

24/7

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Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep

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CHAPTER TWO

24/7 announces a time without time, a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence. In its peremptory reductiveness, it celebrates a hallucination of presence, of an unalterable permanence composed of incessant, frictionless operations. It belongs to the aftermath of a common life made into the object of technics. It also resonates indirectly but powerfully as an injunction, as what some theorists call an "order-word." Deleuze and Guattari describe the "mot d'ordre" as a command, as an instrumentalization of language that aims either to preserve or to create social reality, and whose effect, finally, is to create fear.¹ In spite of its insubstantiality and abstraction as a slogan, the implacability of 24/7 is its impossible temporality. It is always a reprimand and a deprecation of the weakness and inadequacy of human time, with its blurred, meandering textures. It effaces the relevance or value of any respite or variability. Its heralding

of the convenience of perpetual access conceals its cancellation of the periodicity that shaped the life of most cultures for several millennia: the diurnal pulse of waking and sleeping and the longer alternations between days of work and a day of worship or rest, which for the ancient Mesopotamians, Hebrews, and others became a seven-day week. In other ancient cultures, in Rome and in Egypt, there were eight- and ten-day weeks organized around market days or the quarter phases of the moon. The weekend is the modern residue of those long-standing systems, but even this marking of temporal differentiation is eroded by the imposition of 24/7 homogeneity. Of course, these earlier distinctions (the individual days of the week, holidays, seasonal breaks) persist, but their significance and legibility is being effaced by the monotonous indistinction of 24/7.

If 24/7 can be provisionally conceptualized as an order-word, its force is not as a demand for actual compliance or conformity to its apodictic format. Rather, the effectiveness of 24/7 lies in the incompatibility it lays bare, in the discrepancy between a human life-world and the evocation of a switched-on universe for which no off-switch exists. Of course, no individual can ever be shopping, gaming, working, blogging, downloading, or texting 24/7. However, since no moment, place, or situation now exists in which one can *not* shop, consume, or exploit networked resources, there is a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life. There are, for example, almost no circumstances now that can not be recorded or archived as digital

imagery or information. The promotion and adoption of wireless technologies, and their annihilation of the singularity of place and event, is simply an after-effect of new institutional requirements. In its despoliation of the rich textures and indeterminations of human time, 24/7 simultaneously incites an unsustainable and self-liquidating identification with its fantasmatic requirements; it solicits an open-ended but always unfinished investment in the many products for facilitating this identification. It does not eliminate experiences external to or unreliable on it, but it does impoverish and diminish them. The examples of how in-use devices and apparatuses have an impact on small-scale forms of sociality (a meal, a conversation, or a classroom) may have become commonplace, but the cumulative harm sustained is nonetheless significant. One inhabits a world in which long-standing notions of shared experience atrophy, and yet one never actually attains the gratifications or rewards promised by the most recent technological options. In spite of the omnipresent proclamations of the compatibility, even harmonization, between human time and the temporalities of networked systems, the lived realities of this relationship are disjunctions, fractures, and continual disequilibrium.

Deleuze and Guattari went to the point of comparing the order-word to "a death sentence." Historically and rhetorically, it may have shed some of this original meaning, but a judgment thus enunciated continues to operate within a system in which power is exercised on bodies. They also note that the order-word is simultaneously "a warning cry [and] a message to

flee." As an announcement of its absolute unliveability, 24/7 is comprehensible in terms of this two-sidedness. It not only incites in the individual subject an exclusive focus on getting, having, winning, gawking, squandering, and deriding, but is fully interwoven with mechanisms of control that maintain the superfluousness and powerlessness of the subject of its demands. The externalization of the individual into a site of non-stop scrutiny and regulation is effectively continuous with the organization of state terror and the military-police paradigm of full-spectrum dominance.

To take one of many examples, the expanded use of unmanned drone missiles has been made possible by an intelligence-gathering system which the US Air Force has named Operation Gorgon Stare. It refers to a collection of surveillance and data-analysis resources that "sees" unblinkingly 24/7, indifferent to day, night, or weather, and that is lethally oblivious to the specificity of the living beings it targets. The terror of 24/7 is evident not only in the drone attacks, but also in the ongoing practice of night raids by Special Forces, beginning in Iraq, and now in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Provided with logistical satellite intelligence from Gorgon Stare, outfitted with advanced night-vision equipment, and arriving without warning in low-noise stealth helicopters, US teams conduct night assaults on villages and settlements with the overt aim of targeted assassination. Both the drones and night raids have aroused extraordinary anger among the Afghan population, not only for their homicidal consequences but also for the calculated ruination of nighttime itself. Part of the

larger strategic intent, in the context of tribal cultures in Afghanistan, is to shatter the communally shared interval of sleep and restoration, and impose in its place a permanent state of fearfulness from which escape is not possible. It is a parallel application of the psychological techniques deployed in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo to a broader population that exploits the vulnerability of sleep and the social patterns sustaining it with mechanized forms of terror.

