eras with Interactive Documentary’. Her examination of the present is through a focus on pop-up culture, which she argues can obscure wider processes of precarity through its celebration of ephemerality and unpredictability. She explores the present temporalities of pop-up culture through the method of non-linear Interactive Documentaries (i-Docs), discussing previous examples of i-Docs as well as one she created as part of her practice-research: www.thetemporarycity.com (password TTC). She argues that, in offering users numerous pathways through multimedia content and facilitating various modes of interactivity, i-Docs are productive analytical tools for making sense both of present moments (as specific affective atmospheres) and present eras (as structures of
feelings). At stake in Harris’ paper, then, is how the conventions and affordances of a specific digital media form – the i-Doc – may be designed so as to elucidate how these differently scaled presents connect and relate, and to communicate the political urgency to hold these two types of present together.

The affordances of media forms are similarly key to Chris Ingraham’s analysis of the different presents of amateur sound-recording media, from the mixtape to the writable CD and playlists in streaming music services in ‘The Present as Platform’. By focusing on the material properties of these media as platforms that produce specific presents, the article argues that, with intentional and algorithmic delivery, the affective synchronicities emerging when the thinking-feeling body finds resonances with music involves a method of capture and closure leading to non-events. Ingraham unpacks the temporal experience of ‘The Sentence’ on the now defunct Beats Music digital music streaming platform, where the listener completes a sentence so that an algorithm can identify the music best suited to their mood. For Ingraham, this algorithmic mediation instrumentalises the experience of the temporal present in advance of its happening, so that the present lacks surprise or unknowability; ‘[t]he music arrives already saturated with the feeling we have not yet had a chance to experience’.

In ‘Horizonless Worlds: Navigating the Persistent Present of the Border Regime’, Nishat Awan examines the types of time that securitised borders and legal regimes yield for undocumented migrants. Building on conversations with people caught between borders, and especially those with people in north Punjab attempting to make their way to Europe, Awan suggests that living in a state of the persistent present is characteristic for many undocumented migrants. Awan inquires into the kinds of spatial imaginaries that might be mobilised to understand such embodied spatiotemporal experiences and the kinds of globalized information exchange through databases via which borders are policed. Turning to the insights of volumetric geographies, whereby vertical regimes of spatial control and surveillance are critically examined, Awan examines the notion of a horizonless world, whereby ideas of linear time and space become untenable in relation to the perpetual presents and circulatory movements of the undocumented migrants she works with. She argues that, in order to be able to become oriented within such a horizonless world,
it is crucial to centre the embodied experiences of those who have inhabited such a world for so long.

The politics of volumetrics are also central in ‘Figurations of Timely Extraction’, in which Helen Pritchard, Jara Rocha and Femke Snelting examine the dynamic crossings of time and matter within volumetric geocomputation through the technocultural figuration of Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole. Their concern with the mediation of presents works across the conception of figurations as involved in presenting overlapping techno-scientific problems. Here, presenting takes on the meaning of an offering to think with as well as a means to make temporally present particular stories and their political and ethical implications. Pritchard, Rocha and Snelting build on a mixed methodology combining ethnography with practice-based experimentations with game engines and 4D earth modelling software to untangle the complex worldings that emerge parallel to, yet irreducible to, the logics of contemporary extractivist capitalism, and outline affirmative modes for understanding timely extraction differently through complexity and alliance.

Working with a different figure – this time Gabriel Tarde’s figure of the sleepwalker – in ‘Spatiotemporal Zones of Neosomnambulism’, Tony Sampson explores the Neosomnambulist, or new sleepwalker, as a conceptual persona specific to the current moment where the seemingly endless timescapes of digital media give rise to states of simultaneous consciousness and nonconsciousness. In a state of constant becoming in the present and caught in loops of imitation and mimicry, the neosomnabulist can be conceived, for Sampson, as an affirmative figure pointing to novel ways of understanding community and communal action that reformulate immunological, racialized divisions. Sampson argues that this potentiality of the neosomnabulist may occur through a speculative mimesis whereby digitised processes and practices of imitation and mimicry are pushed or probed further so that self-identity collapses into indistinct and impersonal experiences, creating a non-linear spatio-temporality that challenges birth and death as the bookends of life.

The articles within this special issue develop theoretically informed and engaged understandings of digital media presents. They do not take either digital media or the present for granted, but rather interrogate what they are, how they work and what their significance is. They draw from and expand a range of theoretical traditions,
including those concerned with feminist, queer and anti-racist theory, science and technology studies, media theory and philosophy, and cultural theory. They similarly take seriously an array of objects, practices and processes. These extend from public and academic debates about distraction and (digital) media effects and affects, to mundane and routinised practices such as sleeping, refreshing and making online playlists, to the internal dynamics of casual gaming and the relations between i-Docs and the organisation of space-times in urban pop-up culture, to software for visualising the earth, and to migration as it is encountered as geographical borders. In this sense, both ‘media’ and ‘theory’ are broadly understood and variously approached in order to examine in detail how mediated presents are produced, patterned and lived.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all of the contributors to the special issue, who have worked with good humour (at least as far as it was communicated to us) in the unusual circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The special issue emerges from a workshop, Mediating Presents, held at Goldsmiths in May 2019 as part of Beckie’s Leverhulme Research Fellowship of the same name. Beckie would like to thank the other participants of the workshop for their insightful engagements with the theme: Carolyn Pedwell, Elena Gonzalez-Polledo, Amit Rai, Anne Kaun, Celia Lury, Sophia Drakopoulou, Alex Taylor and Ruth Raynor. We would also like to thank Simon Dawes for his careful work on the special issue, and anonymous reviewers for their comments and feedback.

References


**Rebecca Coleman** is Reader in the Sociology Department, Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research and teaching span sociology, media and cultural studies and feminist theory, and she has particular interests in temporality (presents and futures), digital media, bodies, affect and inventive methodologies. Recent publications include *Glitterworlds: The Future Politics of a Ubiquitous Thing* (2020, Goldsmiths Press) and a special issue of *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* on Feminist New Materialist Practice (2019, edited with Tara Page and Helen Palmer). Publications that develop
the idea of mediated presents can be found in the journals, Distinktion (2020), *New Media and Society* (2020) and *Cultural Studies* (2017).

**Email:** rebecca.coledman@gold.ac.uk

**Susanna Paasonen** is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Turku. Her research focuses on popular culture, affect, sexuality and media theory. She has published extensively in these areas, including most recently, *Dependent, Frustrated, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media* (2021, MITP), *Who’s Laughing Now? Feminist Tactics in Social Media* (with Jenny Sunden, 2020, MITP), *Not Safe for Work: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media* (with Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light, 2019, MITP), and *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play* (2018, Goldsmiths Press). She is PI of the research consortium, ‘Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture’ (2019-2022/25), funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland.

**Email:** susanna.paasonen@utu.fi
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 disenchanted 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 Zylinska, 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 grassroot 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.

**References**


Cambridge: Polity.


Thoreau, H.D. (1854). Walden; or Life in the Woods.
http://www.gutenberg.org/files/205/205-h/205-h.htm


Susanna Paasonen is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Turku. Her research focuses on popular culture, affect, sexuality and media theory. She has published extensively in these areas, including most recently, Dependent, Frustrated, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media (2021, MITP), Who’s Laughing Now? Feminist Tactics in Social Media (with Jenny Sunden, 2020, MITP), Not Safe for Work: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media (with Kylie Jarrett and Ben Light, 2019, MITP), and Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play (2018, Goldsmiths Press). She is PI
of the research consortium, ‘Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture’ (2019-2022/25), funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland

Email: susanna.paasonen@utu.fi
Special Issue: Mediating Presents

Im/possible Boredom: Rethinking the Present of the Gamer Subject

LIU XIN
University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

Mobile games downloads have witnessed a surge during the covid-19 lockdown. Gaming is said to provide a much-needed distraction from the crisis whose intensity is felt as shrunk space and paused time. This article concerns the seemingly contradictory modes of attention – bored/disengaged and intensely engaged – during the covid-19 pandemic. It rethinks the relation between boredom and care by zooming in on the present of the gamer subject. Drawing on feminist theorizations of care and time, critical game studies as well as theorizations of boredom, especially in the context of digital games, this article analyses a hyper-casual game called Helix Jump and rereads the temporality of the covid-19 narrative in China through the logic of digital gaming. It suggests that boredom should be understood as an im/possibility, that is not antithetical to, but an expression of the as-well-as-possibleness of care.

Keywords

Boredom, Digital Games, Present, Gamer Subject, Covid-19, Care

Gaming in the time of crisis

Swiping left and right, linking the cute images of bears and rabbits, my mum is fully absorbed in a game on her phone. The game is called Craz3 Match, a popular match 3 mobile game in China. She sits still and looks relaxed, moving nothing but her right index finger. Left. Right. Left. Right. Sitting next to her, I anxiously follow the
reports about the virus outbreak on TV. It has been 22 days since we got to know that the novel coronavirus – now called covid-19 – spreads person-to-person, and since Wuhan – a city of more than 10 million residents and the epicentre of the virus outbreak – has been on lockdown. My parents and I, like most other people in China, have been following the instructions to stay indoors most of the time.

First thing every morning, we check the numbers of infected persons, and whether there have been any new confirmed cases in my hometown, a small city in Sichuan province, Southwest China. We follow reports from state media and social media. We discuss how frightening the situation is, how sad it is to see so many people infected and suffer, how helpless it is to see the lack of medical resources for the health workers and the patients, how touching it is to see so many health workers across China volunteer to travel to Wuhan and support the control and prevention work, how worrying it is if the situation does not improve, and when and if the “turning point” will take place.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1:** an image of the gate of the apartment complex in which my parents live. The barbed wire was installed at the end of January. People who do not live in this community are not allowed to enter. Residents’ temperature is checked before entering the community too. Photo taken by myself.
As the images of empty Chinese cities show, it is as if time – marked by the rhythm of the mundane life in the city – has been paused and re-placed by the time of crisis – felt through the held breath, and the anxious anticipation of impending infections and death. It is as if time and space have shrunk. The accessibility of the next day and the next place can no longer be taken for granted in the face of the looming threat of the outbreak (see figure 1). And yet, at the same time, this shrunk space and time also feels too spacey and too long, a time of boredom that feels insignificant to and incompatible with the time of the crisis.

Like my mum, many Chinese smartphone users play mobile games to kill time. According to a recent report by the Financial Times, a record number of games have been downloaded in China since the outbreak, with an average of 60 million weekly downloads of mobile games by Chinese smartphone users. The surge in game downloads is attributed to the long and “empty” hours of staying at home. As Jiahui Wang, who has been self-quarantined at home for 14 days, is quoted saying in a report by CNN, “Every day I’m at home, I’m so bored. I don’t want to use my brain, so I’ll play some light and joyful games.” And as Clement Wen is quoted as saying in the same report, “it does give me more peace of mind and keeps me from looking too much at coronavirus news, whether real or fake.” In these accounts, gaming is said to provide pleasure, relaxation and distraction. It allows an active dis/engagement – “don’t want to use my brain” – that results in a sense of calmness – “more peace of my mind”. What is the relation between this form of dis/engagement that separates the time and space of the game and its environment, and the attentiveness to the crisis felt as the shrunk space and paused time?

The seemingly contradictory modes of attention – bored/disengaged and intensely engaged – have also informed how relations of care are depicted in the predominant narratives in China. In these narratives, the carers are the ones who work at the front line of the “war on virus”, such as state officials, experts, health workers, social workers and volunteers. They represent and embody the heroic nation that risks its life to protect its citizens. In video footages that are circulated on Chinese state media and social media platforms, the front-line workers are often seen to be either working till exhaustion, or rushing between wards, hospitals and communities. The intensity of their presence is depicted in stark contrast to the passivity and boredom
of the bodies at home, whose modes of existence during the covid-19 crisis are characterised by the extended time of waiting. The insignificance that is typically attributed to gaming also reinforces the stark contrast between the carer and the cared. Such a configuration of relations of care supports the heteronormative and heroic narrative about the coronavirus crisis in China that justifies the intensified surveillance and censorship, and eclipses other narratives of the virus outbreak.

In this article, I aim to challenge the configuration of care that is built upon the opposition between being present and attentive for others and dis/engagement as a form of self-care. I do so by zooming in on the present of the gamer subject. I want to emphasise that I do not downplay the importance of the work done by the people at the front line. Rather, following feminist critical engagements with moral rigidities of hegemonic ethics (see for example de la Bellacasa, 2017), I ask how boredom might be a form of, rather than antithetical to, care. I take inspiration from McKenzie Wark’s suggestion to rethink digital game not simply as a form of media among others, nor “a pastime, outside or alongside of life” (2007: 98), but “our contemporaries, the form in which present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through” (2007: 145). Instead of considering gaming simply as a means to entertain and to fill in the empty and boring time, I am interested in considering how time is felt and made sense of, in, through and as the present of the gamer subject. How might for example the time of the crisis be thought of from the perspective of digital games?

This article proceeds as follows: First, I provide a brief overview of the theoretical frameworks that support my analysis of the question of care, boredom and the present of the gamer subject. Second, I analyse a hyper-casual game called Helix Jump. I explain what is specific to the game mechanics and representations of the genre of hyper-casual games, of which Helix Jump is exemplary. I then zoom in on how time and the present of the gamer subject are felt and materialised in the process of playing Helix Jump, and consider how such a process makes visible the im/possibility of boredom. Finally, I return to the time of the covid-19 crisis. The time of gaming is routinely explained through a certain linear temporal logic that locates gaming as an interlude; that is, as an in-between moment among other activities (see for example Anable, 2018). To make the familiar strange, I reread the
temporality of the covid-19 narrative in China through the logic of digital gaming, and ask about the implications of rearticulating care in the time of the crisis.

**Care, boredom and the gamer subject**

A thorough engagement with the scholarly fields of feminist studies of care, boredom studies and game studies is beyond the scope of this article. In this section, I try to explain how I approach the questions of care, boredom and the gamer subject. I take inspiration from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s conceptualisation of care as an open-ended “as well as possibleness” (2017: 202). Staying with the tension between the three dimensions of care – “labor/work, affect/affections, ethics/politics” (2017: 5), de la Bellacasa displaces the intentional and self-reflective individual subject from the centre of care. According to de la Bellacasa, care is emergent through and embedded in a web of care and cannot be reduced to a set of normative moral obligations. Furthermore, the contingency and situatedness of care mean that the temporality of care needs to be rethought from the perspectives of everyday lived practices that confound the linear progressiveness of productionist fantasy. De la Bellacasa’s following explanation of care time assists my analysis here, I will thus cite it at length:

Care time is not a get-it-while-you-can *now*, which ignores the future and obliterates the past. But even when one cares for the dying, with hope and anxious anticipation, even when care is compelled by urgency to enjoy the fleeting present, charged by past regrets and joys and the weight of accumulated experiences, a certain suspension of feelings of emergency, fear, and future projections – and weighty pasts – is required to focus on caring attention. In particular with regard to anxious futurity, feelings of emergency and fear, as well as temporal projections, need often to be set aside in order to focus and get on with the tasks necessary to everyday caring maintenance. Without this mode of attention, care would be an impossible charge, always at the edge of a break (2017: 207; emphasis in the original).
As de la Bellacasa’s description of care time makes clear, care as a mode of attention is a practice that suspends feelings such as fear, anxiety, and perhaps even pleasure about past and future, so carving out the space and time of (being) present. This simultaneity of attention and suspension of care time resonates with the aforementioned active dis/engagement of playing mobile games. As Lisa Baraitser and Laura Salisbury observe in the context of covid-19, care time provides an alternative recursive temporality, experienced for example as a stretch of boredom, that “is likely to be able to know more about the ongoing violence as it holds back from narratives of battles to be won” (2020: 10).

Drawing on de la Bellacasa’s and Baraitser’s conception of the relation between time and care, I locate the analysis of boredom and the gamer subject in the care time – the suspended present thickened with care-ful attention and “multilateral demands” (de la Bellacasa 2017: 208). My aim is not to redeem boredom – a supposedly “ugly feeling” (Ngai 2005) – as a caring affect, nor to value self-care over and against self-less care that would reproduce the opposition and separation between the individual and the collective, self and other. Rather, in line with the ontological turn in critical studies of care and time, exemplified by for example de la Bellacasa’s and Baraitser’s respective work, I attempt to rethink boredom, care and time through each other. In what follows, I turn to boredom and the gamer subject.

Boredom is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon (see for example Haladyn and Gardiner, 2016). As Tina Kendall observes, “boredom is everywhere and nowhere; boredom is a collective affective sensibility, at the same time that human subjects are losing the ability to reflect on, or even feel it; boredom coerces our involvement within networked circuits of data and information-processing – even though we are aware that such activities are profoundly tedious and even pointless – but without offering the opportunities for critical reflection or cultural resistance that were once delegated to boredom” (2018: 83; emphasis in original).

Digital games, especially the genre of casual games, are considered to offer tactile responses to and monetise the ambivalent experiences of boredom. For example, time management casual games such as Diner Dash are seen to be embedded in the post-Fordist condition of work where the line between work and leisure has become increasingly blurred. As Aubrey Anable notes, as a form, casual games bring to mind
the bored worker sitting by the desk who is at the same time overwhelmed by the multiple and fragmented tasks at work. Casual games offer “microflow activities” (Soderman, 2017: 46) and “rhythmic interludes” (Anable, 2018: 1617) for the interstitial moments between different tasks at work, or between home and work, that make everyday life more manageable. Moreover, they not only mirror the individual emotional experiences of fragmented temporality (multiple tasks take place within the same time period), but are also constitutive of and make palpable the broader affective system, characterised by the simultaneously stressful and fragmented rhythms and the intensified feeling of disinterestedness and boredom.

The form of boredom that casual games respond to and produce is typically considered vulgar. Its relation to and difference from profound boredom has been much analysed in boredom studies. Whereas profound boredom is said to produce the analytical and philosophical subject, vulgar boredom is conceived of as shallow, passive, and reproduces sameness and apathy. Importantly, as Scott C. Richmond shows, the shallowness of vulgar boredom could be rethought in terms of care, that provides the possibility to “be with ourselves for a while, in a way that is neither overorganized, subjected to productivity or uplift or pedagogy, nor intensive, taking the exacerbated or heightened state of modernist or Romantic aesthetic response as its model” (2015: 31).

Richmond’s account of vulgar boredom affords an analysis of the ways in which playing mobile games during the pandemic is a practice of care, as it provides the space and time, however temporary, to turn away from the need to be “present (or not) to, or for, someone else” and towards “an experience of I-ness” (Richmond, 2015: 33). The emphasis on the durational and extensive aspect of care resonates with de la Bellacasa’s and Baraitser’s conception of care time. However, whereas the latter puts primacy on care-ful attention and thinking (otherwise) and does not differentiate between vulgar and profound boredom, the former underscores a state of in/attention and dis/interestedness, in which a more engaged relation with the other may or may not take place.

The difference between these conceptions sheds light on the problem of the individual subject, and its corollary issue the relation between self and other, that is considered separable in Richmond’s work, and entangled in de la Bellacasa’s and
Baraitser’s theorisation. It seems to me that despite the received difference in its orientation – towards oneself or towards the other – the presence of the individual subject is not itself in question in these accounts. If care time is one of unbecoming, as Baraitser writes, and if vulgar boredom makes felt a mode of presentness that is non-productive, as Richmond notes, then surely the subject’s own undoing or unbecoming is a possibility, and even necessity, in practices of care. I am interested in rethinking the presence of the caring subject – its being-itself – that is necessitated by the “as well as possibleness” of care. To do so, I turn to Wark’s theorisation of boredom and the gamer subject.

For Wark, digital games are not simply “props” (Richmond, 2015: 32) that mediate between the player and the device, between code and image, between the individual emotional experiences and the structure of feeling. Instead, they are constitutive of the world as the game space, that is structured by the either/or logic of winning and losing, that is the phallogocentric logic of presence/absence. In this account, the gamer is everyone, and not merely the one who plays games. As Wark writes, “The digital always addresses its subject as a gamer, a manager, a calculator and competitor who has value only in relation to a mark, a score. The digital inscribes game-space within the subject itself” (2007: 55-56).

In line with the reconsideration of digital games in ontological terms, Wark shifts the conception of the relation between boredom and the gamer subject from the question of affective response and value extraction to the problem of being. As Wark writes, boredom leaves “nothing but indifference, neither one nor the other, the grunge of time, the lint that sticks to all things digital” (2007: 94). Conceived of as a non-relation, boredom is simultaneously the condition of possibility and the threat of the digital game space. According to Wark, “Digital object, digital subject – these are by-products of a boredom that, seeking respite from nothingness, projects its lines across all space and time, turning it into a topology of commodity space and military space” (2007: 50).

Along these lines, Wark suggests that the gamer subject emerges through an intuitive relation to the algorithm and the structure of the digital. Wark understands algorithm in two interrelated senses. First, it is “a finite set of instructions for accomplishing some task, which transforms an initial starting condition into recognizable end
condition” (Wark, 2007: 6). Second, algorithm and code are said to follow the phallogocentric logic that values the “the good (father, sun, capital)” (Derrida quoted in Wark; 2007: 141). As Wark writes, “The algorithms of writing, calculation, navigation, and the game, at first separately and then coming together, create a topology” (2007: 141). Along these lines, Wark suggests that the algorithm of the game is all encompassing, valuing everything in terms of scores.

The emphasis on intuitive knowledge to the relation between the appearance in the game and the algorithm – “allegorithm” (Wark, 2007; Galloway, 2006: 90) – affords an account of the affective and embodied experience of the gaming present. According to Alexander Galloway, “To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel allegorithm)” (2006: 91). This analysis of allegorithm resonates with what Rebecca Coleman calls “infra-structures of feeling” (2018: 609). As Coleman makes explicit, “the term infra-structure draws attention to the technological and institutional linkages or systems which are often overlooked but are central to the organization and functioning of social and cultural life” (2018: 610; emphasis in original). It is through these systems and linkages that the “affectivity of the present is encountered, experienced and arranged” (Coleman, 2018: 610).

Wark’s gamer theory provides the license for examining how the present of the subject emerges in the world as the game space. And yet, this account separates the algorithm and code of a game from its content, which is considered irrelevant. For example, according to Wark, the storyline of a game is an alibi and that the image does not matter, because “[u]nderneath it is a game like any other game, built out of arbitrary rules that one makes one’s own” (2007: 101). As Aubrey Anable (2018) asserts, the computation/representation split in game studies is informed by and reinforces the gendered hierarchies in gaming culture. It is perhaps for this reason that there are two kinds of time in Wark’s conception of the digital game space.

On the one hand, there is a spatialized time, which is cut into identical and saveable chunks and bits – a repeating present – within the game. And on the other hand, there is an indifferent time that flows, and whose “mortal flaw” (Wark, 2007: 9) marks the limit of the game space. As Wark writes, “The digital creates a timeless
space that can be saved by making all the time equivalent. It is a time without violence. What is saved does not suffer from erosion or decomposition or decay. It always comes back as the same – unless the system crashes and the digital can no longer impose its code, in which case it may never come back at all” (2007: 48-49). It seems to me that at work in Wark’s theorisation of the two kinds of time is the distinction installed \textit{a priori} between the disembodied and immaterial time – a timeless and infinite space – and the embodied and material time – a finite and continuous time. This \textit{a priori} separation is interesting given that Wark’s gamer theory is about rethinking the present from the perspective of the game. If the game ultimately includes everything, as Wark suggests, what constitutes this line that separates and distinguishes these two forms of time?

In an attempt to eschew the representation and computation divide, and to rethink time in and through digital games, I supplement Wark’s conception of gamer subject with Anable’s (2018) theorisation of digital games as affective systems that zoom in on the enactments at the interface between bodies, platforms, codes, sounds and images, where affect is registered and made felt. In what follows, I analyse a hyper-casual game called Helix Jump. My aim is, to paraphrase Wark, to make the familiar time strange, in, through and as the game, and to ask about its implications for the question of care.

\textbf{The present of the gamer subject}

The game that I choose to analyse in this article is a hyper-casual game called Helix Jump, published by Voodoo. In selecting this game to focus on, two aspects are significant. First, hyper-casual games differ from casual games that have been much analysed in game studies in the sense that they typically have no storyline, no clear beginning nor endings, no progression such as from self-discovery, to skill learning, to defeating enemies and saving the world\textsuperscript{4}. In many cases, hyper-casual games do not use complex art styles or construct easily identifiable characters. However, as I will show, even in such cases where representation and aesthetic styles of the game seem to matter the least, they are constitutive of what game coders and designers call a good feel that makes the game addictive.
Second, the genre of hyper-casual games is one of the most popular types of mobile games during recent years. Helix Jump is one of the urtexts of hyper-casual games which was the most downloaded mobile game in 2018 with 25.6 million daily players. The popularity of the Helix Jump game in particular and the hyper-casual game genre in general speak of the affective appeal of games that are simple, repetitive and seem to require the least investment, in terms of time (short levels) and meaning (the lack of story line and a sense of progress). Taking inspiration from Wark’s gamer theory, I analyse the game allegorically. That is, I consider the intuitive knowledge of the relation between the appearance in the game and the underlying algorithm as a double – an allegorithm – of the relation between the appearance and its underlying algorithm in the game space. I also complicate Wark’s approach by considering the specificities of the images, the game mechanics, the materiality of the device and the affective and embodied practices of playing.

Having said this, I now turn to the Helix Jump game. The game is about making sure a colourful ball falls all the way down on to the ground. On its way down, the ball needs to pass through the gaps of platforms that potentially interrupt its journey to the ground. Ink that matches the colour of the ball leaks out from the ball and splashes out on to the platform. The task of the player is to let the ball land on the part of a platform that is “safe”, which is distinguished from the “wrong” part of a platform marked by a different colour. For example, as is
shown in figure 2, the safe part of the platform is in the colour green, whereas the fatal part is in the colour yellow. The colour of the ball and the platform change at every level.

The game is simple. The ball falls by itself. There is no storyline, no enemies, no twists and turns of a plot, no climax nor final victory. The ball falls. By moving the finger/s left and right on the touch screen, the gamer rotates the platforms so as to allow the ball to fall through the gaps or to land on the safe parts of the platforms. Once the ball reaches the ground, a level is passed. And then another level begins. The ball falls. The gamer moves their finger/s left and right. And repeat. If the ball lands on the wrong part of the platform, the ball stops falling, stays flattened and still on the platform. The screen becomes blurry and the colour fades. The death of the ball is made ever more visible when contrasted against the falling white particles in the background. Time flows and is indifferent to the death of the ball and the end of the level. At the bottom of the screen, a line that reads “tap to replay” (see figure 2) appears.

The genre of hyper-causal games is in fact not new. In the game industry, it is typically conceded that the genre of digital hyper-causal games can be traced back to the 70s. The most essential characteristics of hyper-causal games include “flat learning curve, no time restraints, and simple mechanics”. The game mechanics of Helix Jump is falling, which is considered one of the most addictive mechanics of hyper-causal games. As one article on mobilefreetoplay explains, “Rising and falling mechanics provide interesting journeys for their players. The constant progression of the level leads to the feeling of progression without a change in the mechanic of goal. To keep people entertained the level itself must develop… The player’s focus is on dealing with the next challenge along the progression and less about accuracy. There are many ways to win these levels, a little luck is often needed over timing or skill. Your only goal is to protect an object from a single point of failure”.

There is no clear indication of the levelling up of gaming skills. In fact, the levels of hyper-causal games can be, and often are, generated randomly using level generators provided by game engines such as Unity. What is required is the intuitive knowledge about the falling mechanics and the rule of the game, made visible and bodily felt through the relation between the player’s input – the right and left movement of the
finger/s, and the rhythmic movement on the screen. The goal is not so much to win, but to sustain the nextness – the next gap, the next platform, the next fall, the next level⁸. Following Richmond, the nextness of hyper-casual games could be considered an expression of vulgar boredom, that is felt as extensive attunements in a suspended present in which time does not unfold⁹.

Wark’s theorisation of nextness shifts the temporality of boredom to another register. For Wark, nextness is not simply characteristic of a certain genre of digital games, but is the temporality of the algorithm of the game – a repetitious “tempo of making, breaking, and remaking alterity, the bounds of one and zero, presence and absence” (2007: 91). Its operation is conditioned upon and threatened by boredom, understood as absolute indifference, neither presence nor absence, neither yes nor no. In this account, boredom is generative, not in the sense that profound boredom allows creativity as opposed to the banal apathy and disinterestedness of vulgar boredom, but it demands and produces necessity; that is, the necessity of difference, significance, the becoming present of presence, and the capacity of relating and of registering affect.

In view of this, it could be said that boredom is im/possible. That is, it is necessarily displaced and maintained. Hyper-casual games provide insights into this double movement of displacement and maintenance. The short-bursts and repetitive levels, the feeling of reward that is quickly established by the simple game mechanics, the visible relation between the player’s embodied input and the display on the screen, and the haptic feedback, enable a short period of attention and of being present that displace the sense of boredom. At the same time, the repetitive game play and the lack of complicated progressive narrative that make hyper-casual games interesting also make them boring after a while. But this boredom is in fact anticipated, desired and maintained by the hyper-casual game developers so that the players are always on the look out for new games.

Hyper-casual games are known to require very short time for development. The simplicity of the games means that hyper-casual game developers could manage to release dozens of new games in a month. This short duration of production is among the key factors that make hyper-casual games highly profitable. In this sense, hyper-casual games could be said to be exemplary of the attention economy that maintains
and monetises boredom. They also provide the interface for registering and managing the increased sense of uncertainty and disturbances that are characteristic of the precarious life conditions in late capitalism. For Wark, the perpetual double movement of maintaining and displacing boredom means that the gamer subject is trapped in a present that is endless. As Wark quotes Roland Barthes, “It does not reveal, does not transform, does not develop, does not educate, does not sublimate, does not accomplish, recuperates nothing, save for the present itself, cut up, glistening, repeated” (Barthes quoted in Wark, 2007: 92).

Interestingly, despite its different valuations – as lack or as a time and space for care, this extended present is located before, beyond and outside time in these different accounts. By taking Wark’s assertion of boredom as a radical no-thing – that is, in a non-relation to the logic of presence/absence, either/or – to its logical conclusion, the sense of particularism of an individual entity (whether that being time or the individual subject), which undergirds the oppositional interpretation of boredom, loses its identifying outlines. In what follows, I complicate the relation between time and boredom by thinking through the embodied and affective experiences of playing Helix Jump.

As the game starts, I immediately get stressed. At the top of the screen, a purple ball bounces up and down. Purple ink splashes out on to the platform. It feels like blood, leaking out from the ball, which seems to hint that the ball is dying and needs to get down to the ground as soon as possible. The falling particles in the background suggest time is running, running out for the ball. However, before I begin to play, an advertisement pops up in the lower right corner of the screen. It is a cross promotion. The game company advertises its games within the space of its own game, so as to save on the cost of advertising. I get distracted by the advertisement. It interrupts the temporality of the game – the bouncing of the ball and the flowing of time made visible by the falling particles.

Focusing again on the ball, and trying to ignore the advertisement, I finally begin to play. Moving my right thumb left and right, the platforms start to rotate. First gap is moved to the right place. And the ball starts to fall, fast. I feel my breathing starts to accelerate. Moving my right thumb left and right, the ball lands on another platform and starts bouncing. Purple ink leaks out. I feel my breathing becomes short. Moving
my right thumb left and right. How far to the left? How far to the right? I panic, seeing that the ball is about to land on the wrong place of the platform. I feel I start to hold my breath. The ball dies. It stops bouncing and lies flattened out on a platform. Purple ink splashes out. Colourful particles pop up on the screen, as if to suggest that the end is not real, time is absent, and all there is is the next, over and over. Tap to restart. The game invites me. However, the tapping of the restart button does not immediately lead to replaying the level, but to a pop-up of a game advertisement that displays on the entire mobile screen and disrupts the gameplay. The pop-up window can only be closed when a timer runs out.

In the Helix Jump game, the simple shapes and colours, the easy game mechanics, the short duration of each level, and the repetitive movement of the finger/s, produce “a veritable synthesis, a blending of the senses” (Wark, 2007: 78). My sense of presence is materialised in and emergent through the nextness – a wrong spot of the platform, a gap that needs to be turned to the right place – that is repetitive. This extensive present is, however, more multi-layered than the one described by Richmond. It is shaped by changes in the movement of my thumb, my gaze (whether looking at the ball or the advertisement), and my changing affective and physical states. Playing Helix Jump feels stressful, as I must target each platform so that the ball can fall through within a very short time. Boredom is maintained and displaced within the game. It is displaced by the intense feeling of being present in trying to let the ball fall, and maintained by the repetitive game play and the interruption and waiting brought about by the pop-up in-game advertisements.

Richmond is right to suggest that playing casual, and in this case hyper-casual, games does not entail as intensive engagements with the game as hardcore gaming. Nevertheless, it still demands attention to my bodily movement and how it impacts the movement on the screen. More than simply a flat and extensive temporality, the nextness of the present involves, implicates and is felt through and displaced by multiple temporalities at the same time – the flow of time made visible by the falling particles in the background, the rhythm of the ball’s bouncing, the fall and the death of the ball, the interruptive and waiting time of different kinds of advertisements, the repetitious timeless time of the game itself, the changing rhythm of my breath and of the movement of my fingers. The presence of I is dis/continuous – emergent,
scattered and displaced – in this process. This is not simply because I feel “stuck with myself... relieved of wanting, waiting, or acting” (Richmond, 2015: 32), but because the multiple rhythmic relations that are felt as embodied and affective demands – necessities – also realize multiple and incongruent senses of I/me.

As I see it, the relation between time and boredom (the time of boredom and the boredom of time) needs to be reconsidered through a radical involvement – thick implicatedness – that de la Bellacasa identifies as the defining feature of care. That is, instead of locating boredom as a duration before, beyond and outside of time, and in so doing either rendering it as lack and insignificant or attributing it with the capacity to maintain, repair and care, I suggest that boredom materialises and is displaced in, through, with and as time. Likewise, instead of considering that there are two forms of time (one digital and chrononormative, the other unconscious and material), I suggest they are expressions of the temporalization of time, felt as the embodied and affective enactments at and of the interface, that the game is. If boredom is the involving and involved non-relation that is the condition of possibility of necessity – the necessity of being, including the being of time – and its undoing, then time itself could be said to be bore and boring.

**Caring gamer subject**

How can this account of the present of the gamer subject be applied to the question of boredom and care in the time of crisis? In the above section, I have analysed boredom and the temporalization of time within the digital game. In what follows, I take cues from Wark’s theorisation of game space and return to the question of boredom and care that are presented at the beginning of the article. In analysing the time of the crisis through the lens of the game space, I do not mean to flatten the difference between the digital game and the coronavirus outbreak. Rather, my aim is to make visible and challenge the phallogocentric logic of presence/absence, either/or, that structures the gamespace, and to propose modes of rearticulating care by rethinking its relation to boredom.

January 24th, 2020 is a day that many people in China will not forget. It was the day before the Chinese Lunar New Year. It was also the day when the city of Wuhan was
locked down. This year’s New Year festival season is not marked by the usual important dates – New Year’s Eve on January 24th, the lunar New Year on January 25th, the Lantern Festival on February 8th. Instead, it is marked by changing numbers of the infected cases and death, shown on the screen of smart phones and on the screen of TVs. The time of the festival season is replaced by the time of the outbreak – felt as the stuck and paused time of the quarantine, as the extended time of waiting, as the urgent time of the crisis in which the threat of death is imminent. Boredom, as Wark writes, “is a spacey feeling, of being spaced out. What is boring is a space in which either one cannot act, or one’s actions amount to nothing… When you are bored, even home feels like a waiting room… What displaces boredom is the capacity to act in a way that transforms a situation” (2007: 100).

