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**The Culture of Distraction:
Fragmented Vision and the Misery of the Senses**

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THE CULTURE OF DISTRACTION: FRAGMENTED VISION AND THE MISERY OF THE SENSES

Abstract: This paper investigates postmodern modalities of the consumption of art, transformed and accelerated by the advent of the Web, and the emergence of social platforms, locus of altered forms of sensuous experience. Fragmented reality appears well suited to a culture of distraction, the general feeling of perpetual diversion and alienation, propelled by device applications, web surfing, social media, and messenger services; a reality in which space is no longer experienced with a synchronous unity of perception and emplacement.

I will examine a reality that has abandoned linear text as the vessel of transmitting information, a reality that in the past few decades has been carried forward by a flood of technical images, following Vilem Flusser's notion.

Lastly, I will scrutinise paradoxical aspects of this virtual domain: what is it that makes an experience itself, when surrogates of someone else's direct or indirect experiences are fed to us through social media, including images, videos, game simulations of various sorts, virtual reality, extended reality? This paradox Bernard Stiegler calls "the loss of participation in the production of symbols" (Stiegler 2014, 10): a symbolic misery that originated in audiovisual and informational mnemotechnological activities, locus of mutated relations with the senses.

Keywords: phenomenology, emplacement, visual representation, kinesthetic, acoustic communication, aesthetic, virtual reality.

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Attention

Speaking of a culture of distraction presupposes and tacitly suggests a close relationship with attention: the process through which a phenomenon does not remain simply within the threshold of consciousness, but is thrust into the foreground of perception, intentionally, and then further scrutinised. Attention is prior to the ability of intentionally observing something: this is Bernard Waldenfels's notion in his *Phenomenology of the Alien*; and intentionality appears to be the locus of phenomenology. Therefore, an intentional act of consciousness can only stem from awareness of objects pertaining to the perceptual field, which brings into being a gesture that germinates into an act of attention. A few questions arise in respect to the apparently fluid unfolding of this process: how much attention is needed for it to be called attention? Where is the dividing line between distraction and attention, the inception of the latter and the waning of the former? How many forms of attention are there? Can I distinguish, enumerate, articulate their individual characteristics? If attention precedes intentionality, is the former a process that stands at the threshold of consciousness, or does it sink below it?

Henceforth, to give voice to these, and many other questions, my observations are meant to analyse a general structural behaviour of online platforms, rather than the specific peculiarities of isolated examples: the names of these websites are therefore purposefully suppressed. Moreover, my interest and focus are limited to the consideration of the question of attention in music and art, and its relation with the navigation of digital social networks: I therefore acknowledge that because of the aim of this research, I disregard, or allude only in passing, to the myriad aspects of digital social media. I investigate this topic through a *phenomenotechnical* lens, provoked by Gilbert Simondon's notion of *technical objects*, and bring into the discourse the thinking of Bernard Waldenfels, together with Vilem Flusser, Bernard Stiegler, all of whom, from their specific viewpoints, have debated many aspects of the digital and analogue world of *techne*.

Gestures

I am sitting at the desk, in front of my laptop; moving one finger of my right hand over the trackpad. I click once to open the internet browser: I click a second time on a shortcut within the browser's home page, which takes me to the so-called timeline of my social media account. I will return later to these gestures and the relevance of their haptic specificity in relation to machines, a

place of investigation dear to Vilem Flusser, with his observations on what he calls *technical images*. But the home page of the social media platform welcomes me with a plethora of information: a timeline displaying other users' events; a chat box showing the users currently online; a myriad of buttons directing to sub-sections and functions; stochastic small windows within the main home page hosting advertisements, links to other events, people I might know, things I might like, a paraphernalia of products I might need. Colours, stills and moving images, sounds and text besiege me from the little squared screen of the machine: squares within squares within squares. A magnifying machine of Jamesian specious reality.

It does not require a big effort of will to be distracted by what I am witnessing and participating in: a social media network is a distraction machine, and it is designed to achieve a well-defined purpose, which is indeed diverting, and entertaining, furtively draining the user's ability to be attentive. It is somehow ironic that such a targeted design, such a specificity of architectural composition, has as its main purpose the distraction of others, the deliberate opiating of the user's attention. But how and why does this actually work?