Even though I have made several characterizations of 24/7 around figures of a perpetual illumination, it is important to stress that these have a limited usefulness if taken literally; 24/7 denotes the wreckage of the day as much as it concerns the extinguishing of darkness and obscurity. Desolating any luminous conditions except those of functionality, 24/7 is part of an immense incapacitation of visual experience. It coincides with an omnipresent field of operations and expectations to which one is exposed and in which individual optical activity is made the object of observation and management. Within this field, the contingency and variability of the visible world are no longer accessible. The most important recent changes concern not new machine forms of visualization, but the ways in which there has been a disintegration of human abilities to see, especially of an ability to join visual discriminations with social and ethical valuations. With an infinite cafeteria of solicitation and attraction perpetually available, 24/7 disables vision through processes of homogenization, redundancy, and acceleration. Contrary to many claims, there is an ongoing diminution of mental and perceptual capabilities rather than their expansion

or modulation. Current arrangements are comparable to the glare of high-intensity illumination or of white-out conditions, in which there is a paucity of tonal differentiation out of which one can make perceptual distinctions and orient oneself to shared temporalities. Clare here is not a phenomenon of literal brightness, but rather of the uninterrupted harshness of monotonous stimulation in which a larger range of responsive capacities are frozen or neutralized.



In Jean-Luc Godard's *In Praise of Love* (2001) an off-screen voice poses a question: "When did the gaze collapse?" ("Quand est-ce-que le regard a basculé?") and pursues a possible response with another question: "Was it ten years, fifteen years, or even fifty years ago, before television?" No specific answer is forthcoming, for in this and other recent films, Godard makes clear that the crisis of the observer and the image is a cumulative one, with overlapping historical roots, unrelated to any specific technologies. *In Praise of Love* is a meditation by Godard on memory, resistance, and inter-generational responsibility, and in it he makes clear that something fundamental has changed in the way in which we see, or fail to see, the world. Part of this failure, he suggests, stems from a damaged relation to the past and to memory. We are swamped with images and information about the past and its recent catastrophes—but there is also a growing incapacity to engage these traces in ways that could move beyond them, in the interest of a common future. Amid the mass amnesia sustained by the culture of global capitalism, images have become one of the many depleted and disposable elements

that, in their intrinsic archiveability, end up never being discarded, contributing to an ever more congealed and futureless present. At times, Codard seems to hold out hope for the possibility of images that would be completely useless to capitalism, but, as much as anyone, he never overestimates the immunity of any image to recuperation and nullification.

● One of the most numbingly familiar assumptions in discussions of contemporary technological culture is that there has been an epochal shift in a relatively short period of time, in which new information and communication technologies have supplanted a broad set of older cultural forms. This historical break is described and theorized in various ways, involving accounts of a change from industrial production to post-industrial processes and services, from analog to digital media, or from a print-based culture to a global society unified by the instantaneous circulation of data and information. Most often, such periodizations depend on comparative parallels with earlier historical periods that are defined by specific technological innovations. Thus, accompanying the assertion that we have entered a new and unprecedented era, there is the reassuring insistence on a correspondence with, for example, "the Gutenberg era" or "the industrial revolution." In other words, accounts of rupture simultaneously affirm a continuity with larger patterns and sequences of technological change and innovation.

● Often suggested is the notion that we are now in the midst of a transitional phase, passing from one "age" to another, and only at the beginnings of the latter. This presupposes an

unsettled interlude of social and subjective adaptations lasting a generation or two, before a new era of relative stability is securely in place. One of the consequences of representing global contemporaneity in the form of a new technological epoch is the sense of historical inevitability attributed to changes in large-scale economic developments and in the micro-phenomena of everyday life. The idea of technological change as quasi-autonomous, driven by some process of autopoiesis or self-organization, allows many aspects of contemporary social reality to be accepted as necessary, unalterable circumstances, akin to facts of nature. In the false placement of today's most visible products and devices within an explanatory lineage that includes the wheel, the pointed arch, movable type, and so forth, there is a concealment of the most important techniques invented in the last 150 years: the various systems for the management and control of human beings.