As I mentioned in the beginning of the article, in the Chinese context, the bored bodies, who are absent from the frontline where the war against virus is said to take place, are considered the ones being cared for. In the game space of the war on virus, the score is based on the changes in the infection rate. However, as many social media users write, the numbers are numbing. They render invisible the sufferings of people, who may or may not be infected, and whose infection may or may not be counted. They also give the illusion that the outbreak is simply an on and off event, in which death is subsumed as a number in the timeless time of the game, in which the affects and effects that exceed the numerical measurement become elided.

In her diary about the lockdown in Wuhan, which is read by hundreds of thousands of people on Chinese social media WeChat, the famous author Fang Fang, writes, “There is a saying in Wuhan: there are those who die from being too busy, and those who die from being too bored. Situating this saying in the current context, the similarity between these two forms of death is all the more obvious. The bored people are under enormous emotional pressure. The busy people are under enormous physical pressure. Everyone is gritting their teeth. Together, they maintain and hold up the city of Wuhan” (my translation). Here the busy ones include the health workers, community workers, police and volunteers in Wuhan, who have been working intensively since the outbreak. The bored ones are the residents that are either stuck at home or isolated in the hospitals. As Fang Fang writes, both groups
are under a lot of pressure. They are both doing the work to maintain the city of Wuhan.

Fang Fang is one of the most vocal voices against the heroic war on virus narrative of the Chinese state. For example, the above quoted passage is a critique of the narrative that depicts the virus outbreak as simply an unfortunate accident that is an on and off event—a game—and that positions the bored bodies at home as the cared for by the state and the national body. As Fang Fang notes, absolute boredom results in no-thingness, death, and therefore cannot be experienced as such. In other words, the boredom experienced by the bodies at home is an im/possibility, felt as the sense of enormous emotional pressure, and experienced as the extensive present of maintenance. In my translation of the quote, I use “maintain and hold up” to translate “扛着”, which is literally translated as shouldering. It resonates with Baraitser’s theorisation of the double actions of maintenance along both horizontal and vertical axes. As Baraitser writes, “It is not revolutionary time, but the lateral time of ‘on-go’ that tries to sustain an elongated present. … To maintain is to underpin, or prop up from below, to hold up when something or someone is flagging. The time of maintenance lies therefore at the intersection between the lateral axis of stumbling blindly on, and the vertical axis of holding up, orientating us towards a future, even when that future is uncertain, or may not be our own” (2017: 66–67).

In her diary, Fang Fang describes the experience of being bored, waiting for the lockdown to end, as well as the mundane practices of maintenance such as feeding her 13-year-old dog. She also writes about conversations that she has with her families and friends on social media, which aren’t always related to the outbreak, as well as the history of the city of Wuhan, and the people in it. While embedded in the game of war on virus, the lived practices of enduring boredom during the lockdown described in Fang Fang’s diary make visible other modes of relating than the dominant configuration of relations of care. The multiple affective rhythms—extended time of waiting, stress and anxiety due to concerns about the virus outbreak, the restless feeling of being stuck at home, the aging of her dog and herself, the temporal aspect of her diet necessitated by her diabetic condition, the blooming of flowers, the weaving together of history of Wuhan and the current
moment of lockdown – afforded by the genre of diary also make felt the thick involvement of the boring present of care time.

As Fang Fang explains, in writing the lockdown diary, she wishes to provide an interface for individual and collective remembering, for grasping the affects and effects of the outbreak that exceed the numerical measurement of infections and death, and for challenging the configuration of care that justifies the intensified surveillance and control in China. The multiple forms of care in, through and as boredom troubles the separation between self-care and self-less care that informs the heroic narrative of the war on virus. As Baraitser and Salisbury note in the context of the pandemic, the recursive temporality might “allow us to know more about the ever-present possibility of failures of care that get written out of discourses of healthcare heroism – to know how such failures occur, what they might communicate and something about how such failures could be contained, delayed or mitigated” (2020: 10).

Watching the flowers bloom, feeding her dog, or reporting the challenges faced by residents, volunteers and community workers, Fang Fang’s dairy records both vulgar and profound boredom, all the while making visible the ways in which their received difference is produced along gendered lines. In rethinking the generativity of boredom in, through and as its im/possibility, I suggest that the bored bodies are not simply the ones being cared for. The boredom and mundane activities that are described in Fang Fang’s diary and the surge in the playing of digital games during the outbreak in China should be considered as manifestations of care, understood in terms of a radical open-ended “as well as possibleness” whose time is the thick involvement felt as boring and bored.

References


**Notes**


3. The way in which the digital game is approached is different in these two accounts. Whereas in Wark's conception of gamer theory, the digital game *is* the actualization of either/or logic, in the framework proposed by Coleman, the digital game is seen as part of today's digital media consisted of a range of platforms and devices. For the discussion at hand, I am more interested in the
emphasis on intuition, feeling and affect in these accounts, and not the different approach to games in these two frameworks.

4 In this article, I follow the definition of hyper-casual games that is provided by the mobile game industry.

5 I use finger/s here because some smartphone gamers prefer to use one finger, where others prefer to use fingers on both hands.


8 According to Coleman, nextness is a specific temporality of the digital media. As she writes, “Of significance to an attention to the present, the flow of Netflix can be seen to create a temporality where the progression from past to present is suspended, and nextness or pre-emergence becomes absorbed within a kind of stretched or expanded present” (2018: 613).

9 It is perhaps not surprising that recently hyper-casual games have been marketed as a therapeutic and relaxing tool. Reasons for this include: first, the game does not progress in terms of a story line, but through short levels. Gamers can choose to play for a short period of time, for example when taking the bus, when taking a quick bathroom break at work, when waiting for an event to start; second, many hyper-casual games can be played on the smartphone. This means that in contrast to other video games that require game consoles such as PlayStation and Xbox, hyper-casual games on smartphones can be easily accessed anywhere; third, unlike more complex games that take a lot of time to load the story before each play, hyper-casual games can be launched quickly—they are simply a tap away; last but not least, the nextness, which entertains, excites, and exercises the attention of the gamer, is said to be at the same time calming.

10 Recently, many mobile games on iPhone incorporate haptic feedbacks. For example, the phone vibrates when the gamer hits the right target. It has been said that the haptic feedback provides a stronger rhythmic attunement with the game.

11 The original Chinese text is, “武汉人喜欢说一句话：忙的忙死，闲的闲死，现在对比，似乎更加鲜明。闲心里压力大，忙人身体压力大。大家都在咬紧牙关，共同扛着武汉。” This paragraph is quoted from Fang Fang’s diary, which I read on Weibo on my smartphone. I don’t yet know how to access it without the mobile app.

**Liu Xin** is a postdoc fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki.

**Email:** xin.liu@helsinki.fi
Abstract

This paper explores the often unremarkable and unremarked upon activity of the refreshing of digital media streams and feeds, paying particular attention to its temporalities. It draws on original empirical research with UK based digital media professionals, mindfulness practitioners and school students to highlight the ways in which the temporalities of refreshing are embodied and experienced. To do this, it considers what theorisations of the prefix ‘re’ might offer, arguing that the ‘re’ indicates a non-linear temporality that is, at once, creating anew, going back, being behind or after, as well as repeating, again and again. Building on these explanations of ‘the re’, the paper argues that the refresh be understood in terms of a present temporality, which is both now and ongoing, and that can be constantly moving, stuck or stilled, and skipped or reset. The paper seeks to understand these specific embodied experiences of the refresh in terms of what Raymond Williams calls a structure of feeling: a ‘temporal present’ that ‘gives the sense of a generation or period’. Taking up Williams’ explication of a structure of feeling in the 1970s through the relatively new experience of the medium of broadcast television, the paper posits that the present temporality of refreshing might be key to the composition of a contemporary structure of feeling.

Keywords

Digital media, time, temporality, the present, refresh, structure of feeling

they have all these multiple data sets coming in, they’re trying to make decisions based on the latest data and it needs constant refreshing (Melissa).
I just feel like I’ll skip and refresh just to see if there’s anything interesting that comes up, because what came up, I’m not really interested in (Jade).

you can’t control what’s happening, but you also can’t make it unfold faster just be refreshing, so you end up not being able to move on from anything else (John).

Refreshing – of social media streams, webpages, email accounts – is a common activity in today’s digital media cultures. Indeed, as the extracts above, taken from interviews I conducted with Melissa, Jade and John indicate, refreshing is an integral aspect of spending time with digital media. In this paper, I explore the often unremarkable and unremarked upon activity of refreshing, paying particular attention to its temporalities. My aim in doing so is to contribute to a plethora of recent work that emphasises the significance of time and temporality to contemporary mediated cultures. The specific contribution that this paper seeks to make is to highlight how the refresh is both embodied and experienced, and is involved in the constitution and organisation of particular kinds of temporalities that are emerging in contemporary digital cultures.

In thinking across the differing scales of embodiment, experience and culture, I attend to what Raymond Williams designates as a ‘structure of feeling’: ‘a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period’ (1977: 131). Williams’ understanding of a structure of feeling is, at least in part, temporal, in that he emphasises the importance of what is emerging or pre-emerging at a given historical moment and proposes the concept as a means to grasp and account for what he calls the ‘active’, ‘flexible’, ‘temporal present’ (1977: 128). The concept is productive not only for its concern with temporality, but also for how it sees media (and art) as central ways in which to both identify and comprehend pre/emergent culture. In the 1970s, Williams considered ‘the television experience’ to indicate a structure of feeling ([1974] 2003); drawing on how he explains the relationships between broadcast television as a relatively new medium and the subjective, embodied, cultural, political and economic processes and practices that gather around and shape it,
I examine how the refreshing of digital media may suggest a new structure of feeling today.

To examine the refresh in these terms, I focus on a discussion of the prefix ‘re’, examining how it refers to processes concerned with creating anew, going back, being behind or after, as well as repeating, again and again. These definitions of ‘re’ point to a plethora of potential temporal processes that are oriented to both the future and past. They thus bring multiplicity and diversity to an understanding of temporality. I situate this discussion within broader interdisciplinary work on ‘re’s, and especially on the ‘re’s of the terms reset, repeat and restrain, drawing out their temporalities which, again, emphasise multiplicity, intensity and the non-chronology of time. Considering what these terms might offer to an understanding of refreshing, I argue that what is distinctive about the temporalities of refreshing is not only multiplicity, intensity and non-chronology but also presentness – a temporality that, as Melissa, Jade and John note above, is (or has the potential of being) constant (Melissa), stuck or stilled (John) and skipped or reset (Jade). I argue that refreshing can be productively understood in terms of a present temporality – that is, a temporality that is both ‘now’ and ongoing. The understanding that I work with in this paper then, sees the present as both inherently supple and flexible – where it is difficult to draw firm boundaries around ‘this’ as the present – and yet also as distinctive – as neither, quite, the past or future. I suggest that this kind of present temporality might be key to the composition of a contemporary structure of feeling.

**Structures of feeling: Mediation, the temporal present and the television experience**

While Williams’ concept of structures of feeling is well-known, two interrelated points regarding how he comes to define a structure of feeling are important for a concern with the temporalities of refreshing. The first point is that Williams argues that culture is always changing. In this sense, culture is to be understood as emergent in that ‘new meanings and values, new practices,
new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created’ (1977: 123). What comes to designate a structure of feeling is that which is ‘active and pressing but not yet fully articulated’ (1977: 126) – what he terms pre-emergence. That is, while culture is emergent, he argues that we need to ‘understand more closely this condition of pre-emergence […] to explore the concept of structures of feeling’ (1977: 126-127). This ‘condition of pre-emergence’ is temporal. Williams critiques humanities and social science approaches for separating out culture and society and the subjective, personal and embodied. A consequence of this separation is that the subjective, personal and embodied are framed and understood in terms of ‘this, here, now, alive, active’ (1977: 128), while culture and society are made into ‘fixed forms’ (1977: 129) and expressed in a ‘habitual past tense’ (1977: 128). Williams proposes the concept of structures of feeling as a means to grasp and account for what he calls the ‘active’, ‘flexible’, ‘temporal present’ (1977: 128). A structure of feeling therefore, as ‘a particular quality […] which gives the sense of a generation or of a period’, is, at least in part, to be defined temporally.

Second, in defining a structure of feeling Williams looks to developments in art and media, seeing them not as determining technologies but as emerging out of as well as establishing social, cultural, political and economic relations and needs. A discussion of his analysis of television in the 1970s (Williams, [1974] 2003) is instructive in both explicating how he does this, and in examining what might be distinctive about the contribution of the present temporality of refreshing to the emergence of a particular structure of feeling today. Williams examines television as part of everyday life, and importantly, he argues that what characterises broadcast television is not only the content of the programmes made and shown but, more significantly, their sequencing as flow. Williams’ starting point is with the discrete character of pre-broadcast communications; books, plays, concerts, matches, meetings were ‘specific and isolated, temporary, forms of attention’ (2003: 87). Broadcasting systems programme these discrete units as ‘a sequence or set of alternative sequences of these and other similar events, which are then available in a single dimension and in a single operation’ (2003: 87). This single dimensionality and operationality remain important, but Williams also identifies ‘a significant shift
from the concept of sequence as programming to the concept of sequence as flow’ (2003: 89). Flow is, for Williams, a means of accounting both for how intervals or interruptions – such as advertisements – become part of the experience of broadcasting (watching television or listening to the radio) and how ‘broadcast planners’ sequence units so as to ‘retain viewers – or as they put it, to “capture them” – for a whole evening’s sequence’ (2003: 91).

Understood temporally, flow is a moving on – or, as Williams puts it, a “moving along”, to sustain what is thought of as a kind of brand-loyalty to the channel being watched’ (2003: 94). This moving along involves the sequencing of discrete units and intervals so as to create a seamless, yet differentiated, stream of content. Explicating this flow, Williams describes ‘the television experience’:

most of us say, in describing the experience, that we have been ‘watching television’, rather than that we have watched ‘the news’ or ‘a play’ or ‘the football’ ‘on television’. Certainly we sometimes say both, but the fact that we say the former at all is already significant. Then again it is a widely if often ruefully admitted experience that many of us find television very difficult to switch off; that again and again even when we have switched on for a particular ‘programme’, we find ourselves watching the one after it and the one after that. The way in which the flow is now organised, without definite intervals, in any case encourages this. We can be ‘into’ something else before we have summoned the energy to get out of the chair, and many programmes are made with this situation in mind: the grabbing of attention in the early moments; the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay (2003: 94).

The flow is made possible by the single dimensionality and operationality whereby the differentiated, discrete units – a play, a football match, a newscast – are engaged with – broadcast and watched – on one medium; the television. Indeed, Williams notes that, “an evening’s viewing” is in some ways planned, by providers and then by viewers, as a whole’ (2003: 93). This ‘whole’
designates the flow of broadcasting beyond or over and above the discrete units; and it also indicates that this flow is in some way bounded.

Williams also draws attention to how the television experience is difficult to express and analyse. Describing his experience of watching American television whilst jetlagged after a week on an Atlantic liner, he comments:

There is in any case enough similarity between certain kinds of films, and between several kinds of film and the ‘situation’ commercials which often consciously imitate them, to make a sequence of this kind a very difficult experience to interpret. I can still not be sure what I took from that whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem – for all the occasional bizarre disparities – a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings (2003: 92).

Televisual flow, then, is the moving along of the audience through the placing of multiple, distinct and diverse units of content on the same plane, within the boundaries of the medium of television. It is involved in the creation of a whole – a whole evening’s viewing, for example, and of the whole, bounded medium of broadcast television. This may be a disorienting experience both while it is happening and in the difficulty found in trying to interpret it afterwards.

In analysing the television experience, Williams argues that flow may be configured differently nationally (he analyses US and UK television) and according to the principles of the television companies (he analyses public and commercial television channels). He details ways in which the subjective and embodied experience of broadcast television flow (for example, his own disorienting example of watching US television) connect with social, cultural, political and economic processes. In these ways, televisual flow combines, arranges and shapes ‘the meanings and values of a specific culture’ (2003: 120); the television experience composes a particular structure of feeling (2003: 113).
Although he was writing in the mid-1970s about broadcast television and the specifics of his argument may no longer hold, the attention paid by Williams to the ways in which subjective and embodied experiences of a relatively new form of media/tion can indicate the qualities that characterise a particular historical moment, remains germane. Taking digital media as our focus, a number of questions follow, which animate the remainder of this article. What kinds of subjective and embodied experiences are prevalent, and how might these come to compose a contemporary structure of feeling? More specifically, what subjective and embodied experiences both shape and structure and are shaped and structured through the refresh? Does the flow that characterises the television experience also characterise the ‘refresh experience’? Does the refresh constitute a whole? Of what significance is time, temporality, and the present?

**Media, time and temporality**

Lohmeier, Kaun and Penzold (2020b) argue that ‘complex interrelations’ between time and media ‘have been true for all kinds of media but are even further complicated in times of digital media and datafication’ (2020b: 1522); ‘the plurality of mediated and media-related social temporalities’ (2020b: 1522) thus require attention1. Recent work has highlighted the role of digital media in changing regulations, patternings and experiences of time and the temporal (Lohmeirer, Kaun and Pentzold, 2020a). These include, although are not restricted to, arguments about the prevalence of 24/7 lifestyles (Crary, 2014), to how it functions to set and synchronise global labour (Sarah Sharma, 2014; Wacjman, 2019a; 2019b), its involvement in monitoring and enforcing mobility and borders (Amoore, 2013), in the emergence of online racialised identities (Sanjay Sharma, 2013), and human embodiment and the unconscious (Clough, 2000; 2018). Digital media are examined in terms of their anticipation or pre-mediation of future events (Grusin, 2010; Hanson, 2015; Amoore, 2020), their role in creating and archiving memory (Niemeyer and Keightley, 2020), and their ‘liveness’ and ‘real-time’ operation (Virilio, 1997; Hassan, 2003; Weltevrede et al, 2014; Coleman, 2020a). They are also seen to produce, shift or augment particular temporal conditions, including ‘updating to remain the
same’ (Chun, 2016), waiting (Farman, 2018), and connection (Lupinacci, 2020) and disconnection (Karppi, 2018). Digital media are also argued to establish and provide instances to refuse or create alternatives to dominant temporal orders. Amit Rai (2019), for example, analyses practices of jugaad (hacks or workarounds to solve problems) in contemporary Indian digital cultures, highlighting how these can act to ‘momentarily suspend[…] the solidity of social and economic relations and of intellectual and manual labour’, creating ‘an interstitial time of material and affective flux (suspension ≠ stasis), a time lived against the tables of measures, regimes of signs, and infrastructures of control of Indian neoliberalism’ (2019: 153). A further set of work conducts an archaeology or geology of media, drawing attention to what Jussi Parikka et al refer to as ‘a deep time of the media’ (2015).

There has also been some focus specifically on the refresh in histories of the computer screen. In his examination of the ecology between humans, computational instruments and the environment through which interactive computer screens emerged, Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan (2019) notes that refreshing emerged as a significant aspect of the United States’ military air defense systems in the 1950s. ‘Every 2.62 seconds’, he writes, ‘the screen refreshed to deliver a moment-by-moment “graphic display of the changing air situation, with correct geographical relations between fixed points and moving targets”’ (2019: 81-82). Jacob Gaboury (2018) also notes the problem of the speed of refreshing in ‘accomplish[ing] complex, fully shaded, three-dimensional images’ in his history of the hardware required to produce computer generated images (2018: 32). Emphasising a somewhat different set of concerns in relation to refreshing and gaming, T. L. Taylor (2012) focuses on the material, technological and embodied relations of first-person-shooter games (FPS). Discussing the importance of the specific monitors in gaming situations she notes, ‘[o]lder style cathode ray tube (CRT) monitors, while bulky, provide much better performance for FPS games than do the newer flat liquid crystal display (LCD) monitors dominating the market right now’ (2012: 45). This is in part due to their refresh rates and how ‘[g]un recoils feel slightly different on different refresh rates’ (2012: 45), which can therefore change how the game is experienced and played.²
Where this work on media and refreshing accounts for time, it does so in relation to the speed at which things appear on the screen: between the aircraft in the sky and what is shown on the computer screen in Geoghegan’s example, between the object or environment and the image of it for Gabor, and between what the gamers see on screen and feel in their bodies for Taylor. What these approaches emphasise, then – implicitly or explicitly and to greater or lesser extents – is the significance of a real-time, immediate or synchronous temporality to the refresh. While such an understanding of the temporalities of the refresh are appropriate for the tasks set by these authors, real-time, immediate and synchronous temporalities do not seem to capture how Melissa, Jade and John (and other research participants) explain their understandings and experiences of refreshing. The presentness of refreshing that they point to seems to involve multiple temporalities; of staying still, constantly moving and of skipping, for example. Williams’ designation of ‘flow’ as central to the television experience does not seem to capture the refresh either. While there may be a sense of ‘moving along’, this does not involve a seamless (if potentially disorientating) transition from a designated start point to an end point (the start of an evening’s viewing to the end of the programming). Rather, the temporality of the refresh may involve a search for new data as well as feeling stuck.

Refresh

The interview extracts with which the paper opens are part of a larger project on digital media presents in which I have interviewed 44 people regarding their understandings and experiences of the temporalities of digital media. Participants in the research include industry professionals (social media managers, digital marketers, directors of digital teams) (20 participants), school students (16 participants) and mindfulness practitioners (8 participants). All of the interviews were, with the participants’ permission, audio-recorded and transcribed. Some of the industry professionals worked in large commercial organisations, others in the arts, charity and third sectors, while some were self-employed or worked on a variety of small self-directed projects. The majority of participants were based in London or the south east of England; I
conducted semi-structured individual interviews with these participants at their workplaces, in cafes, pubs and bars, at their homes and in my work office. As part of the interview, I asked participants to explain their understandings and experiences of some of the terms that frequently describe the temporalities of digital and social media – ‘live’, ‘real time’, ‘instantaneous’ and ‘always on’ – and noted some of their responses on post-it notes that we arranged to make word clouds. Writing these terms and explanations down and re-arranging them to make patterns of association led to the participant/s and me identifying and discussing further some of their key understandings and experiences of the temporalities of digital media and allowed me to document the interviews visually as well as through the audio recordings and transcripts.

The participants who practised mindfulness ranged from those who taught, wrote and gave talks on it, to those who practiced it daily, to those who sporadically returned to a mindfulness app on their phone. I conducted semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews, as well as interviews over Skype and email, depending on the participant’s location and availability. These interviews were mainly focused around a series of questions asking participants to explain and elaborate on their understandings and experiences of digital media and time. The school students were based in a girls’ secondary school in south east London, and were aged 13-14 or 16-17 years old. These interviews were organised as group art-making sessions where we discussed, watched art videos and created various visualisations of temporality, digital media – and especially social media – and the feelings that they generated. The visualisations included word clouds, drawings and collages, and the students worked on them individually or in pairs or small groups. The sessions were held in the students’ usual art classes and in their art classroom. While in some ways it was therefore a pragmatic decision to ask the students to make art around the themes of digital media, temporality and feelings, I was also keen to work with visual and sensory methods as a means to explore the affective and embodied aspects of the topic (see as examples Lyon, 2016; Lyon and Carabelli, 2015; Coleman, 2016; Gunaratnam et al, 2017).

Across the interviews, refreshing emerged as a significant way in which digital media and time were discussed. Iris, for example, who is General Manager at a
large international cosmetics brand and who described her expertise as turning around the marketing and branding strategies for large organisations in the digital age, said:

there’s just too much content on the internet already.

There is the thing of things being there forever. So you’re doing a brand refresh or you want to change your appearance. That’s really difficult to tidy up the internet (Iris).

While ‘refresh’ for Iris refers to an updated or new identity for a brand, and is therefore different to the kind of refreshing of content on digital and social media streams, there are similarities with how Melissa, above, talks about the constant flow of data that the press office needs to analyse and make decisions on – there is a lot, too much. Similar sentiments were expressed by Giles, co-founder of a creative collective who had previously worked in marketing for an environmental charity, who said:

I think, conceptually, you’re sitting in the current moment but you’re anxious to get to the next thing, so you scroll up to see what’s happened. […] I mean, […], I think FOMO is so crucial (Giles).

The feeling of Fear Of Missing Out that Giles discusses is generated by the refreshing of content, which he sets up in terms of the ‘current moment’ and ‘the next’.

The extract above regarding ‘skipping and refreshing’ comes from a group interview with 13 and 14 year girls where they discussed Snapchat and Instagram as apps that they would often refresh. They explain that skipping and refreshing enable them to focus on what’s interesting to them, which may be what the feed shows them or may be produced through the refresh. In this case, refreshing is associated with finding that which is of interest – ‘people that I want to see’, as they put it. Adam, a digital director in the education sector, discussed how effort was put into ‘keeping our [social media] accounts vibrant, so there are things happening’. He noted the importance of this effort because of ‘the big difference between I’m just looking for something, anything, and these are the sorts of things which pique my interest, or I’m just
looking for this particular thing’. This association between refreshing and interest was not shared by all participants. The extract from John, above, comes from a broader discussion in which he linked refreshing with what he calls ‘mindless scrolling’. For John, this refers not quite to what Jade and Adam describe as searching for a ‘particular thing’, nor ‘just looking’ for things that ‘pique my interest’ but rather a sense of getting lost in a seemingly endless sinkhole:

It’s almost like it depletes your capacity to focus on anything else, so it becomes a solution to the fact that you can’t focus. The more you are using it, the more it stops you from focusing, and you just fall into this kind of mindless scroll, which is of course something that very smart people have sat around trying to design as an intended outcome.

[...] because if I get sucked into something like that, that’s when it does feel oppressively real time, because you can’t control what’s happening, but you also can’t make it unfold faster just by refreshing, so you end up not being able to move on from anything else.

There’s a kind of repression of the present. When that has happened to me I’ve found it so incredibly unpleasant that I think I spend a lot of time thinking reflexively about how to avoid that (John).

Here, John, who worked on social media accounts in the publishing sector, talks about becoming ‘sucked into’ a ‘real time’ present where scrolling creates a ‘repression of the present’. This present cannot unfold into something else: it can’t be made to ‘unfold’; it doesn’t ‘move on’. Suvi, an academic, linked refreshing with a lack of focus, talking about the capacity of digital media to always be refreshed and losing the capacity to read ‘two or three articles in a row’:

I think I developed this constant reflex of constantly checking emails. Then I feel I probably didn’t do anything substantive or dig my teeth into anything serious.

Then that’s when you get into the cycle, ‘I’m going to check the news. I’m going to check the opinion leader. I’m going to check Twitter’, and cycle through it that way, do a few emails, do a few small things, mark a few papers but never do anything serious. Time during the working day suddenly felt fragmented and small
and bitty and quite stressful. Then time after the working day was not work but that felt much calmer (Suvi).

Refreshing, here, is in some ways similar to the ‘mindless scrolling’ described by John: it is a ‘cycle’ where nothing ‘serious’ can be achieved. However, while John discussed a present that seems to have the potential to go on and on, for Suvi, the ‘cycle’ of refreshing made time feel ‘fragmented and small and bitty and quite stressful’. Refreshing involves not so much getting sucked into the present as the fragmentation of constantly moving across different digital platforms – email, news, Twitter, other ‘small things’ – and not achieving anything ‘substantive’.

As is indicated in these interview extracts, refreshing might involve scrolling and cycling, ‘skipping’, the influx of constant data, and somehow being perched between ‘the current moment’ and ‘the next’. It is also capable of generating various intensities and affects, including interest, FOMO and stress. While it may be an ordinary and even banal activity, refreshing can be involved in the creation and organisation of multiple and diverse temporal dimensions. It thus can be understood as one way in which digital media produce and pattern contemporary everyday life.

The multiple temporalities of the ‘re’

As I have noted above, one way in which media refreshing has been theorised is in terms of the aim of reducing a temporal lag between what appears on the computer screen and what is being imaged. However, to understand the temporalities and their affectivity discussed by the research participants in more detail, it is productive to consider what ‘the re’ of refresh refers to and signals. Conducting an etymology – or perhaps more accurately, an exploration of some of the different definitions – of ‘the re’ focuses attention on the specificities of the temporalities of digital media that I have begun to draw out. Indeed, an examination of ‘the re’ may shed light on how the specific temporalities of digital media come to produce and calibrate distinctive individual and collective experiences, or structures of feeling.
A first point to note in this project of unpacking ‘the re’ is that the re functions, grammatically, as a prefix. A prefix refers to something that precedes something else – for example, the preface that prefixes the book – or is an element of a word that begins that word and in so doing, changes the meaning of that word. According to dictionary definitions, the prefix ‘re’ refers to:

1. Once more; afresh; anew
   ‘reaccustom’
   ‘reactivate’

1.1 with return to previous state
   ‘revert’

2. In return; mutually
   ‘react’
   ‘resemble’

2.1 in opposition
   ‘repel’
   ‘resistance’

3. Behind or after
   ‘relic’
   ‘remain’

3.1 in a withdrawn state
   ‘recluse’
   ‘reticent’

3.2 back and away; down.
   ‘recede’
   ‘relegation’

4. With frequentative or intensive force.
   ‘refine’
   ‘resound’

5. With negative force.
   ‘recant’

Origin: From Latin re-, red- ‘again, back’

*English Oxford Living Dictionaries*

(https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/re-)
What is evident from this definition is that the ‘re’ may involve, potentially, many different temporalities. For example, it might involve ‘afresh’ or ‘anew’ as well as a reversion or ‘return to [a] previous state’. It may signal remaining, receding and reacting. It may also highlight an ‘intensifying force’.

The many temporalities of the ‘re’ have been examined in a recent ‘errant glossary’ of ‘the re-’ (Holzhey and Wedemeyer, 2019). In their preface to the collection, Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer note the ‘complex temporality’ and ‘plurivectorial tension’ of some of the prefixes that are prevalent in contemporary critical theory, including ‘post’, ‘de’ and ‘re’ (2019: x). Indeed, in her analysis of the ‘re’ of ‘recherche’ (or ‘research’) as it functions in Marcel Proust’s *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu (In Search of Lost Time)* ([1913-1922] 1988-90), Julie Gaillard (2019) draws attention to the problem of an ‘understanding of time as infinite succession from past to future’ (2019: 2). Gaillard notes that in French, ‘temps perdu’ refers both to ‘time lost but also time wasted: while lost time is a metaphor of the past, time can be wasted in past, present, or future’ (2019: 2-3). She argues that this ambiguous, double meaning of the term sees ‘the prefix “re”, [as] now divided into two co-existing yet contradictory meanings and directions, at the same time intensive and iterative, forward and backward’ (2019: 3).

In another essay, Daniel Reeve (2019) explores ‘the curious relation to time’ (2019: 91) of the animated sitcom, *The Simpsons*, which he conceives in terms of repetition. On the one hand, he notes how despite the ‘remarkable sequence of events [that] takes place’ in an episode of the programme,

> the consequences of these life-changing happenings do not survive beyond the end of the episode in which they take place: the credits roll, the reset button is pushed, and the family returns to their sofa. At the beginning of each new episode, we are invited to forget the years of accreted narrative that precedes it, except when these accretions are played for laughs. Episode breaks thus function as a way of regenerating a state of near-endless potential for new stories, unencumbered by the need for continuity (2019: 91-92).
On the other hand, Reeve asserts that this situation of ‘near-endless potential’ is ‘maintained equally by another strange temporality’ (2019: 92). This temporality is a ‘present-day time in which the show takes place’, whereby an episode takes place approximately within the timeframe in which it is produced and aired (1989, 1999, 2009, 2019…) but where the characters do not age – Bart is always ten, Lisa eight, and Maggie, a dummy-sucking baby. ‘[T]he overall effect of this presentness’, Reeve argues, ‘is to sharpen further this sense of stasis. We should not understand *The Simpsons* as existing within historical time; instead, the show’s situatedness in a roughly present time should be taken as a guarantee that it is not historically placed. The show exists inside historical time, but isolated from its flow’ (2019: 93).

Reeve understands these ‘strange’ temporalities of *The Simpsons* in terms of a response to the demands and requirements of ‘serially extended texts’, such as television series:

> to maximise the possibility of continued commercial success, a serially extended text must stay the same – stay recognisably itself, true to the core of its own original appeal – as its run continues through time. At the same time it must change, because of the demand for new stories within the established formulas, and because of an expectation that each iteration produce a sense of closure. Such texts must therefore change as little as possible; they must satisfy a need for new stories while remaining, in quite a strong sense, themselves (2019: 93-94).

That *The Simpsons* has been running for over thirty years demonstrates, Reeve suggests, that ‘[t]he show’s attitude to time solves, perhaps more successfully than any other work of television, the contradictory demands of serial textuality’ (2019: 93). Central to Reeve’s analysis of repetition, then, is the relationship between continuity and change, or sameness and newness. As a serially extended text, *The Simpsons* both resets (becomes new, different) and remains (stays the same); the calibration of this relationship is key to its endurance and success.
Also discussing the relationship between two seemingly opposed or contradictory processes or movements, Christine Frey (2019) focuses on the verb ‘restrain’, noting the word originates from the Latin, ‘restringere’, meaning ‘first and foremost, “to hold back”, “to withhold”; it can also mean to “bind back”, to “put in chains” or figuratively to “put in limits” or simply “to limit”’ (2019: 141). Analysing the function that the ‘re’ has in this word, Frey observes that both stringere and restringere ‘denote the action of “binding”’ (2019: 141); hence, ‘the re’ ‘does not connote a repetition or a restitution – this is not an iterative “re”. An act of restringere does not stringere something again, nor does it take it back to its original status’ (2019: 142). Frey’s analysis here highlights that the ‘re’ of restringere has a function other than repeating a stringere or returning it to its original state. In the case of this word, the ‘re’ functions ‘as an intensifier, adding emphasis to the meaning already expressed in the base’ (‘stringere’). Frey argues:

Like many Latin prefixes, such as ‘ad’, ‘ex’, or ‘cum’, ‘re’ can have the function of an aspect marker, signifying ‘thoroughness’. ‘Resplendent’, for example, means not to shine (splendere) again or to shine back, but to shine brightly. Similarly, ‘to restrain’ would thus mean to bind, but to do so thoroughly or fully: perhaps with great intensity, force or effect (2019: 142).

While Frey’s comments here develop the definition of the ‘re’ as a force or intensity, she goes on to argue that ‘the intensifying “re-” [of restrain (and restringere)] does not simply strengthen the root meaning while leaving it unchanged; rather, it carries additional connotations, connotations that add to or even alter the meaning of the base’ (2019: 142). Frey understands the ‘re’ of restringere as indicating both that whatever is being bound in some way ‘calls for the intensification of the binding signified by the “re-”’ – otherwise the word stringere would be sufficient – and ‘to the restraint of something that would otherwise, were it not restrained, be in flow, in movement, that is: ongoing’ (2019: 142). Thus, the force to which the ‘re-’ of restraint and restringere refers is one that is both exerted and countered. ‘In every restraint’, Frey writes, ‘there are two forces at work: one that aims, obviously, at
continuing its course, or to say the least, aims at not being arrested; and one that arrests, one that suspends – even if intermittently or provisionally – an action or motion. The very “re-” in “restrain” implies by necessity two different dynamics, or two opposed forces’ (2019: 143).

