Book Review

Pettman, Dominic. *Infinite Distraction: Paying Attention to Social Media.*
Cambridge: Polity, 2016.
ISBN: 978-1-5095-0227-1 (pbk)

Social theory doesn't know what to do about social media. Dominic Pettman's
Infinite Distraction (ID) situates itself between the technophilia and technopho-
bia pervading the literature. ID neatly captures the dystopic elements of today:
compulsory permanent visibility disguised as unending voluntary self-expres-
sion. Who better expressed and predicted our dystopia than Gilles Deleuze?

> Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to
> express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing,
> because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that
> might be worth saying. What we're plagued by these days isn't any blocking of
> communication, but pointless statements (1990:129).

ID's central conceptual contribution is Pettman's attenuation of Bernard
Stiegler's concept of *hypersynchronisation,* which can be read as a detailed
addendum to Deleuze's above quote. Pettman's revision of hypersynchronisa-
tion, *hypermodulation,* is the conceptual lens through which much of the
book's better insights are filtered through.

Hypersynchronisation is the acceleration of the experience of temporality
and is about 'the cynical, corporate-governmental control of attention, behavior
and thought' (p. 29) made possible by contemporary technologies: smart-
phones/laptops/tablets and synchronised social media across these, Fitbits, GPS,
and so forth. Pettman's attenuation, *hypermodulation,* is expressed as-follows:

> What if the *raison d'être* of so called social media is to calibrate the interactive
> spectacle so that we *never feel the same way* as other potential allies and affines at
> the same moment? In this case, it is quite deliberate that while one person is fuming
> about economic injustice or climate change denial, another is giggling at a cute cat
> video. And – two hours later – vice versa. That nebulous indignation which consti-
> tutes the very fuel of true social change can then be safely redirected around the
> network […] we might want to call this strategic phenomenon *hypermodulation*
> (pp. 29-30, italics in original).

Whilst we are synchronised to an accelerated hyper-temporality (synchronic
form of time), what that time is populated by is a-synchronic (a-synchronic

content of time), dulling the potential of collective political praxis. Contemporary media technologies are the homogenous means through which our experiences are infinitely heterogenised and, by extension, through which political indignation is dulled. We need not assent to Pettman's ascription of a set of quasi-conspiratorial agents 'behind' hypermodulation to agree on its effects: that social media generates a sense of togetherness and simultaneity, but also an increasing and pulsating sense of absence or loneliness (pp. 68-69).

Distraction is not to be avoided in-itself (p. 23). However, our distraction today is, for Pettman, thoroughly in obedience to a capitalistic temporal and social logic. Two examples serve to illustrate this point: (1) Facebook is an avenue of hypersynchronisation-hypermodulation insofar as participation in it is increasingly socially compulsory, in the interest of the owners of the means of communication (p. 49), and insofar as the algorithmic filtration of our newsfeeds serves to render our experiences of the social sphere permanently a-synchronic (p. 79). Indeed, our affective experience of Facebook is partially manipulatable.[1] (2) Tinder serves to further render experiences – now sexual and romantic – to algorithmic filtration, and is a further capitulation of our personal relationships to the logic of exchange: users exchange physical-personality packages in pursuit of sexual gratification or distraction from boredom and loneliness:

> This package that represents all the corners of our being is determined by the template of the app or site: name, occupation, interests, connections, profile picture, and so on. One must adapt to the reductive parameters of the program in order to show up on the collective radar (pp. 102-103).

Whilst the reduction of sexual relations to the logic of exchange is not novel, it is the case that modern technologies render its scale wider than ever before. Whether on Facebook, Tinder, Twitter, or Instagram: compulsory self-commodification and visibility (Foucault's panoptic nightmare) is, increasingly, the only game in town. Our participation in the 'virtual world' is the perverse condition for legitimate social existence (pp. 111-112).

'Ping goes the phone. Jerk goes the neck' (p. 121): this might be as sharp an analysis of the current mediascape and our relationship to it we have heard thus far. ID is not, though, a Luddite tome. Leaning again on Stiegler, but this time on his notion of the *pharmakon*, Pettman considers how technologies might be the cure as well as the poison to these social ills (p. 125).[2] This would necessitate a distraction from our constant distraction (pp. 132-136) or an attention to our hypersynchronisation-hypermodulation. How can the mediascape be used fuel social indignation and social imagination rather than simply rerouting these affective states safely around the network (p. 132)? This is the vital question ID poses; it is not, unfortunately, the one it answers.

If this is the key question to which this book helps to spark a response, ID may well help play the type of pharmacological role Pettman hopes; providing a potential cure to our social media ailments. Having said this, there remain three further points worthy of exploration. First, there are a number of under-

developed theoretical gestures that are suggestive, but which are quickly brandished and discarded (e.g. Heidegger (p. 58, pp. 110-111), Bateson (p. 119) and Agamben (pp. 45-47)). Second, while Pettman clearly displays an interest in the metaphysics of the event (invoking Badiou, Barthes, Benjamin, Kracaeur, and Žižek to this effect), evental dynamics are not independently developed. In both of these first two cases, the absence of a thorough exploration of these issues subtracts from the thoroughness and convincingness of Pettman's conceptual explorations: they come across as side-thoughts for dramatic effect rather than as conceptually rigorous. Thirdly, Pettman's work on the difference between the owners and consumers of the 'means of communication' (and the subordination of the experience of the latter to the material interests of the former) is well argued. Nonetheless, the question of the *subject of distraction* remains as open as ever. Pettman does not stupefy 'the masses', but he does charge most of us with displaying what he calls a 'will-to-synchronise' (that is, a willingness to collectively 'bury our heads') (p. 123). We are anxious, lonely, atomised (and so on), and it is from this bleak picture that Pettman rallies for new tools to help fuel social indignation and imagination. It is, as yet, an unfinished rousing call (as Pettman admits (p. 135)): that work remains ahead of us.

Reviewed by Conor Heaney

Notes

1. This is not conspiratorial. Facebook's own published research states as much: 'We show, via a massive ($N = 689,003$) experiment on Facebook, that emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness.' See: Kramer, Adam D. I., Guillory, Jamie E., and Hancock, Jeffrey T., 'Experimental Evidence of Massive-scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111, 24 (2014), 8788–8790.
2. See: Stiegler, Bernard, 'Relational Ecology and the Digital *Pharmakon.' Culture Machine,* 13 (2012), 1-19

References

Deleuze, G. 1990. *Negotiations, 1972-1990.* New York: Columbia University Press.