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The Will-to-Synchronize

No question, we are entering uncharted waters when it comes to digital social media. The scale, reach, intensity, and industrial resources involved are all unprecedented, so that we cannot know what the impact may be on our behavior and modes of thinking (indeed, many commentators insist that the very *capacity* for critical thinking, or enabling self-reflection, is being steadily eroded, tweet by tweet). This is a global experiment, occurring in real time: an experiment largely designed by the owners of the means of communication. Some commentators, however, insist that this seemingly sudden explosion of virtual interaction is merely the latest phase of something which is as old as human sociality itself.

Tom Standage, for instance, has made a career of helpfully reminding us that the tendency to fetishize the originality of the present is misguided. To counter this habit, his writing provides precedents, genealogies, and continuities where we presumed there were none. In *The Victorian Internet*, for instance, Standage uncovered cases of flirtations and even marriages occurring “online” in the nineteenth century—through the

telegraph, rather than through email or chat programs. This reminds us that there have *always* been different types of “world-wide web,” and we would do well to acknowledge this fact, in order to better understand how earlier networks rearranged social structures, cultural arrangements, and psychic habits. In his more recent book, *The Writing on the Wall*, Standage traces the roots of today’s social media back to the Roman Empire, when influential citizens relied on a complex constellation of messages, messengers, and media to keep “in the loop” of political affairs, as well as the general goings-on in a thriving network of cities distributed throughout the Mediterranean world. (In this sense, ancient shipping routes were the original pier-to-pier network.) The daily digest of the Senate, known as the *acta diurna populi Romani*, was copied and recopied many times each day, as news spread through and beyond the *polis*, thanks to the relatively new technologies of wax tablets and writing, as well as the more established technology of a slave class. (The latter, it should be noted, is just as indispensable for today’s digital economy—whether the literal slave, mining minerals in Africa or assembling iPhones in China, or the disavowed kind who is paid starvation wages in the overdeveloped nations.)¹⁰ Throughout Rome, the walls of the cities themselves were used as communication interfaces,

covered in graffiti dedicated to everything from political campaigns to proto-Yelp reviews of public establishments and services (including, of course, “the world’s oldest profession,” prostitution). A good deal of such graffiti simply reads as idle Facebook updates or Tweets, as Standage points out:

At Nuceria, I won 8,552 denarii by gaming—fair play!

On April 19, I made bread.

On April 20, I gave a cloak to be washed. On May 7, a headband. On May 8, two tunics.

....

Atimetus got me pregnant. (40)

One instance sounds like a surreptitious text message: “The man I am having dinner with is a barbarian.”

Standage goes on to credit the next great social media moment to the technological and cultural matrices that allowed Martin Luther to “go viral” (the most crucial element being the invention of the printing press). This in turn anticipates the famous coffeehouses of post-Restoration England, which served as hubs for general gossip, social intrigue, and political plottings. (Standage, following Dunbar, argues in his first chapter that gossip is—and always has been—the essential glue for all human societies, and this is because it serves an

evolutionary purpose, as a linguistic extension of the bonding functions of primate grooming.) From this author’s perspective, the Internet is merely the latest manifestation of our innate drive for inventing and exploiting “social media.” Indeed, this long view of the symbiosis between technology and culture suggests that the Internet may not in fact be the apotheosis of so-called social media (as we assume it to be today). Rather, it may be the current incubation chamber for as-yet unanticipated new types of collective transmission and mediation.

As social creatures of the techno-mammalian class, humans, as a rule, prefer to cluster rather than withdraw. Our default inclination is to extend our senses, via media, to ascertain what else is “going on,” beyond those personal horizons, limited by our biological reach. (As McKenzie Wark famously said, “We no longer have roots, we have aerials.”) We are curious animals ... in both senses. Even when we can curate our own perfect media environment, we tend to feel isolated or restless if we are too long deprived of receiving real-time signals from our scattered neighbors. Those readers old enough to remember what it was like to live before the Internet will recall the strange phenomenon where the general noosphere seduced us by its sheer beckoning presence. Thus, we would find ourselves

