

A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media

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Intro

A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media is a book all about user experience. It is not, however, a study typically focused on a notion of user understood as an individual person. The discussion instead follows a trajectory of critical theoretical work that endeavours to conceive of experience by decentering the human subject from its analytical foci. The approach tends to stress, as such, the collective, mimetic and nonconscious nature of user experience rather than fixing on subjective consciousness. Significantly, though, it is important not to misconstrue the emphasis on impersonal experience as dismissive of personal subjectivity. My approach does not discount the attentive labours of an individual user's cognition. It does not deny the emergence of subjects who *feel* their own sense of rationality as a kind of core self-concept. It does not refuse phenomenal modes of subjective volition or intentionality towards objects. Nevertheless, as will soon become apparent, these more concentrated moments of lucid experience are regarded as a part of a process stirred into action by a *collective nonconscious*. In a nutshell, the subjectivity of the user is the product, not the producer of experience.

Before reading on, it also is important to note that *A Sleepwalker's Guide* builds on previous work by this author addressing the collective nonconscious.¹ It is, as follows, a continuation of a *dystopian media theory*.² For readers unfamiliar with this approach, it can speedily be defined as an alternative mode of critical theory, which does not grasp its subject (social media in this case) by way of a conventional ideological critique of media power. It does not follow dialectical movements or indeed look for its subject in symbolic ideas-in-form or media representations. Instead, the dystopian mode of criticality suspiciously follows the movement of often unresolvable and paradoxical mixtures of power, including hard and soft control, oppositional and acquiescent behavioural manipulations, and modes of domination established, simultaneously, by way of slavery and freedom.³

Throughout this work, the shadow of certain theorists has loomed large. Readers familiar with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari will no

doubt recognize most of the ontological preferences utilized in these pages. It is, nonetheless, the presence of the influential microsociologist, Gabriel Tarde, and the persistent mobilization of his *conceptual persona* of the somnambulist that figures most prominently throughout.⁴ The somnambulists are social figures who originated (and initially faded) alongside the rise and fall of nineteenth-century crowd contagion theories, yet have, in recent years, found a new sense of purpose in the analysis of viral networks and the neurocultures of social media.

This new somnambulist coincidentally corresponds with a spate of media headlines declaring that humanity is sleepwalking into numerous world crises (see the discussion in Chapter 2). It is important, however, not simply to grasp the sleepwalkers, as they are often represented in these foreboding newspaper headlines, as dispossessed of rational consciousness. In spite of these popular discourses, which position populations as collectively sleepwalking towards various economic, political, environmental and technological calamities, this book is not solely about sleep, nor indeed does it concern waking the sleepwalker! Along these lines, Frédéric Neyrat proposes that our experience of the digital present may in fact have little to do with sleep.⁵ In place of the dulled sense of reverie we might experience when struggling to wake up; those moments when it is difficult to differentiate between the woken surroundings from a lingering dream, Neyrat points to periods of protracted wakefulness. The power is always switched on, or permanently on charge, meaning that digital work and leisure time can indeed occur at any time. Check that email, notification, update, post, tweet ... The platform tells us when to start and when to end a shift. Sleeping isn't easy, with the onset of all these attentional demands, excesses of light, data and infinite linking and smart thinking. Contrary, then, to the popular figure of the involuntarily zombie smartphone user, and apparent rise in cases of so-called sleep texting,⁶ Neyrat supposes that digital work requires vigorous cognitive engagements.

But then again, perhaps the digital present is a little fuzzier than this somewhat forced distinction between dreamy sleep and full on wakefulness suggests. Which is to say, such a clear distinction seems to miss a number of paradoxical aspects of the contemporary user experience. This is the main point of bringing back Tarde's somnambulists. They are absurd conceptual personae who do not sit easily on either side of a barrier erected between dreamy or uninterrupted sleep, on one hand, and the prolonged interruptions and wakefulness of digital culture, on the other. What is argued here is a little closer to what Jonathan Crary calls the 'monotonous indistinction of 24/7' digital labour and consumption.⁷ This is a 'zone of

insensibility' and memory loss which 'defeats', Crary contends, 'the possibility of experience'.⁸ However, again, we need to be careful. The struggle for experience seems to be a lot fuzzier than this account suggests. This indistinction must not simply be restricted to the erosion of day and night or work and leisure time alone. On the contrary, what I will call *experience capitalism* has already breached the boundaries that separate wakefulness and sleep. Much of what is produced, consumed, and discarded is now carried out in these zones of indistinction.