This pseudo-historical formulation of the present as a digital age, supposedly homologous with a "bronze age" or "steam age," perpetuates the illusion of a unifying and durable coherence to the many incommensurable constituents of contemporary experience. Of the numerous presentations of this delusion, the promotional and intellectually spurious works of futurists such as Nicholas Negroponte, Esther Dyson, Kevin Kelly, and Raymond Kurzweil can stand as flagrant examples. One of the underpinnings of this assumption is the popular truism that today's teenagers and younger children are all now harmoniously inhabiting the inclusive and seamless intelligibility of their technological worlds. This generational

characterization supposedly confirms that, within another few decades or less, a transitional phase will have ended and there will be billions of individuals with a similar level of technological competence and basic intellectual assumptions. With a new paradigm fully in place, there will be innovation, but in this scenario it will occur within the stable and enduring conceptual and functional parameters of this "digital" epoch. However, the very different actuality of our time is the calculated maintenance of an ongoing state of transition. There never will be a "catching up" on either a social or individual basis in relation to continually changing technological requirements. For the vast majority of people, our perceptual and cognitive relationship to communication and information technology will continue to be estranged and disempowered because of the velocity at which new products emerge and at which arbitrary reconfigurations of entire systems take place. This intensified rhythm precludes the possibility of becoming familiar with any given arrangement. Certain cultural theorists insist that such conditions can easily be the basis for neutralizing institutional power, but actual evidence supporting this view is non-existent.

At a fundamental level, this is hardly a new state of affairs. The logic of economic modernization in play today can be traced directly back to the mid nineteenth century. Marx was one of the first to understand the intrinsic incompatibility of capitalism with stable or durable social forms, and the history of the last 150 years is inseparable from the "constant revolutionizing" of forms of production, circulation, communication,

and image-making. However, during that century and a half, within specific areas of cultural and economic life, there were numerous intervals of apparent stability, when certain institutions and arrangements seemed abiding or long-lasting. For example, cinema, as a technological form, appeared to consist of some relatively fixed elements and relations from the late 1920s into the 1960s or even early 1970s. As I discuss in Chapter 3, television in the US seemed to have a material and experiential consistency from the 1950s into the 1970s. These periods, in which certain key features seemed to be permanent, allowed critics to expound theories of cinema, television, or video based on the assumption that these forms or systems had certain essential self-defining characteristics. In retrospect, what were most often identified as essential were temporary elements of larger constellations whose rates of change were variable and unpredictable.

In a related manner, many ambitious attempts have been made since the 1990s to articulate the defining or intrinsic manifestations of "new media." Even the most intelligent of these efforts are often limited by their implicit assumption, conditioned by studies of previous historical moments, that the key task is to outline and analyze a new technological/discursive paradigm or regime, and, most importantly, that this new regime is derivable from the actual devices, networks, apparatuses, codes, and global architectures now in place. But it must be emphasized that we are not, as such accounts suggest, simply passing from one dominant arrangement of machinic and discursive systems to another. That books and essays

written on "new media" only five years ago are already outdated is particularly telling, and anything written with the same goal today will become dated in far less time. At present, the particular operation and effects of specific new machines or networks are less important than how the rhythms, speeds, and formats of accelerated and intensified consumption are reshaping experience and perception.

To take one of many possible examples from recent critical literature: several years ago a German media theorist proposed that the cell phone equipped with visual display represents a "revolutionary" break with previous technological forms, including all earlier telephones. He argued that, because of its mobility, the miniaturization of the screen, and its ability to display data and video, it was "a truly radical development." Even if one is inclined to approach technological history as sequences demarcated by inventions and breakthroughs, the relevance of this particular apparatus will be notably and inevitably short-lived. It is more useful to understand such a device as merely one element in a transient flux of compulsory and disposable products. Very different display formats are already on the near horizon, some involving the augmented realities of see-through interfaces and small head-worn devices, in which a virtual screen will be identical with one's field of vision. Also, there is the development of gesture-based computing in which, instead of a click, a wave, a nod, or the blink of an eye will suffice as a command. Before long these may well displace the apparent ubiquity and necessity of hand-held, touch-based devices, and thereby cancel any special historical claims for

what came before. But if and when such devices are introduced (and no doubt labeled as revolutionary), they will simply be facilitating the perpetuation of the same banal exercise of non-stop consumption, social isolation, and political powerlessness, rather than representing some historically significant turning point. And they too will occupy only a brief interval of currency before their inevitable replacement and transit to the global waste piles of techno-trash. The only consistent factor connecting the otherwise desultory succession of consumer products and services is the intensifying integration of one's time and activity into the parameters of electronic exchange. Billions of dollars are spent every year researching how to reduce decision-making time, how to eliminate the useless time of reflection and contemplation. This is the form of contemporary progress—the relentless capture and control of time and experience.

As many have noted, the form that innovation takes within capitalism is as the continual simulation of the new, while existing relations of power and control remain effectively the same. For much of the twentieth century, novelty production, in spite of its repetitiveness and nullity, was often marketed to coincide with a social imagination of a future more advanced than, or at least unlike, the present. Within the framework of a mid-twentieth-century futurism, the products one purchased and fit into one's life seemed vaguely linked with popular evocations of eventual global prosperity, automation benignly displacing human labor, space exploration, the elimination of crime and disease, and so on. There was at least the misplaced

belief in technological solutions to intractable social problems. Now the accelerated tempo of apparent change deletes any sense of an extended time frame that is shared collectively, which might sustain even a nebulous anticipation of a future distinct from contemporary reality. 24/7 is shaped around individual goals of competitiveness, advancement, acquisitiveness, personal security, and comfort at the expense of others. The future is so close at hand that it is imaginable only by its continuity with the striving for individual gain or survival in the shallowest of presents.