listening to terrible songs or talk shows on the radio in the car rather than listening to our perfectly sequenced mixtape or intriguing audiobook. Or we would end up flicking from channel to channel on the TV, preferring this cathodic wasteland to the stack of quality VHS videos that sat neglected in the corner of the living room. Such perverse behavior exhibits a profound and tenacious *will-to-synchronize*. Indeed, this is the source and continuing energy supply for everything we call “media” (or what Stiegler calls, following Derrida, our “grammaticization”). This crucial characteristic shapes the general desire to connect with the signals and traces of other monads, no matter how tedious or embarrassing these signals and traces may be. (Just take a look at the top ten movies, TV shows, and albums right now, for ample evidence of this claim.) Broadly speaking, this will-to-synchronize occurs on at least five interlocking planes: the evolutionary (biological), the metaphysical (social-spiritual), the affective (phenomenological), the historical (technical, biopolitical), and the post-historical (libidinal-ecological). While we can find any of these planes comprising the architecture of any moment in the history of hominization, they are also—by virtue of ratios and sedimentations—periodic or epochal layers. So to say, the first plane provides the foundation for the subsequent ones,

giving them all a chronological aspect. In terms of the first plane, our will-to-synchronize exhibits itself in order to reproduce and continue the species (driven by our DNA, or “the selfish gene”). Here we find lust and attraction, and all those things we do in an ongoing attempt to gratify bodily appetites (and to have better odds of survival, according to the law of safety in numbers). On the second plane, we seek to *make sense* of these primal urges, beyond mere assembly for its own sake, and the organic imperative to persist and procreate. On this plane we synchronize our activities with the seasons, the gods, the cosmos—and we look for signs that help us orient ourselves in this uncanny valley known as existence. Here we try to work together within a single, overarching *raison d'être*: whether this be called “religion” or “art” (both connected to aesthetics, as is the first plane, in fact, when it comes to the dance between beauty and seduction). The third plane—co-terminous with the second—is where we try to make further sense of these collective signals for our own individual context: where a self-reflexive subject navigates the blessings and terrors of being one solitary will among many others (usually coming into conflict with our own). On this plane, however, cultural rituals reinforce the collectivity over the self, partly as a way of keeping a homeostatic state between human atoms that

threaten to go rogue. And this occurs within the frame of a greater social project which we are obliged to fit in to. The fourth plane is where we start to recognize and reflect on patterns amongst our collective endeavors, and the narratives we put upon them: where we have been, and where we think we are going (and/or *should* go). Here we are swept up in a larger trajectory and momentum. And this is where we elaborate and refine discussions of conduct and ethics, first encountered on the religious plane, but now no longer conceived as moral prescriptions from *beyond*. Rather, these new imperatives emerge from within the greater human project, unmoored from celestial designs. This is where we become our own “prosthetic gods,” using rapidly evolving technologies to manage and administer the new understanding of—and relation to—*life* (and, thus, death). Political programs are paramount here, determined on macroeconomic principles. We ask ourselves, “What is to be done?” (now that, as a species, we are no longer told what to do by invisible agents). And finally, the fifth plane is in fact more of a precipice, and one we are all teetering on at present. Here we find a pervasive bewilderment and insecurity, exacerbated by loss of shared chronology, direction, or purpose. (What Stiegler calls “disorientation,” due to a forfeiture of access to *cardinality* and *calendricality*: the once

stable parameters of space and time.) The environment is thus revealed to us as “ecological” at the same moment that it is lost to us as a *place* of unthinking habitation. And in the same stroke, “nature” is revealed to us as a retrospective *space* of romantic-phantasmatic projection.

The kind of will-to-synchronize I have been describing in our own lives—the millennial kind, emerging in the late twentieth century, and extending into today—is one deeply colored by the experience of alienation. (Or, rather, it is colored by the *anti*-experience of alienation, since according to the critical theorists we rarely, if ever, encounter any experience worth having.) This is why we hope the remote control, or the smartphone, will reveal to us the semi-magical “lives of others,” which for some reason, unconnected to logic or experience (but heavily suggested by the Spectacle), promises something *more* than what we ourselves have (or *feel* we have). Now that previous “organic” modes of community have been shattered by the forces of capitalist modernization, and we are thrown into a sea of confused humanity, we feel, paradoxically, cut off from our fellow man and woman. (“Water water everywhere / Nor any drop to drink.”) Gossip now comes to us not so much from the neighbor, relation, or co-worker, but the TV show, the radio broadcast, or the website newsfeed. Thus, we postmodern folk

are haunted by a will-to-synchronize, left bereft in a temporal landscape littered with the debris of previous forms of being-together (what Heidegger called *Mitsein*, or “with-being”).