I return to the home page of my social media website: while scrolling through the timeline of life events, photographs, videos, and whatnot of other users (the platform's 'friends'), I can chat with one of more of these persons online; while doing so I might also cross something which attracts my interest (an event, an advertisement, a news item) and click to know more about it; meanwhile I might like to listen to some music 'in the background' (a disputable idea in itself: poor choice of words for a poor act of listening), music which is provided *in primis* by the many videos, advertisements or links to musical events within the website; I can eventually choose to access more music by opening a new browser window and selecting a preferred 'audio streaming and media services provider' (as per the description from one relevant company). Simultaneously, I am navigating the social media platform and listening to music: most likely I am also eating or drinking something with a mobile phone on the side, which is supplying further connectivity with other 'service providers': more messenger applications, more social media, more streaming services. I am aware that by labelling the activity of listening to music in the 'background' as a bad habit, I am at risk of being accused of having a bias in favour of attentive listening, as the only operable modality. A number of alternative listening modalities indeed come to mind; here a not exhaustive list of overlapping possibilities without a specific order of relevance: distracted [listening], focused, hypertextual, critical and acritical, intermedial, kinesthetic, synesthetic, analytic, synthetic, emotional, logical, bias, neutral, passive, etc.

The restricted repertoire of gestures involved in navigating the Internet invites further investigation: Vilem Flusser's *Into The Universe of Technical Images*

ponders at length the nature of the relationship between our body and the digital world. The Czech philosopher argues that in the transmission of information, what was formerly accomplished by linear text has been carried forward over the past few decades on a flood of *technical images* based on the use of photographs, films, videos, television screens, and computers. Flusser is concerned with the cultural consequences and implications of the mutating form of experience, perceptions, modes of behaviour, and values of such a social turn. I want to expound upon his concerns and observations; Flusser's starting point is that the relationship between the digital devices and tactility is reduced to a minimum datum, the digital pressure of the fingers on smooth surfaces: keyboards, trackpads, glass-like panels. The remainder of the body is relegated to the background, without any real involvement with the events happening on the screen of the computer. Anthropologists such as Ashley Montagu, Constance Classen, and David Howes have written on the topic of tactility and its primary function and relevance in the development of human experience of the world as well as the proprioceptive and interoceptive processes of our bodies. Here I am addressing the senses and the Internet. The issue with sensory experience completely removed from virtual reality appears to be that the primary form of learning in humans, tactility, the awareness by the skin of the world outside, through the process of acquiring haptic cues and feedback, is bypassed with surrogate virtual experiences that are devoid of physicality, or with a physicality heavily modified. Tactile phenomena, and therefore tactile qualities such as roughness and smoothness, disappear if the exploratory movement is removed, argues Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Thus, movement and time are not only an objective condition of knowing touch, but a phenomenal component of tactile information. Smoothness is not a collection of similar pressures, but instead the way in which a surface relates to the time needed for our tactile exploration or modulates the movement of our hand: hence the many modes of appearance of tactile phenomenon cannot be deduced from an elementary tactile perception. The hand, Kant's outer brain.

Again: 'I am sitting at the desk, in front of my laptop; moving one finger of my right hand over the trackpad, I click once to open the internet browser: I click a second time on a shortcut within the browser's home page which brings me to the so-called timeline of my social media account.' A few gestures have taken me far away from my desk: windows (!) into other people's lives, other places and sounds, odours, aromas, and textures; but my experience is so far removed from the real experience of such places, limited to the minimal gestures requested while I am sitting at my desk in front of the laptop: moving one finger over the smooth surface of a trackpad and the computer's keyboard. The spatial displacement is equally evident as I am experiencing at least two dimensions of space

concurrently: the physical space in which I am sitting in front of the computer screen, and the virtual space projected by the window to another world which I am peeking into through the peephole, a voyeuristic gesture destitute of any eroticism or *élan vital*. This is the terrain of Bernard Stiegler's *Symbolic Misery*, in which the French philosopher argues that the advent of postmodern forms of what he call *hyperconsumerism*, media technology *in primis*, have sheared away the ability of humans to be the main actors in production of symbols, and cut away our symbolic access to the meaning of reality. Humans that are no more producers of symbols are relegated and bound solely to the role of consumers: a zombified living condition well depicted in Bertrand Bonello's 2019 film, *Zombi Child*.