It would seem that we need a somnambulist who can explore these in-betweens, since, like most other kinds of work, digital labour tends not only to interfere with, but also occupies the outer margins of sleep.⁹ The neuro-management of collective user experiences by psychological corporations, with their teams of behavioural marketers, data miners and experience designers, similarly works in-between nonconscious and conscious states. To be sure, reading the work of influential experience designers and consumer researchers, we can trace a long-running fascination with appeals to an overriding relational nonconscious state of consumption. Along these lines, experience capitalism might be seen as an extension of earlier appeals made to a theatrical subconscious as a way to affect social influence that leads to mass consumption. It is this new focus on the neurochemically constituted nonconscious states of the user that supposedly processes experience on a visceral register (apparently located in the body–brain relation) before it surfaces as a mechanical habit or moment of inward reflection concerning, for example, an affinity with a brand identity.¹⁰ *The collective nonconscious is the new parasomnia*. As follows, users do not need to be asleep or fully awake to negotiate neurologically premeditated comfort zones of consumption or the increasing pervasiveness of nontask interactions at work.

Tarde's sleepwalkers are indeed central to how this book conjures the concept of the collective nonconscious. They help to bring the concept to life by providing a persona through which it can live and breathe. It is, indeed, through the lives of various sleepwalkers in each chapter that the nonconscious is thought, perceived, and felt. The sleepwalkers become intrinsic conceptual personae; philosophical tools able to make interventions into the production of the concept itself.¹¹ Tarde's somnambulists are, as such, the perfect conceptual personae for the paradoxical ontology of dystopian media theory, since they allow analytical entry to the collective nonconscious of user experience.

Crucially, though, sleepwalkers are not really persons at all. They are *larval subjects* or becoming subjects. They are never quite actualized as fully

formed subjects. Sleepwalkers are not social actors or individual nodes in a network, as such. They are rather social relations or collectively felt experiences. Along these lines, then, the experience of the somnambulist helps us to grasp why, although many users may feel wide awake, they cannot become dissociated from their nonconscious associations with the collective. *A Sleepwalker's Guide* marks a point in this author's work wherein the persona of the somnambulist (and its luring by way of the action-at-a-distance of social relationality) begins to encompass a far wider range of concepts of impersonal user experiences, including overlaps with the concepts developed by A. N. Whitehead, Patricia Clough, R. D. Laing, Roger Caillois and Roberto Esposito, for example.

A Dark Refrain of Social Media

A Sleepwalker's Guide uniquely points the antennae of Tarde's conceptual persona towards a particularly dark moment in the social media age. I have to admit, regretfully, although there are a few affirmative propositions (i.e. around the failure of immunopolitics), much of the discussion will not make for an especially joyous read. The previous conclusion of dystopian media theory did not unsurprisingly propose a blooming bed of roses for future user experiences either. *Far from it!* There was already an apparent sense of foreboding; a Huxleyesque orchid garden taking root in digital culture, and therefore a need to ramp up the aforementioned suspicions of critical theory.¹² However, dystopian media theory also needs to explore potential *lines of flight*, offering some insights into the possibilities of revolutionary social media contagion; suggesting something more democratic might always be conceivable. As imperfect and overhyped as earlier examples of social media-fuelled contagions have proven to be, their part in the election of the first black US President in 2008 and the emergence of a nascent prodemocracy movement in the Middle East in 2011, for example, offer some clues as to what might be imaginable in the future.

Even so, I started to write this current text at a very different moment in time; a moment when the possibilities of revolutionary contagion have become deeply entangled in what I call a dark refrain. Broadly speaking, these references to the dark refrain are intended to draw attention to a far-right territorialization of the global political scene and its various manifestations on social media. To understand how such a political land grab has transformed the potentiality of social media contagion, we need to briefly grasp a rudimentary appreciation of musical improvisation.¹³

Lines of flight and refrains are indeed mutual concepts that most improvising musicians should already be familiar with. On one hand, imagine these 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 recognizable groove. There was no tempo set; no opening bars to conform to. Nothing is composed, as such. For Deleuze and Guattari, these notes *without order* appeared like the random scribbles on Sylvano Bussoti's musical staff.¹⁴ They are a scattering of notes that *become-other*.

The refrain is, on the other hand, a moment in the improvisation when players begin to fall into a repeated pattern of notes. The notes might become harmonized; syncopated. The rhythm is quantized. At the same time, the bodies of the players become biomusicologically entrained. Which is to say, there is synchronized foot tapping, arms 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; an inducement or seduction of everyone assembled in its catchy cadence. The musicians and the audience similarly begin to pulse together, swaying to the same rhythm. Yet, despite the promise of joy, these movements are pegged in such a way as to determine what comes next. The key fixes the line to a predicable scale of notes, a familiar chord progression. Things start to repeat themselves over and over again, *without difference*. They are the production of a musical mechanical habit. It becomes problematic to try to break out of such a rhythmic rut. It's not just bodies that become entrained. The pulse acts as an affective contagion, bringing bodies, brains, feelings and thoughts into line with each other. Musicians, audiences *become-the-same*.

