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Risk Area: The firefly narration

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Abstract

This article draws a line between the experience of shock in modernity as described by Benjamin, and the current state of overstimulation that collapses our perceptual system. It includes the recent analysis by Crary about a society whose objective is to stay active
twenty-four hours a day, consuming and producing. To address these issues, we stress the need to incorporate an emotional approach, briefly reviewing the concepts of vulnerability and risk. We also address the absence of narration and experiential content, and their transformation into other information-based models. Finally, we consider an episode of Black Mirror that deals with relations between new technologies, affects and acts of creation/resistance in our society.

Keywords: trauma, affects, narration, vision, art, vulnerability.

> In the early sixties, due to air pollution, and particularly in the countryside due to water pollution (blue rivers and lipid canals), fireflies began to disappear. It was a fulminant and fulgurant phenomenon. Some years later, there were no fireflies left. Today is a fairly wrenching reminder of the past [...].
>
> Pier Paolo Pasolini (Didi-Huberman 2012, p. 20)

> In the late 1990s a Russian/European space consortium announced plans to build and launch into orbit satellites that would reflect sunlight back onto earth. The scheme called for a chain of many satellites to be placed in sun-synchronized orbits at an altitude of 1700 kilometers, each one equipped with fold-out parabolic reflectors of paper-thin material. Once fully extended to 200 meters in diameter, each mirror satellite would have the capacity to illuminate a ten-square-mile area on earth with a brightness nearly 100 times greater than moon-light.
>
> Jonathan Crary 2013, p. 4

Specular-lenses for hyperstimulation

In his recently published book, *24/7*, Jonathan Crary highlights one final frontier ripe for colonisation by our societies' current economic systems:: sleep, or resting time. Food, sexuality, birth and death have long been domesticated, but this last barrier remains standing. In this lucid essay, Crary reviews the current experiments and changes in sleeping patterns. The consequences of creating a society that is awake twenty-four hours a day, producing/consuming around the clock, implies radicalising the collapse of that

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subject discussed by Benjamin in *The Writer of Modern Life: essays on Charles Baudelaire* (1939[1]). He considered the shock of the masses, overstimulated by the sensorial disturbances entailed by urban lifestyle changes. Crary elaborates on the consequences that light and a state of alertness have on dreams and perceptions. The text also invites us to reconsider Pasolini's firefly metaphor, those tiny, glowing insects that disappeared due to light pollution, environmental contamination and energy wastage in cities, and which would use their blinking lights for nocturnal encounters. Fireflies bring to life the Pasolinian eco-social, eco-affective metaphor which Didi-Huberman (2012) retrieves in order to address the social divide caused by the emergence of the bourgeois-capitalist models[2] that became more invasively potent after the 1960s and 70s. The neoliberal epistemicide[3] had already been brewing for centuries, an annihilation of those forms of knowledge not originated by the white, European, colonising male subject. Bodies, voices and memories were diminished, and other modes of perception curtailed in order to shift our gaze to a homogenised knowledge, which consequently becomes distanced from the very concept of knowledge and which, in equal measure, precludes encounters.

In the early twentieth century, the concept of shock[4], rescued from Freudian analyses[5], helped create a more precise description of the sensory experience caused by the new urban and manufacturing contexts. The new production areas, shaped by the industrialisation process, subjected workers to states of permanent stress and alert, among clattering noises and crammed spaces, diminishing their bodies to repetitive tasks and mechanical processes, carrying them out like drills: performing the same gestures and actions over and over again. As a result, or in parallel to this, perception levels became saturated, producing therefore a sensory blockade. Perceptual disturbances, inherent to staying in a risk area for long periods of time, now transcend the battlefield, and are so widespread that they are becoming a standard part of modern life. An adequate response to these disturbances will naturally arise, this being necessary for survival (Buck-Morss 2005, p. 188). A crisis in perception sets in, which damages the senses and hinders the imagination. Where work "is impermeable to experience", as Buck-Morss rereads in Benjamin, the memory is altered by conditioned responses. Learning becomes "training", ability becomes repetition (2005, p. 189) and as a result "the cognitive synaesthetic system has become an anaesthetic system"(2005, p. 190).

Benjamin also sees the turn of the century as decisive, which relates sensorially to the whole boom of 'technologies of illusion'. Artefacts such as panoramas, dioramas, cosmoramas, phantasmagorias, as he named them, being unlike drugs for individual consumption, generated all-encompassing environments whereby the city, full of phantasmagorias, is reduced to the spectator's mood (2005:198).

The importance Benjamin gives to movement, to the movement of crowds infected by the expansion of visual stimuli, bumping into each other as they move through the city, finds its correlate in our society where crowds are exhausted by light and agitated by a movement which is already fully ocular, i.e. restricted to the visual. In such a way, we now blindly stumble upon the information that shows up on our screens, stumbling upon the words and images that are flung in our direction, dispossessed of their potential evocation, of all their ability to summon the involuntary memory, and which are thus converted into "bullets" of data, yearning to be seen as truthful.

In line with this, Benjamin's insistence on the changes caused by jobs impervious to experience is

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linked, in turn, to another transformation that occurs in narrative forms (*The Narrator*, 1936). For Benjamin (2010), this reached its climax with the shell-shocked soldiers returning from the First World War, when it was revealed that they were unable to share their experiences. Stories then began to be articulated as a juxtaposition of data, of information, where first-hand content is dissolved, dissociating the processes of collective and individual memory. Although Benjamin does not here specifically speak of how trauma and its analysis is limited to narrative forms, this observation holds many similarities with the symptoms associated with it. Judith Herman cites three main symptoms: stress, intrusion, and constriction. For her, both the symptoms of intrusion, which involves the repetition of the traumatic event, and constriction, linked to a system of blocked self-defence where the person is paralysed, or numbed, maintain a close relationship with the perception of a different temporality that combines, at the same time, with "a sense of indifference, emotional estrangement" (Herman 2004, pp. 77-78).