Stiegler argues that a problem of individuation, Simondon's notion, arises within the hypertechnological society, with respect to the experience of the Internet: the synchronism of a user's operations elicit circumstances when consciousnesses are unified, acting as one. The loss of definition of the psychic 'I' and the 'We', induced by the control of temporalities of consciousness imposed by marketing through the mechanisation of daily life. Stiegler here echoes Deleuze's control societies; and Lefebvre's critique of daily life.

Techne

Techne, before the unfolding of modern times, was confined to the development of prosthetics, apparatuses in which the human being was the fulcrum and crux of action, the Saint Augustine's *vita activa* in which machines were born to be manoeuvred and controlled by man. With the modern and postmodern acceleration of technological advancement, man is not the sole engineer anymore: machines are the fulcrum and crux of action, man is the prosthetic accessory. Moreover, as Stiegler reminds us again in his *Symbolic Misery*, the human being has ceased to exist as the *deus ex machina*, becoming more and more the subject of machine-made decisions, evaluations, data extrapolations. Machines that work without the need of human beings, machines that work incessantly, machines that can plan and put into practice decisions ahead of any person. Hannah Arendt's distinction between work and repose, private and social time, as delineated in *The Human Condition*, has been dissolved, and replaced by a continuous intrusion of the public into the private sphere: intrusion propelled by the introduction of portable digital devices and the expansion of internet networks.

It is therefore apparent that distracting machines, virtual machines such as social platforms, are descendants of the Deleuzian's *abstract machines* (introduced in the seminal *Anti-Edipo* and *A Thousand Plateaus*), and develop a novel

definition for what it means to be attentive, and/or focused. Ergo we should inquire into the unprecedented definition for attention regarding something created by new technologies. Am I able to listen to music, write in the chat box, while scrolling through the social media timeline page, responding to incoming messages on the mobile, writing and responding to emails, looking at the latest news, without missing any steps of this procedure? Am I able to engage and sustain all these activities with an uninterrupted effusion of attention? It is hardly possible: we believe it is, because we are provided with digital tools that promote the notion that productivity is advisable in everyday life (an idea from who knows who!), and that this productivity is equivalent to ability to multitask and shift our attention between numerous (and heterogeneous) tasks. This evaluation of productivity deals with two aspects of everyday living in contemporary society: working and consuming. All other aspects can be disregarded because they are redundant, marginal, or eventually retrofitted and ingested by the semi-otic chain of work and consumption itself. An example based on the aforementioned scenario will illustrate the point: music is 'provided' to me by a paid service; I can bypass it by listening to music from a 'free' platform, swamped, alas, by advertisements: I am definitely a consumer. Using a messenger service, which is 'free', comes with the caveat of being subject to marketing searches made in the background for which if, for example, I type 'guitar' or 'caviar' into the chat window, in the next few minutes (minutes, not even hours or days!) 'guitar' and/or 'caviar' advertisements flood my social platform: I am a consumer, again. Checking the email exposes me, several times a day, to advertisements and promotions of any sort of 'products and services': I am a consumer, again and again. And the example can be multiplied ad infinitum. The fact that I might ignore the circumstances depicted above does not really matter because marketing strategies work on numbers and preferences of a cloud of potential consumers: to each their own misery. At some point one or more than one of these strategies will hit the target: it is only a matter of probability and time. Temporality here is crucial.

Boredom

As a consumer, my attention span, in the digital realm of media platforms, virtual relations and online events, should be but a short one: a compliant consumer is a quick and fast-paced individual. A productivity of consumerism is required: social platforms, by eliciting a 'diversified' and distracted attention, are purposefully contributing to the establishment of a form of organised but veiled boredom; boredom which is the locus for this sort of consumerism. By alluding to boredom and its significance, I am aware that I introduce a further element to be discussed. Briefly, boredom can be considered a condition which

will lead potentially to changes. A change propelled by boredom which is the *sine qua non* of two fluid states of consciousness: idleness and motion. I move until I rest: I rest until I move. I refer here to the etymological origin of the word in Latin, *moveo* (translated in English as move, begin, provoke, initiate, etc). The superabundance of information provided by social media triggers a sense of displacement and boredom that solicits an action to nullify the sense of tiredness: a vicious cycle in which the effect and cause collide, regenerating and proliferating potentialities of boredom and action. Therefore a broad net of offers (the nefarious 'content') is provided, for a consumer easily displeased and easily distracted: the system, by generating confusion, boredom, a swarm of signs and symbolic references (the fewer the better), guarantees that the consumer does not focus on only one option, but navigates between as many as possible. Boredom which is hauled into an economic process where alienation is used to favour the consumption of fast-withering objects of diversion.