My argument may seem to contain two inconsistent threads. On one hand I am affirming, along with some other writers, that the shape of contemporary technological culture still corresponds to the logic of modernization as it unfolded in the later nineteenth century—that is to say, that some key features of early-twenty-first-century capitalism can still be linked with aspects of the industrial projects associated with Werner Siemens, Thomas Edison, and George Eastman. Their names can stand emblematically for the development of vertically integrated corporate empires that reshaped crucial aspects of social behavior. Their prescient ambitions were realized through (1) an understanding of human needs as always mutable and expandable, (2) an embryonic conception of the commodity as potentially convertible into abstract flows, whether of images, sounds, or energy, (3) effective measures to decrease circulation time, and (4) in the case of Eastman and Edison, an early but clear vision of the economic reciprocities between “hardware” and “software.” The consequences of

these nineteenth-century models, especially the facilitation and maximization of content distribution, would impose themselves onto human life much more comprehensively throughout the twentieth century.

On the other hand, sometime in the late twentieth century it is possible to identify a constellation of forces and entities distinct from those of the nineteenth century and its sequential phases of modernization. By the 1990s, a thoroughgoing transformation of vertical integration had taken place, exemplified most familiarly by the innovations of Microsoft, Google, and others, even though some remnants of older hierarchical structures persisted alongside newer, more flexible and capillary models of implementation and control. Within this emerging context, technological consumption coincides with and becomes indistinguishable from strategies and effects of power. Certainly, for much of the twentieth century, the organization of consumer societies was never unconnected with forms of social regulation and subjection, but now the management of economic behavior is synonymous with the formation and perpetuation of malleable and assenting individuals. An older logic of planned obsolescence continues to operate, propelling the demand for replacement or enhancement. However, even if the dynamic behind product innovation is still linked to the rate of profit or to corporate competition for sector dominance, the heightened tempo of "improved" or reconfigured systems, models, and platforms is a crucial part of the remaking of a subject and of the intensification of control. Docility and separation are not indirect by-products of a financialized global economy, but are

among its primary aims. There is an ever closer linking of individual needs with the functional and ideological programs in which each new product is embedded. "Products" are hardly just devices or physical apparatuses, but various services and interconnections that quickly become the dominant or exclusive ontological templates of one's social reality.

But this contemporary phenomenon of acceleration is not simply a linear succession of innovations in which there is a substitution of a new item for something out of date. Each replacement is always accompanied by an exponential increase beyond the previous number of choices and options. It is a continuous process of distension and expansion, occurring simultaneously on different levels and in different locations, a process in which there is a multiplication of the areas of time and experience that are annexed to new machinic tasks and demands. A logic of displacement (or obsolescence) is conjoined with a broadening and diversifying of the processes and flows to which an individual becomes effectively linked. Any apparent technological novelty is also a qualitative dilation of one's accommodation to and dependence on 24/7 routines; it is also part of an expansion in the number of points at which an individual is made into an *application* of new control systems and enterprises.

However, it must be said that, at present, individuals experience the workings of a global economy in very different ways. Within cosmopolitan sectors of the planet, the strategies of disempowerment using mandatory techniques of digital personalization and self-administration flourish even among

very low-income groups. At the same time, there are vast numbers of human beings, barely at or below subsistence level, who cannot be integrated into the new requirements of markets, and they are irrelevant and expendable. Death, in many guises, is one of the by-products of neoliberalism: when people have nothing further that can be taken from them, whether resources or labor power, they are quite simply disposable. However, the current increase in sexual slavery and the growing traffic in organs and body parts suggest that the outer limit of disposability can be profitably enlarged to meet the demands of new market sectors.

This unrelenting rhythm of technological consumption, as it has developed over the past two or three decades, prevents any significant period of time elapsing in which the use of a given product, or assemblage of them, could become familiar enough to constitute merely the background elements of one's life. Operational and performative capabilities assume a priority that overrides the significance of anything that might once have been thought of as "content." Rather than being a means to a larger set of ends, the apparatus is the end itself. Its purpose is directing its user to an ever more efficient fulfillment of its own routine tasks and functions. It is systemically impossible that there might be a clearing or pause in which a longer-term time frame of trans-individual concerns and projects might come into view. The very brief lifespan of a given apparatus or arrangement encompasses the pleasure and prestige associated with its ownership, but simultaneously includes an awareness that the object at hand is tainted with impermanence and

decay from the outset. Older cycles of replacement were at least long enough for the consensual illusion of semi-permanence to hold sway for a while. Now the brevity of the interlude before a high-tech product literally becomes garbage requires two contradictory attitudes to coexist: on one hand, the initial need and/or desire for the product, but, on the other, an affirmative identification with the process of inexorable cancellation and replacement. The acceleration of novelty production is a disabling of collective memory, and it means that the evaporation of historical knowledge no longer has to be implemented from the top down. The conditions of communication and information access on an everyday level ensure the systematic erasure of the past as part of the fantasmatic construction of the present.