The dark refrain is 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, rampant, yet botched capitalism, and neo-Nazis mass shootings. More specifically, though, this is a refrain that has so often been played out on social media. Certainly, after Brexit and Trump in 2016, the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke in April 2018. This massive data breach of millions of Facebook user profiles for the political purposes of the Trump campaign brought about what Karen Simecek calls 'a renewal of paranoia and anxiety about life online and engagement with social media'.¹⁵ It is against this backdrop that my renewed interest in the user experience of social media has been formulated.

In short, what *A Sleepwalker's Guide* sets out to do is consider how earlier lines of flight have flipfopped into a darker, portentous and repetitive refrain. This refrain has seen both an economic and political expropriation of the user experience. Social media users not only give away the ownership of their community relations to parasitic social media platforms, but the potential of revolutionary contagion has also been utterly dispossessed. The repossession of the territories in which revolutionary contagion might overspill – once the occupancy of prodemocratic movements – has shifted to this antidemocratic refrain. This is important because when a population feels the same hate, feels the same fear; when it begins to share the same experience, then we have produced, as R. D. Laing argued, compliant consumers and cannon fodder.¹⁶ The revolutionary moment is, it would seem, now with the far right. So, what is of interest throughout the text is the role social media plays in this somewhat abrupt capitulation and acquiescence to the dark refrain. My interest here is in the refrain's utterings of post-truth, contagious fake news and hate speech. Its expressions of a racist immunopolitics and coincidence with a convergence between neoliberal capitalism and fascism. Ultimately, the book looks beyond social media to the apparent immersive futures of digital culture that are already seeping into the user experience.

Indistinctions

A closer reading of Neyrat's description of what constitutes sleep suggests that our digital labours might be neither entirely somnolent nor wide awake. The user experience seems to be at a threshold point in-between these two distinct states. There is clearly a connection here with a *Deleuzoguattarian* interest in *The Middle*, wherein those infamous weeds begin to appear in-between the deterritorialized cracks.¹⁷ Yet again, perhaps this notion of an in-between state is in itself continuing to force a distinction? User experiences are intuitively felt, but they produce concrete actions, habits, compulsions and collective impulses. These are blurry moments of indistinction, whereby the nonphenomenological world of somnolent experience slips into ambulant states of user engagement. In this new light, user experiences are neither asleep nor wide awake, or indeed, in-between, but rather they are, at once, somnambulistic.

The indistinctness of somnambulism is certainly a recurrent theme throughout this book. There is nothing primarily new here. Tarde's

original contagion theory was firmly located in the insensible degrees between nonconscious experience, mechanical habit and volition. There is no ‘absolute separation of this abrupt break, between the voluntary and the involuntary ... between the conscious and the unconscious. Do we not pass by insensible degrees from deliberate volition to almost mechanical habit?’¹⁸ What is novel in this latest rendition is that indistinctness is now resolutely linked to a methodology. Important to this procedural development is the work of Roger Caillois.¹⁹ In short, for Caillois, the process by which biological camouflage blends an organism into its surroundings presents a disruption of perception, but also opens up the potential and perils of collective mimicry. Borrowing from Caillois’s proposal that the fundamental role of all study is to set about resolving distinctions, this book endeavours to tackle a series of forced divisions. By doing so, each chapter looks to the indistinct nature of things; the vagueness of it all.

Of course, some Gestalt-minded scholars will say that a failure to make a clear distinction is 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 is regarded in this book as a mode of access to preperception; a way of slipping into the insensible zones of user experience. This is again nothing new in terms of aesthetic work. There is a long history of indistinctness in art. The art critic, Adrian Stokes, noted how the ‘embracing or enveloping quality’ of Turner’s art came about because of its ‘indistinctness’ and ‘loss of definition’.²⁰ Cray similarly notes the somnambulant indistinctiveness of ‘attentiveness and distraction’ established between the aesthetic figures in Manet’s paintings.²¹ In literature too, there are characterizations that are made purposefully indistinct. Gatsby is a great illusive aesthetic 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. Likewise, in the latter stages of writing this book I worked with the artist, Mikey B. Georgeson, whose series of *Auto Matter Flow Morning Drawing* (see figure 1) and experiments with the glitches of green screen technology helped me to consolidate a broader sense of the aesthetic power of indistinction to produce what Gary Genosko brilliantly calls, an ‘enemy of crisp synthesis’.²² Throughout this book, then, indistinction is an aesthetic methodology that refuses forced distinctions. The doodling, ‘noodling’, ‘fuzziness’, and ‘muddiness’²³ of indistinctness resists border regimes by sliding in between foreground and background, sleep and wakefulness, truth and fakery, self and other, self and nonself, mind and matter.