The attention is purposefully fragmented, mitigated, dispersed: the consequences of these new habits fostered by the postmodern digital habitus are yet to be fully enumerated. While it seems difficult to quantify the damage done (or received), it seems plausible to attempt an evaluation of the inescapable changes to the perception of music and art in general, which has been generated by the emergence of social media, audio and media services, messenger applications, etc.

It is worth noting that the ability to listen to music actively (as opposed for example to the 'background music' modality of listening), has been clearly modified by the disintegration of the attention promoted by numerous digital gadgets of alienation that exist on the market. This alteration to the process of listening music, is the same sort that affects the perception of art in general: when I am scrolling daily through hundreds of images and videos of whatever nature which populate the timeline on a social media, I am inadvertently cultivating a habit induced by the virtual social habitus of the Internet; a novel Stendhal syndrome which has little to do with beauty, but where overexposure and redundancy of signs decreases the ability to be attentive and focused on anything, and where the objects in the perceptual field are mutually interchangeable, losing all specificity. A process of normalisation and equalisation which has its beginning in the modern age of mechanical reproduction affects the perception of all the works of art, as Walter Benjamin has clearly elucidated in his well-known essay. An acceleration of the normalisation process to which recording devices, digital devices and internet connectivity have greatly contributed: an endless act of repetition for which objects, real or virtual alike, are more and more similar to each other, perceptually and physically. From this perspective it is manifest how the sensuous experience of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting is continuously diverted, impoverished, and displaced (temporally and spatially)

by overexposure to repetitive stimuli provided by platforms of social entertainment, such as online social networks and similar web-based applications.

Displacement

The temporal and spatial displacement (as opposed to what anthropologist David Howes calls *emplacement*, implying a sense of bodily attunement to a certain space), produced by social media networks, is in itself worth examining for its remarkable significance and potential consequences. Never before the development of audio-visual recording devices, digital technologies and internet networks, could we have had the same experience twice, as Barry Truax's *Acoustic Communication* points out about the relation between sound and music. In the pre-audio-visual recording era, temporal and spatial events collided in a present sensuous experience never to be repeated as exactly the same; the Heideggerian *dasein*, as 'being in the world'. Antithetically, audio-visual recording devices fundamentally change the way we experience listening to music, see a work of art, experience events of any sort: our ears and eyes are continuously listening and seeing, endlessly, repetitively, obsessively. A piece of music can be heard hundreds of times, in different moments, from different devices, with different tools (headphones, earphones, loudspeakers, etc); not only can I choose to interrupt the music anytime; I can choose to listen to it from any segment or part of the piece; I can even chose the space in which my listening will happen. Emplacement and temporalization of what I experience is completely disconnected from the original musical event itself: today, tomorrow, and in the future I can listen to music recorded in a concert hall somewhere in some other city, some other country, some decades ago; a sort of hallucinatory experience. The development of internet connectivity and the surge of digital social media platforms, has taken the modified modality of experiencing music and visuals a step further from what was already in place with audio-visual recording devices. Recording devices have a specific purpose: to record and playback; a specific support media: tape, vinyl, CD, DVD, Blu-ray, more recently USB key or hard disk. With online platforms, audio-visual outputs are streamed in real time, any time. Not only that: the quantity of the streamed media is not related to the size of the support (for example the data capacity of a CD), because the support does not exist anymore (clouds!). Therefore I am eventually able to listen (or see) a myriad of suggested 'content' (in the current jargon) endlessly without pause or rest. It can be argued that with a vintage portable CD or portable music player, I could have listened to the same music, repeatedly. But there is a striking difference: firstly I have to make an intentional choice about the music on the CD or the music player; secondly the limited (however large) quantity of music on the supporting

media, is again a choice, a measure of temporality: a selection about the quantity of time for listening made by the selection of the material to be listened to.