Inevitably, such short cycles will, for some, produce anxieties about outmodedness and frustrations of various kinds. However it is important to acknowledge the attractive incitements to align oneself with a continually evolving sequence based on promises of enhanced functionality, even if any substantive benefits are always deferred. At present, the desire to accumulate objects is less important than the confirmation that one's life is coinciding with whatever applications, devices, or networks are, at any given moment, available and heavily promoted. From this vantage point, accelerated patterns of acquiring and discarding are never something regrettable, but rather a tangible sign of one's access to the flows and capabilities most in demand. Following Boltanski and Chiapello, social phenomena that are characterized by the appearance of

stasis or slow rates of change are marginalized and drained of value or desirability. Committing to activities where time spent cannot be leveraged through an interface and its links is now something to be avoided or done sparingly.

Submission to these arrangements is near irresistible because of the portent of social and economic failure—the fear of falling behind, of being deemed outdated. The rhythms of technological consumption are inseparable from the requirement of continual self-administration. Every new product or service presents itself as essential for the bureaucratic organization of one's life, and there is an ever-growing number of routines and needs that constitute this life that no one has actually chosen. The privatization and compartmentalization of one's activities in this sphere are able to sustain the illusion one can "outwit the system" and devise a unique or superior relation to these tasks that is either more enterprising or seemingly less compromised. The myth of the lone hacker perpetuates the fantasy that the asymmetrical relation of individual to network can be creatively played to the former's advantage. In actuality there is an imposed and inescapable uniformity to our compulsory labor of self-management. The illusion of choice and autonomy is one of the foundations of this global system of auto-regulation. In many places one still encounters the assertion that contemporary technological arrangements are essentially a neutral set of tools that can be used in many different ways, including in the service of an emancipatory politics. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has refuted such claims, countering that "today there is not even a

single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated or controlled by some apparatus.' He contends convincingly that "it is impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it 'in the right way.' Those who continue to promote similar arguments are, for their part, the product of the media apparatus in which they are captured."²

To be preoccupied with the aesthetic properties of digital imagery, as are many theorists and critics, is to evade the subordination of the image to a broad field of non-visual operations and requirements. Most images are now produced and circulated in the service of maximizing the amount of time spent in habitual forms of individual self-management and self-regulation. Fredric Jameson has argued that, with the breakdown of significant distinctions between what had been the spheres of work and leisure, the imperative to look at images is central to the functioning of most hegemonic institutions today. He indicates how mass culture imagery up to the mid twentieth century often provided ways of evading the prohibitions of a super-ego.³ Now in a reversal, the demand for mandatory 24/7 immersion in visual content effectively becomes a new form of institutional super-ego. Of course, more images, of many kinds, are looked at, are seen, than ever before, but it is within what Foucault has described as a "network of permanent observation." Most of the historically accumulated understandings of the term "observer" are destabilized under such conditions: that is, when individual acts of vision are unendingly solicited for conversion into information that will both enhance technologies of control *and* be a form of surplus value in a

marketplace based on the accumulation of data on user behavior. There is a much more literal overturning of assumptions about the position and agency of an observer in the expanding array of technical means for making acts of seeing themselves into objects of observation.

The most advanced forms of surveillance and data analysis used by intelligence agencies are now equally indispensable to the marketing strategies of large businesses. Widely employed are screens or other forms of display that track eye movements, as well as durations and fixations of visual interest in sequences or streams of graphic information. One's casual perusal of a single web page can be minutely analyzed and quantified in terms of how the eye scans, pauses, moves, and gives attentive priority to some areas over others. Even in the ambulatory space of big department stores, eye-tracking scanners provide detailed information about individual behavior—for example, determining how long one looked at items that one did *not* buy. A generously funded research field of optical ergonomics has been in place for some time. Passively and often voluntarily, one now collaborates in one's own surveillance and data-mining. This inevitably spirals into more fine-grained procedures for intervention in both individual and collective behavior. At the same time, images are essentially continuous with all the non-visual forms of information that one engages regularly. An instrumentalized sensory perception is merely one accompanying element in the accumulated activities of accessing, storage, formatting, manipulation, circulation, and exchange. Incalculable streams of images are omnipresent

24/7, but what finally occupies individual attention is the management of the technical conditions that surround them: all the expanding determinations of delivery, display, format, storage, upgrades, and accessories.