In conceptualising restrain in terms of two competing forces of movement, Frey problematises a chronological understanding of time, arguing that restraint refers not to a temporary halting or delaying of the movement of that which is restrained. This is a misguided understanding of restraint as it assumes that the movement of that which is restrained and the restraint itself are of ‘the very same time’ (2019: 144). Instead, she argues that the times of the restraint and that which is restrained are ‘of an entirely different order’ (2019: 144):

A restraint is more than a simple delay, a postponement is one and the same time as that occupied by what it postpones. Rather, a restraint interrupts not just a movement but the very time of that movement, in order to institute another kind of time: the indefinite, non-teleological, open-ended time of the restraint. The restraint does not just arrest a movement, but suspends the very time of that movement and imposes its own, essentially different regime of time. Since its duration is indeterminate (the act of restraining could stop after a few seconds or go on for ages), the act of restraining, in other words, gains a certain autarchy (2019: 144, my emphasis).

In unpacking the temporalities involved in restringere, and in particular examining the tensions involved in the temporalities of a movement and that which restrains the movement, Frey’s argument points not only to a multiplicity of temporalities but also to the ways in which these temporalities might function as ‘essentially different regime[s] of time’. For Frey, the temporality of restringere operates not only to halt movement but to instigate an alternative regime of time. This new regime of time is autocratic in that it is both separate to the temporality of the movement it halts and determinative of how long the movement is halted. While Frey’s work highlights the struggle via which a certain kind of time might become dominant, or imposed over other
kinds of time, Reeve’s discussion of repetition examines how such different regimes of time may function together to create a temporality specific to serially extended texts. In the case of *The Simpsons*, neither resetting (the new) nor remaining (the same) become dominant but rather the tensions between them become another ‘strange temporality’.

**Refresh, again and again...**

The discussion of the multiple and potentially different regimes of the temporalities of the ‘re’ that Reeve and Frey point to help to develop an appreciation of the temporalities of digital media refreshing. For example, they aid an understanding of how the refreshing of streams and feeds create, at once, a situation in which there is always the potential for new stories, and for a ‘resetting’ of those stories – ‘sitting in the current moment but you’re anxious to get to the next thing, so you scroll up to see what’s happened’ as Giles puts it. There is also, at once, the potential for a sense of stasis, or as little change as possible – getting sucked in to or endlessly cycling digital media platforms and apps.

Moreover, Frey’s argument draws attention to how the ‘re’ of refresh intensifies and also changes the meaning of ‘fresh’. As noted above, refresh involves not so much a more forceful or concentrated freshness as a distinct temporality that is capable of moving forwards, backwards and staying still or stuck. However, Frey’s and Reeve’s analyses focus on the temporalities of restrain and repeat respectively; while they are helpful and can be taken up in understanding the temporalities of refresh, they are not intended to address its distinctive qualities.

My suggestion is that the multiple and diverse temporalities of refreshing be understood in terms of a present temporality; that is, in terms of a temporality that is located somewhere in between the past and present but where the boundaries that demarcate it from these other temporalities are porous and in continual movement and readjustment. The present is both ‘now’ and ‘immediate’, and on-going and open-ended. Refreshing brings forth the next
moment from the current moment, and this current moment can also be subsumed within the next. It may, then, be (experienced as) contracted and expanded so that it is, at the same time, new, continuing, and stilled or paused.

Indeed, returning to the discussion of the prefix ‘re’, at first glance, it would appear that the first definition of ‘the re’ – ‘Once more; afresh; anew’ – is of primary interest to an understanding of digital media refreshing. Indeed, the Word Thesaurus offers up ‘enliven’, ‘rejuvenate’ and ‘revitalise’ as synonyms for ‘refresh’, and a range of platforms and apps highlight their ability to continually present new stories, messages and images. Taking this definition in isolation, refreshing would seem to imply a constantly changing stream, feed or page of information, where the temporality is forward-moving, inclined towards newness. However, for the participants discussed above, this linear, progressive temporality is only one aspect of refreshing. The other definitions of ‘the re’ are also implicated. For example, the first definition is accompanied with a ‘return’ or ‘reversion’ to a ‘previous state’; ‘afresh’ and ‘anew’ are not ‘fresh’ and ‘new’ but are a reinvigorated freshness or newness. Here, the ‘once more’ indicates a starting again, or a situation in which ‘the re’ is continually in process. In this sense, the ‘cycle’ or ‘repressed present’ that Suvi and John note is of significance. Refreshing conjures new material but this new material is never-ending. There is always more content and so the ‘latest’ data is always being refreshed, as Melissa and Iris say.

In addition to ‘starting again’, the cycle of refreshing also involves, as the second and third definitions of ‘the re’ specify, returning, remaining and receding, and being ‘behind or after’. With the possibility of constant refreshing, there is a sense not only of returning, once more, but also of never being on top of or ahead of the content. Such a situation might involve, as the third definition also highlights, being in a ‘withdrawn state’ – ‘recluse’, ‘reticent’ – as John’s explanations of the feeling of being sucked into the mindless scroll as ‘incredibly unpleasant’ seems to suggest – and/or a receding from it. John was one of many participants who discussed ways in which they were trying to control their digital media use by limiting it and/or by expanding their engagement with other non-digital activities. During our interview, for
instance, Giles noted how he had placed his phone face down on the table with the sound turned up as part of a strategy to cope with its potential to ‘keep bugging me’, while Bea talked about how they had become more mindful of how long they spent on their phone and what they did whilst on it to try to maintain mental good health. The withdrawn or potentially stressful or upsetting states described by John, Giles and Bea serve to indicate the affectivity of ‘the re’; the ‘frequentive or intensive’ or ‘negative’ force of definitions four and five.

Here, the ongoing refinement or renunciation (‘recant’) of people’s engagements with digital media is of note. As many participants explained, there were both positive and negative affects associated with digital media, and a continual assessment and reassessment of how these were experienced and might be managed had become embedded in their lives. In one of the group interviews, for example, the girls discussed a ‘spectrum’ of positive and negative aspects of social media, and talked about how they might recognise and balance them. What these various definitions and examples of ‘the re’ indicate is a complication of a linear temporality – a straightforward ‘going forward’ – by insisting on how a range of temporalities might be important. These include how in a ‘going forward’ there may also be a ‘going back’, or a ‘being behind’ and a sense of the continual looping of temporality; a perpetual starting again.

On this point, it is worth noting its origin from Latin as ‘again, back’. While ‘back’ is a feature of other ‘re’ words – including repeat and restrain – ‘again’ might be understood as more specific to refresh. The Microsoft Word Dictionary defines ‘again’ in these ways:

a·gain (adverb)

1. at another time
2. as before
3. differently
4. in addition
5. moreover
6. these days
7. after all
All of these definitions are of interest to an understanding of refreshing, for they all indicate its dynamism and multiplicities. Refreshing provides ‘another time’ that is ‘different’, ‘in addition’, ‘more’ and ‘moreover’ and that can yet also, ‘after all’, appear or feel ‘as before’. Moreover, it is also a temporality that is done ‘repeatedly’, incessantly: ‘again and again’.

It is this aspect of refresh that helps to make sense of the present, as a temporality that is both distinctive and with porous boundaries, that is both immediate and capable of going on, and on. Understanding refreshing in terms of the again and again, for example, captures how it is explained by Adam as ‘looking to see if there’s anything interesting that comes up’. Flicking, scrolling or pressing to increase the chances of content that ‘pique’ the interest can introduce the most recent posts into the feed as well as re-order content so that posts not seen before appear. In both of these cases, ‘freshness and relevance’ are delivered by digital devices (Weltevrede, Helmond and Gerlitz, 2014: 135). Adam contrasts searching web content with ‘just looking’, noting that they are differing processes; the former is aimed at finding specific content that is defined in advance of the search (a place or time, information about something in particular), the latter involves an openness to what might be(come) interesting. Whereas the former is more focused on content, so that the search is a means to an end, with the latter the search might be understood as that which folds together the process by which content is found and engaged with and the content itself. That is, the search is as important as the content that is found. Gaillard’s argument about Proust and ‘recherche’, where she argues that the ‘temps perdu’ involves ‘time lost’ and ‘time wasted’ captures an aspect of this search; it is pointed to in how Suvi and John discuss the presents of being sucked into and cycling across social media platforms. However, understood in terms of the ‘re’ of refreshing, searching might also involve refreshing content to deliberately waste or lose time; whilst waiting for a bus or a kettle to boil, whilst taking or making a break from paid or informal care work. In these senses, the search may be more aimless than the ones
directed towards finding specific content, but no less significant. That content may be refreshed again and again, then, designates a present temporality in its capacity to both move on and be still, be of interest and be dull, flattened, or oppressive.

The againness of refreshing also signals the situation of the present as being an in between temporality. This is indicated by the explanations of refreshing as a temporality that is a cycling or scrolling or ‘just looking’; a temporality where linearity is suspended, paused, or scrambled. In one of the group art workshops conducted at the school with a group of 16-17 year old young women, we explored ways to visualise the times of social media. As I noted above, one small group of three of the students made a diagram using ‘an acronym to explain social media but in an unexpected way. So we talked about generations and we thought about positive words that we could use to describe it. So then we did “growth, engulfed, neglect, evolution, restart again, trance, inspiration, options, never-ending and separation” (Rima). They go on to explain how the acronym represents a spectrum of affects and emotions that social media can generate:

we wanted to use positive sides of the spectrum as well as negative sides and then we put restart in the middle because it can be looked at as a bad thing and a good thing. So we thought it was just interesting to see the type of things that social media can evoke as well as the type of things that it makes you strive towards being. So it inspires you as well as it also separating you. So we found that quite interesting, the different sides of the spectrum.

Notable here is where ‘restart’ is placed in the spectrum. The students explain this placing in terms of ‘restart’ being potentially both a positive and negative ‘thing’ – it thus sits ‘in the middle’ of the spectrum of ‘the types of things that social media can evoke’. What is also notable is how this is described as ‘restart again’, which seems to indicate the possibility of changing the affects and emotions that social media evoke, away from the negative ones and towards those that are more positive, for example. ‘Restart’ in this sense is ‘in the middle’ because it offers the possibility of beginning anew, or differently.
It is important to recognise that the students select a specific ‘re’ word — restart, defined as ‘a new start or beginning’, and also as ‘to start again’. While the specificities of this ‘re’ word must be taken into account, the ‘re’ of ‘restart’ functions in a similar way to the ‘re’ of ‘refresh’ in designating again; a new start that may, at the same time also refer to ‘as before’. This is a new start that might be repeated — again and again — and where the newness may involve stasis, suspension and a going ‘back’. Understood temporally, the ‘re’ of ‘restart’ and of ‘refresh’ indicates a present temporality of both inertia and movement, continuity and change, the same and the new, difference and repetition (Deleuze, [1968] 1994). This is a present temporality because it is in the middle. In the middle of a plethora of affects and emotions, and in the middle in composing a temporality that, in moving on and going back, somehow stays where it is, again.

The refreshing experience

I asked above about how the refresh experience — and specifically its temporalities — might be coming to compose a contemporary structure of feeling. Returning to Williams’ elucidation of the television experience as constituting a structure of feeling in the 1970s, it is notable that the digital media experience shares some aspects with it. These include the ‘ruefully admitted experience’ that it is ‘very difficult to switch off’ either television or digital media — as with television, the refreshing of digital media suggests ‘the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay’ — and that both may facilitate ‘a very difficult experience to interpret’ — as Williams describes of television, digital media may also involve ‘bizarre disparities’ within ‘a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings’. In these senses, the concept of flow, developed to understand broadcast television, is also a feature of digital media. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012) argue, life with and after new media is ‘the incessant flow of mediation’ (2012: xvi).

However, Williams defines televsional flow as the uninterrupted sequencing of units (adverts and trailers as well as programmes) so as to ‘move along’ the audience seamlessly. This implies that the temporality of televsional flow is
linear and progressive; the ideal experience (from the point of view of programmers if not the audience) is one where intervals, interruptions and ‘bizarre disparities’ are smoothed into ‘a single’ flow that moves the audience from the beginning of the evening to its intended end. Furthermore, Williams argues, televisual flow is possible and desirable because television as a technology enables the sequencing of different units ‘in a single dimension and in a single operation’, which he describes as a whole.

What becomes apparent from concentrating on refreshing as an integral and mundane aspect of digital media culture is that a temporality that does not so much move along from past to present to future but both moves and stays still, seems more characteristic of experience today. In this sense, then, the digital media experience is also in many ways distinct from broadcast media. That is, as I’ve suggested, a present temporality seems to distinguish the refreshing experience. Indeed, while the television experience involves a whole, the refreshing experience is a temporality that is in between; it involves the middle.

Celia Lury (2012) explains the middle as ‘no longer defined with respect to determinable end points; rather it is an infinite and infinitely divisible space’ (2012: 190). She argues that this understanding or fantasy of the ‘pure middle’ is ‘the work of a medium, or, in media res’ (2012: 190); that is, in the middle, in the midst. The present of refreshing can be understood in these terms; as a temporality that is defined not in terms of external beginning or end points but in relation to its own contraction and/or expansion through the ways in which it continues and/or is subject to restarts and/or repetitions; the ‘againness’ of the present. This is a middle not only in terms of its location within a spectrum or between the past and future but also because it is always in the midst. While Williams defines the television experience as a flow of moving along, the refreshing experience is the production of and dwelling within the midst of the flow of mediation. This middle may be expanded or contracted in terms of how long it lasts – from a quick refresh of content on a webpage or app to the endless cycling within one or across many different platforms – and in terms of affective intensity – from bitty to endless, from stressful to mindless to
inspiring. This refreshing experience is then, in Williams’ terms, an ‘active’, ‘flexible’, ‘temporal present’ (1977: 128) and part of what constitutes a particular structure of feeling today. That is, refreshing is, as Lury argues of the middle, ‘one of the animating dynamics of contemporary mediation’ (2012: 190), providing the sense of a collective, yet differentiated, contemporary, everyday and unexceptional experience.

Acknowledgements

Versions of this paper have been given at the Critical and Legal Conference, Open University, 2018, the ‘Re’ Network, CRASSH, University of Cambridge, 2019, and the Mediating Presents workshop, Goldsmiths, 2019. Thanks to Matthew Howard, Ruichen Zhang and participants at these events and to anonymous reviewers of this paper for sharpening my understanding of the issues explored. This research has been funded by the Leverhulme Trust (Grant number: RF-2017-632\8).

References


Gunaratnam, Y. et al. (2017) *Every Minute of Every Day*. Available at: http://research.gold.ac.uk/20602/.


introduction to the special issue’, New Media and Society, 22(9), pp. 1521–1527.


Lupinacci, L. (2020) “‘Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing’: liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media’, Media, Culture and Society, Online first. DOI: 10.1177/0163443720939454


**Notes**

1 On the relationships between time and temporality, see Coleman (2020a), which also discusses interviews from this research project.
2 On another ‘re’ word – this time ‘reload’ – and gaming, see Juul, 2004.
3 On buffering as a further practice through which temporality is made, see Geoghegan (2019).
4 Holzhey and Wedemeyer’s discussion pays particular attention to Rita Felski’s (2015) discussion of – and challenge to – the prefix ‘de’, which interestingly for this paper, compares unfavourably to the ‘re’. Felski’s discussion is based on the predominance of ‘de’ to critique. She argues, ‘We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the “de” prefix (its power to demystify, destabilise, denaturalise) at the expense of the “re” prefix; its ability to recontextualise, reconfigure, or recharge perception’ (2015: 17; see Holzhey and Wedemeyer, 2019: viii).
5 Reeve’s point here about the flow of historical time might be re-formulated to address the flow that Williams’ identifies as key to the television experience. That is, *The Simpsons* as a specific programme or unit may contribute to the flow of broadcast television, but its temporality is not of this flow.
6 For Kember and Zylinska, mediation is a series of flows into or out of which media are cut; media are temporary stabilisations of mediation. While Kember and Zylinska don’t explicitly discuss Williams’ concept of flow and its relationship with ‘units’, there may be further productive connections to make here.
7 Lury’s point here is drawn from the work of Peter Fenves (2001) who is discussing Walter Benjamin, and is in the context of understanding the significance of the middle to ‘live methods’ in sociology and other social research.

**Rebecca Coleman** is Reader in the Sociology Department, Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research and teaching span sociology, media and cultural studies and feminist theory, and she has particular interests in temporality (presents and futures), digital media, bodies, affect and inventive methodologies. Recent publications include *Glitterworlds: The Future Politics of a Ubiquitous Thing* (2020, Goldsmiths Press) and a special issue of *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture* on Feminist New Materialist Practice (2019, edited with Tara
Page and Helen Palmer). Publications that develop the idea of mediated presents can be found in the journals, Distinktion (2020), New Media and Society (2020) and Cultural Studies (2017).

Email: rebecca.coleman@gold.ac.uk
Connecting Present Moments and Present Eras with Interactive Documentary
ELLA HARRIS
Birkbeck, University of London, UK

Abstract
Interactive documentary is a non-linear digital form of documentary that allows users numerous pathways through multimedia content. This was the original meaning behind the abbreviation i-docs (Aston and Gaudenzi, 2012) and the sense in which I use the term. While in recent years the ‘i’ has expanded to include immersion, my focus remains on interactivity and nonlinearity. The nonlinearity and multimodality of i-docs are being taken forward into experiments with i-docs as an academic method, including my own.
In this paper I discuss my use of i-docs to study London’s pop-up culture, focusing on two kinds of ‘present’ that i-docs illuminated. First, I explore how working with i-docs elucidated present moments as they are imagined and experienced in pop-up culture: a phenomenon defined by its celebration of ephemerality and unpredictability. Secondly, I explore how the i-doc foregrounded pop-up culture’s role within the present era; revealing pop-up as implicated in politicized processes of urban change in the post 2008 crash climate. Overall, the paper demonstrates how i-docs can make us attentive to both present moments and present eras as well as, crucially, to the relationships between these two kinds of present.

Keywords
Interactive Documentary, Pop-up, Affect, Structure of Feeling, Presents

This paper explores interactive documentary as an approach that can grapple with two kinds of ‘present’, present moments and present eras, as well as, crucially, with the relations between them. Interactive Documentaries, or ‘i-docs’, are defined here
as web based, multimedia documentary productions that can take a range of formats. Most significantly, these kinds of i-docs are nonlinear, offering content that users can navigate through via multiple pathways, as well as various interactive capacities. Interactive documentaries offer a burgeoning creative method within artistic and commercial documentary making worlds. In recent years, there has been an increase in academic communities engaging with them, not only as an object of study but as a methodology too (Aston et al., 2017; Aston & Odorico, 2018, Harris, 2016; Smith & Tyszczuk, 2016). In this paper, I examine how the formal properties of i-docs enable them to evoke and interrogate both the qualities of present moments – the affective atmospheres specific to a certain space-time – as well as those of present eras – the structures of feeling that define a zeitgeist.

The paper focuses on interactive documentary as methodology. I discuss an i-doc I made myself about London’s pop-up culture (the trend for temporary and mobile place making, most centrally in the leisure and consumption industries). As I explore, the i-doc focused on the localized present moments of pop-up places but also on the structures of feeling that pop-up is part of. Importantly, as I’ll illustrate, the process of making my i-doc also illuminated the nonlinear interconnections between present moments and present eras.

**Reading Present Moments and Present Eras through Affective Atmospheres and Structures of Feeling**

In exploring the present moments of pop-up I build, theoretically, on a recent surge of interest in ‘affective atmospheres’; a term that refers to the ‘particular feel’ or ‘tone’ of ‘sites, episodes or encounters’ (Anderson, 2014: 138). Affective atmospheres are collectively felt, although individually differentiated: they involve feelings that belong to and engage a group of people while impacting on each one in unique ways. They are what give situations their specific ‘charge’ (Anderson, 2014: 139), like the charge felt at a sporting event or in a nightclub. This charge can be political and politicized, as, for example, in the affective atmosphere of hope at the inauguration of America’s first black president, Barak Obama (Anderson, 2014: 2).
In conceptualising pop-up’s relationship to the present era, I draw on and contribute to a renewed interest in structures of feeling as well as a longstanding body of work on pervasive cultural logics. Raymond Williams captured how certain points in social history have a distinctive sense via his conceptualisation of ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977: 133), the lived and felt experience of emerging meanings and values in a given era (132). Multiple structures of feeling can co-exist within an era and can be experienced more, less and differently by different social groups within it. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in structures of feeling within which much work identifies precarity as a key structure of feeling today (Anderson, 2014; Berlant, 2011), operating in connection with others such as neoliberalism as a structure of feeling of ‘unconstrained submission to administration’ (Highmore, 2016: 154) and structures of feeling linked to internet technologies and reality TV ‘characterized by an anxious need to talk back, weigh in and be seen’ (Hearn, 2010).

For Ben Anderson, structures of feeling, like affective atmospheres, are also affective and work to mediate and condition collective life. However, they function differently to affective atmospheres; setting ‘limits’ and exerting ‘pressure’ while an atmosphere, on the other hand, ‘surrounds’ and ‘envelops’ (Anderson, 2014: 139). That is to say, as a structure, structures of feeling set parameters as to how life is experienced and felt and as to what actions are likely to unfold and how, whereas atmospheres colour a particular situation, encouraging and enhancing feelings and behaviours but without determining durable arrangements and distributions of sense. In considering the structures of feeling that pop-up relates to, I explore structures of feeling as phenomena that, while functioning on the level of the sensory, are akin to a set of logics and assumptions at work in a given era. With regards to pop-up, I see it as instrumental in the structure of feeling of precarity dominant within an era (in the UK setting) that can be loosely demarcated as ensuing from the 2008 crash and persisting up until roughly 2016, from which point a series of events including the UK’s vote to leave the European Union, the election of Boris Johnson (2019) and the onset of the Covid-19 Crisis (2020) transmuted this structure of feeling into one of more heightened volatility and absurdity (in an Existential sense).

My treatment of structures of feeling as entailing assumptions and imperatives connects the concept to accounts of cultural logics. For example, Fredric Jameson’s
important work on postmodernism and late capitalism used the term ‘cultural logics’ to identify the ways of thinking and feeling distinctive to that socio-economic setting (Jameson, 1991). David Harvey similarly focuses on the spatiotemporal logics and distributions that characterise eras including modernity and postmodernity (Harvey, 1990). These concepts, like structures of feeling, help to elucidate how particular moments in history have distinctive patternings of thinking and feeling, emergent from, and reproductive of, their socio-economic, political and cultural conditions. Put in proximity to structure of feeling, they help to focus on how shared affects and moods contain and shape socio-political agendas and limit what is thought, accepted and encouraged.

**Connecting Affective Atmospheres and Structures of Feeling with i-Docs**

As well as developing work on affective atmospheres and on structures of feeling distinctly, a key contribution of this paper is illuminating the complex connections between affective atmospheres, as operative in localized present moments, and structures of feeling, as defining and delimiting a given era. I show how, while affective atmospheres can coincide with and reinforce structures of feeling, these two differently scaled affective forces can also be in conflict or contradiction; can undermine or transmute each other as well, or instead of, working in tandem. I illustrate this with reference to the i-doc I built for my doctoral research on pop-up culture which can be accessed at the site [www.thetemporarycity.com](http://www.thetemporarycity.com) with the password TTC. To create the i-doc I worked with a web developer who coded its interface, based on my designs, and embedded the content I made; several short videos as well as collaged image and text boxes made on Photoshop (which I call ‘outside the temporary city boxes’). Here, I show how considering how to express pop-up and its implications through the i-doc’s design necessitated reflection on the specific elements and relations that constitute pop-up’s affective atmospheres. Equally, it necessitated consideration of pop-up’s role in the construction of the present era’s structure of feeling and the socio-economic and political conditions it is rooted in. Crucially, I also show how making the i-doc assisted me in thinking through the entanglements of affective atmospheres and structures of feeling.
As you read this it would be helpful to engage with the i-doc to get a sense of how the features I discuss operate in practice. However, I won’t give suggestions to engage with particular parts of the i-doc while reading particular parts of the paper. As a nonlinear medium, each experience of the i-doc is different from the last so it’s neither advisable nor possible to try and follow its contents in the order I talk about them. I’ll leave it up to the reader how and at what stages they choose to engage with the i-doc but it’s useful to remember that its primary purpose in my work was as a methodology rather than an output and my intention in sharing it is to show how its construction enriched my thinking about connections between present moments and present eras.

**i-docs: Lineage and Context**

Creative media including film or photography have been explored by many scholars as particularly adept at engaging with the qualities of present moments and present eras (Williams, 1977; Jameson, 1991; Harvey, 1990). My use of interactive documentary builds on this tradition, but rather than looking to analyse existing creative media to understand such qualities – as academics more often do – I engage their production as a methodology. For Fredric Jameson, it is in literature and other art forms that structures of feeling are first manifest. Likewise, David Harvey has explored how the logics of a given era are expressed through creative media including how postmodern films like *Blade Runner* capture the compressed spacetimes and unequal socio-economic structures of late capitalism. The affective atmospheres of localized present moments too, are, as many have explored, well evoked by particular art forms. For example, film scholars have examined how the slow cinema movement engages with the atmospheres of boredom and dead time (Caglayan, 2016; Schoonover, 2012). As I will outline, i-docs, like other media, have been used to engage with both the experience of being present in particular circumstances and with the distinctive qualities of present eras. Their interactive and nonlinear form gives them exciting capacities for engaging with the nuances and complexities of these two kinds of present.

I-docs can be positioned within a wider context of past and contemporary technologies of digital storytelling. The nonlinear formats they engage build on
creative experiments with digital media including those before the advent of Web 2.0 (which foreground participation, user engagement and user generated content). For example, CD-ROM art was an offline format for interactive creative projects, many of which explored concepts of mutability, relationality, agency and multiplicity that are central to interactive documentary today, as noted from the categories of CD-ROM art that made up the exhibition ‘Contact Zones’ in 1999 (Murray, 1999). CD-ROM art capitalized on the new interactive and nonlinear capacities of CD-ROM technologies and their hypertext format to examine such themes as well as to create a space of encounter for audiences that was at once solitary and collaborative. They also prefigured web-based interactive documentaries by using the limiting functions of interactive technologies, as well as the exploratory and participatory ones, to construct meaning. For example, the piece Rehearsal of Memory was a ‘navigable composite body made up of skin scans taken from inmates’ at a hospital for the criminally insane. Users were invited to explore this composite body but ‘only able to do so in ways allowed by the project architecture’, so as to ‘organize the interactions to undermine the conventional relationships operating between the inmates of such institutions and the general public’ as well as to look ‘back out at the user’, effecting an escape’ (Bassett, 2007: 103). As in my own work with i-docs and other i-doc projects, Rehearsal of Memory uses interactive technologies to foreground power dynamics within the issue depicted – here criminal insanity – by playing with both what interactive technologies enable and what they refuse or constrain in terms of user agency.

More recent experiments with storytelling in nonlinear digital media are mostly online and include ‘immersive journalism’ and ‘news games’, alongside i-docs. Sometimes the term i-docs is expanded to include these media, although in this paper I use it in its narrower sense. Mainstream news services like The Guardian in the UK and The New York Times in the USA have experimented with using virtual reality to ‘create deeper engagement and empathy with their audiences’ (Laws, 2020: 213). For example, Guardian VR is a section of the Guardian News Outlet specifically for immersive, virtual reality journalism, engaging users in topics including ‘A virtual experience of autism’ or ‘a virtual experience of waiting for asylum.’ Interactive news games can similarly put users in the position of vulnerable people such as refugees, migrants or participants in national revolutions in order to engage them with the
complexities, insecurities and ethical ambiguities of decision making in crisis contexts (Plewe & Fursich, 2018; Bogost, et al., 2010). Like i-docs, these interactive, digital forms of factual storytelling seek to foreground nonlinearity and agency. Where i-docs differ from these forms of journalism is that their interfaces normally emphasize the multiplicity and plurality of separated pieces of content from which wider logics, feelings and meanings emerge as the user engages with them.

**i-docs; the field**

Interactive documentaries are made on a variety of budgets and by multiple kinds of practitioners. They include artistic experiments and academic projects as well as large-budget productions by institutions that have traditionally focused on conventional films or factual content such as the National Film Board of Canada, The New York Times and Sundance Institute’s New Frontier Lab. Others are being produced by technologically focused institutions such as MIT from their OpenDocLab (Kaufman, 2013). They require relatively large budgets as well as somebody to monitor the sites they’re hosted on after the project completion, which can be a barrier to entry for those looking to make interactive documentary work.

Given the claims that interactive documentary makers and theorists make about their capacities for audience engagement and empowerment (Nash, 2014a; Cortes-Selva & Perez-Escolar, 2016), not much is actually known about who engages with i-docs and how (Kaufman, 2013). There have been some academic studies on how audiences interact with specific i-docs, including how meaning is produced through interactivity in *Fort McMoney*, about Fort McMurray, an oil producing city in Alberta, Canada (Nogueira, 2015) and in *Bear 71*, which is about threats to grizzly bears in Banff National Park (also Alberta, Canada) (Nash, 2014b). However, such studies are more focused on qualitative experiences of participants solicited specifically to interact with these projects rather than on wider questions around the normal audiences of such projects and the geographies of distribution and consumption for i-docs. The limited investigations that have taken place suggest that interactive documentaries primarily reach younger audiences and those already involved in digital cultures; ‘tech-savvy millennials: designers, programmers, film industry professionals, filmmakers, and other early-adopters’ (Kaufman, 2013). Most of them have relatively
small numbers of viewers. In 2016, 300,000 viewers for an interactive documentary project over a four year period would have been considered a success, although many of these views would be brief visits to their websites, sometimes lasting less than five minutes. It has been suggested that, as a new medium, users are often unsure how to interact with interactive documentaries (Nash, 2014b), which have very different, and sometimes ambiguous, semantic and technological structures to traditional documentary, or how long to engage with one for; given they often have no fixed length.

Interactive documentaries then, seem to not yet have found a mainstream audience base beyond the world of ‘academia, creative and cultural institutions’ that ‘has developed around digital storytelling experiments’ (Cucinelli, et al., 2018). This enables them to remain a genre defined by experimentation, although codified conventions have been defined (Nash, 2017; Nash, 2014b; Aston & Gaudenzi, 2012). Most academic attention to the experiments of i-doc makers focus on their political agendas as a medium equipped to provide ‘new ways of engaging with social issues and opportunities for forms of self-representation’ (Nash, 2017: 9) as well as to foreground and foster responsibility and agency (Favero, 2013). However, the temporalities of i-docs, including the ways they construct the present, are also novel and experimental. Elsewhere, I’ve explored how their formal properties make them especially attuned to nonlinear spatiotemporality and have argued that analysing i-docs can help us to engage with the varied politics and implications of nonlinear spatiotemporal logics (Harris, 2016). Before detailing my own methodological experiments with interactive documentary I’ll briefly contextualise my project within some examples of commercial projects to show how the method is more widely used to engage with both present moments and present eras.

**i-docs as Engagement with Presents**

The i-doc making process is a process of practice-led research. Within my own work, thinking about how to design the i-doc’s interface – its infrastructure, aesthetics, and interactive capacities as well as the content and its curation – was simultaneously a process of thinking about the logics and implications of pop-up culture. The same approach to i-doc construction as a mode of grasping the mechanisms of an issue or
subject is evident in other i-doc projects too; including in relation to grasping the atmospheres and logics of present moments and present eras.

In my own i-Doc, as the next section explores, I experimented with features in order to express the affective atmosphere of immersion and ephemerality in the present moments generated by pop-up places. Some i-docs generate affective atmosphere through interactive elements. For example, Thank you for Playing (2017) about gambling, opens with a game, asking users to keep track of which of three chips has a heart icon on it as they’re shuffled around. This interactive activity subsumes the user into the atmosphere of suspense and compulsive repetition that defines gambling. Others use the multimedia capacities of i-docs to create experiences of present moments, for example by contrasting still images with voiceovers. Roxham (2018) takes us to the moments when Royal Canadian Mounted Police intercept asylum seekers at the US/Canadian border. In the non VR version of the i-doc, still images of the silhouettes of asylum seekers at the border, normally with their hands up in surrender, are coupled with recordings of exchanges with border control officials. The still images juxtaposed with the unedited recordings give a sense of the intense atmosphere as asylum seekers are frozen in fear, and suddenly stripped of agency, as this pivotal moment unfolds around them. For other i-docs, the process of its curation and maintenance is in itself the process of keeping alive the atmosphere of a present moment. 18 Days in Egypt (2015), created during the Arab Spring, captures an affective atmosphere of hope and possibility. It functions like a database, where people can upload their own footage or photos of their experiences of the uprising. Its tagline is ‘You witnessed it, you recorded it. Now, let’s write our country’s history’; aligning participation with political participation, as interactive documentaries are often described to do (Aston, et al., 2017). Almost a decade on from the Arab Spring, at a time when the promises of the revolution have largely dissipated, 18 Days in Egypt reminds users of the atmospheres that defined that present and attempts to retain its spirit. If hope can be a ‘resource’ (Anderson, 2014: 1) then 18 Days in Egypt stores and restores that resource in a period when it’s hard to hold on to.

As I also explore in the next section, considering the logics by which the component features of my i-doc should connect with one another enabled me to elucidate pop-
up’s relationship to its present era; the structure of feeling within which it is operative. Again, this expression of structures of feeling – meanings and values as they are lived (Williams, 1977: 133), via the system of an interactive documentary is evident in other projects too. For example, *How to Create a Financial Crisis* (2017) uses a comic book style format that users click through to involve them in thinking about the meanings and values that emerged from and informed the crash of 2008. The interactive elements remind the user of their agency as a ‘financial player’ (as the project labels them), as they must engage in answering questions to progress to the next frames. However, the questions asked are all very leading and responses are usually limited to a choice between two glib answers. In this way, the interactive documentary echoes the structure of feeling of the present economic climate – of powerlessness on behalf of the public – by linking content with questions that seem key to the i-docs progression but are in fact epiphenomena. The comic book style evokes the frivolity with which financial elites play with risk, and thereby with the fates of ordinary people.

Many interactive documentaries use their own digital structures to reflect on the values and mechanisms of digital cultures in the present era in a meta-, self-referential way. For example, *Do Not Track* (2015) responds to anxiety about how data is used by big companies in the current era. It invites users to learn about the exchange value of their information and ‘what is happening without your permission’, mirroring the process by itself tracking the user’s data while they engage with the project. *Seven Digital Deadly Sins* (2014) also speaks to the cultural logics of the digital age, examining “our modern-age sense of right and wrong” via an interface on which a web of icons are laid out that link to illustrated articles about how the seven deadly sins manifest in digital behaviours. The interface of *Seven Digital Deadly Sins* echoes and reproduces the experience of an ‘internet wormhole’; a sprawling, addictive path of hyperlinked content. Both interactive documentaries evoke a structure of feeling defined by our anxiety about how internet technologies are changing the way that people and societies think, communicate and behave, and use their interactive and nonlinear formats to elucidate the mechanisms behind these changes.
Mediating Presents with interactive documentary as Method

In the rest of this paper I now turn to my methodological work with interactive documentaries. Having shown how commercial i-docs use their formal properties to engage with both present moments and present eras, I now discuss how making an interactive documentary as part of my research into London’s pop-up culture enabled me to engage with its productions of present moments and present eras as well as, importantly, the connections between those two types of present.

Pop-up Culture

Pop-up culture is a trend for temporary and mobile spaces. Most centrally, it includes spaces of leisure and consumption, such as pop-up bars, restaurants, cinemas and shops. Recently, however, pop-up has expanded to include spaces of housing and welfare, including pop-up libraries, pop-up emergency accommodation and pop-up courts of law. Pop-up began as a ‘compensatory’ urban form (Harris, 2020) in the aftermath of the 2008 recession, responding to high vacancy rates and funding cuts by encouraging charities, creative groups and small businesses to temporarily occupy empty spaces while the economy recovered. However, while starting out as a better than nothing option in crisis times, it is now a highly popular kind of urbanism, used by big brands like Adidas or Fullers and incorporated within the urban place making strategies of most cities in the Global North.