Temporality

Online streaming departs from both determination of choice and temporality. While choosing one's own music requires an active evaluation of alternatives, a temporal choice, internet streaming fosters a passivity in the decision making: listening becomes one of the many background activities without a foreground. By continuously multitasking, everything is equally foregrounded or backgrounded regardless: a continuum, an infinite vanishing point. It appears in this perspective that online social networks redefine and perhaps abolish the notion of temporality as we knew it before the appearance of the internet. Potentially I can be uninterruptedly 'connected' to the Internet: an activity that can be protracted indefinitely is but an atemporal one, in which time stands still (somehow vouching for quantum physics' spacetime notion). However what is at stake here is internal perception of time, rather than the physics of temporality from without. Perhaps the Homo Digitalis is an atemporal being, bound to a perpetual 'connectivity' which has dissolved the traditional habits of perceiving time, being focused on something, and listening to it attentively. This is the illusory world of perception of Flusser's *technical images*, for which the traditional historical, textually linear thinking, has been overturned by a visionary, superficial mode of thinking; in which physical bodies (solids, objects, things) are disregarded in favour of an abstract universe of photographs, films, computer generated images, in denial of the objective world.

What music, what art: a conclusion

I am about to end my excursus into the intricate realm of digitality, the outcomes and consequences of this relatively novel relationship on the perception of music and art. While I have sketched out challenges of a widespread system of consumerism (Stiegler's *hyperconsumerism* and *hypercapitalistic* societies); while I have delineated the poor habits (as per Bordieu's notion) generated by a social media habitus, purposefully shaping and conditioning the senses; while I have brought into this discourse Flusser's notion of *technical images*, and his concern about the impoverished tactile experience fostered by the digital experience; I am also aware of alternatives paths that have been traced: composer Pauline Oliveros's *deep listening* notion is one; the researches of composers Alvin Lucier and Raymond Murray Schafer into the realm of psychoacoustic and acoustic ecology is another. And many more, hopefully, are out there.

While difficulties and challenges to the experience of music and art are flagrantly present within a consumerist system that leaves little room for alternative modalities of living and behaving, it is also relevant that these issues have been addressed, repeatedly and, at times, with auspicious outcomes. My short excursion into the topic of attention and its relevance to today's perception of music and art, will hopefully spark further discussion and observations, questions and perhaps elucidations: hence what music, what art is available, envisaged, nurtured by the current model and social construct? What music, what art is an alternative to this model? What music, what art?

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**THE CULTURE OF DISTRACTION:
FRAGMENTED VISION AND THE MISERY OF THE SENSES
(summary)**

The article brings the reader through a focused examination of what is described as the culture of distraction; a predicament that has its origins in a semiotic chain of human states and activities: the act of being attentive (or else distracted); the gestural act, accompanied by a tactility reduced by the modus operandi of modern and postmodern machines: a *techne* designed to induce boredom, with the purpose of fragmenting the attention of the users onto a multiplicity of products, services and gadgets. Lastly, the continuous sense of bodily displacement which these technological devices induce.

The article opens by delineating attention as a phenomenological process with which a phenomenon is thrust into the foreground of perception. This introduction opens the door to observations in relation to the transformed relationship between human gestures, tactility and the use of computers, and internet social networks. This mutated relationship ushers in Vilem Flusser's notion of *technical images*: a concern of the Brazilian Czech-born philosopher over the reduced and impoverished tactile experience that digital devices are fostering. A relation of tactility brings into the article's discourse anthropologists' Ashley Montagu, Constance Classen, and David Howes on the sense of touch, its fundamental function in the development of human experience of the world, and the proprioceptive processes of the human body.

An interaction with devices that generate distraction. Social media networks are designed to achieve the purpose of diverting and entertaining, draining the user's ability to be attentive. An example is the impoverished modality of listening to music: the ability to listen to music actively has been modified by the disintegration of the attention encouraged by the numerous digital gadgets available. Furthermore, a modified relationship with attention induces a sense of boredom, railroaded into an economic process: a widespread system of consumerism which Bernard Stiegler identifies as the contemporary *hyperconsumerist* and *hypercapitalistic* societies, tied to the evolution of digital platforms and the media. Boredom is hauled into an economic process where alienation is used to favour consumption.

The article's conclusions take into consideration alternative modalities, and relationships with attention, technology and music: composer Pauline Oliveros's *deep listening*; the research of composers Alvin Lucier and Raymond Murray Schafer into the field of psychoacoustic and acoustic ecology. The topic of attention, the questions of what music, what art is available, envisaged, nurtured by the current model and social construct, are loaded questions. What music? What art? asks the article.

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