Everywhere one encounters the complacent and preposterous assumption that these systemic patterns are "here to stay," and that such levels of technological consumption are extendable to a planetary population of seven going on ten billion. Many who celebrate the transformative potential of communication networks are oblivious to the oppressive forms of human labor and environmental ravages on which their fantasies of virtuality and dematerialization depend. Even among the plural voices affirming that "another world is possible," there is often the expedient misconception that economic justice, mitigation of climate change, and egalitarian social relations can somehow occur alongside the continued existence of corporations like Google, Apple, and General Electric. Challenges to these delusions encounter intellectual policing of many kinds. There is an effective prohibition not only on the critique of mandatory technological consumption but also on the articulation of how existing technical capabilities and premises could be deployed in the service of human and social needs, rather than the requirements of capital and empire. The narrow and monopolized set of electronic products and services available at any given moment masquerades as the all-enveloping phenomenon of "technology." Even a partial refusal of the intensively marketed offerings of multinational corporations is construed as opposition to technology itself. To characterize

current arrangements, in reality untenable and unsustainable, as anything but inevitable and unalterable is a contemporary heresy. It is impermissible for there to be credible or visible options of living outside the demands of 24/7 communication and consumption. Any questioning or discrediting of what is currently the most efficient means of producing acquiescence and docility, of promoting self-interest as the *raison d'être* of all social activity, is rigorously marginalized. To articulate strategies of living that would delink technology from a logic of greed, accumulation, and environmental despoliation merits sustained forms of institutional prohibition. Notably, the task of such policing is undertaken by that class of academics and critics that Paul Nizan called *les chiens de garde*: today the watchdogs are those technophilic intellectuals and writers anxious to qualify for media attention and eager for rewards and access from those in power. Of course, there are many other powerful obstacles to the public imagination of creative relations between technology and social reality.

Philosopher Bernard Stiegler has written widely on the consequences of what he sees as the homogenization of perceptual experience within contemporary culture.⁴ He is especially concerned with the global circulation of mass-produced "temporal objects," which, for him, include movies, television programs, popular music, and video clips. Stiegler cites the advent of widespread internet use in the mid 1990s as a decisive turning point (his key date is 1992) in the impact of these industrial audiovisual products. Over the last two decades, he

believes, they have been responsible for a “mass synchronization” of consciousness and memory. The standardization of experience on such a large scale, he argues, entails a loss of subjective identity and singularity; it also leads to the disastrous disappearance of individual participation and creativity in the making of the symbols we all exchange and share. His notion of synchronization is radically unlike what I referred to earlier as shared temporalities, in which the co-presence of differences and otherness could be the basis for provisional publics or communities. Stiegler concludes there is an ongoing destruction of the “primordial narcissism” essential for a human being to care for themselves or for others, and he points to the many episodes of mass murder/suicide as ominous results of this widespread psychic and existential damage.⁵ He calls urgently for the creation of counter-products that might reintroduce singularity into cultural experience and somehow disconnect desire from the imperatives of consumption.

Stiegler’s work is representative of a broader shift away from more celebratory accounts in the mid 1990s of the relation between globalization and new information technologies. There were many then who predicted the opening up of a multicultural world of local rationalities, of a diasporic and multi-centered pluralism, based on electronic public spheres. In Stiegler’s view, hopes for such developments were based on a misunderstanding of what was driving many processes of globalization. For him, the 1990s opened onto a hyper-industrial era, not a post-industrial one, in which a logic of mass production was suddenly aligned with techniques that, in

unprecedented ways, combine fabrication, distribution, and subjectivation on a planetary scale.

While much of Stiegler's argument is compelling, I believe that the problem of "temporal objects" is secondary to the larger systemic colonization of individual experience that I have been discussing. Most important now is not the capture of attentiveness by a delimited object—a movie, television program, or piece of music—whose mass reception seems to be Stiegler's main preoccupation, but rather the remaking of attention into repetitive operations and responses that always overlap with acts of looking or listening. It is less the homogeneity of media products that perpetuates the separation, isolation, and neutralization of individuals than the larger and compulsory arrangements within which these elements, and many others, are consumed. Visual and auditory "content" is most often ephemeral, interchangeable material that, in addition to its commodity status, circulates to habituate and validate one's immersion in the exigencies of twenty-first-century capitalism. Stiegler tends to characterize audiovisual media in terms of a relatively passive model of reception, drawn in some respects from the phenomenon of broadcast television. One of his telling examples is the final match of the soccer World Cup, when billions literally watch the same images on TV simultaneously. But this notion of reception disregards the status of current media products as resources to be actively managed and manipulated, exchanged, reviewed, archived, recommended, "followed." Any act of viewing is layered with options of simultaneous and interruptive actions, choices, and

feedback. The idea of long blocks of time spent exclusively as a spectator is outmoded. This time is far too valuable not to be leveraged with plural sources of solicitation and choices that maximize possibilities of monetization and that allow the continuous accumulation of information about the user.