Pop-up culture is interesting for producing particular kinds of present moments, with distinctive affective atmospheres including of immersion, interstitality, flexibility, surprise and secrecy (Harris, 2015; 2020). As a phenomenon defined by ephemerality, pop-ups are performatively temporary and frequently promised to involve secret and surprising elements. Many pop-ups market themselves as immersive, garnering appeal from offering visitors sensory, haptic and imaginative experiences that often involve performances, themed decorations and outfits and/or the recreation of fictional or historical worlds. Pop-ups also cultivate an atmosphere of possibility, envisaging the city as a flexible fabric full of potential for change and strewn with interstitial spaces from which new activities and ideas can emerge.
Elsewhere I have argued that pop-up culture’s logics and affective atmospheres work to normalize and glamorize precarity in the post 2008 city (Harris, 2020; 2015) by rebranding precarity’s characteristics¹. This rebranding, I think, happens through a particular interaction between the affective atmospheres of pop-up and precarity as a structure of feeling. In his discussion of affective atmospheres, Ben Anderson (2009: 77) discusses a famous passage by Karl Marx and notes an intriguing question posed by Marx:

“although the atmosphere in which we live, weighs upon every one with a 20,000 lb. force, do you feel it?”

For me, the implications of this question are relevant to the atmospheres and structures of feeling produced by pop-up culture. I have argued that pop-up’s affective atmospheres stop us from feeling precarity as a broader structure of feeling; instead transmuting the qualities of precarity so that they are experienced positively. For example, rather than experience instability, pop-up gives us flexibility; rather than experience uncertainty, it gives us surprise. As such, the localized present moments produced by pop-up culture – the atmospheres at its events – have a specific and important relationship to the structure of feeling of precarity in the present era; ensuring that precarity is not felt in full. In the rest of this section I detail how making an interactive documentary about pop-up culture helped me to explore this relationship.

Present Moments in the Temporary City

In designing the interactive documentary I thought carefully about how to give the user an experience of being present in the kind of affective atmospheres that pop-up cultivates. When you arrive there is a button saying ‘enter’ that takes you through to the main home page. The word ‘enter’ was chosen over ‘next’ (which I’d previously used) to evoke the immersive atmosphere of pop-up places. In pop-up culture, immersion can be understood as ‘the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world’ (Griffiths, 2013); the ‘enter’ button evokes this sense of entering a demarcated space. While this space is hosted online, the enter button signals to the visitor that another mode of attention is now required. The fact that you have to access the space via this initial page, as a kind of
gateway, also echoes how pop-ups demarcate themselves from other city spaces, generating an atmosphere of secrecy and interstitiality.

There are two options for how to access the interactive documentary’s content. A category view allows users to browse all the clips available, sorted by three ‘types’; clips about shipping container spaces, ones about supper clubs and others about pop-up cinemas. However, the user is encouraged to access the interactive documentary via the other route – ‘play the pop-up city’ – as this option is made larger on the home page. In this option, users are invited to ‘Experience pop-ups as they come and go by clicking on the icons’ or ‘following suggested links at the ends of clips to continue with a common theme or aesthetic.’ Users are also warned not to ‘expect to catch all the pop-ups first go.’ From here, another button, labelled ‘explore’ takes users through to the play page.

On this page, icons signalling video clips are displayed on an adjusted map of London. There are three kinds of icon signalling the three kinds of pop-up I focused on; container spaces, pop-up cinemas and supper clubs. A calendar at the bottom of the page marks the passage of time, as icons appear and disappear across the map, signalling places popping up and down. The user has from January 1st until December 31st to explore the temporary city, a window that lasts ten minutes of ‘real’ time.

Clicking on an icon opens up a video about the place it pertains to. Some videos are interviews with the owners of pop-ups while others are exploratory clips about a pop-up place or event. Each has a caption that briefly explains the context. At the end of each clip links are offered that allow the user to continue following a theme or aesthetic from the clip just watched, or to see what’s happening ‘outside the temporary city’ (a feature discussed later). They can also choose to go back to the map. For example, the clip about Backyard Cinema, a pop-up film screening event in a church, ends with options to “Open More of London’s closed doors”, ‘Continue Exploring the Temporary City’ or ‘see what’s happening outside the temporary city.’

The turning pages of the calendar and the coming and goings of the clips evoke the atmosphere of ephemerality and flexibility in pop-up culture. The pace of these processes is deliberately set fast enough that users are unable to watch all the clips
available in one sitting. After watching a video about one pop-up, the user will return to the map to find that others they had planned to watch have now disappeared. Unable to keep up, the user is then forced to choose, somewhat haphazardly, between the rapidly vanishing options, generating a sense of unpredictability and surprise that is at once stimulating and anxiety inducing; a key element of pop-up’s affective atmospheres.

Having icons rather than still images representing the clips available evokes the atmosphere of secrecy in pop-up culture. Many pop-ups are branded as ‘secret’; including the prominent pop-up cinema company ‘Secret Cinema’ as well as many ‘secret supper clubs’. The secrecy imaginary presents pop-up events as parallel to but separate from more routine city spaces. This is evoked in the interactive documentary by how the user can’t tell from the icon what the clip will be about, as well as by the way that the neon pop-up icons stand out from the muted blue background. The ability to move between pop-ups by following thematic links at the end of clips also suggests the temporary city as a network of connected places, joined by their affiliation with the aesthetics and sentiments of pop-up culture; an inner circle accessed by those with the right cultural capital.

As well as using the design and capacities of the interface to evoke the common affective atmospheres of pop-up culture, the editing of the clips themselves engages with particular versions of this atmosphere at different types of pop-up event. This is clear in the editing of the clip about ‘Pulp Kitchen’. Pulp Kitchen was an immersive cinema screening of the film Pulp Fiction at which spectators were given snacks and drinks to eat at different points in the film; ones that correlated to particular scenes or actions. For example, guests were given a shot of alcohol in a syringe to consume at the point in the film where the character Mia is given an adrenaline shot following a drug overdose. In producing this clip I wanted to engage with how the event cultivated a sense of immersion in the film by linking the on-screen with off-screen events through the consumption of food and drink; making watching the film a bodily experience. Simply showing my footage of people watching the film and consuming the food and drinks wouldn’t have captured how, for a person attending the event, this action felt tied up with the action of the film so I experimented with ways to convey this interconnection of real and reel space. I decided that part of the
clip would be made up of juxtaposed still images of the snacks/drinks given to guests and their on-screen correlates, introduced with gunshot sounds to give a sense of dynamism and integrate them into the *Pulp Fiction* aesthetic of the event. The edit aimed to express the particularities of the immersive atmosphere produced at Pulp Kitchen.

Editing the clips also enabled me to bring out commonalities in the material elements that constitute the atmospheres of pop-ups. In sifting through my footage of supper clubs, for example, I became interested in the doors of the different places in which they were held. In public sites of consumption doorways are usually clearly signposted, left open, made of transparent glass or in some other way marked to attract customers. However, because supper clubs are normally hosted in private spaces the doorways are not designed to be inviting to an unknown stranger and this is part of what gives supper club culture its atmosphere of secrecy. I made sure, therefore, to include establishing shots of doorways, or shots of doors to supper clubs opening in the supper club clips, to foreground this shared experience of entering the space-time of a supper club; stepping through an unmarked door.

**The Temporary City and the Present Era**

As well as evoking the localized affective atmospheres experienced by those present at pop-up places, I also sought in the interactive documentary to engage with the role that pop-up plays in the broader structures of feeling in the present era. In particular, the interactive documentary critically explores the relationship of pop-up to precarity as a structure of feeling that is definitive of life today. Precarity has been identified as a central experience in the present era (Berlant, 2011; Anderson, 2014; Anderson, 2016) and a reality that has now encroached into traditionally privileged middle class communities as well the lives of groups that have longer histories of disenfranchisement and insecurity. Elsewhere I have argued that pop-up culture is both emergent from the precarity that has hit London, and other cities of the Global North, since the 2008 crash, as well as reproductive of it (Harris, 2020). The concept of ‘meanwhile use’ of vacant spaces emerged from the high vacancy rates and landscapes of dereliction following the 2008 crash, and temporary place making appealed to charities, creative groups and small businesses unable to access funding
or generate revenue in this period of recession and austerity. As well as being a result of precarity though, pop-up is also a means by which precarity is disguised and exacerbated. In the direct aftermath of recession, pop-ups covered up the gaps in urban space use that would otherwise signify the scale of the crisis and, in the years since, pop-ups have made temporary and unpredictable forms of labour (and more recently housing and welfare (Harris et. al. 2018) seem not just acceptable but even desirable. As I mentioned earlier and have argued elsewhere, pop-up’s logics work to mute and transfigure experiences of precarity, normalizing and glamorizing it so that insecure ways of living and working appear as actively appealing (Harris, 2020). For example, pop-up places make insecure labour, in what would traditionally be blue collar roles such as bike mending, baking or hair dressing, attractive to university educated, middle class millennials; reframing these vocations as aspirational, hipster activities rather than as downward social mobility (Ocejo, 2017).

Some of the interactive features of my interactive documentary are intended to express pop-up’s relationship to and role in contemporary conditions of precarity. One means of doing this is by using interactivity to mirror the burden pop-up places on workers with a burden placed on i-doc users. Pop-up exacerbates labour precarity, partly by normalizing the idea that work in the creative and cultural industries (as well as more broadly) should be temporary and partly by expecting more of workers, shifting the onus onto them for rejuvenating declining spaces in the aftermath of recession; even though the place rebranding enacted by pop-ups only serves to displace those pop-up businesses when higher value land users return. This weight of expectation on the labour of pop-up workers is echoed in the i-doc by the labour required of the user to keep The Temporary City functioning. In the play option, time doesn’t begin to pass (the calendar pages don’t turn) until the user starts watching a clip. Without their involvement, time stands still so that the i-doc as ‘an independent and standalone artefact does not exist’ (Gaudenzi, 2013: 14). This gives the user power in a sense; a power that reflects how pop-up in some ways democratizes decision making over urban places. However, it also foregrounds the burden of being involved in the interactive documentary, or in pop-up. The necessity of the user to perform work in order for the interactive documentary to function reflects the onus put on individuals by pop-up culture to keep the city functioning at a time of
recession and austerity. Vacant spaces are animated and revitalized, only to raise their value in ways that benefit housing developers.

Other features of the interactive documentary engage users more explicitly with how pop-up culture produces and reproduces precarity, not only for pop-up workers but for those displaced by the gentrification and redevelopment that pop-up paves the way for. The ‘outside the temporary city’ boxes (collages of text and images made in Adobe Photoshop) that I referred to earlier do a large part of this work. As noted previously, they’re offered to users as options at the end of certain clips. The boxes highlight processes that pop-up is involved in but that are not acknowledged within pop-up’s promotion and self-representation. These processes include gentrification as well as the normalization of precarious labour (Graziano & Ferreri, 2014; Ferreri, 2015).

To give one example, the clip about The Artworks, a shipping container mall occupying a vacant site awaiting redevelopment, ends with an option to see ‘outside the temporary city’. The illustrated box that opens up explains how the mall occupies the site of the former Heygate Estate, one of Europe’s largest social housing estates which between 2011 and 2014 was controversially decanted, sold at a loss by the council then knocked down to be turned into expensive flats, displacing its residents far across London and beyond. It offers a critical insight into the functions of the artworks, showing how the container mall is being used by the developers, Lend Lease, to babysit the site while they ready it for construction, while also rebranding it to attract the upper middle class buyers the new flats are aimed at.

The information given in the ‘outside the temporary city’ boxes problematizes the suggestion that pop-up’s transformation of sites are ‘temporary’, as the icons coming and going from the interface might otherwise suggest. While pop-up culture celebrates the supposed flexibility and openness of the city and promises democratized place making, the box described above demonstrates how the participatory spirit of pop-up for pop-up workers can be co-opted and deployed in processes of forced eviction and displacement. The critical interjection is aided by the aesthetics of the illustrated box which depicts a version of the ‘streets in the sky’ that characterise post-WW2 social housing and its utopic vision of urban community (Borges & Marat-Mendes, 2019). Here, however, the streets in the sky are made up
of several fragments of different images of the Heygate Estate, spliced together inexactly, and with a chunk of the image removed and replaced with white gaps, so that the streets appear precarious and perplexing. One pillar of the collaged structure is ungrounded, floating instead above a glossy image of London’s skyline; the version of London desired by developers. The collage also features the famous “Now Here” graffiti that came to epitomize Heygate, a commentary on the estate and its inhabitants as both present and nowhere, socially displaced even before their physical removal.
The interactive documentary’s ending picks up the same critical thread as the ‘outside the temporary city’ box described above. After ten minutes in the ‘play’ page the users’ explorations are interrupted by another pop-up window which takes over the whole screen. The box is made up of collaged developers’ images of glossy new housing blocks, as well as images of workmen on scaffolding affixed to the sides of the buildings. The text informs users that ‘your time in pop-up city is up. Development is due to commence.’ It instructs them instead to ‘visit pop-up city showrooms for information about our one, two or three bed properties and penthouse apartments.’ Albeit somewhat crudely, the ending highlights the teleological progression of the pop-up city towards gentrification; it reveals pop-up as a landscape of apparent flexibility and openness that in reality is subservient to a domineering agenda and trajectory.

**Connecting Present Moments and Present Eras**

The two sections above have explored how making an interactive documentary enabled me to engage with and communicate two kinds of present in pop-up culture; the particular present moments it constructs and the present era, defined by precarity, that it is instrumental in. Importantly, my i-doc also aimed to illuminate the relationship between these two kinds of present, using the interactive experience to enliven my argument that pop-up culture’s logics both emerge from but also rebrand precarity in the present era, so that it becomes not just palatable but desirable (Harris, 2020).

Other scholarship on affective atmospheres and structure of feeling has pointed towards this intersection, illuminating how localized affects and broader structures of feeling interact. This interactions can involve contestation or reinforcement. Esther Hitchen (2019) points towards how localized atmospheres and broader structures of feeling can reinforce each other. She explores how atmospheres of paranoia at a council library are driven by a wider structure of feeling of precarity, and also reproduce that structure of feeling, as the anxiety of the library staff becomes part of a palpable national mood of insecurity and anxiety under austerity. Isabel Airas (2018), on the other hand, describes how, during Corbyn’s campaign to become Labour leader, affective ‘hotspots’ – at key campaign events – were able to counter
pervasive negative affects circulating in the contemporary condition; feelings of disenfranchisement and frustration. Hotspots, as theorized by Airas, are particularly intense affective atmospheres that have the power to influence the trajectories of a broader mood or structure of feeling. Pop-up places, as we’ll see, can be understood as hotspots in this sense; generating affectively charged present moments that alter the overall sense of the present era.

In my interactive documentary the connection between the affective atmospheres of pop-ups and precarity as a structure of feeling is brought out by the outside the temporary city boxes and the ways they illuminate elements of the clips. One clip is about The Floating Cinema, a pop-up cinema on a purpose-built canal barge. The clip explores an event at which a sound artist had come to work with people in Brentford, as part of the creation of a piece of sound art about life along waterways. The editing of the clip is intended to engage viewers with the type of immersive atmosphere curated by The Floating Cinema. Unlike other immersive cinemas, like Secret Cinema, that construct versions of fictional worlds, immersion in The Floating Cinema means bringing an immersive way of seeing to ‘real’ space, inviting visitors to engage more deeply and viscerally with their everyday surroundings. The clip shows how the sound artist generates this immersive way of seeing. It begins with a sound boom being brushed around a bush, but the audio in the clip is not the audio the boom is picking up. The boom is attached to headphones worn by myself, off screen. Instead of being invited to listen to these enhanced sounds, the viewer is made to wonder about their qualities when the artist, removing the boom from the bush, asks ‘how was that?’; suggesting a layer of immersion that only those actually present at the event were privy to. Similarly, the clip later shows another participant rattling a fence while listening to the noises coming through his headphones with a curiosity and fascination that seem bizarre given the mundanity of the sound as captured in the clip.

Elsewhere in the clip we see how the sound artist mobilizes the enhanced auditory perception and immersive atmospheres of the event towards critical agendas. He has constructed a list of sounds to record, aided by suggestions from passers-by and the public via twitter. The list includes things such as “trains, boats, wildlife” but also more intangible experiences of “austerity, apathy, capitalism” and elements of the
soundscape like “accents” that speak to how Brentford has changed over recent years.

In the background, beyond the workshop, we can see an estate agent showing somebody around a showroom for flats at Brentford Lock West, a development of high-spec flats on the waterside. The developers had actually sponsored The Floating Cinema’s event, granting them the space to run it. While I was observing the workshop, one participant went to record the sounds of the builders working on the new flats and returned to tick off ‘gentrification’ from the artist’s list. This foregrounded an obvious tension, where an atmosphere of critical immersion enabled by the sound artist was being facilitated by the very forces it was trying to be critical of. This tension is highlighted in one of the ‘outside the temporary city’ boxes that you can reach as a link from the clip of Floating Cinema. The box conflates images of gentrification from across London. It shows the estate agent from Brentford gesturing towards the London Orbital (a symbol of the Olympic Games-led gentrification of East London), highlighting the redevelopment at Brentford as one instance of a wider process of London’s rebranding and gentrification.

The middle-classes have also become more precarious since the 2008 crash, and under austerity measures and rising housing costs they have been pushed further out of the city to areas like Brentford. This displacement of course leads to a knock-on effect of displacing London’s poorer residents, as costs of living in these once undesirable areas go up too. Creative projects like The Floating Cinema that aim to bring cultural activities to deprived areas can then become entrained with this displacement process as although they target ‘harder to reach’ communities – as they put it – they are appealing to the typically more middle-class communities arriving in such peripheral areas. These newcomers to the area can themselves feel precarious, as they acclimatise to revised expectations of where in the city they can live, and also have much to gain from immersive events like those held by The Floating Cinema, as they seek to form attachments to place. Yet in appealing to this incoming community, these kind of events can counterproductively end up undermining feelings of belonging for those already there and exacerbating the conditions that force them out.
The way that interactive documentary foregrounds The Floating Cinema’s part in this illuminates the contradictory relationship between the kind of present moments it produces and its role in the wider workings of the present era. While the floating cinema creates affective atmospheres defined by critical immersion, the interactive documentary suggests that these critical potentials somewhat fall flat in the face of the overwhelming force of gentrification, serving only to distract from it and compensate for its displacements by offering fleeting moments of engagement with the social histories of places that many people will soon be pushed out of. Moreover, the events can quicken the displacement process, by enhancing the appeal of the area for those who can no longer afford more central or upmarket locations. Indeed, the estate agent pictured in the clip has no doubt arranged viewings to coincide with the art workshop, so that he can demonstrate the area’s cultural activities to prospective buyers.

Other potential user experiences in the interactive documentary illustrate similar connections between present moments and the present era. One of the options offered at the end of The Floating Cinema clip is to ‘follow the river’, a link that takes users to a clip about The Ship’s Kitchen; a supper club on a house boat in Barking. The clip shows how the boat owner has used the ‘quirkiness’ of the supper club’s location on his house boat as a core part of the event’s appeal. As the clip begins we hear the drum roll of Scottish drums that we will later learn are from a band entertaining guests at this Burns Night themed supper club event. The camera moves rapidly towards the door of the barge as the drum roll progresses and finally, as it culminates, my hand emerges from behind the camera to open the door. This build-up of suspense makes entering the boat an exciting experience; an intense present moment defined by an atmosphere of secrecy and surprise, enabled by the unusual location.

However, the ‘outside the temporary city’ box connected to this clip sheds a different light on the supper club’s location, linking it to London’s housing crisis. The collage in the box uses images taken from New London Architecture’s catalogue of architectural designs that can (supposedly) ease London’s housing crisis. It specifically uses ones that involve developments of housing on the waterways, including propositions to create ‘waterhoods’ that will turn ‘generation rent’ into
‘generation float.’ In light of this ‘outside the temporary city’ box, we can see the house boat where The Ship’s Kitchen supper club takes place as evidence of young people forced into compensatory forms of housing (Harris, 2020), such as moving onto a house boat in Barking. The feelings of secrecy and surprise cultivated at the supper club, then, are feelings that divert from and compensate for the diminished housing aspirations of adults coming of age after the 2008 crash. The affective atmosphere of the supper club offers an experience that mutes the precarity of the housing crisis as a structure of feeling, which might otherwise be felt intensely, enabling the host’s housing situation to be received, in part at least, as exciting and unusual. This is a key function of pop-up culture; the generation of affective atmospheres that transfigure a structure of feeling of precarity running through the years following the 2008 recession, generating optimism and enthusiasm regardless of ongoing insecurity.
Conclusions

My interactive documentary then, sought to engage with the atmospheres produced by pop-up culture, illuminating both the experiences of being present at particular pop-ups and the atmosphere of pop-up culture as a whole; typified by immersion, secrecy, surprise, flexibility, interstitiality and ephemerality. However, it also sought to engage with a structure of feeling that because of pop-up’s atmospheres, can go somewhat unnoticed; one of precarity. As the interactive documentary examined, the jubilant atmospheres of pop-up culture transmute the conditions of precarity that it is founded in and reproduces, enabling them to be experienced positively. In this way, making it allowed me to think through the nature of the connection between the affective atmospheres present at pop-ups, as localized space-times, and the structure of feelings that define the present era, which pop-up is instrumental in.

The ability to connect differently scaled elements of ‘the present’ is rooted in the specificities of interactive documentary as a method and as a means of communication. As the examples discussed in this paper illustrate, interactive documentary typically organises collections of content which connect to a broader overall experience. Interactive documentary creation requires the production of individual bits of content, but also attention to how (and why) that content should be organised and linked within a broader interface. It therefore inherently requires contemplation of the relationship between particular moments and the more pervasive logics and feelings that those moments are part of. Crucially, this connection is nonlinear, the broader experience of the interactive documentary emerges from the combination of its contents, but the content is also read through and altered by the feelings and logics of the experience as a totality. Equally, the connection is not necessarily one of reinforcement, as well as supporting the overall mood or message of an interactive documentary, individual pieces of content can also work to contradict or transform that wider totality. These formal qualities of interactive documentary, I argue, can help us to understand the multiple ways in which the affective atmospheres of present moments and the structures of feeling of the present era can interact; an interaction that can be typified by reinforcement, contradiction, or transformation.
As scholars increasingly look to concepts of affect, atmosphere and structure of feeling to understand the workings of the present, it is crucial to interrogate the way these differently scaled elements interact. In this paper I have begun some of this work, showing how interactive documentary is an approach that can help to elucidate these relationships. As I have shown, it is adept at communicating the particular atmospheres of present moments as well as the broader logics and senses of a present era. Most crucially, though, it can shed light on why it is important to attend to these two types of present together. Looking at how present moments and present eras connect reveals the complex, politicized processes that govern what elements of the present are felt; processes that undergird how collective life is encountered and reproduced.

References


Anderson, B. (2009) 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Society and Space,* (2) 77-81


Harris, E. (2016) 'Introducing i-Docs to geography: exploring interactive documentary's nonlinear imaginaries', *Area*.


Smith, J. & Tyszczuk, R. (2016) 'Media, interaction and environmental change: revising 'our place in the world'', s.l.:s.n., i-Docs Symposium, Bristol.


**Notes**

1 For a fuller account of how pop-up’s affective atmospheres interact and glamorize precarity, as well as of how precarity is glamorized through other culture and practices, see Harris, 2020.

2 A celebration of the Scottish poet Robert Burns.

**Ella Harris** is currently a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Geography Department at Birkbeck, University of London. Her Leverhulme funded project explores lockdown and conceptions of freedom within the Covid-19 crisis. This
builds on expertise in urban crisis cultures emerging from the 2008 crash, including pop-up culture and glamorized forms of housing precarity. She works with interactive documentary as an experimental, creative method. Ella is also working on an ongoing collaborative project about shrinking domestic spaces globally. She has published widely on these topics including in her recent monograph *Rebranding Precarity: Pop-up Culture as the Seductive New Normal.*

**Email:** ella.harris@bbk.ac.uk
The Present as Platform

CHRIS INGRAHAM

The University of Utah, USA

Abstract

Recent interest in platform studies has called attention to the ways technologies both afford and constrain creative ways of participating in social and cultural life. Digital platforms have become adept at collecting historical data and using it not just to predict future outcomes, but to produce the present through cultivated expectations of what it will have been. By exploring the case of amateur sound-recording media such as the mixtape, the writable CD, and online playlists, this paper explores how the material constraints of these media change the possibilities for what curated music can communicate. If one result is to mediate different temporal experiences by using timely music to elevate moments into events, then algorithmic music recommendations foreclose the affectability of experience by circumscribing it in advance as deliverable.

Keywords

mixtapes, algorithms, recommendations, event, experience

Platforming Time

As live streaming, status refreshes, launch events, and unboxing videos have become more commonplace, the conspicuously new has become more than spectacle. It has become pre-historical: newness imbued with a sense of historical momentousness ahead of its arrival. Though the acceleration of the cultural field wrought by ever-shorter news cycles, always-on digital technologies, and the relentless pulse of capital is well familiar, techniques to manipulate the felt importance of temporal experience have changed in step with the spread of digital technologies that promise both to deliver personalized content and to enable creative expression for their users. Certainly, within a digital culture that thrives on likes and re-tweets, clickbait and
notifications, the struggle to get more monetized attention is a struggle waged through attempts to deliver newness with great occasion.

In this paper, I am interested in thinking about how newness itself is being appropriated and commodified as a quasi-platform capable of being programmed and manipulated. By “newness,” though, it’s important to note that I am not referring to the materially new, such as the latest product or invention, or even to the conceptually new, such as a breaking news story or idea. Rather, the newness at issue here is the temporally new, that is, the unfurling of the temporal present itself so as to invite experiencing the present in the key of its novelty and micro-historical significance, even if only on a personal scale. The argument is that, by tacitly treating the present as a platform—as something programmable according to certain predetermined rules—digital technologies bent on molecularized personalization can approach the ultimate circumscription of phenomenal experience itself: the foreclosure of surprise and presence by anticipating desire and mediating its fulfillment, as if all experience could be born intensified in advance of its happening.

Recent scholarly interest in platforms has invested in the important work of showing how different media potentiate and circumscribe different possibilities of experience and expression. As an offshoot of media and cultural studies, the growth of platform studies has coincided with an interest in remix culture. The way Jean-Christophe Plantin and his collaborators describe it, as digital content providers began to enlist those who consumed their content to be unpaid producers of it as well—that is, with the rise of Web 2.0 in the 2000s—“scholars began to interrogate the political and cultural implications of these participatory forms of production and remix of content” (2018: 296). Henry Jenkins (2006), for instance, was among the first to lay some groundwork for platform studies to emerge by focusing on the burgeoning remix culture wrought by these new, more participatory forms of media, in which a greater capacity for programming, modifying, and generating new content on an existent scaffolding was shifting the difference between producers and consumers.

For Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort (2009), two of the more prominent voices in platform studies, the aim of the field is to “investigate the underlying computer systems that support creative work.” But this doesn’t mean platform studies are interested in technical details alone. The point is rather to connect a given platform’s
technical scaffolding—whether of a gaming console, computer system, social media service, or something else—to the specific ways that the particular scaffolding influences and shapes culture. In this way, emphasis on platforms, Bogost and Montfort write elsewhere, seeks to increase work “on how the hardware and software of platforms influences, facilitates, or constrains particular forms of computational expression” (2007: 177). One of the fundamental if implicit precepts of platform studies is accordingly the supposition that the types of data capable of being selected, stored, and processed by a particular platform—and in what ways and to what ends—simply differ depending upon the material limits of a given technology and the structure of its computational system. An Atari 3000, for instance, is capable of accommodating different forms of game design and gameplay than, say, a Nintendo Wii. Attending to these differences, the premise goes, might help to identify some ways that individual platforms uniquely afford and constrain creative ways of participating in social and cultural life.

This is important work. Yet, it can begin to lose its critical edge by attending too narrowly to computational systems without also considering the wider material and contextual ecologies in which people experience their creative interaction with what mediates those very experiences. In what is surely one of the most important and engaging works of media theory this century, John Durham Peters makes a case for these wider material and contextual ecologies by advancing the notion that media are at root elemental and environmental. “Media,” he writes, are “modes of being” (2015: 17). They order our very civilization, and include such mediums as the sea and the sky, even time itself, though always in concert with the techniques and technologies used to experience, measure, and record them. As Peters explains, for instance, “The ship makes the sea into a medium—a channel for travel, fishing, and exploration—but would not be such without the ship, at least for us” (p. 111).

Similarly, I propose that many of the digital media technologies that seek to deliver personalized newness to their users (or to enable them creatively to customize it themselves), have, like the ship that makes the sea a medium, made the experience of temporal newness, the very unfolding present, into a channel for a mode of being marked by a manufactured affectability. More than just a platform that exposes time as an elemental medium of all experience, networked digital media are capable of operating as if time itself were the platform to be programmed and designed.
The “jump” from programming computers to programming experience itself is not as large as it may seem. Considering the extent to which networked technologies and mobile devices have become integrated into daily life—in our wayfinding, our work, our play, our bodies, even communication itself, let alone in such sectors as the economy, health care, warfare, and so on—it has become increasingly harder to distinguish between the ways people program platforms and the ways platforms program people. One need not subscribe to a hardline technological determinism to accept the truth in Friedrich Kittler’s maxim that “Media determine our situation” (1999: xxxix). According to Kittler, media are not passive vessels for content, but creators of world-changing epistemic contexts circumscribed by different discourse networks: “the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data” (1990: 369). Kittler saw that different discourse networks make their allowances in different ways, each accommodating certain kinds of communication and excluding others. Not unlike Foucault’s project in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Kittler was less interested in the hermeneutic work of understanding discursive acts than in identifying the rules that organize discourse—what counts as “signification” and what doesn’t—in a given system (see Krämer, 2006: 97-98, and Wellbury, 1990: xii). To this end, one of Kittler’s most important insights was to recognize that time itself had become a discursive variable subject to manipulation through techniques that were capable of manipulating it to particular ends.

In *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, he forwards this thesis by distinguishing between textual media in the discourse network of 1800 (which structured romanticism) and technological media in the discourse network of 1900 (which structured modernism). Textual media can transcribe only the literary-symbolic registers of written language or speech into a technically processed code or notation. Ruled by the alphabet, textual media traffic only within this symbolic chain of signification. Signifiers get transcribed into letters and spaces and words and sentences. Technological media, conversely, record, store, and produce data from the material world itself, and hence refer to things that cannot be transcribed in the symbolic order. The gramophone, for instance, could record sound in “real time,” from amid the chaos and contingency of its live occurrence in a physical context. With technological media, from the gramophone to the computer, the ephemerality of the real could now be
repeatable, which meant that the irreversibility of time’s incessant flow could now be manipulated as a cultural technique. The very axis of time was now subject to remixing.

Though Kittler is an important precursor to platform studies insofar as he validated critical attention to the material technicity of different media, his relative inattention to the social and cultural context of how media were used in practice leaves an opportunity that today’s cultural studies and media theorists in particular might do well to seize. Raymond Williams would likely agree, having recognized that media are both technical and social phenomena, and hence that the relationship between these aspects is what matters (see, e.g., Williams, 1981; Freedman, 2002). Identifying the constraints in technologies and platforms of wide ordinary use, along with understanding their non-arbitrary nature, is also an essential first step for a critical practice that would follow the insights of affect theory and nonrepresentational thought in feeling around for the background conditions and atmospherics of exposure that prefigure the force of encounters between different texts, technologies, temporalities, and sensations.

In what follows, then, I offer a condensed, nonhermeneutic archaeology of a relatively familiar technology—in this case, musical storage and playback systems that enable people to make “mixtapes” and their variants—in order to show how what’s possible in a given context of expression is delimited by those technologies that mediate it. In the same spirit of remix culture that first galvanized platform studies, and picking up from Kittler’s discussion of the gramophone’s ability to manipulate the time axis, I hope to show that the respective affordances and constraints of these different music recording and playback technologies do more than manipulate the time axis of that which they record or play, as Kittler foresaw. The process of “making a mix” using different media—including cassette tape recorders, CD burners, and streaming platforms—also illustrates in what ways each invites a different experience of passing time, ultimately to show how streaming media can co-opt the present itself as a kind of platform for mediating the affectability of phenomenal experience.
Mixtapes

Although the participatory affordances of platforms, from posting food porn on Instagram to making a virtual bookshelf on Goodreads, seemed relatively novel in the early 2000s, the ability of those with nontechnical expertise to utilize storage technologies and related hardware for the creative remixing of the aesthetic is not all that new. Certainly, DIY mixtape culture, and the technologies that support it, are precedents worth considering. What seems striking, though, is that the evolution of Web 2.0 has coincided with the rise of “curation” as a kind of catch phrase for culturally-savvy and aesthetically minded people, many of whom use the affordances of digital platforms to select, store, and share for others those aesthetic goods they hold to be worth sharing. One of my premises here is that it’s important to realize that the technologies and platforms involved in curating culture are not just neutral vessels, but rather involve particular cultural techniques for mediating a body’s phenomenal being-in the passage of time—that is, “experience” itself—by way of the aesthetic. “Cultural techniques,” as Bernard Geoghegan explains, “concern the rules of selection, storage, and transmission that characterize a given system of mediation, including the formal structures that compose and constrict this process” (Geoghegan, 2013: 69). In other words, before particular instances of curation can be communicated publicly and thereby given to attain some social meaning or significance, curatorial processes are constrained by the cultural techniques endemic to the media that make them possible.

The example of the mixtape is a relatively recent form of vernacular curation. The cultural salience of mixtapes in the liberal West is plain to see. It’s there in British novelist Nick Hornby’s bestselling novel, High Fidelity (later produced as a successful film, and more recently as a TV series), and it’s there on the street corner when aspiring hip-hop stars hand out their “mixtape” hoping to be discovered. Rolling Stone and other music magazines or blogs routinely publish their favorite songs or the favorites of famous musicians; Apple Music offers Celebrity Playlists; the broadcast news sometimes reports on what songs politicians or athletes have on regular rotation; Starbucks sells “Artist’s Choice” CD compilations. Cameron Crowe, the American movie director, revealed in 2000 that he had made a mixtape for every month of his life since 1978: “It’s as good as a diary.”
What’s so special about the mixtape is not just its diaristic potential, but how it affords the chance to let personal expressions of taste communicate to others what cannot as adequately be conveyed by other discursive means. Mixtapes mobilize moods. And they are *curated* texts: in this case, the selection and arrangement of sounds, usually in the form of discrete songs, in order to affect experience through a personal identification with the intensities of an aesthetic medium. Some people, like Cameron Crowe, make mixtapes for themselves; others make mixes for occasions: parties, soundtracks, seductions, road trips, exercise. People make them as gifts for friends or lovers, family or strangers. Whatever the situation or audience, making a mix involves choosing particular songs, placing them in a particular sequence, and doing so knowing that these choices directly affect the listening experience, whether as story, mood, idea, or the emotional resonance that the mix is able to produce. As anyone who has heard or made a mixtape knows, curation can be a powerful form of communication.

