

“Please approach me, astonish me.” Notes on Distraction in the Social Media Age

By Geert Lovink

“Never get high on your own supply.” Ten Crack Commandments—“The Other as Distraction: Sartre on Mindfulness” Open University lecture—“She never felt like she belonged anywhere, except for when she was lying on her bed, pretending to be somewhere else.” Rainbow Rowell—“In my head I do everything right.” Lorde—“15 years ago, the internet was an escape from the real world. Now, the real world is an escape from the internet.” Noah Smith—“Do Not Feed the Platforms” t-shirt—“How can you learn from mistakes if you don’t remember them?” Westworld— “Sent from my phone. Forgive the brevity, the typos and lack of nuance.”—Bacon: “Truth emerges more easily from error than from confusion.” “My words don’t matter and I don’t matter, but everyone should listen to me anyway.” Pinterest—“Stop Liking, Start Licking” ice cream advertisement—“A profile-free life: “Imagine being able to exist without having to explain yourself to everyone, all the time. That’s the goal.” Hrag— “Everything is riddled with emptiness.” Lucretius—“Kick that habit, man.” W. Burroughs.

Networks are not quite pleasure domes. Discontent grows around form and causes: from Russia’s alleged interference in US presidential elections, to founding Facebook president Sean Parker admitting that the site purposely gives users a short trigger, outed as “addiction by design”. Parker: “It’s a social-validation feedback loop... exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you’re exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.” Next is Justin Rosenstein, inventor of the Facebook ‘like’ button, who compares Snapchat with heroin. Or Leah Pearlman, a member of the same team, admitting that she too has grown disaffected with the ‘like’ button and similar addictive feedback loops. Or take Chamath Palihapitiya, another former FB executive, who claims that social media is tearing society apart, recommending people to “take a hard break.”

After reading such stories, who wouldn’t feel betrayed? Cynical reason sets in as we realize the tricks being played on us. The screens are not what they seem. Soon after any behavioral targeting is exposed, our biases are confirmed while effects start to wear out, and marketing departments go on the look-out for the next forms of perception management. When will social media move fully onto the stage of world history? Is it never going to end? This leads to the question: what does it mean that we’ve become aware of such ‘organized distraction’? We know we’re pulled away, yet continue to be interrupted, that’s distraction 2.0.

A similar discontent is felt in my own net criticism filter bubble. What to do once you’ve realized we are cornered from all sides and must come to terms with this mental submission? What is the role of critique and of alternatives in such a desperate situation of ubiquity? Take the crypto-currency critics who must have felt they lost out on the bitcoin craze, feeling stuck with a bunch of lousy Facebook friends. Depression is a general condition, whether realized or unrealized. Internet, is that all there is? Discontent with the cultural matrix of the 21st century inevitably moves from the ‘technology’ label to a political economy of society-at-large. Let’s put our collective inability to change the internet architecture in the light of the larger ‘democracy fatigue’ and the rise of populist authoritarianism, as discussed in the 2017 anthology *The Great Regression*. But also be aware there is a dark side to this understandable gesture. Critical analyses often, unwillingly, end up in moral judgement. Shouldn’t we instead ask the uneasy question of why so many were lured into the social media abyss in the first place? Is it perhaps because of the “Disorganization of the Will,” Eva Illouz talked about

in her study *Why Love Hurts?* The many that defend the usefulness of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, at the same time express mixed feelings about the moral policing of CEO Mark Zuckerberg, masking a widely felt inability to make lifetime decisions. That's what Illouz describes as 'cool ambivalence', a new architecture of choice in which rational and emotional considerations blur, causing a crisis of commitment in the choice of partners, a pattern we also see in the social media debate. I want to leave but I can't. There's too much but it's boring. It's useful yet disgusting. If we dare to admit it, our addictions are filled with an emptiness at the prospect of life unplugged from the stream.

"Flood the zone with content." Dopamine is the metaphor of our age. The neurotransmitter stands for the accelerated up-cycles in our mood, before we come crashing down. The flux on social media varies from outbursts of expectation to long periods of numbness. Social mobility is marked by similar swings. Good and bad fortune stumble across each other. Life goes its way, until you suddenly find yourself in an 'extortion' trap, your device high-jacked by ransomware.

We move from intense experiences of collective work satisfaction, if we are at all lucky, to long periods of job uncertainty, filled with boredom. Our interconnected life is a story of growth spurts, followed by long periods of stagnation in which staying connected no longer serves any purpose. Let's call it social hoovering: we're sucked back in, motivated by suggestive improvements of conditions that never materialize. Social media architectures lock us in, legitimated by the network effect that everyone is in on it, at least we assume they must be. The certainty, still felt a decade ago, that users behave like swarms, freely moving together from one platform to the next, has been proven wrong. Departure seems persistently futile. We have to know the whereabouts of our ex, the event calendars and social conflicts of old or new tribes. One may unfriend, unsubscribe, log off or block individual harassers, but the tricks that get you back into the system ultimately prevail. Blocking and deleting is considered an act of love for oneself, hooked otherwise. The suggestion to leave social media altogether is beyond our imagination.

The only thing they request
Is something to numb the pain with
Until there's nothing human left

Father John Misty

"Please approach me, astonish me." No matter how perfect the technology, smooth and fast exchanges remain the exception as we bump into the harsh reality of the Other. At the point where a text message is sent to someone there is an expectation to receive one back. This wait, also known as 'texpectation', is the long and painful experience of anticipating a text message. The electronic ghost of the other haunts us, until it finally appears on the screen. "Every time my phone vibrates, I hope it's you." As Roland Barthes notices, "to make someone wait is the constant prerogative of all power." It is always me. "The other one never waits. Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn't wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late; but I always lose at this game. Whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits." After the excitement, during the dark days, social media no longer fills the void. During the loveless days one feels flat, like a failure, with little emotion. Some get angry easily, with social anxiety on the rise. When mood stabilizers no longer work, and you no longer get dressed during the day, you know you've been hoovered.

“There are days that I’m so bored, I can’t even concentrate.” Swiping fingers assist to move the mind elsewhere. Checking the smart phone is the present way of day dreaming. Unaware of our brief absence, we enjoy the feeling of being remotely present. Briefly you remember what it’s like to feel. While checking status updates we’re wandering off in our mind, the movement is reversed and, without notice, the Other enters our world. Getting our phones out for short triggers, the anxiety doesn’t go away. Like day dreaming, social media visits can be described as “a short-term detachment from one’s immediate surroundings during which a person's contact with reality is blurred.” The second part of this Wikipedia definition however doesn’t fit. Do we pretend to be somewhere else when we quickly swipe through messages in the elevator? Quick social media scans may be an escape from the present reality but can we say that it is done to withdraw into a fantasy? Hardly. We glance through the updates and incoming message, much like the reason of day dreaming, to erase boredom.