Certainly, this is a crude “grand narrative”—the kind that Jean-François Lyotard warned us against taking too seriously. And yet few would dispute the general thrust, and import, of smaller, relatively coherent social groups being violently subsumed into much larger ones through colonization, urbanization, industrialization, globalization, and so forth. While every generation in the Western hemisphere, since the invention of writing—or even the invention of language—may have feared that it had been left to pick up the pieces of a formerly unified Arcadia, we know today that we are producing more and more toxic and tangible fragments of betrayed human solidarity and “lived experience.” Every piece of trash washing back up on the seashore, every image lapping at our tired retinas, bears witness to the shattered ideal of our once promising species-being. Which only makes us more desperate to distract ourselves from our own existential belatedness and perplexity, while holding out hope that we will soon find “the one” to make this ordeal seem somehow “worth it”—or, at the very least, make some kind of sense. (And “the one” here need not be a messianic lover, but could equally be a teacher, a guru,

a health coach, a life coach, a yoga teacher, or a suburban spirit guide.)

Letters, telegrams, telephones, “the talkies,” newspapers, ham radios, car radios, television ... and of course social media: all of these have helped us at least *try* to put our lonely souls in sync with others, and find an acceptable likeness of what Georges Bataille described as existential “continuity.” Such media, whether analog or digital, aid us in our attempts to receive a continuous feed from what we might call “the banal beyond”: the virtual space *somewhere out there*, where significant decisions are made, where people know things you do not, where life is lived *as it should be*. (Baudrillard: “Porno says: somewhere there is true sex, since I am its caricature” [Revenge 152].) Hence the power of Hollywood, which promises to teach us how to desire and how to live (which is essentially the same thing). Somewhere, in our own minds, there is a picture of a functioning society in which we fit, but we feel like a jig-saw piece that has been abandoned in a basement. And the box—which boasted the completed image—has also gone missing; so we don’t have a map to help us put everything together again. And *this* is what propels our appetite for distraction. Every status update, every tweet, every post, every tumblr, every selfie promises to add up to that lost picture and reflection of

premodern society that Durkheim described in such detail. Instead, each digital tid-bit threatens to obscure the image further, as the shiny surface loses its power to reveal anything other than our own *personal* reflections. We thus lose any sense of a “we” at all.

This is the danger, in any case. But we must not get too caught up in nostalgic rhetoric, since this is as likely to foreclose or obscure possible exit strategies as the new technologies we find so easy to demonize (even as we rely on them for almost everything besides breathing). In other words, we should not lose sight of the many enabling and encouraging uses and potentials of social media (as strange as this may sound, after the common doomsday scenario sketched above). Indeed, some critics play the devil’s advocate with such enthusiasm that they even argue that what appears to be distraction, to us analog humans, is in fact the birth of a new, superior digital-species, capable of dexterous multitasking and mental parallel processing.¹¹ The next super-human is nigh, ushering in the Singularity. The question remains, however, to what degree this is an evolutionary shift shaped by the capitalist requirement to adapt to the machine, rather than by our own freedom and agency. At any rate, the chorus of voices condemning the global addiction to social media all too often rings hollow, especially

when we take Standage’s long view into account, and see such technologies, and their uses, as simply (and not so simply) the latest iteration of cultural communication, albeit one uniquely vulnerable to being observed and controlled.