It is also important to consider other omnipresent electronic industries of temporal objects, though ones that are more open-ended and indeterminate in their effects: for example, online gambling, internet pornography, and video-gaming. The drives and appetites at stake here, with their illusions of mastery, winning and possession, are crucial models for the intensification of 24/7 consumption. An extended examination of these more volatile forms would likely complicate Stiegler's conclusions about the capture of desire or the collapse of primordial narcissism. Admittedly, Stiegler's postulation of a global mass synchronization is nuanced, hardly reducible to the notion of everyone thinking or doing the same thing; and it is based on a sustained, if recondite, phenomenology of retention and memory. Nonetheless, against his idea of the industrial homogenization of consciousness and its flows, one can counterpose the parcellization and fragmentation of shared zones of experience into fabricated microworlds of affects and symbols. The unfathomable amount of accessible information can be deployed and arranged in the service of anything, personal or political, however aberrant or conventional. Through the unlimited possibilities of filtering and customization, individuals in close physical proximity can inhabit incommensurable and

non-communicating universes. However, the vast majority of these microworlds, despite their patently different content, have a monotonous sameness in their temporal patterns and segmentations.

There are other contemporary forms of mass synchronization not directly tied to communication and information networks. A crucial example would be many of the consequences of the global traffic in psychoactive drugs, both legal and illegal, including the growing blurred area between them (painkillers, tranquilizers, amphetamines, and so on). The hundreds of millions of people taking new compounds for depression, bipolar conditions, hyperactivity, and numerous other designations make up various aggregates of individuals whose nervous systems have been similarly modified. The same can obviously be said of the enormous constituencies, on every continent, buying and using illegal substances, whether opiates and coca derivatives or the proliferating number of designer drugs. Thus, on one hand, there is a vague uniformity of response and behavior among the users of a specific pharmaceutical product; but, on the other, there is the global patchwork of different drug-using populations, often physically proximate, but made up of highly disparate affects, drives, and incapacitations. The same difficulty arises with the problem of drugs as with that of media objects—the impossibility and the irrelevance of isolating any single determinant as responsible for the alteration of consciousness. There are shifting and indistinct composites of elements in the ingestion of both electronic flows and neuro-chemicals.

My intention is not to address the huge topic of the relation between drugs and media—or to test the familiar hypothesis that every medium is a drug, and vice versa. Rather, I want to stress how the patterns of consumption generated by current media and communication products are also present in other expanding global marketplaces—for example, in the ones controlled by major pharmaceutical corporations. Here too is a related acceleration of the tempo at which new and supposedly upgraded products are introduced. At the same time, there is a multiplication of the physical or psychological states for which new drugs are developed and then promoted as effective and obligatory treatments. As with digital devices and services, there is a fabrication of pseudo-necessities, or deficiencies for which new commodities are essential solutions. In addition, the pharmaceutical industry, in partnership with the neurosciences, is a vivid example of the financialization and externalization of what used to be thought of as “inner life.” Over the last two decades, a growing range of emotional states have been incrementally pathologized in order to create vast new markets for previously unneeded products. The fluctuating textures of human affect and emotion that are only imprecisely suggested by the notions of shyness, anxiety, variable sexual desire, distraction, or sadness have been falsely converted into medical disorders to be targeted by hugely profitable drugs.

Of the many links between the use of psychotropic drugs and communication devices, one is their parallel production of forms of social compliance. But emphasizing only docility

and tranquilization bypasses the fantasies of agency and enterprise also underpinning the markets for both these categories of products. For example, the widespread adult use of ADHD drugs is often driven by the hope of enhancing one's performance and competitiveness in the workplace—and, more harshly, methamphetamine addiction is often linked to destructive delusions about performance and self-aggrandizement. A generalized sameness is inevitably one result of the global scale of the markets in question, and their dependence on the consistent or predictable actions of large populations. It is attained *not* by the making of similar individuals, as theories of mass society used to assert, but through the reduction or elimination of differences, by narrowing the range of behaviors that can function effectively or successfully in most contemporary institutional contexts. Thus, above a relatively low economic stratum, a new blandness flourishes almost everywhere that accelerated consumption has become normalized—not just in certain professional strata, social groups, or age groups. Paul Valéry foresaw some of this as early as the 1920s in his understanding that technocratic civilization would eventually eliminate any ill-defined or incommensurable form of life within its spheres of operation.⁶ To be bland is a becoming “smooth,” as distinct from the idea of a mold that the word “conformity” often implies. Deviations are flattened or effaced, leading to that which is “neither irritating nor invigorating.” (OED) This has been most evident over the last decade or so in the disappearance or domestication of what once constituted a much wider range of the markers of cultural