The mixtape’s curatorial power is so great that a number of scholars have even noted that mixes offer critical counterparts to voices of authority and oppression, making them integral modes of participation in public affairs. Here’s how Jared Ball puts it:

> As an expression of the colonized, the mixtape remains a kind of unsanctioned or dissident communication exercised by oppressed populations seeking to disrupt imposed media environments, which of necessity narrowly limit the roles and function of communication. The mixtape, evolving out of colonial antagonisms, asks for no permission, is bound by no laws of the state, and disseminates a national mythology essential to all national groupings (Ball, 2011: 155-156).

This notion of the mixtape asking for no permission, being bound by no laws of the state, and disseminating a national mythology, begins to sound curiously similar to the idea of a public sphere as a communicative ecology that comes into being through attention to circulating texts.² Others have made similar arguments. Adam Banks also locates the mixtape relative to cultures of the oppressed, African Americans in particular, and suggests that the curatorial/rhetorical aspects of music selection has a community function. Focusing on party and radio disc jockeys in particular, he argues that the African American DJ “tells the stories, carries the
history, interprets the news, mediates the disputes, and helps shape the community’s collective identity” through rhetorical practices that Banks sees as multimedia forms of composition (Banks, 2011: 25). Thomas Bey William Bailey, similarly, has argued that self-released audio, largely associated with the mixtapes of “Cassette Culture,” can offer creative resistance to the media conglomerates whose technologies of music dissemination entrench existing power structures and are not always in the interest of the people (2012).

What Ball, Banks, Bailey, and others share is a belief that mixtapes—and hence the curatorial rhetorics enacted in their creation—serve a social purpose that is more than just the expression of aesthetic taste or the sharing of aesthetic experience through music. In the case of music, acts of vernacular curation can circulate a kind of affective sensibility capable of acting as its own reward insofar as it inculcates a mood, a disposition to be affected. The political scaling of mixtapes is accordingly not to be denied, as mixtapes have played important roles worldwide in political identity formation and counterpublics, for instance, in the Teshuva cassette culture of Israel (Leon, 2011), in the ethical listening associated with Islamic “cassette sermons” of Egypt (Hirschkind, 2009), and in the technocultural critique tacitly associated with the underground Noise music of Japan (Novak, 2013: 169-183). Yet, the media technologies that make it possible for ordinary people to create mixes have, in their relatively short history, already undergone major transformations with consequences for how such acts of curation can attain a political or affective heft and intervene rhetorically in social life. These transformations, I want to suggest, indicate evolving cultural techniques that contribute to shaping the feeling of the present’s historical momentousness.

**Cassette Tapes**

In the time of its flourishing (after the 8-track, before the CD, overlapping with both), the compact cassette tape made it possible as never before for ordinary people to record an assortment of their favorite music and share it with others. With just a blank tape and a cassette tape recorder, anyone so equipped could record audio of all varieties: ambient, live, or recorded. Reel-to-reel and 8-track recorders had made this possible for the amateur as early as the 1960s, but these technologies were
cumbersome, of spotty quality, and more cost-prohibitive than their successor. With
the introduction of the compact cassette tape and its recorders into the household,
the “mixtape” became a widely practiced vernacular art—and a seminal precursor to
our curatorial, platform-rich age.

The material limitations of a cassette tape accommodate and invite only a certain
kind of curatorial form, excluding others altogether. A 60-minute tape, for instance,
can only record 30 minutes of audio on each side. For all the kids in their bedrooms
with a dual cassette recorder, this required some planning. They needed to time the
songs they recorded so neither precipitously to cut the last one off when the tape
unspooled to the end, nor clumsily to leave too much time remaining without room
for another song altogether. The desire to leave a few seconds of silence between
songs only complicated the procedure. For the meticulous mixtaper, this required
listening to each song at least twice all the way through: once to time its length, and
then again while recording it in the desired order relative to the other songs and the
planned interval between them on each side of the tape. With cassette tape
technology, the magnetic tape only recorded the music as it played. Press the Stop
button too soon, and that chopped the song’s end. Hit Stop too late, and the
recording had already captured whatever unwanted sounds came next.

Making a mix on tape, in other words, entailed a real-time commitment and a
measure of attentive presence to the music. The music was not a background or
soundtrack to some more primary experience; the technology made recording the
music the experience itself. Not only did doing so require being physically present
near the tape deck while the music being recorded played out loud at a volume high
enough to be heard. It also required being aware of, and situated in, the temporal
present of the song as it played, insofar as getting “lost” in song would risk a failure
to stop recording at just the right moment. In this sense, to record the music was of
necessity to experience the music, or, minimally, to hear it over the course of each
song’s duration, let alone the nontrivial time it took to rewind or fast-forward
between songs. *(That time was perhaps the most tedious to endure, because it often
took the guesswork of hitting Stop then Play over and over again until eventually
arriving at the rolling tape’s brief interstice between one song’s end and another’s
beginning.*) The entire process involved an embodied presence that, because the
technology wouldn’t allow eliding the actual music, made the time required to make a mixtape an “experience” in its own right: music not as supplement to experience, but an experience all its own.

Cassette tapes and the technologies available to record on them also necessarily constrained the affordances one had in curating a mix. For instance, if one envisioned the first and last songs on a side being crucial to a mixtape’s overall impact (the way songs from a movie’s credits tend to have more salience than those played over scenes of less consequence in the middle), then the two sides to a cassette meant a mixtape had two openers and two closers: four opportunities for salience “built-in” to the media’s very materiality. And because to make the mix at all required being present to the music in the process of its recording, the creation of the mix also entailed an experience of the music that the mix itself was designed to create for its eventual audience. In a way, that is, curating a mix on cassette entailed nostalgia not just after its creation, but at the very moment of its inscription: a kind of Nabokovian “future recollection” (2006: 160) as the slow gesture of the process made it easy to fill that time imagining how the mix will eventually have turned out.

Moreover, the cassette tape has what Gilbert Simondon, in an unsent but posthumously published letter to Derrida, describes as techno-aesthetics: a kind of “intercategorical fusion” between a material thing’s technical and aesthetic aspects, which makes it “perfectly functional, successful, and beautiful” (2012: 2). That a workman’s tools, for Simondon, are great exemplars of techno-aesthetics owes to the way their functionality and the beauty of their design converge in a tactile pleasure experienced at the level of aesthetic sensation for both the tool’s creator and user. The painter feels her paints, as does the perceiver of her painting. So it is that Simondon celebrates “the bite of a saw with clean teeth” (2012: 3) the way Auden extols poems that “click like a closing box” (Wellesley, 1964: 22) or Nabokov, ever the synaesthete, performs a techno-aesthetics of his own by describing the “square echo” of a car door slamming (Nabokov, 1990: 59). The technicity of a thing cannot be separated from its sensorial and aesthetic affects, and techno-aesthetics are achieved when the intercategorical fusion of these elements is something we experience as the medium’s entelechy. Alas, however fully realized its potential, not
even the tactile techno-aesthetics of the cassette could save it from being supplanted by newer means of home recording.

Compact Discs

The cassette tape’s successor, the compact disc, offers different material affordances that grossly change the possibilities and means of musical curation—including how one experienced the temporal present in its process. The difference makes its way into our language. One used to make a mixtape; the act was creative. On CD, however, one burns a mix; the act is destructive. With the spread of “writable” blank CDs, the technology no longer required the meticulous care of planning ahead and timing the songs or their sequence so to maximize available space or affectability. In fact, it was possible to burn a CD without listening to a single note of music at all. No longer did one need to be ever at the ready to catch a song as it stopped. Most recording software did all that on its own: it indicated if the disc’s available time had been exceeded (though, by collapsing music into bytes, time was really the disc’s available space); it showed by how much that capacity had been exceeded; it automatically adjusted the intervals between songs to meet one’s preference; and, because a song was mere data, neutral bytes occupying storage capacity, it knew each song’s length without a user even needing to hear it. In other words, the process was still entangled with a way of manipulating and experiencing time, but time had now become something else.

As the laboriousness of recording from real-time audio became obsolete, not only did the experience of the music while recording it change, so did the ways the music would be experienced even after it had been curated onto a playable CD. Making mixes on a typical compact disc gave you 750 MB of space, which amounted to 80 consecutive minutes of playtime: only one side, and therefore only one opener and closer, with more prolonged attention required to carry the musical narrative from beginning to end. In short, the material-discursive constraints of the platform changed the rhetorical possibilities for the curatorial act, making curation’s capacities to generate meaning fundamentally different from what they are on cassette. No experience of the music itself, of its unfolding in the temporal present, accompanies
making mixes on compact disc, no inherent nostalgia, not the same haptic pleasures or techno-aesthetic. All of that gets flattened on a shiny surface, “burned” away.

At the same time, however, the advent of the writable CD gave the vernacular curator a modicum of authority. Mixes on compact disc didn’t feel quite so homemade. Though the results of course differed from platform to platform in direct relation to the affordances of their hardware and software, including their compression technologies, audio quality generally didn’t suffer as much generation loss. The technology lent to more exactitude and precision. Time itself became compressed on CD: skipping between songs was an almost instantaneous act, not a Stop and Play process. Depending on the playback technology, at least, fast-forwarding and rewinding could also be instantaneous, making it possible to find, down to the second, the exact moment on a track that one wanted to hear. In this sense, if the mix was being made as a gift, and if the time invested in a gift’s creation is taken as measure of its meaningfulness, then CD mixes were inherently less meaningful. The cassette may have made amateurs into curators of a vernacular sort, but the compact disc began making vernacular curators less distinguishable from those presumed experts in the music industry who were doing more or less the same thing.

**Streaming**

The CD, though, has gone the way of the cassette: it’s been supplanted by new technologies whose cultural techniques change the nature of curation in significant ways. The same digitization of music that made CDs successful also made them obsolete. Why burn a mix onto a portable disc, fixing that one mix to that one disc, an object that still requires a CD player to use, when the likes of an iPod or phone could accommodate nearly as many playlists as one wants and play them for you too? Mixes now survive largely through digitized music files distributed through digital downloads to a mobile device or computer, or increasingly over streaming services, which store music remotely but make songs available on demand. These services enable new curatorial processes in part because their users can create playlists from a more enormous inventory of available music. Such playlists are the successor of
mixes, a difference most fundamentally marked by the playlist’s potentially endless length.

This difference has an important pragmatic basis. It used to be, if I came to your place and looked through your music collection, I could tell from what music you owned whether and to what extent we shared compatible tastes. And if you made me a mix, whether on cassette or CD, it would already have been subjected to a curatorial process because its songs would come from only those already in your inventory (or, if you were particularly committed, perhaps those you had acquired for the purpose of making the mix). In other words, mixes themselves were a secondary curatorial act following from the primary curatorial act of building your particular music collection: a sort of expression of your taste’s taste. This extra-distillation, the refinement of selecting from an already selective selection, gave mixes inherently more rhetorical salience. Including hard-to-find or previously unknown songs only contributed to the power of a mix based on limited personal inventory of music. As a social act, that is, mixes shared interpersonally (in a different way than those shared with strangers) came from a curatorial horizon that already existed at a personal level, and the sharing of that mix with someone else condensed an already existing personal expression of taste for social dissemination.

Music streaming services have changed this phenomenon by eliminating the primary curatorial act of building a music collection. The capital you might personally have demonstrated by owning a copy, say, of Dylan’s “Great White Hope” bootleg, diminishes when his entire “Bootleg Series” is part of anyone’s available “collection” online. Indeed, the very idea of a music collection disappears. This development matters because it illustrates a fundamental change in the nature of cultural curation in an age when varieties of aesthetic mediation have become digitized and so abundant. Specifically, this change has meant that the dissemination of art—in this example, music—takes for granted that art can actuate certain experiences, and indeed that these experiences, not the expression of personal taste, are central to how the personal jurisdiction of aesthetic experience intervenes in public life. And yet, while curatorial media reify aesthetic texts into their potential for aesthetic experience made social, they also circumscribe that experience as highly customized and
personal—seeking to change the very ways the temporal present can be intensified into quasi-historical eventfulness as it’s mediated through the song.

The best example of this intensification may be Beats Music, a bygone service utilized at the outset of the enormous media epistemic (and cultural and industry-changing) shift toward the streaming music paradigm. Though Beats Music was eventually acquired by Apple to the end of helping Apple build its own on-demand streaming music platform, one of the innovative features of the defunct Beats Music platform remains exemplary of the ways shifts in media technologies can also govern expectations about how we encounter that which these technologies mediate. Beats accomplished this specifically by its emphasis on curation. The company employed a “music curation team” of songwriters, radio disc jockeys, industry specialists, and music experts to arrange the service’s library and sharpen the algorithms that ensure listeners have “the right music for right now” (Beats Music, 2015). The highlight of their service was a playful feature called “The Sentence,” which involved completing a fill-in-the-blank sentence to help the service’s algorithms determine which music best suits your mood (Fig. 1). I’m __________ & feel like __________ with __________ to ___________. So, perhaps: I’m on a rooftop & feel like making out with this cute guy to Brazilian Samba. And voilà: Astrud Gilberto.

Despite its veneer of gimmickry, “The Sentence” did something interesting in that the basis for its curatorial choices foregrounds personal feeling as a relational experience. Not only did “The Sentence” begin with a statement of identity (I am…), and follow it by an expression of feeling or desire (and feel like…); it asked that this personal feeling be shared “with” others “to” some style of music. Here, to do something “to” a certain kind of music is not to act upon the music, but to let that music affectively saturate what one does. The music does something to the listener. “The Sentence,” in this sense, attempts to capture one’s presumed desire to have an intensive affective experience: to be emplaced somewhere, doing something, with someone, and to have music mark the time of your presence to that event. The tacit promise is that the right music fulfills the experiences that one desires. But can it?
In a time when media platforms have become so integral to nearly all aspects of social and cultural life, one challenge of media theory has become the difficulty of identifying what’s a platform and what’s not, or, from a different angle, where one medium ends and another begins. Indeed, the “key phenomenological characteristic of media,” as Patrick Eisenlohr has put it, “is their propensity to erase themselves in the act of mediation” (2009: 44). The great fantasy of the “The Sentence” was that the perceived *immediacy* of phenomenal experience could be enhanced with musical mediation so perfect for an occasion as to seem *already* an indistinguishable part of it. The mediation strove to be so aptly customized, in other words, that it would seem elemental to the experience itself, hence not mediated at all. Thinking about “The Sentence” accordingly suggests the benefit of understanding it less as a bounded medium than as a process of mediation—a process that strives to be phenomenologically constitutive of the unfolding present itself.3

---

3. Figure 1: Screenshot of Beats Music’s “The Sentence”
The critical claim I’m making is that “The Sentence” circumscribes the experience it seeks to accentuate. The proffered song itself is that experience’s condensed iteration: not a supplement to it but an expression of it. Being lost within or fully “present to” the experience one desires is a possibility already dead on arrival. The music arrives already saturated with the feeling we have not yet had a chance to experience as something other than a deliverable. The present becomes historical, becomes momentous, in advance. This music, we could say, is what the experience will have been. We are, all too literally, sentenced to it. The algorithm tacitly tells us that just by executing its procedure it has already fulfilled our desires, whether we feel that way or not. Like the most photographed barn in the world in Don DeLillo’s White Noise, in which “nobody sees the barn” (1989: 12) because they can only see it as a thing being seen, “The Sentence” delivers an event we don’t actually experience; we can only experience it as what Brian Massumi (2011) would call the “semblance” of that event, a sort of virtual reality.

To see the mediation of streaming music in the lineage of mixtapes is to acknowledge a radical change in techniques for curating recorded music, particularly when it comes to modulating time. Moving well beyond Kittler’s observation of the point when storage media such as the gramophone began manipulating the ephemerality of time, “The Sentence” offers a mediation that accentuates the momentousness of a human subject’s phenomenal being-in-time itself. It is important to know, however, that clever packaging aside, “The Sentence’s” delivery of virtual experience is not a feature unique to the Beats Music service. It has since been adopted, in different forms, across music streaming platforms to such a degree as to be nearly constitutive of their proprietary distinctiveness. As a curatorial technology, music streaming is intrinsically disposed toward promising listeners the semblance of experience because its algorithmic infrastructure not only analyzes components of songs automatically to know as much about the music as possible; it also learns over time the context-specific dispositions and preferences of the listeners.

Spotify, for instance, is working to use the data trail of its members to learn other aspects of their digital profiles in real time, in order then to customize music that anticipates the experiences its algorithms indicate listeners will want specific songs to
have helped them have. So, if a Spotify member posts photos or comments on Facebook indicating she’s going out dancing with friends tonight (or has just split with her girlfriend, or just got a new job), Spotify might with kairotic timeliness recommend music in line with that listener’s other known musical preferences to deliver anticipatory experiences befitting the mood Spotify suspects its members are likely to want at that moment: maybe club music for the dance party, maudlin weepers for returning home alone to face the break-up. More longitudinally, by tracking the listening habits and social media activity of its members over time, Spotify can deduce what kinds of activities its members are doing at certain times of day (exercising, studying, commuting, meditating, etc.) and deliver music that suits these experiences as well. As Daniel Ek, the company’s CEO has said, “We’re not in the music space—we’re in the moment space” (Seabrook, 2014).

On the one hand, shifting attention overtly from music to moments merely illustrates the extent to which capital rules digital processes of mediation. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska have observed of digital media in general, “the supposed social and emotional enhancement of the self through technology . . . encloses and reorders the self as a marketable (data) object” (2012: 120). On the other hand, Kittler’s observation about technological media’s ability to manipulate the time axis continuum here becomes inverted: streaming platforms aren’t just capturing real-time sound and subjecting it to manipulation; that very manipulation is what in turn feeds back through a recommended song or playlist to make the actually lived, affective experience of an unfolding present itself something customizable and subject to manipulation. To be “in the moment space” while really being in the big business of a musical streaming platform, of course, is to suggest that the diverse, ordinary moments of lived experience are best made sensible musically. In other words, the capacities of streaming platforms are such that time—but more specifically than that, any given present moment, or what Wendy Chun calls “the enduring ephemeral” (2008)—is always something subject to affective manipulation through music that, by anticipating a moment’s predictable characteristics and accompanying them with an appropriate song, exerts social control by raising the phenomenal experience of that moment into an intensified event.
The Event of Feeling Pre-Historical

What happens in the affective appropriation of a “moment space” attuned as eventful through song? Theories of “the event” in continental philosophy and social theory end up being integrally connected with what Lauren Berlant (2008) calls “feeling historical.” Though that connection is seldom made explicit, I’d like to end this inquiry by trying to make it more so. An event, for Isabelle Stengers, “establishes a difference between before and after” (2000: 66). This means that if there is an event there is “therefore a ‘pre-’ and ‘post-’” event (Stengers, 2010: 115). One way to think about history (and not just historiography) is as the coming to pass of before and afters, identifiable markers of change that, whether perceptible in the duration of their manifesting or not, at least retrospectively index a difference. Sometimes that difference is orchestrated, sometimes arbitrary. Deleuze’s thinking about events is particularly helpful in this regard because in his thought events have a singular quality that enriches or intensifies encounters even as it emerges from them.

In Deleuze’s theory of the event, an ideal event “is a singularity—or rather a set of singularities” that have some affective consequence, but not one reducible to an elicited emotion or reaction that conveys meaning according to agreed-upon social codes (Deleuze, 1990: 52). “The singularity,” Deleuze writes, “belongs to another dimension than that of denotation, manifestation, or signification. It is essentially pre-individual, non-personal, and a-conceptual” (Deleuze, 1990: 52). While these features make singularity “neutral,” the crucial idea is that a singularity “is not ‘ordinary’: the singular point is opposed to the ordinary” (Deleuze, 1990: 52). As always with Deleuze, the work of understanding what he’s up to can be a slog through artful yet arcane assertions, but I think what he’s describing is some singular quality of events that distinguishes them from the banality of everyday experience. Their singular quality, however, does not derive from some identifiable who-what-when-where state of affairs and its signifying properties. Rather, he emphasizes, “the splendor and magnificence of the event is sense” (Deleuze, 1990: 149). In this way, events have a “double-structure”: on one hand, there’s “the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person,” and on the other, there’s “the future and the past of the event considered in itself, sidestepping each present, being free of the limitations of a state of affairs, impersonal and pre-individual, neutral” (Deleuze, 1990: 151). Deleuze’s theory of the
event suggests that what matters about events is not their signifying meaning, but their asignifying sense.

The critical point is not whether a timely recommended song from “The Sentence” (or similar algorithmic procedures attentive to real-time listening situations) hits its mark enough to become “an event,” but rather to notice that algorithmic recommendations of music ideally seek to upgrade all experience into eventfulness. They strive to make the feeling of some great historical occasion, if only great personal historical occasion, deliverable in advance of its arrival. Their functional telos, in other words, is to proffer fully bespoke phenomenal experience: exactly what you want when you want it without having realized as much beforehand. In this way, the “event” of a timely recommended song operates at the level of sense perception more urgently than the level of representational meaning. That is to say, the music recommended serves to orient one to an experience of the “now” within a sensory framework that disposes a listener to ascribe it with meaning, to “enter” a moment “looking” for the affective intensities already presupposed to be condensed “within” it.

In perhaps his most revealing passage on the subject of events, Deleuze writes, “the event is not what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed. It signals and awaits us” (Deleuze, 1990: 149). Though he doesn’t say so, I read Deleuze here to be using “accident” in the Aristotelean way whereby accidents are properties of a thing that aren’t essential to its nature. A table could be made of wood or plastic or metal, for instance, but those are just its “accidental” properties, not its essential substance. Events are more substantive than accidental; they are of the essence. Accidents traffic in subjectivation, deliverability, signification. They can be personal, synchronic, meaningful. Events traffic in response-ability, intensification, affectability. They are the essential if provisional condensation of relationality, process, sensation. The trouble is, to instrumentalize the present, effectively to manufacture would-be events algorithmically as if as a judge delivering a sentence—the gavel booms: here is your event!—inevitably forecloses the messy dynamism of its becoming singular. In such cases, though at risk of sounding clever, the present is no longer a present, a gift whose surprise becomes the unknowability of what it will have been; the present is rather then a sentence, a dictated conscription.
and constriction of the possible. I have tried to suggest that this is a problem, but let me conclude with some final thoughts as to why.

Certainly, a custom delivered “soundtrack to your life” has its allures. Who hasn’t been moved on occasion by the uncanny perfection of a song so timely and appropriate that it serves to accompany and accentuate a phenomenal passage through an experience as it becomes one? Maybe it’s the upbeat playlist that keeps you going through exercise, or the sudden spark in unexpectedly hearing a long-loved song you’d not heard in some time, as if at just the right moment. Music carries feeling, and the incessance of feeling accompanies all experience, which is to say, the constancy of thinking-feeling is a perpetual condition of our being-in-the-world, from which it follows that sometimes the feeling of music will match the constellation of thinking-feeling that orbits a given moment, and when that happens it brings forth an affective synchronicity that’s special and singular. But the intentional and algorithmic delivery of that synchronicity, according to a predetermined calculus of value and salience, is a method of capture and closure, not of freedom and opening. To circumscribe the present by its supposedly appropriate aesthetic ornaments is to make great occasion of even non-events. Events are not eventful if they happen over and over again. Even Freud acknowledged, “We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things” (1962: 23). If the moment space being appropriated by recommendation algorithms and mixtapes on streaming platforms teaches us anything, maybe it’s that sometimes it’s important for the ordinary to go on being ordinary, to sit with it—and to listen.

References


**Notes**

1 Kittler’s interest in discourse analysis is heavily influenced by Foucault’s efforts to trace “discourse” from a place outside discourse, through the various apparatuses of power that condition actual communication. Foucault’s project, in his own words, was “to determine the principle according to which only the ‘signifying’ groups that were enunciated could appear . . . based on the principle that *everything* is never said” (1982: 118).

2 For more on my sense of public spheres, see Hauser, 1999; Warner, 2002; and Rice, 2012. Those interested in the appropriative nature of “not needing to ask for permission” might see Jared Sterling Colton’s (2016) work on the ethics of care in music sampling.

3 See Kember and Zylinska (2012) for more on the benefits of a shift from media to mediation: that is, of attending to processes of mediation, as distinct from media, and how doing so can help provide insight into the vitality of the latter.

**Chris Ingraham** is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Utah, and core faculty in Environmental Humanities. Among other publications across rhetorical theory and media studies, he is the author of *Gestures of Concern* (Duke, 2020), and co-editor of *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

**Email:** Chris.Ingraham@utah.edu
Horizonless Worlds: Navigating the Persistent Present of the Border Regime

NISHAT AWAN

TU Delft, Netherlands

Abstract

Through discussing the persistent present of displacement the essay argues that a politics of time is being mobilised as a biopolitical means of control in migrant lives. This can be seen in the circularity of displacement, deportation and return, where waiting and disorientation become forms of control. The discussion emerges from field research and interviews I carried out in the villages of north Punjab, Pakistan, where many people are caught in this chronopolitics of migration. The migrant experience of borders is read alongside a critical interrogation of the computational technologies deployed in border management, including EuroDAC and iMap. They produce a form of imperial temporality for which the horizon acts as a constitutive trope of progress, while simultaneously producing a sense of a horizonless world through the networked logic and ubiquity of datafication. I end with a discussion of how it may be possible to find other orientations within these normative spatiotemporalities of a bordered world.

Keywords

chronopolitics, migration, navigation, algorithmic control, borders

The lives of undocumented migrants are spent attempting to be somewhere else, so it is ironic that in such lives the question of temporality emerges more urgently than that of space. This is because the price exacted for moving across borders without papers is time. People wait to earn enough money, they await decisions on their asylum applications, or simply wait for an opportune moment to go further.
question of the future becomes fraught as planning is not only difficult but often impossible due to the increasing uncertainty that is the result of migration policies and border securitisation. People are kept in constant circulation, so that they are always on the move, meaning that the kind of generational thinking usually attributed to migrants is not possible. Not being in a place long enough with enough stability to begin to make a life and a home means that many never settle down enough to have the children for whose welfare they were supposed to be acting. Here I discuss this condition of undocumented migration as a state of living in a persistent present, in order to explore what political possibilities remain for those trapped within the border regime. What types of spatial imaginaries can account for this circulatory movement of people that is also an inhabitation of different temporalities? In my conversations with those caught between borders, their descriptions of their journeys often transform from quantifying them in monetary terms to accounting for their experiences temporally. This is partly because people find themselves in places they do not know, or are unable to locate themselves on a map, but I would argue that this is also an expression of a different kind of subjectivity, one that has lost its ability to fully situate itself in a world that has unfolded both too fast and too slow. But through this process they may have gained a different kind of ability, one that allows them to partially orientate themselves through temporal and embodied means. In the stories that I have had the privilege to hear, however curtailed these movements and alignments dependent on orientation might be, they do offer a challenge to the perceived absoluteness of state space and provide a template for a political refusal of globalised border regimes at the so-called planetary scale.

The persistent present of displacement

It is now commonly understood that in many journeys of displacement, and especially those made by forced migrants, there is no direct route that can be traced from A to B (Ahsan Ullah, 2013; Hassan and Biörklund, 2016; Shaffer et al., 2018). Instead, the journey is emphasised as a social process that is an ongoing event in people’s lives, as well as shaping the places through which they travel. There may be periods where people remain static, but that does not necessarily signal the end of a journey, which can also encompass settling in, finding a home, deciding to move on or being deported. At the same time, deportation regimes and militarised borders
keep people moving; what Shahram Khosravi (2018) terms circulation: ‘a controlled movement of people sent back and forth between undocumentedness and deportability: between countries, between laws, between institutions.’ Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) made a similar argument in their analysis of the functioning of geopolitical borders as filtration devices that allow some to pass through and not others. Those who do manage to make it to the global North can only find precarious employment due to their lack of legal status and are easily exploited, meaning that securitisation regimes derive surplus value from the very conditions of precarity that people are forced into. As the Windrush scandal in the UK and the changing fate of the dreamers in the US has shown, the confluence of securitised borders and legal regimes produces illegality within racialised subjects. In these situations, changes in legal and bureaucratic procedures can transform a legal citizen into an ‘illegal migrant’, when often it is the very processes themselves that are illegal. The production of illegality can therefore be thought of as an ongoing process or an emergent property that is produced as certain subjects encounter border regimes.

In thinking with the persistent present of migration, the way in which time is embodied within a particular life is important, especially because in many cases of deportation time is used as a mechanism of control. In some instances time can slow down completely while people wait months and years for a decision on their asylum application (Griffiths, 2014). For many, time becomes a bodily experience that weighs heavy in waiting. In other cases, it is accelerated with deportation decisions being made in days, or even hours, making the threat of having to leave always imminent. The time of deportation is therefore contradictory, both fast and slow, disrupting attempts at constructing an everyday life with plans for the immediate future or for the longer term. Many live with the constant threat of being ‘sent back’, sometimes to a place they do not even know. Within the UK context, perhaps the best known example is of Afghan refugees who came to the country as minors but only have leave to remain as children, meaning that as soon as they turn eighteen they are to be sent back. Such a policy demands that both the person and their place of origin remain in stasis so that a decade or more later, they can simply go back. In the case of Afghan refugees this would require on the one hand that the place change completely in the sense that the war and violence they have fled ends, but on the other for it to remain recognisable. As Rob Nixon has argued in the context of
places transformed through environmental degradation, temporal dislocation should also be considered a form of displacement that might encompass ‘the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable’ (2013: 19). In a similar vein, Georgina Ramsay has argued that the disruption of temporal rhythms are not only limited to the refugee experience but are also present in many lives where precarity causes displacement (2019).

Recently I visited one of the villages of north Punjab in Gujranwala division, Pakistan, where I have been researching and conducting interviews over the past two years. The agricultural area is well known for two reasons: as the place in the country where some of the best quality and highly priced basmati rice is produced, and being home to the majority of men who are attempting to make their way to Europe. The incongruous nature of these two facts is explained somewhat when driving to the area from the city of Lahore. It is being engulfed by the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation that has been creeping northwards from the city over the last decade. As villages lose their land to industrial workshops and small-scale highly polluting factories, and as climate change makes crop yields unpredictable, young men are being lured to make difficult journeys, to go bahar, a word that means ‘outside’ and usually denotes for them somewhere, anywhere, in what they consider to be the prosperous West. The villages are nestled between small towns, half-built motorways and the debris of a fast and unregulated industrial expansion. Yet, despite this rapid urbanisation there is severe unemployment and what work there may be is highly precarious. Working conditions are cited as the main reason for migration by everyone I spoke to:

I decided to go because here we suffer so much, all of our labour is for others’ benefit. I thought if I went I could at least work for myself and sort my life out. That’s why I wanted to go… I wanted to go to Greece as I have some friends there.

There are many stories of the violence that has engulfed the area in the recent past, stories of land disputes and conflict between villages around questions of izzat – a gender-based idea of family honour residing in a woman’s body and her social status. As the majority of the male population has either left, are planning to leave or have just returned, that is, they are caught in the circulation described earlier; women’s role
and their position in society is transforming albeit slowly. Sarah Ahmed discusses this in the context of rural-urban migration in south Punjab, Pakistan, particularly to understand what she calls the ‘aftermath of male migration’ (Ahmed, 2020: 601). She writes of how despite the absence of their husbands, women are still subject to patriarchy, their movements controlled and surveilled by the wider family including older women. Yet, that does not mean that they are unable to find their own ways of negotiating and bargaining a better situation for themselves. The circulatory movements of migration in the villages of Gujranwala division mean that there is no ‘after’ as such, and that there is always a patriarchal presence within the wider familial context, but the loosening of what were strict gender roles due to migration has created some space. In the context of gender relations, such transformations are a double-edged sword, allowing women more freedom but at the same time contributing to an increase in honour-based violence. This erosion of a traditional way of life leads to a sense of what Hedda Askland calls ‘broken time’ (2018: 233). Askland is describing the situation in New South Wales, Australia, where displacements caused by mining have produced a temporality completely entwined with the before and after of the extractive and destructive processes of mining, where the landscape itself serves as a constant reminder of dispossession. There is something of this sense in these villages where industrialisation has indelibly marked the landscape through constructions, pollution and ever increasing mounds of litter abandoned by the roadsides.

In thinking with the temporalities of undocumented migration as they reveal themselves in the lives of migrants and in the landscape around Gujranwala, I am interested in how time is being mobilised as a biopolitical means of control. Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of ‘chrononormativity’ developed in conversation with queer lives shows how the privileged rhythms and temporal experiences of heterosexual, bourgeois life become for others a ‘mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts’ (Freeman, 2010: 3). The seasonal rhythm and slower pace of village life being replaced by another time tied to the demands of capitalist production, as well as to the circulatory rhythms of migration, are one such example of chrononormativity. The operations of the normative also emerge in language as the Punjabi lunar calendar and its associations to particular seasons and to farming loses out to the Gregorian calendar. At the same
time, the journeys of undocumented migration follow their own temporal and seasonal logic that emerges in relation to the restrictions and filtrations of borders, resulting in the smallest of distances sometimes taking days or weeks to cross, while at other times large distances can be travelled easily and quickly. In such moments of speed, those without documents are able to inhabit the contiguity of normative time and space that those of us with documents take for granted. Time is also encoded in the very systems of documentation that keep people moving; for example, the databases and their functions that are used to police borders through biometrics, passport controls and visa checks. What does it mean to be entered into EuroDAC (European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database) as a category 2 person; that is, as someone who has been tagged as having entered the EU ‘in an irregular manner’? The records in the database include age, sex and the place where the biographical data was taken. As Tsianos and Kuster have pointed out, this is sparse and very basic information that is mobilised to categorise individuals as asylum seekers or as illegally entered foreigners and then is used to not only decide their future but also wider European migration and asylum policy. There is a fixity to the categorisations in such databases, so that it is almost impossible to move from the ‘illegal’ category to that of asylum seeker, although moving the other way is of course easier. The modes of identification, such as iris scans and fingerprints, are attached not to a living and embodied person but to their representation understood as biographical data; what Tsianos and Kuster describe as ‘the digital representation of a living and volatile body’s singularity via its fingerprints’ (2016b: 51). That is to say that the relation fixing the contents of the database to a now ‘identified’ person is extremely strong and endures over time, but we know that the individual bits of data are fluid. They inhabit a different bureaucratic temporality and operate within the spatiality of a network that allows data to be transferred across jurisdictions (legally as well as illegally, as we have seen from the revelations of Edward Snowden) and mobilised within different algorithmic processes.

How then can we move from the lived experiences of people making their way across inhospitable and securitised landscapes to the globalised scale of information exchange through databases that are used to police borders? What spatial and temporal imaginaries are required for such moves that also keep open the political possibility of resisting the border regime? Freeman’s reading of Derrida in *Spectres of*
Marx (1994) gives a clue to how we can mobilise temporality as a form of ethics or a responsibility towards the other across historical time and across a present that is always already split ‘but split by prior violence and future possibility rather than simply by the nature of signification’ (Freeman, 2010: 9–10). What new modalities of living and being are produced through this splitting temporality and in relation to the violence of borders, and how do ordinary people affect the border regimes that they pass through and are not only subject to? What may be required is a mode of thinking resistance beyond opposition towards something that is much more mundane and non-spectacular (Povinelli, 2011; Weheliye, 2014).