We certainly find ourselves interacting online for a constellation of different reasons. Some seek company, others specific information. Some crave distractions, while others scan the wires with the focused intensity of a laser beam. We can find instructions, advice, suggestions, recommendations; often volunteered out of the goodness of someone’s own heart, and a general sense of helpfulness toward others. The Facebook newsfeed is often treated like the town square, town hall, and town crier, all at once. Moreover, it can function as virtual school, tavern, press, library, salon, catwalk, gallery, market, movie palace, agony aunt, and matchmaker. We can listen to someone speaking on their soapbox and respond in kind. Or we can witness an exchange inconspicuously, like someone in sunglasses in the corner of a café—watching, speculating, judging. We can ask for assistance, we can conduct informal polls, we can savor the sweetness of the honeyed hive-mind when it responds positively to our questions (or curse it when it greets our earnest question with silence or sarcasm). We can fish for compliments or enjoy giving them to others. We can

humblebrag and self-promote. We can commiserate, congratulate, and congregate. Certainly in my own case, I use various social media feeds as my primary daily interface with the wider world, and would feel lost without it. (Most of us now know the feeling of nearphysical panic when the Internet goes down, and we are literally left to our own—unconnected—devices. Increasingly, however, the world spares us such anxious moments by providing a second electronic umbilical cord, thanks to smartphones and cell towers.)

The gift of social media is indeed the gift of remote and imperfect (or asymptotic) mass-synchronization. I find here, literally on the same (web)page, a cornucopia of links, information, and exchanges—certainly more than I can really register or digest. This kind of nodal centralization means that I can find travel tips, upcoming conferences, new music, film recommendations, political commentary, social justice activism, and tempting recipes, all in one place. And many of these are likely to resonate with me, since they are provided by friends, and friends of friends. (If they don't resonate with me, then I can hide or unfriend them.)¹² Beyond this, the Kevin Bacon principle means that I can sense waves of potential relationships lapping at my door. Indeed, one positive aspect of online spaces like Facebook is that they provide a rare

intergenerational gathering space, where people of different vintages can share experiences and interests in an ongoing game of “show and tell.” While such fleeting glimpses and (largely unclicked) links may not qualify as Stiegler’s much-needed “long loops”—or pedagogic chains—these scrolling *short loops* at least have the virtue of opening windows onto worlds that were previously shut fast between generations that would mostly interact in only formal or familial circumstances. (Then again, we are often told that younger people only join and suffer Facebook for coercive family reasons, and hardly spend any time there at all, preferring chat programs and more image-based platforms, like Instagram and Tumblr.)

In her short meditation on the specific affective exchanges of Facebook, the celebrated cultural critic Lauren Berlant begins with an anecdote:

Today I introduced Facebook to someone older than me and had a long conversation about what the point of networking amongst “friends” is. The person was so skeptical because to her stranger and distance-shaped intimacies are diminished forms of real intimacy. To her, real intimacy is a relation that requires the fortitude and porousness of a serious, emotionally-laden, accretion of mutual experience. Her intimacies are spaces of permission not only for recognition but for the right to be seriously inconvenient, to demand, and to need. It presumes face to faceness, but even more profoundly, flesh to fleshness. But on Facebook one can always skim, or not log in.¹³

Berlant’s own perspective, however, is that social media allows a more ambiguous space: neither inherently lamentable nor worthy of celebration, but allowing different degrees of attention, alternative “investment” strategies, and less taxing forms of exchange than those we encounter offline. For her, “the stretched-out intimacies” of digital communication matter precisely *because* they are “more shaped by the phantasmatic dimension of recognition and reciprocity.” When online, “it is easier to hide inattention, disagreement, disparity, aversion.” Thus, there is less likely to be “collateral damage” in “mediated or stranger intimacies.” In Berlant’s view, social media allows

us to communicate in less demanding ways—more playful and glancing—because they are somehow “atmospheric.” Interactions in this register thus have an almost climatic dimension. The microthoughts and semiotic gestures of other, unseen, people waft in like fog, breezes, or spells of sunshine, only to quickly evaporate or condense into something else. (Indeed, one of the most popular pastimes online is “venting”—a term with linguistic roots in the Latin word for *wind*.) And these signals arrive unanchored by the heaviness of another’s presence; by the facticity of another flesh-and-blood person, which in its somatic assertions is incapable of *not* making mute bodily demands on one’s emotional resources.

For some, especially those who found themselves in adulthood before the turn of the millennium, this evacuation of the actual is the main problem with social media. To many in this group, it seems like an evasion or abdication of responsibility to alterity, in all its brute and sensuous immediacy. To others (and we should not be too dogmatic about age or generations, since there are a great deal of zealous “silver surfers,” just as there are plenty of teenage techno-skeptics), interaction via the network is not a *replacement* for “real” communication, but a somewhat freeing alternative space: a valuable adjunct to the face to face, precisely in its superficial supplementarity.