marginality or outsider status. The omnipresence of 24/7 milieus is one of the conditions for this flattening, but 24/7 should be understood not simply as a homogenous and unvariegated time, but rather as a disabled and derelict diachrony. Certainly, there are differentiated temporalities, but the range and depth of distinctions between them diminishes, and an unimpeded substitutability between times becomes normalized. Conventional and older durational units persist (like “nine to five” or “Monday to Friday”), but overlaid onto them are all the practices of individual time management made possible by 24/7 networks and markets.

In the past, forms of repetitive labor, in spite of their tedium or oppressiveness, have not always precluded satisfactions derived from one’s limited mastery or efficient operation of tools or machinery. As some historians have shown, modern systems of labor could not have flourished without the cultivation of new values in the context of industrialization to replace the ones that had sustained craft or artisanal work. The possibility of a sense of accomplishment in some end product of one’s work became less and less tenable in large factory conditions. Instead, there arose ways of encouraging an identification with machinic processes themselves. Part of the culture of modernity took shape around various affirmations that there could be individual gratification from emulating the impervious rhythms, efficiency, and dynamism of mechanization. However, what were often ambivalent or merely symbolic compensations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have become a more intensive set of both real and imagined

satisfactions. Because of the permeability, even indistinction, between the times of work and of leisure, the skills and gestures that once would have been restricted to the workplace are now a universal part of the 24/7 texture of one's electronic life. The ubiquity of technological interfaces inevitably leads users to strive for increasing fluency and adeptness. But the proficiency one acquires with each particular application or tool is effectively a greater harmonization with the intrinsic functional requirement continually to reduce the time of any exchange or operation. Apparatuses solicit a seemingly frictionless handling, dexterity, and know-how that is self-satisfying, and that can also impress others as a superior ability to make efficient or rewarding use of technological resources. The sense of individual ingenuity provides the temporary conviction that one is on the winning side of the system, somehow coming out ahead; but in the end there is a generalized leveling of all users into interchangeable objects of the same mass dispossession of time and praxis.

Individual habituation to these tempos has had devastating social and environmental consequences, and has produced a collective normalization of this ceaseless displacement and discarding. Because loss is continually created, an atrophied memory ceases to recognize it as such. The primary self-narration of one's life shifts in its fundamental composition. Instead of a formulaic sequence of places and events associated with family, work, and relationships, the main thread of one's life-story now is the electronic commodities and media services through which all experience has been filtered, recorded, or

constructed. As the possibility of a single lifetime job vanishes, the enduring lifework available for most is the elaboration of one's relation to apparatuses. Everything once loosely considered to be "personal" is now reconfigured so as to facilitate the fabricating of oneself into a jumble of identities that exist only as effects of temporary technological arrangements.

The frameworks through which the world can be understood continue to be depleted of complexity, drained of whatever is unplanned or unforeseen. So many long-standing and multivalent forms of social exchange have been remade into habitual sequences of solicitation and response. At the same time, the range of what constitutes response becomes formulaic and, in most instances, is reduced to a small inventory of possible gestures or choices. Because one's bank account and one's friendships can now be managed through identical machinic operations and gestures, there is a growing homogenization of what used to be entirely unrelated areas of experience. At the same time, whatever remaining pockets of everyday life are not directed toward quantitative or acquisitive ends, or cannot be adapted to telematic participation, tend to deteriorate in esteem and desirability. Real-life activities that do not have an online correlate begin to atrophy, or cease to be relevant. There is an insurmountable asymmetry that degrades any local event or exchange. Because of the infinity of content accessible 24/7, there will always be something online more informative, surprising, funny, diverting, impressive than anything in one's immediate actual circumstances. It is now a given that a limitless availability of information or images can

trump or override any human-scale communication or exploration of ideas.

According to the Tiqqun collective, we have become the innocuous, pliable inhabitants of global urban societies.⁷ Even in the absence of any direct compulsion, we choose to do what we are told to do; we allow the management of our bodies, our ideas, our entertainment, and all our imaginary needs to be externally imposed. We buy products that have been recommended to us through the monitoring of our electronic lives, and then we voluntarily leave feedback for others about what we have purchased. We are the compliant subject who submits to all manner of biometric and surveillance intrusion, and who ingests toxic food and water and lives near nuclear reactors without complaint. The absolute abdication of responsibility for living is indicated by the titles of the many bestselling guides that tell us, with a grim fatality, the 1,000 movies to see before we die, the 100 tourist destinations to visit before we die, the 500 books to read before we die.