**Mapping geospatial totalities**

As the example of EuroDAC reveals, the use of digital technologies in border management relies on a bureaucratic and archival tendency that takes individual bits of data and assembles them anew to make arguments for the securitisation of borders. The temporal logic of data collection works in an historical timeline – who you are (included in the database as a reference number and algorithmically verified fingerprint data), where and when you were located. Once these discrete bits of information enter the database they become spatialised into the form of a network and subject to its calculative processes. Network science as a form of data management and economic model produces an accelerated time through promising to reveal hidden links and by claiming to produce real-time connections. To be able to map evolving relationships over time is the conceit of dynamism that underpins computational network analysis (Chun, 2019). Yet, the very nature of the connections that are made leads to fixed categories and subjectivities mapped as static identities. In this the categorisation processes of databases such as EuroDAC are no different from the imperial archival techniques of the past, and the use of computational technologies to continue the work of racialised categorisation is well documented (Azoulay, 2019; Eubanks, 2019; Noble, 2018). As a digital archive, albeit one that can be assembled and reassembled through an algorithmic logic, it contains within it the progressive temporality of coloniality even if it can be understood as accelerated through the logic of the network society and its variants (Castells, 1996). As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay reminds us in her reflection on institutional and state archives: ‘To engage with the histories and modalities of the archive from outside the
position it shapes for us as citizens or as scholars requires unlearning its latent progressive temporality’ (Azoulay, 2019: 143). I would suggest that this unlearning is even more important in the context of digital archives whose techno-politics and reach often leave no outside as such. The stated function of EuroDAC to store information on potential asylum seekers might mean that most of us will never be entered into it, but the information from this database is used for visa decisions, at ports of entry into Europe and those states it shares data with. When we consider this extended network that EuroDAC participates in we can all potentially be included within its functions. This is what Azoulay identifies as ‘one of the major rights violated by imperial sovereignties […] the right not to become a perpetrator, that is, the right not to act as a privileged citizen who complies with or acquiesces to the differential sovereignty from which she or he benefits’ (2019: 36).

Being included in citizenship registers means that we participate in the violation of others’ rights but it also produces a sense that we now inhabit a world of totalities where the horizon beyond which things might remain uncertain or incalculable seems to have disappeared. How does this production of a horizonless world intersect with the spatiality of migration journeys and particularly in the way that they are controlled through geospatial techniques? A good example of this spatial control from the world of migration policy is the i-Map produced by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), which claims to map irregular migration not only through focusing on the start and end of journeys, as we often see in the arrows in journalistic maps of migration that are all inevitably pointing towards Europe. Instead, the focus shifts to the routes that people take, pin-pointing important nodes and places of passage that should be targeted in the quest to reduce migration towards Europe and North America. The i-Map is interactive and regularly updated to reflect the changing nature of the routes and, in its claim to provide real-time data to border control, the i-Map’s expanding database produces a geospatial territory. Techniques of crowd-sourcing are used to collect and collate information from different sources in order to capture the shifting routes that people take to evade border control. The aesthetic of the map is relational, rather than using arrows to map flows in one direction only, the map has a networked logic that encompasses some of the circulations of the undocumented. As Casas-Cortes et al. have noted, the map attempts to capture a shifting subject in order to ‘facilitate control and not
movement’ (2017: 13). The different thicknesses of lines used denote major and minor routes, as well as distinguishing between what they call ‘migration hubs’ and ‘migration route cities’. Thus the i-Map is mapping what it considers to be a fixed subject, the illegal migrant, but of course as people cross borders they are categorised differently – transit migrant, economic migrant, refugee, asylum seeker – where you are denotes who you are within the complex and highly troubling politics of international migration policy. At the same time, how a person embodies laws and illegality changes as they cross borders; for example, it is often experienced migrants that become agents, facilitating others’ journeys. Thus, there is a slippage between the categories that people inhabit and the way in which they slip between legality and illegality through, for example, bureaucratic manipulations, as can be seen in the Windrush case. One of the reasons the i-Map is so successful is because its logic and its politics are aligned to those of network science. It is designed to provide states with a risk calculus, to predict where the next ‘migrant flow’ will occur, where to plug the leak in the system, where to fortify the walls. It demonstrates clearly why the underlying assumption of the fluidity of network behaviour is so problematic; fixed attributes are encoded within the network that are then used to calculate and feed into and reinforce those very same categories.

One question for a more emancipatory practice could be to ask how we encode databases without the risk calculus? What would a mapping that refused fixed categories look like? Here the question of data aggregation becomes important. Algorithmic functions are performed across different data sets and through a series of repeatable moves that organise, sort and process data. Whatever information about a person or a thing is stored in a database will not only be partial but also particular. This process of taking parts and not the whole and then aggregating is of course reductive; that is, many elements across different databases can be included within algorithmic functions, but none of these parts necessarily adds up to a whole that we might recognise as ourselves or as a thing imbued with meaning in the world. As Adrian Mackenzie states: ‘No one belongs to a database as an element, but many aspects of contemporary lives are included as parts of databases’ (2012: 343). All the idiosyncrasies and details of a particular life are not in the database as such, but the fact that you are Black, or you are brown, the fact that once you were caught shoplifting as a teenager, are there. It is this openness of databases to continue
aggregating, to continue to derive new relations from such simplified and decontextualized aggregations that is so dangerous. And it is found in the way that certain people get on ‘no fly’ lists, it is in the kill lists of the US, in the unlawful detention of people, and it does of course underlie the technology that is used at the border which makes judgements about who can or cannot enter and who can remain. As Louise Amoore states, these sifting functions are the ontology of algorithms: ‘In a real sense, an algorithm must necessarily discriminate to have any traction in the world. The very essence of algorithms is that they afford greater degrees of recognition and value to some features of a scene than they do to others’ (Amoore, 2020: 8).

**The horizon as form of colonial navigation**

New spatial and visual regimes are being produced as algorithmic functions become embedded within geospatial technologies, such as the manipulation of data in satellite remote sensing or the increased use of drone and radar surveillance technologies. Platform visuality seems to have exploded notions of perspective and embodied forms of knowing that might be the usual mode of navigating the visual and the spatial as lived and perceived. Instead, the challenge posed is similar to what Harun Farocki identified as that which computer animation presented to film. As Doreen Mende (2017) explains, Farocki thought that the relationships between space and time usually made by the filmmaker through techniques of montage were increasingly being produced by the viewer (or the user) themselves as they navigated through and across platforms. Yet, this navigation occurs in a totalising world that resists any outside meaning beyond the closed and often obscure circuits produced through the exchange and analysis of data across platforms. Recent debates have discussed what a machine or a platform sees (as opposed to what it makes visible) from Trevor Paglen’s (2014) exploration of machine vision that does not produce images that can be seen by what he refers to as ‘meat-eyes’ to the question of how visuality transforms in relation to algorithmic production. Here the notion of ‘image ensembles’ emerging across hardware, software and various external inputs produces a form of seeing that according to Adrian Mackenzie and Anna Munster ‘creates new opacities that even the most advanced seeing-devices – the machine learning-based predictive models used to organize and order image flows – cannot dispel’
This opacity sits uncomfortably next to the claim that geospatial technologies make visible the spatiality of migration journeys, as we have seen in the discussion of the i-Map. It points to the fact that the pertinent political question may not be what we see but how we see and what this does to our ability to act. If we take Farocki’s insight that navigation is a key mode through which we can critically engage with new forms of the visual, which seems to still hold true for the image ensembles described above, then the question of what forms of navigation through opacity are being deployed in border control seems to be crucial, knowing also that opacity as described by Édouard Glissant (1997) is in certain contexts for certain people a mode of survival.

If we consider the traditional practice of navigation in the context of seafaring it requires an external datum provided by the horizon or the stars, and in contemporary times is provided by the ping of our phones to the satellites orbiting overhead. These form a relation to a known object from which a position can be triangulated and then pinpointed on an already existing map. Hito Steyerl (2011) has written on how linear perspective depends on a stable horizon, producing a calculable and navigable space that has of course been central to colonial expansion. At the same time, it positions the viewer opposite the vanishing point and therefore in a commanding position, but one that is also subject to the scientific regime of vision encapsulated within linear perspective. Referring to Turner’s 1840 painting, *The Slave Ship*, Steyerl describes how the scene shows the moment when the slaves were thrown overboard upon the captain’s realisation that they were only insured as cargo lost at sea, and not as people who might fall ill and die. It is a painting where the horizon has not yet disappeared but has become less stable through being duplicated and scattered. Steyerl writes:

> At the sight of the effects of colonialism and slavery, linear perspective – the central viewpoint, the position of mastery, control, and subjecthood – is abandoned and starts tumbling and tilting, taking with it the idea of space and time as systematic constructions (Steyerl, 2011: 6).

This description of the loss of horizon in many ways corresponds with the persistent present described by undocumented migrants, where normative ideas of linear time and space become untenable. Just as the sextant and the Mercator projection were
key instruments in the navigation of a world understood through the colonial logics of the horizon, we need an understanding of the instruments and maps being used to navigate and to continue the colonising logic within a horizonless world.⁹

The metaphor of the horizon is a constitutive trope in the production of the imperial or chrononormative temporalities described earlier. Underlined by notions of progress and modernity, they require the deviant to be brought into the fold of liberal spatio-temporalities. This imaginary of the horizon also appears in Reinhart Koselleck’s (2004) definition of modernity as the gap between a ‘horizon of expectation’ and the ‘space of experience’. It is that quintessential feeling of modernity described by many commentators of a radically different future that seems to have already arrived and so is not part of a society’s experience, and, concurrently, having already arrived is no longer something to be anticipated. It is certainly a feeling alluded to by many inhabitants of the villages I visited in relation to the rapid transformations that have occurred within their lifetimes as traditional ways of life have been made untenable. And so people leave lives that are not always as abject as we might think they should be to countenance the types of migration journeys being made. This leads to a certain incredulity in the wealthy and bureaucratic classes in places like Pakistan who try to make sense of why people leave. As a high-level official in the FIA (Federal Investigation Agency) stated, ‘Gujranwala division [in north Punjab] is an industrial zone […] so why are these kids going? There isn’t extreme poverty or unemployment there.’¹⁰ Perhaps their motives can be explained through following Frantz Fanon, as Ian Baucom does in writing that ‘a nascent intelligentsia trained by colonial ideology and the colonial educational system’ will ‘mistake the colour line for the border (the horizon) of modernity’ (Baucom, 2006: 70; Fanon, 1963). The FIA official trained by IOM (International Organisation for Migration) and UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) failed to apprehend the temporal violence encapsulated in the logic of the horizon and the forms of displacement without moving that people from the area were already subject to. But my own location in the UK also makes it achingly obvious to me that the notion of the ‘prosperous West’ or ‘the Europe of opportunities’ that so many of the interviewees mentioned cannot exist for them. I could go as far as to say that the would-be migrants were mistaken, not understanding that our common neoliberal future is not their future, that the promise of shiny skyscrapers is also their world of
precarious labour and the reality of racialised carceral capitalism (Wang, 2018). Yet, there is something more going on here. Fanon writing from the perspective of newly independent colonial states was surveying a very different world from the one we inhabit now. While it is true that still there are elites in the so-called postcolonial world who refuse to acknowledge that ‘we’ can never have ‘this’ for all the reasons of skewed economics, centuries-old debt and the fact of racialisation, the young men that I spoke to know all of this already. Whether here (Pakistan) or there (anywhere in the West), it is after all their experience. Baucom wrote: ‘Modernity is not the gleam. It is the view from the township’ (2006: 74). So, what is it that these young men see, what does the view look like from a small village somewhere in Punjab? And does it allow us to think navigation differently from the colonial logics of the horizon or the totalising worlds of the geospatial?

**Navigation versus orientation**

Thinking again with the view from Punjab, in certain villages nearly all the older men have attempted the journey to Europe at one time or another with varying degrees of success. Many of these same men do _agenty_ – that is they are agents who facilitate others’ journeys. I met a group who were all part of the same extended farming family in a village surrounded by a high mud wall, which I was told was due to the violence between villages. We spoke in a room full of smoke, in the _baithak_ or sitting room that is always at the edge of a house, so that people can come and go without having the inner workings of the household revealed to them. About ten men sat around laughing and joking, falling silent and shy at the sight of a woman entering their world, but after a while everyone relaxed enough to discuss the topic at hand. I heard stories of the violence and exploitation that many of them had to endure, a violence that they often attributed to an agent who took their money, did not inform them properly of what was to befall them, and then was absent when they needed help. To me this seemed strange, that in the same extended family there were agents and there were migrants, families were sending their young children on these harrowing journeys and everyone was sitting there ignoring the fact that they were directly implicated in the violence that others have had to endure. There is an unwritten rule that you do not send anyone from your own village but there seemed to be a disavowal at the heart of these discussions that to me as an outsider was
striking. The systemic violence of militarised borders and their differential inclusions has created a global class of precarious migrants who are both traumatised by the violence and abjection that they have had to endure but have at the same time, paraphrasing Azoulay (2019), lost the right not to become perpetrators. Having spent months and years caught within the carceral regime of borders or in attempting to find a way into Europe, the majority are no longer capable of doing the work they might have done as farmers or labourers. Instead they mobilise their knowledge of the routes they have taken and the language skills they have picked up along the way to make ends meet through agentry. But they pay a high price for this work, which does not allow them to leave behind the violence of borders and ensures that they become complicit in circulating that violence within their own communities. It seems that the rivalries related to the ‘agentry business’ have perpetuated and deepened the already existing animosities between villages, particularly related to the fraught question of izzat.

One man in particular who had recently returned from Greece possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of the various bureaucratic, biometric and data collection processes implemented by the EU at its external borders. He had spent many months in Lesvos and then in Athens volunteering for an NGO. It was also how he had managed to come back, through IOM’s so-called voluntary return scheme. While he might not have described the workings of these databases, such as EuroDAC that he is now a part of, in the terms that I have used — calculation and aggregation — he was very aware of their function in creating the complexity of the world that he would have to navigate should he decide to return — because the question of return is always open in the persistent present that he inhabits. But he was also confident in his own capacity to find a way through by mobilising the opacity that is the gift a racialised world offers to those who are seen as an undifferentiated mass (Glissant, 1997). As I have been told on a number of occasions, ‘you must always try not to give your fingerprints or your eye prints’. Combined with desperate tactics such as burning your own fingerprints, return is always possible so long as the network of relations built during these difficult journeys is kept alive. Azoulay on archives as institutions writes that they are ‘a regime of coordinated thresholds—what I have called imperial shutters—that underwrite the shared world’ (Azoulay, 2019: 91). She suggests that a strategy for working against the imperialism of archives is to keep the
shutters open. Those who have chosen *agency* as their line of work are contributing towards keeping the shutters open even as the only way they can do this is through remaining within the persistent temporality of borders and of perpetuating their violence.

Their work contributes to a network of practices that has the potential to become emancipatory through a collective project of unlearning the chrononormativity of borders and the spatialities embedded within computational navigation. It is a project that could be understood through notions of orientation over navigation, which, rather than requiring an external datum, is related to how the sharing of time and space affects bodies and objects. Here I am thinking with Sara Ahmed’s notion of orientation, where she writes that bodies and objects are affected by the orientations they take towards each other through sharing space, and that these orientations depend on certain tendencies and social norms. Ahmed is writing about queer lives, but her insight into how orientations act, both as ‘straightening devices’ as well as providing ‘fleeting moments’ where something slips and other inhabitations are possible, is, I think, also applicable to the lives I am discussing (Ahmed, 2006: 563 & 565). This slippage, or a moment of orientation with potentiality in a life full of disorientation, is the small possibility that is left of finding new directions within a totalising horizonless world. The notion of orientation as a practice and methodology for working with the chronopolitics of migration has emerged from the experiences of undocumented migrants. Their inhabitation of a persistent present can also be considered a refusal of the normative concept of linear time embodied in notions of progress and modernity. In thinking with the migrant experience the question of temporality is always already entwined with the spatiality of border regimes that are increasingly operating within an algorithmic logic. Their chronopolitics offers a challenge to the perceived absoluteness of state space and provides a template for a political refusal of globalised border regimes.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the special issue editors as well as the two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on the draft. The essay has emerged out of a wider research project, Topological Atlas, which has received funding from the European Research
Council (ERC) under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no: 758529).

**References**


ubversion_in_a_Networked_Age_Berlin_Archive_Books_2017_pp._73-83 (accessed 19 February 2020).


migration', *African Geographical Review* 37(2): 159–171. DOI:

Steyerl, H. (2011) 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', *eflux*
24. Available at: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-
thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/ (accessed 22 March 2019).

Tsianos, V.S. and B. Kuster (2016a) 'Eurodac in Times of Bigness: The Power of Big
Data within the Emerging European IT Agency', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 31(2).

Tsianos, V.S. and B. Kuster (2016b) 'How to Liquefy a Body on the Move: Eurodac
and the Making of the European Digital Border'. In: Bossong R and Carrapico H
(eds) *EU Borders and Shifting Internal Security: Technology, Externalization and
Accountability*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 45–63. DOI:
10.1007/978-3-319-17560-7_3.

Walters, J. (2017) 'What is Daca and who are the Dreamers?' *The Guardian*, 14
September. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-
news/2017/sep/04/donald-trump-what-is-daca-dreamers (accessed 11 March
2019).


*Wikipedia* (2019a) 'DREAM Act'. Available at:
(accessed 11 March 2019).

*Wikipedia* (2019b) 'Windrush scandal'. Available at:
3 (accessed 11 March 2019).

**Notes**

1 I have borrowed this term from Patricia Reed (2019) although I think she was using it a little
differently. The feeling of being stuck in place has of course been described by many authors for
different situations, including those of migration. Navaro-Yashin (2016) and Rabinowitz (2001) have
described something similar but in the context of a mostly spatial enclosure caused by conflict,
whereas Hage (2009) has described an existential feeling of being stuck, what he refers to as
‘stuckedness’. My use of the phrase ‘persistent present’ attempts to emphasise the temporal over the spatial; even when there is mobility, the feeling of being stuck within a particular time remains.

The Windrush scandal concerned people from mostly Caribbean backgrounds who were wrongly detained and deported by the UK Home Office. Many of these were British subjects that arrived in the UK as citizens before the Immigration Act of 1971 that restricted the citizenship rights of those from the former colonies. For more information see El-Enany, 2019; Wikipedia, 2019b. The Dreamers refers to undocumented migrants within the US that arrived as children. They were provided temporary rights under the Obama administration but their fate has become a political bargaining tool under the Trump administration. For more information see Walters, 2017; Wikipedia, 2019a.

Griffiths identifies ‘four experiential temporalities’, including ‘sticky time’, ‘suspended time’, ‘frenzied time’ and ‘temporal ruptures’ that reveal the contradictions of the way time is experienced in detention and deportation (2014: 1994).

One man in his late-twenties described his reasons as: ‘I was interested in a better life and a better income in Europe. I thought there would be a hundred new opportunities there and I could make something of myself.’ From an interview conducted by the author in Punjab in 2020.

Extract from an interview conducted by the author in Punjab in 2020 with a man in his mid-twenties who had recently returned. He did not make it to Europe but was arrested in Turkey and taken to a camp to be deported. He was not given an opportunity to apply for asylum or a visa but was transported back to Iran by road and handed over to the Iranian authorities who then sent him back to Pakistan by road.

The map used to be available to view freely, but since the controversy surrounding it, the website now requires a password: http://www.imap-migration.org/index.php?id=4. For a detailed account of the i-Map and its complicities, and a conceptual distinction between routes and trajectories, see Casas-Cortés et al., 2017. A graphic derived from the interactive i-Map can be viewed on the Reuters website (Reuters, 2016).

In the rapidly evolving world of border securitization, the i-Map is now an old technology. Instead, projects like the infamous i-BorderCTRL, an EU-funded project for automated border security, envisages the use of facial recognition technologies as a form of lie detection, through analysing micro facial movements (Crampton, 2019).

A similar point is made by Mende in her discussion of Farocki’s later films where she describes how, for Farocki, the world of computer animations posed a challenge to the usual technique of montage in filmmaking that produced a timeline and a filmic narrative. She writes: ‘If montage is the core formal device for concatenating space and time into a continuous causal sequence, then for Farocki, the computer-animated, navigable images that constitute the twenty-first century’s “ruling class of images” call for new tools of analysis’ (Mende, 2019: 1).

Quote from an interview conducted by the author in Lahore in 2019.

Quote from an interview conducted by the author in the Gujranwala area, Punjab in 2020.

Nishat Awan is Senior Research Fellow at the Faculty of Architecture, TU Delft. Her research focuses on the intersection of geopolitics and space, including questions related to diasporas, migration and border regimes.

www.topologicalatlas.net

Email: n.n.awan@tudelft.nl
Abstract

During recent years, geocomputation has become increasingly entangled with so-called 4D visualization. The contemporary infrastructure of fossil fuel extraction depends on these software tools for geological data handling, interpretation, and modelling of subterranean. This paper makes use of the contaminated and contaminating practice of figuration to plot stories that highlight some of the milestones of deadly collaboration, of optimised acceleration, and of sedimented damage. It engages with three figurations of timely extraction (Consortium, Borehole and Amalgam) to tell stories that provide a way to make present the time-space complexities that emerge from the connections between extractivism, computation and semiotic-material values. The Underground Division studies those rocky figurations to expose some of their interdependent articulations such as transnational alliances, gold mining and geocomputation and how they shape life/non-life temporalities.

We argue that the dynamic crossings of time and matter that Consortium, Borehole and Amalgam are embedded in establish a dynamics of repeated damage, via latent regimes which maintain extractive forces, practices and modes. We amalgamate the clock time of turbo-computing with the megaannums at the timeline of digitally mediated rocks to present agential combinations of exclusion and occlusion that each create unique modes of discrimination and privilege.

Keywords

queer feminist technoscience, extraction, geo-computation, volumetrics, time-space, figuration, creative methods, disobedient action research
“We broke the earth and now we fall through time”  
(Gumbs, 2018: 139)

This paper engages with three figurations of timely extraction, Consortium, Borehole and Amalgam. It makes use of the contaminated and contaminating practice of figuration, to plot stories that highlight some of the perhaps uneventful milestones of deadly collaboration, of optimised acceleration, and of sedimeted damage (Haraway, 2004: 47). But let’s start with a warning: these stories are dense. They travel through paradigms, scales of concern and fields of operation to make the time-space complexities present that emerge from connections between extractivism, computation and semiotic-material values. Specifically, the stories inquire into how timely extraction might be understood through what Rebecca Coleman calls the “temporality of the present” and in particular the making and managing of ‘the now’ (2020: 1681). This can be called an unscoping study of nowness in geocomputation, given the fact that the stories emerge from a need to write from cuts of intricacy, instead of calibrating with specific disciplinary fields.

Tracing the rocky figures of Consortium, Borehole and Amalgam, involves disclosing some of their interdependencies such as transnational alliances, gold mining and geocomputation and how they shape life/non-life temporalities. The three figures are therefore joined by many other tales and stories such as Akan gold weights, timely titans and wounded rocks. By their intertwined figuration we unfold some of the diverse temporalities and modalities along the chapter. The dynamic crossings of time and matter that they are embedded in establish a dynamics of repeated damage via latent regimes which maintain extractive forces, practices and modes. In this paper we amalgamate the clock time of turbo-computing with the megaannums that mark the timeline of rocks to present agential combinations of exclusion and occlusion, each creating unique modes of discrimination and privilege. By attending to the differentiated realities that are constituted by these ongoing, irregular and unstable intersections, we try to account for the specific complex
worldings that emerge in the contemporary industrial and techno-scientific continuum.

Consortium, Borehole and Amalgam are figures of timely extraction that allow us to inhabit, problematize, intensify and/or dismantle the operative modes of technobiomythical geontopraxis. Timely extractions are the specific crossings of the dimension of time in its diverse finite uses and measuring inventions, a fundamental physical quantity also known as “the fourth dimension”, with the Modern practices and operations taking place within the realm of extraction from the body of the Earth. “Timely” alludes to a rampant opportunism, a clear productivism ruling units of measurement and the overall observation of time as it goes. Technobiomythical geontopraxis is our combination of the notion of “geontologies” worked by Elizabeth Povinelli (Povinelli, 2016) with the sensibility shared by Sylvia Wynter of “bio” and “mythoi” (McKittrick, 2015: 23). The chapter establishes a dialogue between geontological thinking and sociogenetic theories, two critical frameworks that urge us to re-understand biopolitics at the complex nexus of volume measurement, time organization and value extraction that entangle prospecting and computing.

The specific time studies activated in this paper ask how synchronization and standardisation, repetition and memory, innovation and processing, continue to be key operations in the volumetric realm of geocomputation. Volumetric geocomputation is the term we use to describe how software and computing solve complex space-time problems for measuring and exploitation of volumes of what Yusoff calls the inhuman earth (Yusoff, 2018).

Figurations are not fictions; they are involved in presenting rather than representing (Haraway, 2018); they are hands-on devices that can activate stories of deep implicancies in techno-sciences, a term we mobilise from Denise Ferreira da Silva to describe “a primordial moment of entanglement prior to the separation of matter evolving into the planet we know” (da Silva and Neuman, 2019). Figures are ways to think with overlapping problematicities such as Donna Haraway with OncoMouse

To attend to the entanglements at work in geocomputation, gold mining and transnational hyperstructures, we decided to think through combined figures: moving from Consortium to Consortium-Amalgam into the increased complexity of Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole. This combinatory figuring became a ‘volumetric figure tactics’, a combinatory figuring as a way to collectively think through modes of what eco feminist Ariel Salleh calls “holding together” (Salleh, 2017). We discuss holding rocks together, but also of holding together with rocks in contingent, computational worlds via the multiforming dimension of time. Volumetric figure tactics are first of all about inhabiting and situating practices and more specifically about departing from the figures of geontopower (Povinelli, 2016). As Povinelli asks in her work with the desert, the animist and the virus, we want to make sure not to cramp out the urgent critical analysis of the geo- by letting the bio- emerge without accounting for the co-presence of onto-, geo- and bio-. Equally, the key combo of the bio and the myth is something we urge to unfold on this arena, having learned from Wynter such a clarifying juncture (McKittrick, 2015).

The inquiry emerges alongside the development of Violent Amalgations, a digital 3D animation we created as The Underground Division. The Underground Division is a disobedient action-research collaboration on techniques, technologies and infrastructures of subsurface rendering and their imaginations and promises (The Underground Division, 2019). With help of many others we explore the computational rendering of subsoil explorations through volumetrics, getting busy with narrative assets for discounting time with a trans*feminist technoscience sensibility. Violent Amalgamations is the eighth addition to a repository of computational rock stories, the ROCK REPO (The Underground Division, 2020b) and was developed for the on-line exhibition ¿Cómo continuar?, organised by Centro Cultural de España in Lima, Peru (The Underground Division, 2020c). The
animation brings together three 3D renderings of so-called rare earth minerals, volumetric models of precious metals and ore deposits from gold extraction. They were gleaned from gaming, geological and amateur photogrammetry contexts and are rotating in front of scrolling textual fragments. The texts are drawn from mining stories found in industry press releases, community demonstration claims, company reports, activist accounts, geochemistry surveys and historical documents. In the background, a screencast of a hesitant scrolling movement, probing a satellite image. On many levels, the on-line render of this visual and textual piece informs, illustrates, challenges and is challenged by the figurations of timely extraction that operate in this paper.

Figure 1: ROCK REPO installed in TETEM (Enschede, NL), as a contribution to BodyBuilding: A Platform in Transition, curated by Hackers & Designers. The Underground Division, 2020.

Consortium

We start our journey into the disclosure of extractive volumetrics with a figure of temporary strategic alliance, ‘Consortium’. In a consortium, international companies,
transnational economic organisms, public entities and/or global industry corporations cooperate to be ready for and hold together a future: their future. Associated by contract rather than affinity, a consortium draws stakeholders together in order to plan ahead for probable outcomes in terms of environmental costs, technological culture and political economy.

Time-keeping and the imposition of timing standards has been a core practice of power. The artefacts designed and cared for by cultures along history are charged with full worldings, in the sense of actively intervening in the opportune setting of the material conditions of possibility at a particular ecology of practice. The Soviet calendar, for example, eradicated Judaeo-Christian weekends to optimize time. Or as Judy Wajcman shows in her work, Silicon Valley calendars underpinned by the assumption that all time should be colonised, harnessed and controlled, accompany users everywhere to ensure work is always present, and close at hand (2018: 15). The Zapatista calendar was introduced with a very different underlying purpose, and other figures of power are legitimized by it:

The oldest of our villages tell us that in the early days time was just like that, all messy and stumbling around like a ball on the feast of the Holy Cross. Men and women lost a lot and got lost a lot because time did not walk evenly, but sometimes it hurried and sometimes it walked slowly, crawling just like a little old reindeer, and sometimes the sun was a big skin that covered everything, and sometimes just pure water, water up, water down and water in the middle, because before it did not rain only from below but also from the sides, and sometimes even from below it rained. In other words, it was all just a relaxing moment and perhaps you could sow, hunt or fix the zacatón roof or the walls made of rod and mud.

And the gods looked and looked at everything, because these gods, who were the first ones, those who were born in the world, just kept walking and grabbing macabiles in the river and sucking cane and sometimes they also helped to shell the corn for tortillas. So everything was watched by these gods, those who gave birth to the world, the first ones. And they thought, but they did not think quickly, but they took a long
time because these gods were not very light, so they spent a long time only looking at time passing by stumbling on the earth and then they dilated because then they thought of/about themselves (EZLN Zapatista Army of National Liberation, 1999).

The figure of the Consortium approaches the monetized timing and time tracking of extraction through its ability to draw a clear line between what goes inside power crusts and what goes outside, as well as what gets done now and what is left for later, or will never be done. Whereas scholars have tended to focus on the ways in which Big Tech individualises the 24/7 present to harness and control time for optimization – the control of time through automation (c.f Wajman, 2018; Sharma, 2017; Gregg, 2017), Consortia make a different story present; the extraction of time through standards. Standards which are dependent on an enormous amount of technical resources to hold them in place. As Consortia ally for accurate timely extraction, they forge paths into the future because something is at stake. The Consortia understand what Rebecca Coleman observes; “that ‘the present’ is not separable from the past and future, but nevertheless as a distinctive temporality that requires conceptual attention” (2020: 1695). They are already-powerful agents who agree to pool their resources and synchronize their processes by setting and committing to their preferred protocols, made to their measure. In this way, they join forces to direct ‘progress’ or innovation in the direction of those who consort, routing possibilities away from those that do not. As a result, everyone outside the consortium needs to cope with the imposed standards of the consortia’s now and their temporally aligned agendas.

The specific consortium that we take up in this section is called Khronos, a partnership of hardware and software companies that are in business together to create “advanced, royalty-free acceleration standards for 3D graphics, Augmented and Virtual Reality, vision and machine learning” (Khrónos Group, 2020). We encountered the Khrónos Consortium while looking for an affordable, contemporary Open Standard that could hold the 3D animations in the ROCK REPO. We wanted a generally used technology that did not require obsessive training nor expensive hardware and settled for the Open Source library three.js that
implements the Graphics Library Transmission Format (glTF), otherwise known as the ‘jpeg of 3D’.

The glTF format is developed by Khronos as a royalty free standard for optimising and streamlining the use of 3D models by generic browser applications. The consortium grants anyone permission to use it without cost, counting on hard- and software industries to adapt it more rapidly and widely which in turn forces interoperability and standardisation through normalisation. Royalty-free is a particular intellectual property approach that strikes a fine balance between cooperation and competition, which characterizes the dynamics of many other tech-consortia such as the World Wide Web Consortium (responsible for HTML, which is a royalty free standard as well) and the Joint Photographic Experts Group (managing the JPEG format). Royalty free is neither in ideological nor in legal terms an actual Open Standard. The Khronos consortium is not obliged to share the design and distribution of 3D assets and their efforts in making documentation accessible is benevolent, which means that rights of use can be retracted at any moment. We argue that the Khronos glTF™ is specifically designed and promoted as an agreement on what time is and how it is made present by 3D rendering.

Khronos was set up in the late 90’s to develop and implement techno-ecological practices of standardisation for the production and distribution of real-time representations in three dimensions (Khronos Group, 2020). The consortium was formed to standardise multispeed volumetrics across the industrial-continuum of 3D, making it possible to share practice from medical imaging to the optimisation of precious mineral mining. One of the areas it has drawn its standards into is what we call “volumetric geocomputation”, the computational processes which include visualisation, spatial regression, statistics and space-time modelling of the geological and the geographical. In this way, the Khronos consortium has become co-responsible for how time is generated in geocomputation. Or to put it differently: the semiotic materialities of volu- and chrono-/khrono-metrics are settled by a very specific transnational technoscientific consortium named Khronos.
The time of the world and in particular the time of the underground has become inseparable from volumetric calculation, due to the committed attunement to the set of standards like glTF, which lay at the core of the techniques, technologies, infrastructures and protocols used for high-tech measuring and extracting projects. The infrastructures that enable the simultaneous quantification of volume and of time could use some disclosure if we want to call into question their operations. What are the specific organising forces at work that structure the production and mobilisation of this worlding regime and the melding of metrics? In these infrastructures, uneasy alliances of perverse synchronicity and timely opportunism grow and expand socio-technically; fiercely protective by being in company, but how do they function? How might they be disrupted, intervened upon, transformed in the key spots where other non-standard worldings might emerge?

On their website, The Khronos consortium promises that its shared standards will enable products and resources to be “experienced realistically and consistently across all platforms and devices, such as mobile, Web and Augmented Reality (AR) or Virtual Reality (VR) solutions” (Khronos Group, 2019). But the commitment to optimised, linear time had already started before, with its very naming, the non-arbitrary and non-innocent mobilisation of the Greek mythological titan Κρόνος, Chronos or Cronus. As the king of heaven, Khronos was associated with linear and destructive time. As a deity, he personified time and temporality with two other titans, Aion, and Kairos. In one version of the myth Khronos was considered to have the shape of a three-headed serpent. The heads were those of a man, a bull and a lion. Along with his daughter Ananke, the goddess of inevitability who also appeared in the form of a snake, Khronos revolved around the primordial world egg, until they split it apart to form the earth, the sea and the sky. According to the Orphic cult, he gave birth to Aether and Chaos, and created a silver egg in Aether. The deities Phanes and Hydrus were hatched from the egg, and later gave birth to the first gods and the universe. There are many variations of the myth, however most recount worldbuilding through “chronological, sequential, linear time – that devours and consumes” (McCulloh, 2014: 55). Chronological, sequential time that devours
and consumes... it is a form of time that sounds all too familiar, due to the euro- and andro-centric process of naturalisation that it imposed in the places we are writing from and the digital tools we are writing with. Just like the mythical story of Khronos, these computational processes are worldbuilding as they shape modes of spatialisation, measurement, standardisation and optimisation of bodies, devices, environments and global systems.

Under the motto “Connecting software to silicon”, Khronos organises almost choreographic alliances between hardware and software companies through agreements of telos. This tying together of matter and time is crucial for understanding how consortia as a figure inhabit the capitalist regime of technobiom Mythical and technobiopose. The Khronos consortium currently consists of 150 self-appointed transnational Big Tech hardware and software companies, academic institutions, public services and institutional structures. They represent the most economically powerful and largest technology companies globally including Google, Apple, EPIC games, Intel and Nvidia. As a member of this developmentalist and innovation-oriented mediatic echo chamber, these companies “contribute to the development of Khronos specifications, and vote at various stages before public deployment and are able to accelerate the delivery of their cutting-edge accelerated platforms and applications through early access to specification drafts and conformance tests” (Khronos Group, 2020b). Other actors (not part of the consortium) are invited to use published versions of the standard, but do not have access to the most accelerated formats. The control over this ‘early access’ constitutes the monopoly position of Khronos, as reigning timekeeper in most 3D worldings. It imposes extractive temporality and linear time at the heart of the consortium, a logic in which members will always be ahead in technological development.