Interestingly, Berlant incorporates the notion of synchronization into her poetics of social media, referencing its novel strategies and capacities for “coordinating lives.” Within the wider contemporary (and technical) project of “synchronizing being,” Facebook rather ironically removes the face of the other and replaces it with a more telegraphic presence, with a lighter touch. This affords a different type of synchrony to embodied interactions: one that encourages “all kinds of emotional dependency and sustenance [that] can flourish amongst people who only meet each other at one or a few points on the grid of the field of their life.” This “light impact” mode of intersection—constituted by a great deal of “echoing and noodling”—renders reciprocity easy, promiscuous, spontaneous. “It’s not in the idiom of the great encounter or the great passion,” Berlant writes; “it’s the lightness and play of the poke. There’s always a potential but not a demand for more.”¹⁴

And yet the will-to-sync is thwarted from many angles and on many occasions. The more we try to synchronize, the more dissonance enters the frame. We may want to talk about movies but find we have disturbingly different tastes to our interlocutors. We may want to talk about the weather, but we live in different hemispheres. At every point that we are drawn

toward an ideal(ized) merger with an abstract companion, the stubborn or petty concrete other blocks our path. Yet our devices promise to give us access to the Big Other, simply by virtue of its networked status and constantly “refreshing” character. The portable device is a portal to elsewhere, which, by the deferred logic of greener grass, is better than wherever the user finds themselves. (Indeed, smartphones tempt us to speculate that Lacan’s *objet petit a* has finally been identified, captured, tamed—as if the inherently virtual had magically crystallized into an object. Or, rather, an encased vector to our endlessly deferred desires.)¹⁵

Think also of all those disconcerting temporal stutters, delays, and drop-outs that occur when we try to “reach out and touch someone.” A friend (or potential friend) may be texting on a train that suddenly rushes into a tunnel, and we lose the connection. Or we might assume we’re in the middle of a chat, while our interlocutor suddenly treats the conversation like email, to be picked up later, leaving us to wonder unhappily if we’ve offended. Or our chat box may be trumped by someone more interesting or desirable popping up on the other’s screen, leaving us in the lurch. (“Hello. Are you still there?”) The mutual temporality we thought we were sharing is shown to be partial, provisional, easily abandoned, without the usual

gestures to soften the blow of social abandonment or neglect. Worse still, we may never really know if we're in the midst of a conversation or not, making the threads more difficult to pick up at a later date. As a result, interaction online can often feel warped and treacherous; especially for those who have internalized the more analog protocols and niceties of interpersonal discourse. We find ourselves obliged to communicate within a new kind of space-time *discontinuum*. (And here we might be cavalier enough to fuse a caricature of Freud with a sketch of Heidegger, and claim that social media encourages an unsettling sense of *fort-da*(*sein*)—of being *here* and *there* at the same time ... which is tantamount to being nowhere in particular. We are thus un-homed by a scrambled sense of our own *adeixis*, as well as that of others.)¹⁶

For Berlant, however, the temporality of social media is primarily defined not by these kinds of dropped connections, but by the ways in which these can be swiftly picked up by others, in what she calls the “episodic now.” Facebook in particular, by this account, concerns itself with “calibrating the difficulty of knowing the importance of the ordinary event.” In other words, “people are trying there to eventualize the mood, the inclination, the thing that just happened—the episodic nature of existence.” Whatever publicity stunt or random viral

content is clamoring to “break the Internet” at any given time strives—or threatens—to become an event. These kinds of events, however, arrive (mercifully) “without the drama of a disturbance.”

For an earlier critic of quotidian affect, Henri Lefebvre, everyday life is “unmediated” (651). While his later writings (from the 1980s) began to grapple presciently with the coming cybernetic revolution, busily dismantling any distinction between the immediate and machinically chaperoned, Lefebvre could not envision the amniotic digital world we have created for ourselves. Thus, his working principle of the everyday was based on a kind of *lived reality*, no matter how annexed or alienated by the complicity between capital and advanced technics. This is meat-based Marxism. But where Berlant finds a kind of relief, or space of play, amidst the tidal currents of pseudo-events online—events which barely bother to clear their throat before departing—Lefebvre sees grounds for hope in humanity’s future within “the moment.” Lefebvre has a very specific and sophisticated “theory of moments” which plucks them from the prosaic flow of everyday life, without fully transcending it. Less than an event, yet more than a mere given situation, this definition of the moment is designed to identify and promote “the seeds of every possibility.”