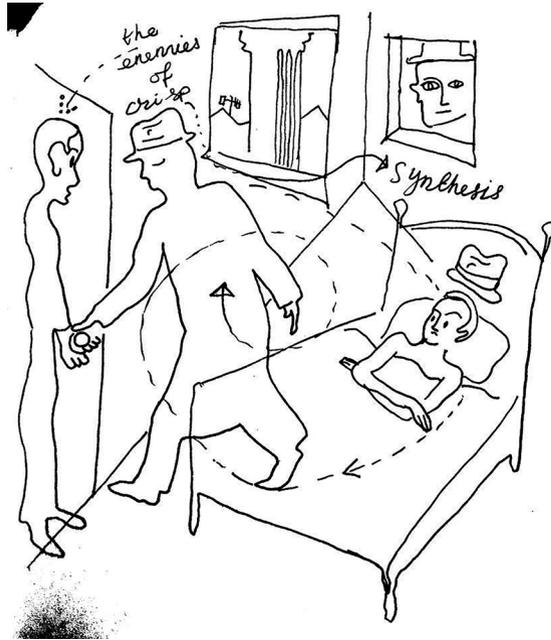


Figure 1 The Sleepwalkers are the Enemies of Crisp Synthesis. Illustration by Mikey B. Georgeson.

The Five Chapters

The first two chapters begin by endeavouring to resolve some of the more significant distinctions that have come to define the so-called post-truth era. For example, the discussion turns to explore how fake news contagions can be alternatively grasped through a Whiteheadian aesthetic ontology rather than prevalent informatic registers of user experience. A number of subsequent questions are raised. When information machines fail to distinguish between fact and fake, what role do feelings play in learning to discern? How do feelings persist in the data voids and political stratagems that crop up in relation to shock events (mass shootings), search engine rankings and social media rumour? Moreover, what role does the collective nonconscious play in the surge of support for the tweeting, WhatsApp bigoted rants of populist politicians? These two chapters conclude by substituting the old spectral measures between brutal fact and total fiction with a somnambulist register of user experience.

Chapters 3 and 4 similarly combine to follow the trajectory of the dark refrain to converged modes of viral capitalism and fascistic immunopolitics. The discussion in both chapters follows the multiple synergies assembled around so-called virality/growth practices of commodification, an impoverished model of online community, and the promises and perils of immunity failure. Following Caillois and Laing the chapters look to resolve a series-related forced immunological (and anthropological) distinction between self and other, self and nonself and what to ignore and what to delete. Chapter 3 argues for a new nonphenomenological syntax able to grasp the indistinctions of the sleepwalker. Ultimately, Chapter 4 moves on to ask what kinds of lines of flight can be salvaged from the dangerous, masochistic tendencies of collective mimicry. Which is to say, when immune systems fail and things become perilously indistinct, what kind of novel communities might emerge?

The final chapter explores the immersive futures of user experience. As an extension of the social technology paradigm of user experience, ubiquitous, pervasive computing has been described as akin to turning virtual reality inside out.²⁴ Computational media thus *comes alive* in the everyday experiences of the world. The chapter argues that the implications of what Andrew Murphie has called *Media Alive* challenge the conventional phenomenological study of user experience. Following Whitehead, the ultimate unresolved distinction is found in the misguided phenomenological attempt to bifurcate mind from nature. Along these lines, the mind's encounter with matter is caught in a seemingly irresolvable distinction, wherein nature is apprehended in the awareness of the brain (consciousness). Yet, for Whitehead, nature is *in itself* the cause of conscious awareness.

This final chapter attempts to utilize the nonphenomenological syntax from Chapter 3 to express a nonbifurcated theory of user experience. Along these lines, the mind of the user is not analysed like an artist working on a 3D world for a virtual reality game. The mind is not engaged in the production of protrusion and distance; an illusory, secondary, production of perspective represented on a primary flat surface. This mode of experience is what Raymond Ruyer, a follower of Whitehead, considers to be an auxiliary mode of consciousness. It represents our awareness of things in terms of perspectival depth, but misses a primary surface of *absolute survey*.²⁵ As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, in theories of perception, like Gestalt, 'the eye is normally understood as the organ that sees a surface by observing [a foreground floating over ground, and] presents it to the brain or mind to confirm'.²⁶ Yet, for this to happen the eye must 'invoke another

eye to confirm the existence of the eye that sees over [the ground]'.²⁷ For Ruyer, this is interesting, but mistaken. *There is no third eye!* We do not observe things through a 'disembodied' receptacle (eye-body) that simply passes on the experience of vision to consciousness.²⁸ Ruyer's absolute survey is thus the ultimate indistinction or nonbifurcation; it is experience, *experiencing itself*. The idea that 'consciousness is somehow a supplementary dimension added to perception, a place where perception is registered or cognized',²⁹ misses the autoaffective nature of consciousness. The third eye thesis misses, as such, what Patricia Clough refers to as the autoaffection of user experience.³⁰ It misses the collective nonconscious. It misses the somnambulist.