Making standards concrete through controlling the flow of processes through time and matter is a characteristic of the extractivism at work in volumetric regimes, and in that sense, Khronos can be called “a stakeholder of the techno-colonial regime” (Ye et al., 2020). This is because extractivist volumetrics are not tied to specific
locations or even resources, but are designed to jump through time and space by the smoothening standardisation of both. Of course, “Through their control over resource-combination and resource-use, extractivist systems are able to generate a huge value flow towards the operational centre” (Ye et al., 2020: 160).

The distribution of power through the delimiting of insides and outsides, nows and laters, do’s and don’ts, accountability and degrees of dissent around 3D and 4D computing is far from neutral, and we argue that the enforcement of linear time on the world is where violence resides. The Khronos consortium demonstrates how volumetric violence takes place when the 3D polygonization of the world happens behind closed, expensive and complicit doors. We call this Khronometric/Khronologic violence – the imposing of linear time metrics over inhuman complexities and interoperabilities. It is important here to note that we are not reasserting computational time as linear, but want to tune to the ways in which the standards hold together progress with metrics to present time as linear through computational processes.

Khronometric/Khronologic violence operates like stasis in narrative structures. It is the benchmark that must be met before a voice can even have an audience (Boje and Henderson, 2014: 56); it counts the rhythms, sets the limits, delimits moments and establishes beginnings as well as ends. glTF standardizes a very specific material constellation through the mechanisms of modern time-keeping. Its industrial consortia execute protocols as a way to enforce the continued standardisation of time through regulating the live computational arrangement of polygonal elements in a 3D object or rendering speed. The Khronos glTF™ format demonstrates how standardisation is not ‘just’ an agreement on a technical format but a platform for shared corporate power that forces others to conform and participate in specific worldbuilding. Standardisation technically rigidifies relationalities. This writing-in of standard time and space into the 3D format of glTF means that it becomes difficult to propose other worldings outside of the consortium – the time of the world becomes made and controlled by the time of computation and economic calculation.
What if time(s) could be grabbed back? Simultaneity, recursion and ongoingness of damage along and through time is what needs to be accounted for in order to interrupt the smooth continuation of technocolonial capitalist exploitation and contemporary totalitarian innovation. How to widen timetracks to do both a theory and a praxis of non-developmentalist, non-fungible co-habiting? How to not let go of tracking damaging timestamps while switching the focus to other space-time matterings? We need to ask what anti-colonial chronologies or chronotopies might be extracted from the problematisation of depoliticized linearity and certain alignments of policies.

The measuring and arranging of time does not necessitate straightness and for-profit alliance, it could also unfold from the situated stumbling messiness of an alloyance (alliance + alloy). If we want to think about time-space otherwise, we need to invent ways to challenge their consorting amalgams. Alloyance might be a mode for not-incompatible aides to cut the oppressive dynamics of hand-holding (Indigenous Action Media, 2014). A means of holding together without blending into the background or emerging as a clearcut alliance.

Figure 2: Violent Amalgamations, text animation layer. The Underground Division, 2020
Consortium-Amalgam

The second figure of timely extraction and the first figure-combination we want to introduce, is Consortium-Amalgam. In this particular arrangement, Amalgam refers to amalgamation, a process of change which happens due to different materials being brought in contact with each other, a transformative blending that changes each agent involved. The amalgam is a figure that crosses between alchemy, contemporary chemistry and mineralogy. It is also commonly used to name ‘any’ mixture, any blend: it is a specific worlding that emerges from the mollifying operation of some materials onto others. Its etymology refers to ‘malassein’ or ‘malakos’, “to soften,” and more precisely to the softening effect achieved by applying a warm ointment on a cut; the substance might soften pain, or soften flesh, or both at the same time. Chemically speaking, the amalgam appears as a mercurial melting; a mixing of metals, and the extraction of gold from ores.

By bringing two figures together, we want to test how the praxis of figuration could work without separating figures from their background. As a techno-political cut, Consortium-Amalgam proposes a particular mixing of elements: situated gatherings, heterogeneous togetherness, semiotic-material co-constitution, specific gatherings and differentiated stuff. It turns our attention from the meta operations of alliance to the intricate micro-politics of the mercurial materials that bind them molecularly. In her work on protein modelling, Natasha Myers suggests attending to the molecular might open up a kind of ‘molecular intuition’ which opens up to possibilities for life at the moment of molecule binding (Myers, 2015). Indeed, research on molecular modelling reminds us of the fact that bindings are never permanent, and also that they were not already there. For instance, in the process of alloying gold from mined ore, both the formation of more-or-less stable materialities and their dissolution, produces toxic waste as well as somewhat pure substances.

Historically precious metals have been used repeatedly to tell and impose telluric stories of value from the mythical El Dorado’s golden aura to the Akan Gold weights (c.f Aston, 2018). As Yusoff shows, gold shapes the material history and temporality of value significantly: “Slave capture and ownership were initially
instigated to mine for gold in the New World. Both enslaved, land and ecologies became subject to encoding as inhuman property, as a tactic of empire and European world building” (2018: 68). Whether tactics of empire or cohabiting with the figurative imagery of temporal bonds of ancestors and the earth (the memory only carried by rocks), or acting as standard units of measurement for trading gold; the telluric stories of value told through gold are the material histories of volumetric time-space.

El Dorado and the Akan Gold weights share an important but often overlooked quality. They are both mediations of the measured amalgamation of volume, value and time that set the mythical conditions for volumetric regimes in contemporary precious mineral extraction as they melt chrono- and volu-metrics together. This amalgamation of objectified time, measurement and volume through myth is the conflation of what Barbara Hernstein Smith referred to as the ‘double-discourse of value’, in which on “the one hand there is the discourse of economic theory: money, commerce, technology” and the other hand the “discourse of aesthetic axiology: culture, art, genius, creation and appreciation” (Smith, 1988: 127). In the melding of chrono- and volu-metrics these contingent material-discourses of money, commerce, technology and cultural myth become amalgamated, and the Marxist separation of aesthetic-use value and exchange-value is collapsed. And as in Smith, the work of valuing (much like in the Consortium) takes place through communal agreements and standards.

Computation has configured the cultural expectation for information as continuous, standardised and increasing in equivalence. Geocomputation in particular combines volume as a resource with ‘objective time’ or rather Enlightenment’s secular time: Modern time, scientific time, measurable and infinitely calculable time – all the way to the high-speed time of hyper-computational turbo-capitalist operations and benign tales of ‘renewable’ energy which tags certain practices of extraction as ‘sustainable’. Gold has become an indispensable resource for making Modern time in digital devices. It counts as the most stable metal, it is resistant to corrosion and is best at keeping computational time in its use in connectors and transistors. For Big
Tech, this means time is money, time is gold: calculable time abstracts the relation between gold and time as equivalent for exchange-value. Again and again, time becomes material through gold; time both figures and is figured by gold.

In technoscientific stories of gold mining or fossil fuel extraction, the Consortium-Amalgam inhabits a volumetric regime that organises the time-space-matter of geo-computing techniques. Gold trade values travel at light speed through fibre optics, automated calculation powers ‘mine initiation’ to prospect and precisely predict volumes of gold ore to be liberated, gold doping speeds up binary computing, wicked profits are made in so-called Urban Mining where cheap broken phones are re-imported from extraction sites so that its gold components can be reclaimed once more by Umicore, and calculable time is being kept constant in computers and smart phones through the use of electrical conductors – yet again – made of gold (UNCTAD, 2020: 16). Could this continuous loop be the ‘golden double-bond’ of the Amalgam-Consortium?

Whereas much post-anthropocentric thinking on time has attended to how non-human and inhuman temporalities are entangled with human time in conflicting ways (Rossini and Toggweiler, 2018), the Amalgam-Consortium tunes us to amalgamated figures that rely on inhuman temporalities and capacities for temporal arrangements and that make extraction possible through computation and at the expense of local, indigenous lives. And it is these figures that have historically and temporally generated regimes of technological, biological, geological, ideological and mythical praxis – regimes that are not often in isolation, yet combined in deep complexity and, we argue, amalgamation.

The digital animation Violent Amalgamations emerged from observing the layering of temporal arrangements and differently calibrated measurements at work in and around the Conga mine in Cajamarca, Peru. Subjects, direct objects, indirect objects and actions move vertically across the screen, overlapping with different speeds. Depending on the graphic processor of the rendering device, they visibly tremble or appear to run smoothly, without latency.
67 trucks waiting for the mine to re-open, finely crushed ore, countless communities of endoliths, a smartphone ringing without end, the importance of saying that it is “over”. How many litres of water will the ancestors drink?, silence and denial, the present tense of the verb “to dig”, 0.1 gram of cyanide killing, one human and countless deeptime bacteria, the important moment when she said it is “over”. Three grams of cyanide diluted in 3 cubic meters of water per ton of rock, a physical separation between cause and effect, the usefulness/price of atomic stability, the importance of saying that it is “over”. To reduce the time between the push and get, colonizing fissures and cracks in the rock, the freezing of a zone, the erasure of many, importantly saying that it is “over” (The Underground Division, 2020c).

Violent Amalgamations is part of a series of audiovisual works gathered in the ROCK REPO. They operate with the deep implicancies of moving between figure and ground, asking what happens as a result of cutting and cleaving, and what other formations could appear. A great deal of “stony patience” (Yusoff, 2018) is required to resist and repair the damages from the various practices of separation which bring ore and its energies to the surface of the earth. Sharpened by queer and anti-colonial sensibilities, the ROCK REPO investigates the way undergrounds are quarried, measured, quantified, historicized, visualized, circulated, predicted, classified, extracted, remembered and modelled. It is an environment for studying volumetric imaginings, the softwares and hardwares that ROCKS intervene on and for building new glossaries on the go. These studies recognise that ROCKS have their own lively forces and relationalities, and operate as a chipping away at what limits the collective resistance and reparative capacities of and with ROCKS (The Underground Division, 2020b).

While the historical present of geocomputation relies on Enlightenment’s stable and continuous time, it also holds a peculiar position as it actively generates the ‘end of time’ through the modelling of melting volumes of ice, carbon and methane and other figures of climate crisis and the Anthropocene. The techno- and geological material-discourse of extraction depends on and produces colonial temporalities of progress and improvement. What Jennifer Gabrys describes as the critical relation
between progress, temporality and materiality (2011: 106). This unstable but continuous alliance of totalitarian innovation, automated geocomputation, glossy data, spinning earth, clean textures, high speeds, gold conductors and 5G networked non-humans seeks to replace the inhuman temporalities of ‘traditional’ imperial devastation, settler exploitation and commercial routes. Mechanical and human scale figures of gold mining such as the open pit, the toiling body, the Northern prospector, el código del virreinado, establish themselves again and again as progressive values and scientific objective temporalities that contrast with the fleshy, subjective and unruly temporalities of the local protestors. Deaths caused by landslides, pollution and lack of water, crushing landscapes and rocks is the material price to pay for the continuation of both extraction and of the too-well known developmentalist timeline of progress.

Contemporary extraction relies heavily on normative temporal modalities that themselves depend upon individualized and stable bodies. The continuum of geology and extraction is amalgamated with consortia of transnational industries, militarized nation-states and Big Tech. Their shared interest is to construct objective time as an extractive temporality against the backdrop of contemporary Indigenous time, and the ancestral protests it carries along. Reducing the possibilities for considering their times as being present or latent instead of past and absent, these consortia are in business to engineer systems for global time versus local time, time as resource versus grounded time.

Both Consortium and Amalgam tend to figure productively arranged whens, how-oftens and for-how-leans. Both figures count confidently on timely projections, setting futures in motion and owning time’s trajectories which produce certain irreversibility and exclude other possibilities. We propose a counter-reading of the combinatory potential of amalgam-consortium, to invite active considerations of simultaneous material-semiotic arrangements, persistence of damage, partial reparations and non-standard coincidences. Attending to the other temporalities of the Amalgam-Consortium is an attempt to reclaim non-linear processes through a coming together otherwise, away from opportunistically synchronized progressive
timeframes. Amalgams and Consortia might also be and are being rethought as a space of alterity and possibilities: “animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities. And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms” (Wynter, 1995).

![Figure 3: Violent Amalgamations, text animation layer plus models: Magnesium (Author: philou972), Chrome (Author: philou972), Gold Nuggets (Author: quedlin). The Underground Division, 2020](image)

**Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole**

In this section, the Consortium-Amalgam conjoins with the Borehole to form an even more complex space-time-matter joint. Through their different volumetrics and transformative materialities, the Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole figures unstable grounds for timely extraction of the present – a present which, as Coleman describes, is folded into the past and future (2020: 1695).

The Borehole is a deep, physical wound but also a wormhole, and hence a specific kind of shortcut for understanding damage. A borehole is by definition a persistent passage which is always just wide enough to make extraction flow easily, again and again. Boreholes are drilled down or sideways, sometimes at great depth, to penetrate gravel, bedrock or aquifers. The downwards and circular movement of the drill
forces openings in matter formations, turning them into always-available resource or storage.

In the company of the straight damage-on-the-spot of the Borehole, the Amalgam has a different relation to extraction. Volatile mercury is put to use again and again to attract specific metallic particles, separating them from the background of their carrier rocks. For now, they form a stable golden bond of solid, paste-like, fluid, spongy, hard or soft material. The amalgam is there as an in-between stage, as a step in a process towards evaporation and separation, form slug to nugget. The Borehole implies quite a different gesture of flow management, a physical driving vertically into the ground that produces access for some, and depletion for others.

The timely operation of the Borehole imposes a never-ending feeling backwards (Love, 2009), through the many layers of the earth, drilling deep down to make repetitive upward movements possible: energy, resources, fluids end up in the dirty and rough hands of already-powerful agents. And this is how we know that the Consortium was already prepared. That potential profit and possible extraction had been scoped. That locations were targeted and conditions were negotiated beforehand. The Consortium arrived but did not situate itself; it is there to manage the taking but not there to hold. With the Consortium-Amalgamate-Borehole setting the scene, we can now return to ‘Conga’.

Now we are in Cajamarca. We are *also* in a web browser, rendering a 3D amalgam over a Google map’s street view; satellite tiles, images appear of a past moment, are stitched together as we move. This is the temporality of capitalist turbo-computation. A representation of a region of Cajamarca is being rendered in a web-browser. Satellite view. Meaning: cenital. A cenital representation of a wound is now being rendered on a smooth surface. And now. Hypercomputation, it’s called. For how long. Rock-like textures overlay on compressed polygonal geometries over Cajamarca. Seamlessly rotating, triangulating. Sometimes these generated textures dissolve, like impossible mineralised shatterings, as they move outside of the designated viewpoint. Conga is located within Cajamarca. Cajamarca is located in the North part of the
Peruvian country and shares a border with Ecuador (the seam of the nation state this time, not so much the dividing axis of the equator). It is located at heights reaching 2,700 metres (8,900 ft) above sea level in the Andes Mountain Range, the longest mountain range in the world. Part of its territory includes the Amazon Rainforest, in total the largest on Earth. Take those as the wound's modern coordinates. This wound fills the screen with solid rendered black, any timely movement flattened in the image until refreshed. The movement is as smooth as a fiction repeated too many times. Right now we are mousing over a Google map. This is not Conga, this is a very specific representational take of it. Cartography-is-not-reality. But still, it shows a damage. And the damage is for real. Looking down from the satellite view we spot the wound at the Conga Mine site.

The wound has particular characteristics, it is black, with steeped edges. Or the wound is blue, with artificial terraces. Or grey, with digging areas. Or brown, with track parking slots. This particular logistic wound is called the Minera Yanacocha. Minera Yanacocha is also the name of the a company mainly owned by Newmont Mining Corporation and Buenaventura, a Peruvian mining company, and the International Finance Corporation, the private-lending arm of the World Bank.

Mousing over to the nearby Las Bambas mine we now see below us telecoms construction work at the open pit mine; a borehole. In a site right in front of us we see that Espoo, Finland-Nokia and Telefónica Peru have signed a contract with Minera Las Bambas, the ninth largest copper mine in the world, to enable digitization and automation projects at its site in Apurímac, Peru. Nokia provides a private LTE network for the mine 4,600 meters above sea level; a high-capacity, low-latency and multi-services network that enables connectivity for several thousands of workers, mine devices and applications. Las Bambas is owned by the Minerals and Metals Group, whose major shareholder is China Minmetals Corporation (CMC), a Chinese state-owned enterprise. MMG acquired Las Bambas copper project from British Glencore Xstrata plc. for US$5.85 billion. Back at Conga, there is a different latency.
Drilling, drying, adulterating and washing away: the story of Conga is a story of damage, led by a transnational consortium with the aim to continue extracting amalgamating ores for profit. The extent of the damage occurs because of the alloyed temporalities of the Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole. Across the Conga site hundreds of boreholes drilled during decades of exploration activities remain inadequately plugged or abandoned (Fernández-Rubio, García and Carvalho, 2015). These boreholes are the material wounds of stakeholders scanning for gold. Many interested parties emerged around the wound of the Conga mine, including mobile network providers, smartphone manufacturers, microchip industries, state officials, water companies, transport companies, international investors. As we observe the extraction of gold in the Conga mine, we see consortia emerging with the Borehole as processes of amalgamations take place. The intersecting layerings of time and extraction that hold this story together are also what keep on breaking the earth: the explicit and implicit pre-planning consortia that agree to share profits, but not the damages visible in the wound. On the one hand, Consortium, Amalgam and Borehole have their timely imposition and hence multiplication of damage in common. On the other hand, their repetitive modes show the recursive temporality of exploitation without end. Now we fall through time.

In the years that led up to the closure of the Conga Mine, local protestors lined the streets chanting: “¡Agua sí! ¡Oro no! ¡Agua sí! ¡Oro no!” (Water yes! Gold no!), exposing the communities’ urgencies as they equated Conga with death (Bernard and Cupolo, 2012). Thousands of residents of Cajamarca gathered at the Laguna Azul, one of many high-altitude lakes on the Conga Mine site, in an effort to protect their water resources from exploitation and contamination. Ana Bueno Abanto, director of La Casa de las Lagunas, clenched a handful of soil and asked the audience to remember the violence. “Rifles have been used against people that have tried to defend this land that I hold here in my hand,” she said. “This land, our land, was disrespected on that day of violence and no matter how many metals and precious minerals are beneath this land, we as a community will always protect it and make sure it is respected” (ibid). Protesters walked to shores of Laguna Azul, cupped the
water in their hands, and drank it down. Speakers rallied up the crowd, vowing for a long fight to protect their land and water from another gold mining operation, and then, finally, the protest ended as it had begun, with the singing of the Tinkari band’s, “¡Agua sí! ¡Oro no!”.

Since the Conga mine closed in response to fierce local protests, its nowness and in particular its ‘liveness’ is made present through endless delays and blurry waiting for the exploitation to actually end. There are different latencies involved in these processes, such as the continued pollution seeping slowly into the neighbouring areas; or the exploitation regimes themselves, that have not ceased to exist with the closing of this particular mine. Currently, they are neither active nor absent in this wound, but somehow “frozen” and waiting confidently for the moment sooner or later that conditions will change, and extraction can be resumed. In Bakhtin’s chronotopes, one of the tropes is the ‘threshold’: a spacetime of quiet evaluation, measuring forces and making both a revision of what happened and a plot for what is yet to come (Bakhtin, 2002). In understanding the Conga mine through the combined figure of Consortium-Amalgamate-Borehole, it becomes possible to see how colonial temporality is not just active but also latent, held at thresholds of power. The infrastructure still remains ready to leap back into action, a passive-aggressive waiting to be made active again by any violent means. At the Conga mine, volumetric time-space lays latent, the protestors are no longer on the streets and machinery is halted at the mine, however trucks are still circling the wound, cyanide leaks from unplugged boreholes and for years to come, metals will be present in strands of hair and breast milk. There are many latent pathways for the migration of contaminants into local Conga waters: permeability of the rock due to fractures and faults; increased fracturing due to mine blasting; open and leaking blastholes; high permeability in the nearby sediments; long-term degradation of tailings and other mine structures; and seismic activity.

Latency, vibration, pulse: the most basic signal of what is generally considered to be ‘alive’ (v. inert) or life v. non-life. However as Povinelli notes, the formula “Life (Life{birth, growth, reproduction}v. Death) v. Nonlife” is now unravelling
The complexity of the Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole produces a powerful impression of the ability to freeze life and non-life, and that ‘nowness’ is not tied to a separation of life or non-life. The intricate interplay between fullness and emptiness produces an unliveable lapse of violent quietness. While the eroding of forces and matter makes it work across time, it seems to reduce the potential levels to fight, react or re-invent to the bare minimum.

Figure 4: Violent Amalgamations, text animation, models and background. Carretera a Conga ©2020 CNES / Airbus Maxar Technologies ©2020 / Google Maps. The Underground Division, 2020

No water, no life – no gold, no time

Working our way down and up from the Consortium, through the Consortium-Borehole and into the Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole, discloses that the mattering of time-space and in particular the “extractable now” will always be a violent amalgamation as long as it is figured within patriarcho-colonial capitalism and its continuous unfolding of hyper productive, timely extractions.

In this chapter we have attempted to think with volumetrics and the time-space telling of stories of volumetric geocomputation and its grounded calculations, generating new figures for unfolding their complexities. As we learned from feminist
techno-sciences, by committing to a presentational attitude, figures have the potential to not operate towards representational tricks. As Elane Gan notes “[t]here is no matter without relations; no relations without durations; no durations without difference” (Gan, 2017: 88). So, we present complexity in ways that keep with matter, space and time, understanding that volumetric thinking and praxis is in urgent need of different figures, but also that figuration might need to operate differently itself.

What volumetric practices might make time and space present in other ways, to tell the stories of damages inflicted through the Amalgam-Consortium-Borehole, without further appropriating or extracting? Each of the elements in the figure-combination Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole offers its own handles on how to draw the maps of timely extraction differently. The Borehole can also be a passage, a shortcut for understanding damage. It is also a wormhole, a portal for drilling down the chronotope of the threshold. The Consortium as transnational alliance does not have to be organised to rule the earth, but can be thought of as a promiscuous practice of organising accomplice for transformation, maybe. The Amalgamate is a way to say entanglement with implicancy and might offer a view on what response-ability (Haraway, 2008: 88; Barad, 2012: 208) with materiality might look like.

The Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole is presented as a set of interdependent tools to be taken up to tell different stories of the mediations of time-space in computational practices. To engage with Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole means to present the complexity of volumetric-geocomputation from the Khronos consortium to the Conga mine, from the boardrooms to the boreholes. Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole discloses the relationalities that make possible telluric mediations and computational practices for volumetrics and the relationalities that are made possible. As practitioners, artists, thinkers, designers we might ask how to intervene on these figures of capitalism and what types of activism can address the “extractable now” of the Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole? How to do this in ways which do not repeat the flip into normative modes of repair and reparation, which often perpetuate the violences of timely extraction by keeping the basis of the regime untouched and not accounting for the complexities of the time-space, and their transformative potential.
Instead we might open up boreholes into other time-spaces that are already there, actively piercing the most deadly crusts of the technocolonial apparatus. As Tiffany Lethabo King suggests, through errant and out-of-sync time and space coordinates we might “disrupt the movement of modern thought, time, and space to enable something else to form, coalesce, and emerge” (King, 2019:11).

What are the potentials of the Consortium-Amalgam-Borehole as a technocultural figuration? How does it recall a sense of and for complexity, a rejection of flatness and flattening, for joy of awkward co-constitution? What it would mean to be in consortia with others, to consort with others differently ‘holding together’? We present complexity from a position of love for alliances and gatherings, as a collective attempt to resist making new boreholes of coloniality, invasiveness and appropriation that is present in telling telluric stories of the global souths. It is through these practices of speculation that imagination becomes folded into our analysis of volumetric time-space, as an attempt to resist overly rational, linear and knowable time-space patterning. As Katherine McKittrick writes, calling on Octavia Butler: “our engagement with place, and three-dimensionality, can inspire a different spatial story, one that is unresolved but also caught up in the flexible, sometimes disturbing, demands of geography” (McKittrick, 2006: 2). So…we might consider how three-dimensionality might also inspire a different and unresolved telluric story.

If you have made it this far, you must have noticed that it is not easy to write of the timespaces that amalgamate through the Consortium-Amalgamate-Borehole because it stretches simultaneously across paradigms, scales of concern and fields of operation. This text and the practice of the Underground Division is an unscoping study, in which clarity is out of reach and the task of writing seems almost impossible within our current scholarly and artistic context. However, making the complexity through which time-space emerges present via specific stories demonstrates the power relations that operate on and are made operative by volumetrics: always and again technically conflating the dimensions of time and space. Through these figures, their tales and material histories, we study the production of time-space within volumetric geocomputation and the ways it enforces how long something takes, the
keeping track of things, the violence that depends on who keeps the time and how time is kept.

We end by returning to the ROCK REPO, our own device for studying the temporalities of volumetric-geocomputation (The Underground Division, 2020b). Placed next to other amalgamates in the ROCK REPO, currently eight clusterings of digital objects bring together elements that are gleaned from different worlds. The Amalgams mix and merge models, backgrounds and animated texts, accentuating and sometimes blurring their diverse materialities, making their differences collide, blend and contrast with each other. While warm mercury is poured onto minerals, softening and dissolving the hardened ROCKS into softened gloopy and viscose liquid form, computation hits the mineral. The ROCK REPO asks: what dissolves? When the minerals of hardware mix with geometries, what amalgamates? Amalgam number one for example, which is called ‘Attractions’. “Oil spills erupt inside a 3D particle of rock, rendered in purple rejection, and text connectors juxtapose polarized terms on magnetic forces, in two moving planes” (The Underground Division, 2020a). Or: a 3D-object cuts open sharply when hitting a virtual horizon, a sharp-lined window reveals for some time a pixelated recording of an uncontrolled oil spill, sending particles upwards and sideways. The hole opens and closes, but text keeps scrolling sideways: “IF SO – WHAT IF – KIND OF – AS LONG AS”, slowly disintegrating sentences and re-compositing phrases (ibid). Or: a text circulates on an endless forward manner along a horizontal set of lines, sometimes occluded by one drop of modelled lava, and then another, and then another... while in the background the spilling force is reproduced in its peak and played all over again. No water, no life – no gold, no time.

As an opportune study on the latent forces of contemporary industrial, colonial, commercial, settler, extractivist capitalism, the figure of the Consortium-Amalgamate-Borehole became a device for recognising and accounting timely extraction differently. While time and time-space made by volumetric geocomputation is usually deadly, it also might have a generative side that provides openings for otherwise. It becomes a way to describe the digital gatherings that
together attempt to address what is going on in volumetric-geocomputation: As chemical solvents, substances of a different cultural order, are merged together and presented to punctually convoke attention to a specific aspect of volumetric-geocomputation, extractable time and its implicancies.

References


Khronos Group (2020) About The Khronos Group. Available at: https://www.khronos.org/about/.

Khronos Group (2020b) Member Benefits and Membership Levels. Available at: https://www.khronos.org/members/.


The Underground Division (2020b) *ROCK REPO*. Available at: http://ddivation.xyz/rockrepo.

The Underground Division (2020c) *Violent Amalgations*. Available at: https://exposiciones.ccelima.org/Underground-division.


The Underground Division is a disobedient action research collective on techniques, technologies and infrastructures of subsurface rendering and their imaginations/fantasies/promises. It is dug by Helen Pritchard, Jara Rocha, Femke Snelting with the help of many other others. Which are the presences, latencies, absences and potentials that need to be accounted for, in relation to that deep and thick complexity? The Underground Division bugs contemporary regimes of volumetrics that are applied to extractivist, computationalist and geologic damages. It is an ongoing hands-on situation for device making, tool problematizing and "holing in gaug", http://ddivision.xyz/

Emails: jara@riseup.net, snelting@collectifs.net, helen.v.pritchard@plymouth.ac.uk
Spatiotemporal Zones of Neosomnambulism

TONY D SAMPSON

University of East London, UK

Abstract

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994) methodology developed in their swansong, What is Philosophy?, this article deploys its own conceptual persona: the Neosomnambulist or new sleepwalker. Not to be mistaken for an actual living person, the Neosomnambulist is utilized so as to bring concepts to life. In this case, what the sleepwalker gives life to are spatiotemporal zones of indistinction that pervade the digital now.

Keywords

Space, Temporality, Indistinction, Sleepwalk, Social Media

Introduction

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994) methodology developed in their swansong, What is Philosophy?, this article deploys its own conceptual persona: the Neosomnambulist or new sleepwalker. Not to be mistaken for an actual living person, the Neosomnambulist is utilized so as to bring concepts to life. In this case, what the sleepwalker gives life to are spatiotemporal zones of indistinction that pervade the digital now. We begin with erstwhile somnambulist personae, borrowed from the old contagion theorist, Gabriel Tarde. Tarde’s social sleepwalkers were continuously composed in the collective mimicries of the newly animated urban crowds of nineteenth century industrial life. Importantly, they were posited as somewhat absurd subjects-in-the-making. Their openness to the imitation-suggestibility of the urban crowd occurred somewhere in between sleep, mechanical habit and awakened
cognitive volition (Sampson, 2012). What the sleepwalkers mistook to be their own sense of self was, in actuality, a composite of collective mimicry and self-other similarity.

What initially defines the Neosomnambulist is a similarly poised imitative and porous social subjectivity. Yet, we must not confuse the sleepwalker’s porosity for stupidity, or indeed, wisdom. We need to smooth out some of the cruder binary aspects of crowd theory and its theoretical legacy in popular psychology. In the work of Gustave Le Bon ([1895] 2002), for example, where rational individuals become absorbed by the crowd, there is an almost magical emergence of an irrational horde, intent on revolution. Inversely, in more contemporary crowd theories, it is argued that the many are often smarter than the few (Surowiecki, 2004). In short, in both cases, the crowd miraculously supervenes the individual, yielding cognitive excesses, collective intelligence or mob mentality. The Neosomnambulists are most definitely not polarized figures of this kind. Their experience of the digital now is not located on either side of a macro/micro spectrum of rational individuality, collective irrationality or indeed the smart mob alternative. On the contrary, the novelty of new somnambulistic experience is found in the breaching of thresholds that are supposed to separate individuals from collectives. Moreover, the nonconscious associations of the sleepwalker also breach the divide between sleep and the cognitive and habitual demands of digital workloads and excessive consumption. To begin with, then, the Neosomnambulists provide a conceptual probe that enters into contemporary zones of indistinction; slipping between the spatiotemporality of nonconscious mechanical habit and conscious user experiences.

The Neosomnambulist is further developed in this article in order to grasp a recent coincidence between a mode of digital capitalism, focused on conforming user experiences, on one hand, and a trajectory toward racialized collective mimics, on the other. In summary, this is a concurrence between the spread of far-right race hate and monetized social media virality, both of which perform political and economic expropriations of the user experience. In other words, Neosomnambulism can be grasped in two intersecting ways. First, it is a ramping up of the intensity, velocity, spreadability and similarity of user experiences in the digital economy. Second, it is implicated in a seemingly docile sleepwalk toward far-right populist contagions.
Subsequently, this article develops on a methodological approach to indistinction, intended to resolve (and challenge) certain distinctions apparent in this coincidental regime, which paradoxically stirs up contagions of collective mimicry, and consequent identity loss, while also forcing immunological, racialized divisions.

Moreover, in addition to raising questions concerning the disturbance of spatial identity through mimetic processes, the article also considers how autoimmunity affects temporality in these zones of indistinction. Finally, then, an alternate account of collective mimicry is forwarded, which although collapsing notions of self-identity into indistinct and impersonal experiences, also opens up to the potential of a speculative communal mimesis. Evidently, such a collapse of the spatiotemporality of identity increases social anxieties concerning the loss of personal distinctiveness, but if these apprehensions can be overcome, then, a new concept of indistinction might provide an alternative to current immunological divisions. This is a concept that not only challenges the spatial predating of self experiencing nonself. It also points toward an affirmative failure of immune systems, resulting in the possibility of what Margrit Shildrick (2019: 11) calls a ‘fundamental disordering of linear temporality,’ which in turn, provides a potential and radical reconceptualization of community, without the ‘conventional bookends of life and death.’

Ultimately, the article makes an important political point. It argues that previous revolutionary moments of social media, like the ostensible nascent prodemocracy movements of the Arab Spring, are currently being usurped by this perilous dark refrain of far-right politics. Nonetheless, in spite of a widespread foreboding rhetoric, concerned with populations sleepwalking into a political abyss, the Neosomnambulist is positioned here as a more affirmative account of how we can comprehend the peril. Along these lines, the proposal herein is less about the idea of waking up individuals so that they are able to think and act against a collective impulse toward the dark refrain. On the contrary, the Neosomnambulist is posed so as to better understand how digital platforms help to spread nonconscious affective flows of micro-imitation through shared user experiences. Again, the somnambulists are neither awake nor asleep. Their viral flows exceed the celebratory distinction made, on one hand, between an awakened emergent cognition, typified in collective
intelligence and global brain discourses, and on the other, the docile subjects of crowd theory. Better to probe the indistinction than continue with this well-worn distinction.

The Sleepwalker Returns

A fairly recent study published in the *Journal of American College Health* looked at incidences of students in Pennsylvania reading and responding to texts while asleep (Dowdell and Clayton, 2017). The authors claim that what it calls ‘sleeptexting’ is an ‘abnormal’ sleep behaviour, similar to sleepwalking, and linked to mobile phone dependency. These cases of sleeptexting share some similarities with French philosopher, Frédéric Neyrat’s (2018) contention that the digital present has little to do with sleep. Instead of that dulled sense of reverie one experiences when struggling to wake up – those zones when we can’t make out the difference between woken surroundings and a lingering dream – Neyrat points to protracted periods of wakefulness. Digital work is certainly not limited to daytime hours. Check email, notifications, updates, posts, tweets… Sleeping isn’t easy in these excesses of light, data overload, infinite linking, and myriad of other attentional demands. Neyrat supposes that digital work requires, as such, vigorous cognitive engagements. Nevertheless, perhaps the sleeptexting experience is a little fuzzier than this somewhat forced distinction between sleep and wakefulness suggests. Which is to say, such a distinction seems to miss the aspirations of corporate social media enterprises to manage user experiences in between conscious and nonconscious states. The Pennsylvanian sleeptexters may well seem like extreme cases, but the compulsion to take smartphones to bed is evidently a more commonplace experience that crosses generations. Arguably, the experience designers of these daytime/bedtime devices produce an array of neurologically intuitive comfort zones, dependent on users that are neither entirely somnolent nor ambulant.

A closer reading of the digital now suggests that workers and consumers may indeed be at a somnambulate threshold; which is to say, their ‘user’ experiences of the digital now are in between these two distinct states. Theoretically speaking, there is clearly a connection to be made here between such thresholds and a Deleuzoguattarian interest in *The Middle* (Genosko, 1998: 91-96). Instead of erecting a barrier between somnolent and wakeful zones, thresholds are like those infamous, deterritorialized
weeds that appear in between the cracks. Yet again, perhaps this notion of an in between (a kind of middle of nowhere) is in itself continuing to force a distinction? Yes, user comfort zones are designed to be intuitively felt and tacitly grasped. They also vary the frequency of experiences registered in the brain, since relaxed states are considered to be creative states. Yet, these zones induce concrete actions too; habits, compulsions, new work velocities and collective impulses. In the intensities of experience and the subsequent clicking or swiping actions, there are blurry zones of indistinction, whereby the nonphenomenological world of somnolent experience slips into habitual ambulant user engagements. In this light, user experiences are neither asleep nor wide awake, or indeed, in between, but rather they are, at once, absurdly somnambulistic.