"Through all the changes," Lefebvre writes, "'something' remains. We would say that 'something' is the *moment*" (636). That is, "'something'—which is certainly not a thing—is encountered once again. Both an illusion and a reality, *lived time* appears once more through all the veils and distances. It vanishes, and at the same time it makes itself known" (636, emphasis added). Among such moments, "we may include love, play, rest, knowledge, etc." Sounding a lot like Alain Badiou at times, albeit on a humbler register, Lefebvre states that the moment "*is constituted by a choice which singles it out and separates it from a muddle or a confusion, i.e., from an initial ambiguity.*" As such, it is "relatively durable" and "stands out from the continuum of transitories within the amorphous realm of the psyche. It wants to endure. It cannot endure (at least, not for very long). Yet this inner contradiction gives it its intensity" (639).

Whether the moment designates a torrid love affair, a stimulating game, a risky wager, the dogged pursuit of solving a problem, an urgent project, or a successful attempt to extricate oneself from the tendrils of work, Lefebvre's *moment* emerges out of the humdrum routine of existence in order to better illuminate its contours and limitations. "The moment is born of the everyday and within the everyday," he explains further. "From here it draws its nourishment and its substance; and this

is the only way it can deny the everyday. It is in the everyday that a possibility becomes apparent (be it play, work or love, etc.) in all its brute spontaneity and ambiguity" (645).¹⁷ Thus, Lefebvre calls the moment "*the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility*"—an attempt doomed to failure, as that is the nature of time ("This too shall pass.") Thus, the mundane routines we endure are revealed as secretly tragic. Indeed, there is some salvation in that, by virtue of realizing that (real) moments pulse beneath the mere metronomic monotony of our days. "It is a festival, it is a marvel, but it is not a miracle." Which is in fact the miracle: that something meaningful is immanent to our (usually) forsaken situation.

What does this all have to do with social media? The connection is uncovered when we update Lefebvre's notion of "unmediated lived reality" into today's information networks, where much of our everyday life is now conducted. Certainly, as already signaled, Lefebvre was not unaware of the growing power of technocratic industries and ideologies during the great neoliberal counterreformation of the 1980s, when "the optimistic prophecies of technicians and official circles have invaded the media" (808). What he called "the formalization of daily life" had already severed the all-important membrane between the *concrete* (human) experience and the *abstract*

(ideal), collapsing them together into a monstrous hybrid, and robbing the power that each had when standing on its own two feet. People start to lose their substance, as they are decanted into abstract equations, supposedly created for their benefit but which instead quantify them into commodified units, ready for easy deployment. (“All that is solid melts into air.”)

Sounding remarkably like Stiegler (whom he undoubtedly influenced), Lefebvre writes:

The creative capacity of communication and information is slowly but surely exhausted. With each new means of communication and information—for example, electricity (the “electricity fairy!,” “electrification plus soviets!”), and then the telephone, radio, television—people anticipate miracles: the transfiguration of daily life. As if it could come from a means or medium. These means or media can only transmit what existed prior to the mediating operation, or what occurs outside it. Today, communication *reflects*—nothing more, nothing less. What was the result of the multiplication of these means in ever more complex forms? Rather than a metamorphosis of daily life, what occurred was, on the contrary, the installation of daily life as such, determined, isolated, and then programmed. There ensued a privatization of the public and a publicizing of the private, in a constant exchange that mixes them without uniting them and separates them without discriminating between them; and this is still going on. (815)

Such new arrangements risk “the destruction of meaning by signs” (Baudrillard’s archtheme, of course). Moreover, “the increasing intensity of communications harbours the reinforcement of daily life, its consolidation and confinement.”

