BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Pettiman, Dominic. *Infinite Distraction: Paying Attention to Social Media*, Chichester, UK and Malden MA: Polity Press. 2016. 165pp. $13.95 paper (9781509502271)

Working within the tradition of Critical Theory, Dominic Pettiman, in *Infinite Distraction*, provides a cultural analysis of social media and develops a theory of distraction– the ways in which digital technologies and devices are shaping our perceptions, desires, and "what it means to be 'the people'" (28-29).

Early on, Pettiman draws upon the arguments of Sigmund Kracauer and Walter Benjamin regarding the distracted "masses" (in relation to the earlier cultural form of film), but wants to – like Jean Baudrillard – challenge the notion of the mass itself, while retaining the faint positivity of these earlier critical theorists that new cultural forms may hold out the hope for their "social possibilities (and) politically progressive agendas" (4).

Pettiman praises Baudrillard for his prescience in diagnosing the rise of the "simulated society" (5). However, where the masses for Baudrillard had imploded into the media and could no longer be understood using the traditional analyses of the social and ideology, the problem with these "silent majorities" now is that they can be data-mined. The ecstasy of communication cannot completely annul the ideological effects of what Pettiman refers to as "hypermodulation" (30). The mass has been rendered the "herd" as digital consumers scroll through their social media feeds and take in the latest, or most popular (but certainly algorithmatized) "events."

Leading up to his own formulation of hypermodulation, Pettiman discusses French philosopher Bernard Stiegler's concept of "hypersynchronization…an excessive, preemptive industrial production of the collective through…industrial, temporal objects" (28). Corporations and governments have an interest in our attention: the difficulty lies in localizing the source of power, or better, seeing power at play in the first place, since we are all complicit in the algorithmatized shaping and representing of our desires, not to mention that we get Google and Facebook for "free." Digitalization creates the conditions for an "acephalic conspiracy" (39), but the manipulators still exist.

In making the argument that our relationship to the world is mediated by our technologies, the "medium is the message" is invoked (although not always explicitly) to support Pettiman's aruguments; for example, he notes how Tumblr makes pornography of anything ("foodporn, art-porn, architectureporn, etc."), revealing the libidinality of social media (108). These porns are structurally similar to pornporn (my term), as they all represent the medium's message. In discussing pornporn, Pettiman quotes feminist philosopher Margret Grebowicz: "What is striking about Internet pornography…in contrast to previous forms of hard-core mov-ing-image pornography, is the meta-level discourse of information shar-ing in which it is situated…Given its success, internet porn is arguably the most important tool of a social order which requires transparency of its subjects" (109). Pettiman also invokes the medium is the message when suggesting that "'there are no more messages', just signals without meaning" (129). McLuhan deserves more that one passing mention in the book and no bibliographic reference.

In developing a theory of distraction, Pettiman briefly notes the Western distinction between essence and appearance (111). It should be remarked that the most influential Western philosophies incorporating this distinction, Platonism and Marxism, posited theories of distraction: the former's notion (in *The Republic)* of our beholdenness to the im-ages on the cave wall, and the latter's formulation of ideology and false consciousness. To be sure the grounding assumptions and binary forms of Western metaphysics have been challenged; in any case, the internet reverses the distinction, revealing another dimension to Heidegger's cri-tique of "vorstellen…an unprecedented modern mode of viewing that approaches its object in terms of *calculated possession*" (110). Our digit-al devices individualize this experience, screening our relationship to the world as a form of "scopic consumption" (110.)

One of the central critical theoretical arguments the book makes is that distraction has mutated. The new distraction is not to "create a distraction": the very representations of events that should capture our attention are precisely the incessant and "deliberately framed represen-tations" that distract us (11). So, the problem is hiding in plain sight: "What if the reason d'etre of so-called social media is to calibrate the interactive spectacle so that we *never feel the same way* as other poten-tial allies and affines at the same moment?" (29). False consciousness is replaced by distracted consciousness, through a kind of infinite dividing and conquering of the production and shaping of desire: "Hypermodu-lation." Through it, "dangerous surges" that fuel social change can be absorbed and rerouted around the system (pp.29-30).

Pettiman gives as an example the killing of Eric Garner, an unarmed black man, by New York City police in 2014. He notes how "even before (the) collective anger was diluted…social media connections were hypermodulating themselves, and others, away from a *potentially effective* form of grass roots hypersynchronization" (131). As this review is being written, the continuing social shocks of the shooting of two black men by white police officers, and the subsequent killing of eight police officers by two young black men in the US are being felt. The killing of one of the black men, Philando Castile, took place as he was sitting in a car along with his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, and her child. Reynolds live-streamed the shooting on Facebook, and of course this footage was taken up by news networks. The footage is powerful and disturbing. In this case, Facebook allowed for the sharing of an event that helped to stimulate outrage and protests against police brutality. The problem, for Pettiman, is that with this type of event, and others that capture our *attention*, we may seek out the comfort of a cat video or some other mindless distraction ("chasing the unicorn"), which our devices equalize. I must mention that when I started reading the book, I appreciated Pettiman's clever chapter titles "Hypermodulation (or the Digital Mood Ring); "Slave to the Algorithm". However, the example of Eric Garner, the police shooting of the black men, and the live-streaming of Castile's death, bring into stark relief the title of Pettiman's Introduction: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Tweets."

Pettiman concludes with some brief considerations for rethinking and reorienting our distraction, and suggests that these could be the basis for another book. In the meanwhile, we are left with our infinite distractions, but it is difficult within the theoretical frames of reference to see the positivity Pettiman hopes for emerging. The book is well-grounded in critical theory (Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm), postmodern theory (Baudrillard, Deleuze, Lacan), feminist theory (Grebowicz, Berlant), and media theory, with a dash of Heideggerian phenomenology thrown in. It is curious though, that Foucault gets no mention: indeed the digitalization and hypermodulation of our desires seems to invoke a Foucaultian lens of power. Grebowicz's idea that pornography instantiates how the social order requires the transparency of its subjects implies the working of power through social-mediated and digitalized desire.

This "short book" (165 pages, including 18 pages of informative footnotes) offers a coherent and timely analysis of the cultural implications and ideological effects of social media, and thus should be paid attention to. While I cannot resist saying that its length will appeal to people with short attention spans, the force of its arguments make it a book that

cultural and media studies and contemporary social theory courses will find stimulating and highly relevant, particularly as the events discussed is this review play themselves out in the cultural, political, and social-mediated realms.

Trent University   Jim Cosgrave

Jim Cosgrave is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Trent University Durham, located in Oshawa, Ontario. He teaches sociological theory, and has research interests in the areas of the sociology of gambling, and mediated conceptions of cultural and national identity in Canada. He has recently co-authored, with Patricia Cormack, "State Celebrity, Institutional Charisma, and the Public Sphere: Managing Scandal at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation," *Media, Culture and Society*, March 2016, and *Desiring Canada: CBC Contests, Hockey Violence and Other Stately Pleasures* (The University of Toronto Press).

E-mail: jimcosgrave@trentu.ca