This brings our discussion to the main point; which is to once again resuscitate Tarde’s old somnambulistic social subjects as a way to probe the digital now. Why bring back these old conceptual personae from nineteenth century crowd theory? Well, Tarde’s sleepwalkers were always situated as absurd conceptual personae. They would not rest easily on either side of a barrier erected between dreamy or uninterrupted sleep, on one hand, or the prolonged interruptions and wakefulness of Neyrat’s digital culture, on the other. Unlike such sharp distinctions, Tarde’s somnambulist brings us a little closer to what Jonathan Crary (2013: 30) calls the ‘monotonous indistinction of 24/7’. For Crary, digital culture has similarly become a ‘zone of insensibility’ and ‘memory loss,’ which ‘defeats…the possibility of experience’ (ibid.: 17). In a similar way, the Neosomnambulists mess with the spatiotemporality of worktime founded on a distinction made between daytime and bedtime. Certainly, Tarde would not be at all surprised to learn about the 24/7 sleeptexting students in Pennsylvania!

Nonetheless, by bringing back Tarde’s somnambulist we need to carefully approach the idea that there are possibilities of experience to choose from. This is because currently there is an ambiguous struggle going on for the so-called user experience in terms of sleep and wakefulness. Zones of indistinction cannot simply be restricted to the industrial capitalist erosion of daytime and bedtime or indeed worktime and leisure time alone. On the contrary, what I will call experience capitalism has already breached these boundaries. Much of what is produced, consumed and discarded in the
experience economy is no longer carried out on either side of this bipolar spectrum, but rather occurs on much thicker spectra of spatiotemporal experiences.

We need a Neosomnambulist who can probe the viscosity of spectra and grasp the user experience in the insensible and inseparable degrees between vigilance and sleep. A Neosomnambulist needs to probe the varying velocities of experience capitalism, which can no longer simply be expressed in terms of high frequency brainwaves at work or low frequency brainwaves at sleep. Crary’s 24/7 ultimately opens up the user experience to a loss of a distinction between beta and alpha waves. Along these lines, then, to understand the digital now, the sleepwalker concept must probe the neuro-management of collective user experiences. This is, it would seem, the principal method of experience capitalism, whereby psychological corporations, with their teams of experience designers, behavioural marketers, data miners and consumer researchers, develop on a longstanding fascination in the spreadability of social influence (Simonite, 2012), on one hand, and nonconscious processing of user experience (Norman, 2007), on the other. Along these latter lines, then, experience capitalism can be grasped as a departure from older models of consumption, based on a theatrical subconscious or dream factory; now moving toward a neurochemically constituted nonconscious mode of social influence. Indeed, the user is said to now primarily process experience on a visceral register (located in neurochemical body–brain relations), before behavioural habits, moments of inward reflection or emotional expressions surface in cognition (ibid). Neurologically modelled in this way, Neosomnambulists are not thinking machines that feel; they are feeling machines that think.

Of course, the exact determinacy of the various components of experience capitalism will require further empirical research. However, the rise of experiential methods of persuasion, suggestibility and control, based on a neurological turn to feelings, emotions and affect, alongside the experience economy model, has demonstrably entered into the cultural circuitry of capitalism (Sampson, 2016). The rise of experience capitalism has occurred via ubiquitous marketing strategies that move increasingly to the centre of most private and public organisations, including banking and universities, where the consumption of commodities has been transformed by data evidenced experiential journeys and a dubious happiness agenda (Davies, 2016).
This transformation also crops up in the utterances of influential TED Talks, business bestsellers and experiential design guru seminars. Even if some of these methods do not work directly on a population, they have become part of the everyday rehearsal of marketing led management regimes across sectors.

The Revolutionary Politics of Neosomnambulism

Another reason for bringing in a Neosomnambulist is to explore how a corresponding visceral register of felt experience can be mapped to a recent dramatic slide into a political abyss. This is a shadowy refrain that has become entangled with contemporary user experiences with viral platform architectures. Herein, the revolutionary moment of social media no longer belongs to prodemocracy protesters, but has been captured by a far-right tendency supercharged by social media. This tendency is, in part, reified by social media because it collapses the immunopolitics of the far-right (Esposito, 2008) and the virality of platform architectures into the same dark refrain. So, on one hand, the failure of social media immunity systems to weed out race hate, for example, plays to the refrain of the Neo-Nazis. Like this, paradoxically, social media immunity failures help to reinforce the far-right desire for racial immunity. On the other hand, the virality of these platforms helps to bolster and spread the sentiments of race hate far and wide (Sampson, 2020: 114-150).

What can we learn about this current dilemma from the indistinctions of Tarde’s conceptual personae? Well, in his day, sleepwalker contagions of the revolutionary kind had both spatial and temporal modes. Firstly, revolutionary contagion spread from the industrial clusters of the urban crowd to infect an entire nation. Secondly, and judging by the anxieties of the French upper-classes, including those expressed by figures like Le Bon, revolutionary modes of nineteenth century collective mimesis were also perceived to spread at a dangerous, breakneck speed. Considered as an extension of the contagions of the urban crowd, Tarde’s newly mediated, imitative, and contagious impulses swept through the countryside via word of mouth, newsprint and telegraph wire. These contaminations made crowds feared entities because they shared radical political experiences that threatened the existing order of things. Early popular crowd psychologies, like those forwarded by Le Bon, were, in
effect, providing a prototype of the dynamics of mob contagion; offering new political strategies for crowd control and modes of manipulation of the populace, later to be exploited by 1930s fascists (Koon, 1985: 4-5).

There are additional historical continuities and discontinuities to pick up on here. In the mass media climate of the 1960s, R.D. Laing (1983: 80) profoundly contended that by inducing similar user experiences, it is possible to more effectively steer a population towards more aligned and conformed behaviours and decisions. A population that feels the same experiences is, Laing argues, a population whose behaviours will become de facto more controllable (ibid). The link between shared felt experiences and contagion may seem continuous, but the potency (and ownership) of the revolutionary moment it inspires seems to be less certain. Indeed, well in advance of the recent social media-fuelled surge in the racist populisms of strongmen, like Trump or Bolsonaro, Laing understood how inducing the feelings of a population and encouraging them to share the same feelings – to ‘want the same thing, hate the same things, feel the same threat’ – would ensure that ‘their behaviour is already captive’ (ibid).

In spite of these continuities, the medium through which shared experiences spread has been radically transformed. In the digital now there are new political modes of experience, stirred into action, and given impetus, through contemporary user engagements with viral social media platform architectures. The sharing of felt experiences has, arguably, become ever more entrained. As Laing put it, once the alignment of experience is achieved in this way, then, ‘you have acquired your consumers [and] your cannon fodder’ (ibid: 80). The difference now is, it would seem, what used to spread through time and space at breakneck speed has become an almost instantaneous contamination of experience. There is, indeed, a potential immediacy in the spreading of collective mimesis that defies the capacity of resistant forces to play catch-up.

There are Many Sleepwalkers

Step right up. Now showing for the first time: Cesare, the somnambulist (Wiene, 1920).
Sleepwalkers occupy zones of indistinction in which they are continually made and remade as they move in-between conscious and nonconscious experiences with media technology and politics. Indeed, the somnambulist is a ubiquitous conceptual persona in the histories of media theory, particularly in early automatic experiences with cinematic technologies, which Deleuze and others have noted coincided with fascism (Crary, 2001: 358). There is, indeed, a more explicit link made between media technology, fascism and the somnambulist in the aesthetic figure of Dr Caligari’s hypnotized sleepwalker. Such a comparison between Cesare and the sleepwalkers in the title of this article may well give the impression that current user experiences of media technology are acquiescent, mimetic acts of reverie. Perhaps the sleepwalkers just need to wake up! Well, some of these facets of Tarde’s original conceptual personae are still highly pertinent, but this is not exactly the proposition put forward here. There are many sleepwalkers.

Along these lines, the aesthetic figure of Dr Caligari’s hypnotized sleepwalker from the 1920s may appear to be only half-awake. His limited bandwidth of discursive attention seems narrow, temporarily oblivious, sleeping or stunned. However, although Robert Wiene’s somnambulist may well seem like a docile subject, he has special powers. ‘Cesare knows every secret. Cesare knows the past and can see into the future’ (ibid). As Siegfried Kracauer argued back in 1947, the fairground somnambulist in Wiene’s 1920 Expressionist film is purposefully positioned in the plot as a presentiment of the future tyranny in 1930s Germany. Dr Caligari is indeed the tyrant, and Cesare, the cannon fodder, ‘drilled to kill and to be killed’ (Kracauer, 1947: 65).

In spite of many ominous sleepwalker discourses, including our current global sleepwalk into the Covid-19 pandemic, the Neosomnambulists are not necessarily docile or in need of an alarm call. To be certain, the idea of waking up the somnambulist misses the point that it is quite often the spreaders of crazy conspiracies or racist hate speech who demand that it is those who refuse to collude that need to wake up! We certainly risk misunderstanding the many nuances of Tarde’s somnambulists if we mistake the sleepwalker’s absurdity for slave-like obedience. Rather than equating Tarde’s social subjects with the vacillating, easily-led social subjects of crowd theory, these new conceptual personae are specifically
mobilized as an expression of the contemporary collective nonconscious. That is to say, the focus is more precisely concerned with bringing up-to-date the *more-than-human* aspects of Tarde’s microsociology; the monadic flows of micro-imitations that are in excess of contaminated individuals. Along similar lines to Patricia Clough’s (2000) *user unconscious*, which collapses the I into the YOU (see also Sampson, 2020: 21); this means repositioning the social subject as part of an infinitesimal relation to the world, experienced through insensible, and indistinct thresholds between macro and micro. There is nothing primarily new here in terms of grasping the collective nonconscious. Tarde’s original contagion theory was firmly located in these insensible thresholds with no ‘absolute separation’ or ‘abrupt break, between the voluntary and the involuntary... between the conscious and the unconscious’ of social relationality (Tarde cited in Sampson, 2012: 36).

The return of the sleepwalker does, however, significantly go against the grain of more celebratory notions of emergent collectivity. Before the recent dark refrain of social media-fuelled collective mimesis emerged, the trajectory of network culture seemed to be heading toward a more enlightened age of cognitive connectivity. As follows, cognitive networks have been conventionally imagined as emerging favourably from the unconscious. Comparable to Tarde’s nemesis, Durkheim, and his sociological rendition of a domineering collective consciousness emerging from dynamic density, Marshall McLuhan offered up a collective awaking of sorts. Significantly, as Adriana Braga (2016: 221) points out, McLuhan’s media extensions uniquely bring ‘the unconscious level of the psyche to the surface where it could become conscious.’ Indeed, McLuhan argued back in 1969 that media ‘[t]echnologies... seem to be the pushing of the archetypal forms of the unconscious out into social consciousness’ (McLuhan, 1969: 31). In short, this means that the image of the technological network is reckoned to impose itself pervasively on the unconscious human psyche by reworking its senses and thus awakening its capacity for collective consciousness (Kroker, 1995).

A Neosomnambulism is not, however, the antithesis of collective consciousness. It is more precisely a concept that is critical of a roused cognitive image of the network, which has failed to offer more searching insights into collective experiences with technology, dipping *in and out* of conscious and nonconscious experiences. Theories
of emergent collective consciousness omit to mention, as such, how both sleep and wakefulness become caught up in deeply entangled digital cultures. Of course, McLuhan did not intend his collective awaking to be misunderstood as a crude emergence of collective intelligence. He was equally interested in how the downside of the collapse of the distinction between time and space in the media age amounted to trivial local gossip going global. He would have perfectly grasped how, in the wake of Covid-19, crazy conspiracies about G5 networks, for example, spread in real-time, or indeed, how Instagram images spread from app to supermarket shelves. More precisely, by updating Tarde’s sleepwalker, these entanglements are conceived of as occurring on an even broader spectra of user experience than those normally attributed to individuals or crowds. Significantly, the concept requires a proposed expansion of the narrow experiential bandwidth occupied by the old sleepwalker that purposefully challenges the distinction made between wakefulness or sleep.

We need to start by resolving the distinction between individuals and collectives. Significantly, then, Tarde’s social subjects are neither an individual person nor a collective representation of persons. Sleepwalkers are continually made and remade by oppositional microflows of imitation. The psychological sense of individual self is in effect an illusory social category marked by a sense of self that is always imitative and thus always etched by its relation to collectivity. This is why it is important to restress how a current wave of social media somnambulism presents a far more complex spectra of possible experiences. This contra-Durkheimian approach is not bipolar. It does not oscillate between individual rationality and stupefied collectives. The spectra of experience the sleepwalker occupies has multiple, complex and indistinct polarities.

**Methodological Indistinctions**

Zones of indistinction can now be resolutely linked to a methodology. Borrowing from Roger Caillois’s (2003) proposal in 1935 that the fundamental role of all study is to set about resolving distinctions, this methodology endeavours to tackle a series of forced divisions. Important to this procedural development is Caillois’s study on collective mimesis, which focuses on how insects blend into their environment through camouflage. In short, for Caillois, the process by which biological
camouflage merges an organism into its surroundings presents a disruption to perception insofar as what is assumed to be in the foreground is *lured* into the background. By looking to resolve such distinctions, Caillois’s method draws on the indistinct nature of things; the vagueness of it all. Of course, some Gestalt minded colleagues will probably say that a failure to make a distinction is in itself a failure of perception. Certainly, we go against Gestalt principles if we fail to distinguish the emergence of foreground from background. Be this as it may, indistinction does not really concern perception as a higher-level cognitive faculty. It is rather regarded as a method that allows some limited access to preperception; a way of modestly slipping into the immediacy of nonphenomenological impersonal experience.

There is perhaps nothing particularly new about indistinction as method. There is indeed a long history of indistinct practices in art, for example, wherein the art critic, Adrian Stokes (2012: 112-13), notes how the ‘embracing or enveloping quality’ of Turner’s art came about because of its ‘indistinctness’ and ‘loss of definition.’ In literature too, there are aesthetic figures that are made purposefully indistinct. Gatsby is a great illusive figure in this sense. He remains purposefully blurred for much of Fitzgerald’s book; a figure that assimilates the background and blends into that big old house in the cause of dramatic effect. Likewise, artists like Mikey B Georgeson consolidate a broader sense of aesthetic ontologies of indistinction. Through his *Auto Matter Flow Morning Drawings* of the Neosomnambulist (see figure 1), and further experiments with the glitches of green screen technology, Georgeson produces a kind of art of indistinction that draws on what Gary Genosko (1998: 96) has called the ‘enemy of crisp synthesis.’ We can see how Georgeson’s sleepwalker illustration adopts the persona to slip ‘in between’ the woken distinction made between two other predicated protagonists. As follows, Georgeson’s sleepwalker becomes a speculative rather than a signifying aesthetic fact. In short, indistinction is an aesthetic methodology that simply refuses to make forced distinctions. The doodling, ‘noodling,’ ‘fuzziness,’ and ‘muddiness’ (Genosko, 1998: 96) of indistinctness resists border regimes by sliding in between foreground and background, and mind and matter, in the same fashion as the somnambulist slips in between sleep and wakefulness.
Although, Caillois was primarily interested in the spatial qualities of these lures that bring about indistinction, the method can also alert us to temporal slippages. These slippages reveal something that Neyrat’s digital now overlooks. These zones are also not limited to the kind of digital cultures apparent in Crary’s 24/7, which drift between macro time shifts, like daytime and bedtime. Instead the method draws attention to varied micro-speeds and tiny slippages associated with brain frequencies throughout the working day. Sleep and work have been, for the most part, respectively associated with low and high wave frequencies. But the sleepwalker demonstrates that this is not always the case. Certainly, whereas industrial and post-industrial capitalism were seemingly all about the alignment of fast brainwaves to even faster work patterns, resulting in cognitive overloads, for example, experience capitalism is arguably about triggering indistinctions between varying frequencies. After all, if a business really wants to make its workers and consumers more creative in the workplace, it is the interferences between frequencies which will produce new patterns of labour. So, the digital now is not just about being fast and awake or indeed online. To be clear, the introduction of sleeping or napping pods to digital workplaces, show how slow frequencies are being blended in with fast worktime. As one trade magazine puts it:
The Google office in Sydney features pod-like compartments for quiet work time. There’s also a nap pod for solid sleep time. But if you’re somewhere in between work and sleep, the “work” compartments… might be the perfect spot to get a bit more done, then drift off into a peaceful sleep away from the noise of coworkers (Simmons, 2020).

**On Spectra of Somnambulism**

It is important to take our lead from Tarde’s rejection of the centrality of the apparent awakened state of the psychological self. This disavowal of the supremacy of the self-concept marks a refusal to put the intentionality of human consciousness at the centre of investigation. It serves as a spur for a nonphenomenological theory of user experience. Along these lines, the Neosomnambulist adds to the spectral density and frequency of experience with two ostensibly extreme, but continuously crisscrossed poles of somnambulist experience: *somnolent* and *ambulant*.

On one hand, then, sleeping subjectivity is, as Matthew Fuller (2018: 1) points out, the ‘somnolent version of the Cretan Paradox,’ since although it provides a distinction between itself and ‘being awake, and thoughtful, hence conscious and knowing,’ sleep in itself ‘cannot be directly known in its native state.’ In other words, like the liar paradox, to *think* sleep we risk producing a self-referential logical loop that would frustrate the refined binary thinking of the logician. As Fuller contends:

> Sleep, unlike any other part of culture has no capacity for reflexivity within its own conditions. In sleeping one simply sleeps, one does not know, anything (ibid).

Sleep is therefore ‘ungraspable, unwritable [and] only perceivable at its edges or its outside’ (ibid.: 2). In sleep we may well still *know* something, but we lose our sense of self as a way of *knowing* it. It is only external to, or at the margins of sleep, in dream states or reverie, for instance, that traces of sleep can be filtered through conscious cognition; and that will only occur by way of a detour into wakeful reflection.

The conceptual persona of the somnambulist therefore provides a unique glimpse of the collective nonconscious because of the exceptional condition sleep offers in
terms of cutting out the cognitive I. This is not the point at which fantasists and conspiracy theorists flip somewhere between the poles on a spectrum of rational thinking and irrational emotions. On the contrary, spectra present zones of indistinction where the psychological sense of self comes into contagious relation with others to such a degree of intensity and velocity that it merges with the surroundings in which mimetic encounters occur. It is at the extreme of spectra, in the gamma rays, that we find a more-than-human collective nonconscious, explained by the exceptional condition of sleep, cutting out the cognitive I altogether. There is not even a dream of self in the collective nonconscious.

On the other hand, the sleepwalker ambulates on spectra, producing exceptional zones of indistinction. This is because walking is an act of mobility that allows its subject to insensibly drift between nonconscious to conscious experience. As the sleepwalker demonstrates, the act of walking can be performed when sleep falls on the subject. Sleepwalking is, like this, an impulsive act, which can be achieved when the act itself is out of mind, since its mechanical and habit-bound processes are, for the most part, nonconscious rather than conscious.

Walking is a collective experience of mimesis too, wherein bodily interactions of different speeds and rhythms become entrained with other bodies. As research into unintentional bodily synchrony in the field of entrainment studies reveals, it is important to avoid a wakeful cognitivist bias, which states that it is only in consciousness that walking becomes real. As Clayton et al argue (2005: 70), in entrainment theory ‘any bodily implementation of interacting processes is real, no matter whether it is consciously experienced or not.’ Moreover, entrainment theory provides insights into the collective nonconscious that can be transposed to the study of digital culture. For example, the nonconscious entrainment of footsteps on a pavement can be substituted for the habitual social media user’s fingers and thumbs grasping, clutching, clicking and scrolling, as captured brilliantly in Esmeralda Kosmatopoulos’s installation Fifteen Pairs of Mouths, exhibited at the Crary inspired 24/7 show in London in 2019 (see Esmeralda Kosmatopoulos’s Fifteen Pairs of Mouths. https://www.esmeraldakosmatopoulos.com/fifteen-pairs-of-mouths).

In lieu of the rhythmic entrainments of walkers, coupled together through the bobbing of heads, or the synchronizations of marching arms and legs, we find the
algorithmically orchestrated and rhythmic coordination of prodding fingers and thumbs. This is the sleepwalker’s experience of the ambulant technological nonconscious. Significantly, these are not merely physical entrainments. Research into entrained self-other similarity suggests a folding of the relation between physical behaviours (e.g. synchronized finger tapping) and emotionally felt experiences, like empathy and other prosocial contagions (Clayton et al, 2005: 70).

Users who scroll together, feel together.

**Playing Along to a Dark Refrain**

The conceptual antennae of the Neosomnambulists are purposefully turned toward the aforementioned dark refrain in the social media age. This is a very different refrain to that previously marked by optimistic accounts of a deterritorialized digital culture. This is a moment when the potentiality of revolutionary social media contagions, like the Arab Spring, have become deeply entangled in far-right spatiotemporal territorializations, engendered in recent months in the far-right refrains of Covid-19 denial and anti-vax, for example.

To understand the spatiotemporality of these territorial refrains, we need to briefly grasp a rudimentary appreciation of musical improvisation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 310-350). Deterritorialized lines of flight and territorial refrains are indeed mutual concepts that most improvising musicians will be familiar with. On one hand, imagine earlier lines of flight in digital culture as the jagged edges of a clashing, a-rhythmic and discordant musical performance. They are the beginning of an improvisation that initially refuses (intentionally or accidentally) to settle into any kind of recognisable groove. There was no precise tempo set; no opening bars to conform to. Nothing is composed, as such. These notes without order appear like the random scribbles on Sylvano Bussotti’s musical staff (ibid.: 3). They are scattered notes that *become-other*. The refrain of far-right contagion is, on the other hand, a moment in the improvisation when players begin to fall into a repeated pattern of notes. These notes might become harmonized; syncopated; their uneven rhythms are quantized. At the same time, the assemblage of players become biomusicologically
entrained. Which is to say, there is synchronized foot tapping; arms and instruments swing together; heads bob in unison.

This shared felt experience of improvised music can of course become an exuberant repetition. The groove can be a feely lure; a joyous inducement or seduction of everyone assembled in its cadence. The musicians and the audience similarly begin to pulse together, swaying to the same rhythm. Yet, despite the promise of musical joy, these movements can be pegged in such a way as to determine what comes next. The key fixes the line to a predicable scale of repetitive notes; a familiar chord progression. Things start to repeat themselves over and over again, without difference. This is a crowd theory of sorts. One is reminded of John Protevi’s (2010) observations of the joyful pulsating affects of the Nazis’ Nuremberg Rallies (2010). Again, it’s not just bodies that become entrained. The pulse acts as an affective contagion, bringing body rhythms, feelings and emotional expressions into line with each other. The dark refrain has become a staccato-like repetition of a racist populist politics, spreading throughout the world: Trump, Salvini, Putin, Modi, Bolsonaro, Johnson, Farage, Le Pen, Alternative for Germany (AfD), Orban, Wilders… It is a refrain punctuated by micro- and macro-fascisms, failing immunity systems, rampant, yet botched capitalism, and neo-Nazi mass shootings. It becomes problematic trying to break out of such a rut. Musicians, audiences, political rallies – all become-the-same.

This is a visceral refrain that spreads like wildfire on social media, stirring up white working-class rage against immigration. Trump and Bolsonaro’s followers, for example, take full advantage of these platforms to register emotive appeals to a population through fear and anxiety, but also through hurried and confused fabrications. It is, indeed, on this visceral register that William E Connolly (2017: 14-15) identifies the ‘conceptual cloudiness’ of the aspirational fascist’s Big Lie strategy, pitched against the fact-checking distinctions of liberal media. These cloudy concepts present zones of feely indistinction, intended to purposefully undermine experts and investigative journalists. The refrain is not, however, simply irrational. On the contrary, it is on the visceral register that these far-right political fiction machines twist and distort democracy, moving at different speeds, weakening the impartiality of trusted media, controlling intelligence, and inhibiting plural societies (ibid.: 8).
The dark refrain is intimately coupled to aspirational fascism, on one hand, and an economic expropriation of the user experience, on the other. Along these lines, social media users not only give away the ownership of their community relations to parasitic corporate social media platforms, but the prodemocratic potential of revolutionary contagion has been utterly dispossessed. Remember Laing’s words! When a population feels the same hate, feels the same fear; when it begins to share the same experience, the same tempos and rhythms, then, we have produced compliant consumers and cannon fodder (Laing, 1967: 80).

**Immunity and Contagion**

The sleepwalker can be uniquely grasped as a probe that enters into the perils and potential of collective mimesis. What is of interest here are the ways in which indistinctions contest the politics of border regimes that tend to make immunological distinctions between, for example, self and other, or more precisely, self and nonself. To fully register the political implications of this methodological approach, it is necessary to address a significant question concerning what it means to survive in borderless encounters, like those currently occupied by the Neosomnambulist. Importantly, then, the method needs to challenge the forced distinctions presented by the various immunopolitical regimes that are steering the possibilities of experience toward what Clough (2010) calls population racism. Such a survival – *in between the cracks* – inverses the preservation of homogenous distinctions common to immune system logic. Indeed, following various authors, like Caillois (2003), but also Roberto Esposito (2008; 2011), indistinctions can be used to replace the typically perilous analysis of immune system failures with the promising potential of communal mimicry and cultural multiplicity.

To begin with, we need to grasp the logics of immunopolitics. As a general rule, immune systems function as border regimes. They are designed to force distinctions between self and non-self. Following immunologics, the collapse of a distinction between, on one hand, an entity (e.g. a self or a body), and on the other hand, certain anomalies (e.g. a nonself or antibody), poses a risk to the stability or even the lifespan of said entity. The problem being that a failure to force a distinction between entity and anomaly means that certain protections and exemptions afforded to the entity
from its perilous surroundings begin to breakdown. The collapse of the barrier immunity provides between interiority and exteriority clearly makes the entity vulnerable to destabilizing contagions of various kinds, as well as exposing it to potential predators. However, for Caillois (2003), the principle of becoming distinct is neither the general rule of things nor does it necessarily guarantee stability. Caillois’s study of insect camouflage thus counters orthodox evolutionary thinking on biological subsistence attained through exemption. By blending in to their surroundings certain insects would, for example, transform themselves into plants that other insects eat. The remains of mimetic insects are indeed as abundant in the stomachs of predators as those that cannot change their visual appearance. In effect, at first glance, the dangers of camouflage seem to outweigh the immunological benefits. To be sure, by transforming themselves into the foodstuff of their own species, insects risk taking part in a horrific masochistic act of collective cannibalization!

Caillois’s desire to resolve distinctions contributes to the method of indistinction in two important and seemingly contradictory ways. Firstly, it helps grasp a cross-context immunity problem that considers how the freedom immunity affords the entity is replaced by dangerous zones of indistinction. Which is to say, as the borders between the entity and its surroundings collapse, distinctions become increasingly blurred, porous, and folded. Dependent on which context this zone of indistinction occurs in (biological, biopolitical, psychological, technological etc.), the contaminated entity might face a loss of self-identity, integrity or even life. In the case of Caillois’s camouflaged insects, a tendency toward the spatial lure of the organism’s environment leads to the collapse of immunological borders, rendering the organism indistinguishable from its surroundings, and as a consequence, vulnerable to self-destructive, collective mimicry. In effect, the dispossessed entity is transformed into the nonentity, leading to a seemingly dreadful loss of distinction.

Importantly, the scope of Caillois’s method unfolds from the physical dissolving of immunological boundaries between a sentient organism and its surroundings to the dispossession of mind. This is to say, the emptying of a subject, if you like, leads to intensified feelings of disorientation, fear, anxiety, and even psychosis. Secondly, though, the apparent horror of Caillois’s self-destruction (physical and psychical),
which follows on from machoistic collective mimesis, suggests a potentially radical
rethinking of shared experience. This is an experience that has been compromised by
all out contagion, but its collapse into indistinction nonetheless brings about
something new in terms of communal relations. As follows, in Caillois’s doubly
dangerous luxury of mimesis we find something affirmative about becoming
indistinct. This is Caillois’s alternative resolution to his ‘fundamental question’ of
distinction. As John Hamilton (2012: 6) argues, it is ‘[p]recisely because [Caillois’s]
mimicry blends the individual into its environment, [that] it also serves as a basis for
community’. So, although we seem to be in the grip of this current dark refrain of
collective mimicry – which poses a persistent threat to cultural multiplicity – the loss
of self-representation, its collapse into indistinction, promises experimentations with
new community forms, yet to come.

To be clear, there are some notably conceptual resonances between Caillois’s
collective mimesis and Esposito’s similar desire to reconsider community as the
inverse of Nazis immunological modes of exemption. Which is to say, in many ways,
the logics of Caillois’s notion of immunity are similarly interlinked with the more
affirmative logics of Esposito’s concept of community. As Esposito (2011) contends,
immunity presupposes community in the sense that the former provides a
biopolitically constituted individual exemption from the ‘expropriating effects’ of the
latter. There is ‘no community without some kind of immunitary apparatus,’ such as
that provided by law, for example (ibid.: 16). For Esposito, immunity and community
are therefore a continuum. A certain kind of negative immunity is nevertheless
grasped as thwarting the possibilities of a more affirmative version of community
that otherwise might challenge the immunological excesses of these biopolitical
regimes (Campbell in Esposito, 2008: xi–xxix).

Like Caillois, then, Esposito goes on to show how the logics of contagion are
similarly coupled to both immunity and community. For example, Esposito (2008:
105) points to the potential power of social inoculation. As he puts it, the biggest
threat to a community’s vitality is not posed by infections from the outside, but is
rather produced by efforts to preserve internal stability.
The more the community is preserved intact, the more the level of innovation is reduced. The greatest danger that the community faces is therefore its own preventative withdrawal from danger (ibid).

What a community needs in order to persist is not therefore immunological stability and exemption, but instead a ‘viral fragment’ needs to be inserted into the ‘collective organism’ (Esposito, 2008: 106).

What can we learn from the logics of contagion, so that we can confront the dark refrain of populist racism? To begin with, this need for inoculation exposes the complete futility of the Nazis. Their ultimate failure emerged in their efforts to normalize their hideous concept of a pure population by eradicating what they perceived as impurity. The Nazis were an archetype of racist immunopolitics. Hitler’s use of immunological terminology, for example, saw his fight against racial impurity as ‘equal to those fought by Pasteur and Koch’ (cited in Esposito, 2008: 122). In effect, by trying to stabilize a specific kind of racist life, the Nazis needed death (ibid.: 117). This propensity towards death is a mode of autoimmunity or the collective masochism of immunopolitics that comes to the fore in demise of the Nazis.

**Speculative Mimesis**

Indistinction is evidently an experimental and problematic methodology, thwart with dangers. There is even a hint of horror autotoxicus or the doom-laden encounters with a Platonic double in the making of indistinction. This is because although the concealment of distinction through camouflage would seem to offer the organism a unique opportunity to blend into its surroundings and survive, Caillois initially sees no evolutionary advantage to nonhuman mimicry of this kind. Such is the danger of collective mimicry that by wearing the mask of its predator, or by trying to blend in, a collective organism may actually transform itself into its own predators’ prey, or worse, a cannibal’s lunch. So, surrendering to indistinction will always be a painful experience.

Similarly, the organic desire to preserve the psychic feeling of self-representation is severely disrupted by indistinction. Which is to say, a mode of horror autotoxicus collapses the distinction between self-representation and self-destruction into a
moment of potentially deadly indistinction. It is nonetheless this failure of psychic immunity, and Caillois’s more positive account of a doubly dangerous luxury of collective masochism, which prompts a new theoretical alternative to be considered. Herein, the loss of self-representation to collective masochism may well lead to communal mimicry. This is a mode of community quite unlike our current sleepwalk toward the abyss, embodied as it is by far-right nationalist identities of resemblance and immunopolitics. Importantly, communal mimicry must not simply become an acceleration of immunological forces! It instead celebrates the collapsing of nationalistic borders and racist distinctiveness into a massive-scale mimicry of cultural multiplicity.

Speculative mimesis becomes something of a necessity in terms of making a break from the fascist captures of community that social media helps to condition through the pass-on power of homophilious echo chambers. This does not mean, however, that we simply replace or oppose immunopolitics with an ideal model of community. Speculative mimesis may provide an expedient starting place, but what is really needed is a concerted effort to rethink the concept of community anew. To be more precise, then, what we need is a speculative mimicry that might provide the ultimate expression of a new concept of community, pushing ‘the apparatus of identity beyond the threshold of sameness’ (Esposito, 2008: 88).

![Figure 2: The Indistinction of the Self-Other Relation. Illustration by Mikey B Georgeson.](image-url)
Neosomnambulist Indistinction

To conclude, then, there are both spatial and temporal aspects to Neosomnambulism. On one hand, there is, in addition to physical blending, what Rosalind Krauss (2008: 155) points out as a ‘peculiarly psychotic yielding to the call of “space”’. This is the collapsing of the Gestalt figure and ground in both a physical and psychical sense, likened by Krauss to a ‘slackening of the contours of [an organism’s] integrity, of its self-possession’ (ibid). Indeed, Caillois’s method explicitly challenges the entire notion of a discrete personality when he concludes that the person is not the origin of the spatial coordinates of the surroundings that are mimicked. The person is rather just one among many coordinates of spatial capture. This is a critical destabilization of the feeling of personality grasped as indistinct from its material surroundings. As Caillois ([1935] 2003: 28) puts it:

The feeling of personality, considered as the organism’s feeling of distinction from its surroundings, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined.

On the other hand, as Shildrick (2019) contends, it is the failure of immunity or autoimmunity that enables us to further rethink temporality away from the bookends of life and death. Drawing on her discussion on the temporal aspects of Esposito’s affirmative concept of immunological breakdown, I would like to venture that aside from the seemingly inevitable death of a selfhood with autoimmune disease, we should take into further consideration the temporal entanglements of sleepwalkers or the collective nonconscious. As already discussed, the sleepwalkers are not negative personae; they are affirmative becomings, giving life to a concept. In similar ways, these liminal subjects attempt to do what Shildrick (2019: 21) aims to do in her work, which is to ultimately escape the ‘modernist boundaries of selfhood and embrace the possibilities of transformation’. The imitative sleepwalkers are not a person that either lives now or dies in the future; the conceptual personae are a becoming other caught up in the speculative mimicry of indistinction. This understanding of the temporal situating of the sleepwalker is moreover reminiscent of Grosz who argues that in order for transformation to take place, we need to grasp the temporality of our past and future judged according to the instabilities of personhood (Grosz cited...
in Shildrick, 2019: 21). Indeed, the residue of collective mimesis is not a new personhood; it is, as we have seen, speculative and transformative. This is where a new concept of community, yet to come, may well live on.

References


**Notes**

1 ‘The philosopher brings to life various personae through which concepts can live'. The conceptual persona should not however ‘be mistaken for a person. They are larval subjects. Through the lives of the conceptual persona, concepts are thought, perceived, and felt. Indeed, the production of concepts requires these intrinsic conceptual personae to be able to make interventions. Plato used Socrates for such purposes, and Nietzsche introduced many personae: Zarathustra, Dionysus, Overman et al’ (See Sampson, 2016: 24).

2 Evidently, this is not the first effort made to link capitalism to the far-right. For further discussion on this matter see Sampson (2020): 79-80.

3 Like Le Bon, Mussolini argued that the mass was a servile flock that needed a master but its multiplicity must also become magnetized by the prestigious image of this master.

4 Inspiration for the dark refrain comes from the ritornello or refrain concept as discussed in Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 310-350).

5 See further discussion on a similar communication model in Genosko (2012): 117-121.

6 Evidently, in the wake of Covid-19, these differences between immunity, community and contagion have taken on a new urgency. The remit here is restricted to a different question.


**Email:** t.d.sampson@uel.ac.uk