One of the greatest dangers Lefebvre warns against is the extinction of spaces reserved for critical thought, unhobbled by positivist exigencies. As if foreseeing the corporate enthusiasm for Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs), Lefebvre writes (in a crucial paragraph, worth quoting in full):

Not only does information ideology not present itself as ideology, but it proposes either to put an end to ideologies or to transfer the ideological function to information apparatuses, including the production and diffusion of positive knowledge, which was formerly the prerogative of schools and universities. The *reduction of positive knowledge to information* would have consequences: the end of critical and conceptual thinking, and hence the end of all thinking, or its departure to take refuge in illegality and violence. All the more so given that information apparatuses are in great danger of being administratively and institutionally controlled either by the national state, or by transnational forces which would use this supplementary means to consolidate their order. Not only would positive knowledge be reduced to recorded and memorized facts,¹⁸ but everything concerning the political and politics would go through the channels of official information. This would create the greatest difficulties for any action independent of established power, and possibly result in the disappearance of all counter-power. (819, emphasis added)

This is a different kind of will-to-synchronization that we have been considering thus far, although they are intimately connected (sadly, increasingly so). In *this* case, the will comes

from above, from the social architects, and harnesses the will of the masses in bad faith, and for its own purposes. “Information,” Lefebvre writes, “together with its extensions, would lead by the shortest route to a fully planned society, in which the centre would constantly receive messages from each base cell, with the result that culture and information, positively identified, possessing the same structure, would render each individual fully conscious” (820). In such a schema we see the centralized rhizome of the Internet (or Google, or the NSA), *avant la lettre*. Describing the as-yet fledgling Silicon Valley with great foresight, Lefebvre makes reference to “the myth of an electronic Agora,” which is little more than a “scientistic mythology.” Moreover, the proto-Zuckerberg ideologues that live there “do not think that they are interpreting the techniques, but that they are estimating them objectively. They refuse to concede that they are presenting, or representing, a tendentious political project” (821). A dangerous state of affairs indeed, when those in control of the planetary communications infrastructure consider it to be ideologically neutral, and thus forging its own direction and valences.

Finally, Lefebvre finishes his massive, threevolume study of everyday life with a nightmarish vision that could be straight

out of the pages of the Gothic novel that he warned us against writing (quoted as the epigraph of this book), when discussing information technologies. Anticipating the current age of Facebook, he writes:

Computerized daily life risks assuming a form that certain ideologues find interesting and seductive: the individual atom or family molecule inside a bubble where the messages sent and received intersect. Users, who have lost the dignity of citizens now that they figure socially only as parties to services, would thus lose the social itself, and sociability. This would no longer be the existential isolation of the old individualism, but a solitude all the more profound for being overwhelmed by messages. (823)

We can only speculate whether Lefebvre would have continued to hold out hope for the revolutionary potential of “moments” in an age when it could be argued that the majority of everyday life is conducted online. One suspects that he would consider “lived reality” to be a rapidly dwindling resource, exponentially evaporating, now that it has been severed from its source of “unmediated” interpersonal contact. The social has migrated into machinic mediation itself, and thus perhaps lost even the potentially recreative residues of its alienated sociality. Today we find ourselves merely “bombed by a hubub.”

Perhaps haunted by premonitions of iChats, conducted via cutesy speech bubbles, Lefebvre (823) ends his tome on a chilling note: “People talk about a new society. Would it not be more accurate to fear a new state, founded on the political use of information, ruling over a population enclosed in bubbles it has inflated, and in such a way that each mouth believes its bubble comes out of it?”

Notes

10. See, for instance, Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, which details the shameful structures that have only intensified in the ten years since this book’s publication, given the accelerated race for mobile technologies.
11. See Steven Johnson’s optimistic piece of counter-wisdom, *Everything Bad Is Good for You*.

12. I still vividly recall my mother’s pained expression when she asked me to explain what this new Facebook phenomenon was, and how I used it, during the early days of its ascendancy into popular consciousness. “But why would you *expose* yourself like that?!” she asked in an exasperated tone, ashamed on my behalf for my now exponentially

amplified lack of dignity.

13. See Lauren Berlant, “Faceless Book.”
14. In Franco Berardi’s terms, this is to perversely value the modern emphasis on *connection* over *conjunction*, where the former is less authentic because it is more reified than the latter. “Desire dwells in conjunction,” he writes, “and is killed by connection. Connection means a relationship between formatted segments; making desingularized bodies compatible. Conjunction means singular, unrepeatable communication between round bodies. Connection means integration of smooth bodies in a space which is no space and in a time which is no time” (98). In her resistance to the too-tempting narrative of decadence, Berlant slyly encourages us to create our own silver linings where perhaps there are none (i.e., in “mere” connections), and in doing so to project new possibilities into new patterns, free from old moralisms.
15. The fetishistic power of the smartphone has been effectively parodied by a prankster product called NoPhone, which is simply a black piece of plastic, the same size and dimensions as an iPhone. Like nicotine gum, this physical negation of the smartphone can help wean someone off their addiction,

in this case to social media, just as its sheer opacity illuminates the virtual hold and promise of our mobile devices as windows into alternative spaces.

16. It may be said that smartphones cultivate not *dasein*—"there-being"—but "neither-here-nor-there-being." They are the midwives of "the birth to distraction." Moreover, this will only be exacerbated further when digital displays become commonplace within the field of our regular vision, as first attempted with Google Glass. Early adopters of this technology, colloquially known as "glassholes," were instinctively distrusted for the very reason that they trouble ontological assumptions linking the body and the presence (interpersonal availability) of the person. As visibly "augmented" humans living fully online and offline at same time, or in the no-place (utopia) between them, glassholes violate a deep humanist principle of "being there"—which is one of the main reasons they often found themselves the target of great hostility, even beatings. (Neal Stephenson, in his earlier cyberpunk novels, called such techno-creatures "gargoyles," for their sinister tendency to watch over the world while not interacting "properly" with it.) We should not discount other motives for the hostility, however, including a healthy resistance to being so fully penetrated by

patented technologies, and the hidden agendas they bring with them, like tiny Trojan horses. (Which is not to excuse violence perpetrated against individuals.) Nevertheless, just as the world at large used to sneer at "douchebags" using cellphones in public in the early 1990s, only to soon take pity on those who don't have the latest model, we are likely looking at the future of online existence with immersive displays like Google Glass and Oculus Rift. Indeed, we can't be too far away from a future in which those people who make a living trying to stop you in the street to sign a petition, or contribute to a charity, hail you by name after matching your face with Google's database. ("What do you mean you can't talk today, you're in a hurry? According to your i-Calendar you still have forty minutes till your next appointment.")

17. When I used to wrestle with the elliptical machine at Ludlow Gym in New York's Lower East Side, my attention was often captured by a truck whizzing past the window on Delancey Street. I noticed this particular truck, as distinct from the hundreds of others, because it bore some spray-can graffiti on its side, which read: "This moment is punctuated by me and you." I often wondered who it was that created this message of delayed co-punctuation. But even without

the shadow of a sense of who this person might be, my perception was impacted by them, and their decision to preemptively and virtually connect with others in this anonymous, “time-shifted” manner.

18. We might call this (realized) danger the “wikipediaization of knowledge”: where concepts are no longer tested, produced, or adapted, but catalogued and contained, like dead butterflies pinned to a velvet board. “Knowing no longer involves using concepts,” writes Lefebvre, “but simply receiving and memorizing information” (821). Further, “Substituted for knowledge, information deletes thought and reduces positive knowledge to that which is amassed, accumulated, memorized without gaps, outside of lived experience” (822).

3

Slaves to the Algorithm

What we see in our social media feeds is almost always carefully calibrated to keep stimulating our general appetite for distraction. Beyond the solicitous content perfected by sites like Buzzfeed—which specialize in “click bait” phrases and images that forever promise more than they deliver (“You won’t BELIEVE what happens next!”)—there are the algorithms that determine which posts we see and which we do not. Facebook notoriously curates the user’s content for them while allowing only a modicum of configurability within the larger parameters of the platform. But only a minority of users realize just how tailored their experience is (with a heavy bias toward targeted advertising, of course). In the natural world, the spider configures its web to the precise specifics of the fly. Silicon Valley does the same with us, spinning its “sticky” offerings to our exhaustively researched demographic measurements.

When our information architecture is built on such shifting sands, it is likely to turn us all into paranoiacs (“no one likes me anymore”), while also giving those who disappoint us—by not “liking” a post, for instance—an unverifiable “out.” (Which