There are already many voices (Serge Tisseron, Abraham and Torok, Marianne Hirsch, Clara Valverde Gefaell, etc.) which insist that trauma is passed on transgenerationally. The weight of unspoken or undetected suffering by previous generations continues to be transmitted, but buried deep within. To keep burying these ghosts (these unspoken secrets), or the crypt, so called by Abraham and Torok (1994), a continual and psychic work of encryption must be carried out. This requires additional energy from the subject, a devitalising and exhausting task which leads him, therefore, to further perceptual numbness.

Thus, this collapse, which comes from the inability to voice experiences, is now embedded in the way we narrate, and, paradoxically, we could say that it finds its representation in our society through an apparent reversal: one which illustrates a society drowning in its inability to silence its own "information". Hence, that zone of perceptual anaesthesia, with its roots in the collapse caused by the continual threat of danger, now seems relocated to the area of communication. Here, the anguish is different: it stems from a continuing need to be visible and connected, receiving information, all of us sharing this mindset which is grounded in sensory disconnection itself - based on the anaesthetic or on a continuous process of encryption. Here, the narrative, like Pasolini's fireflies, disappears. This time amid the lights, which only the illusion of encounter can endure and which, as Crary states, would be predicted by Guy Debord:

> It is worth remembering the concluding paragraphs of Debord's book, in which the problem of communication is foregrounded. He is hardly alone in emphasising the link between the words "community" and "communications", where communications is not the transmission of messages but in some way an ethos of sharing. Spectacle, he writes, is the expropriation of that possibility; it is the production of a one-way communication that he characterizes as "a generalized autism." Debord saw that by the 1960s capitalism had produced a systematic breakdown in the faculty of encounter (*rencontre*), and "the replacement of that faculty by a social hallucination, an illusion of encounter (pp. 119-120).

On the other hand, from art theory, the allusions to symptoms of trauma and also "autism" appear in some of the theoretical approaches to early twentieth century artistic practice. In this way, Rosalind Krauss, in her analysis of Duchampian production, posits a connection between trauma and autism and speaks of the "trauma of signification" (1986, p. 206), analysing the link between Duchampian language and certain traits of the autistic. For Krauss, this proximity results from interpreting certain symptoms of autism, i.e.

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those related to feeling akin to a machine, or the renouncing of language. However, as she has argued, the trauma of signification that affects artistic languages posed a crisis whose scope seemed to be narrowed to a mere question of language in art. The emerging fields of photography and abstract painting were being discussed as issues of art alone, which would suffice to explain the questioning of the new artistic languages arising at the time. Other analyses, such as that offered by Amelia Jones (2004), which examines the work of European artists exiled in New York in relation with certain neurasthenic pathologies, reveal, however, that this "trauma" is inextricably linked to corporal and, clearly, sensory issues. Thus, Jones includes factors related to a broader discursive dimension, taking in the political and social circumstances that affect the turbulent beginning of the twentieth century. She addresses the New York Dada scene with an approach which pays more attention to issues of the affective. This kind of approach has mostly been overlooked in theoretical analyses, which tend to understand the affective either as an extension of the expressive, or as an approach to the artistic subject in excessively subjective and/or autobiographical terms. Correspondingly, trauma has often been considered from an overly psychologised perspective, rooted in the pathological, closely linked to the creator-subject mythologies and understood within the paradigm of creativity as madness, or genius as madness, or indeed linked to any type of disorder. Similarly, the categories of non-subjective and non-affective are presented to us as inextricably bound, tied together, right from the formulation of the work and weaving all the way through to its reception. The fleeing to the non-affective as a place in which the subject could produce work entailed a whole series of questions that began with those stated by Duchamp, in which the artist was no longer present, or did not have to be the producer or maker of the work. This would break down the relationship between subject and artwork, thereby eliminating the idea of the artist's fingerprint, his own mark on his own "creation", and from thereon a more complex connection would be formed. Hanging over these established relationships with production was the shadow of trauma-like symptoms, as I said, and I refer here to the experience of production. They arose from a separation, or an "illusion of contact", very similar to that pointed out by Benjamin concerning the imprint of the narrator[6] and for which reason we again deal with the illusion of encounter, of contact.

It is therefore important to understand trauma from a context broader than the pathological, following Cvetkovich's reconceptualisation (2008), which puts it down to an excessively psychologised dimension and restricts its operational capacity to explore the tensions between the subject and the world, the intimate and the political. This inclusion is also supported by Cvetkovich, for whom "trauma is a part of the affective language that describes life under capitalism" (2008, p. 19). Therefore we can now trace a path starting from the crisis, in Benjamin's sense, in terms of the modes of relationship and socialisation built around the story and the narrator, modes which can be extended to the language adopted in artistic praxis. This is the scourge of a society which gradually turns communication processes, based on experience, into informative content.

Affective-lenses for Vulnerability

If we include the emotional perspective while we think, if we remember that Dutch lens polisher, the geometric method established by Spinoza must be understood precisely as a correction of sight. As we know, for Spinoza (2011) ethics is organised by the genealogy of the passions, according to those that boost and those that diminish our capability for action, seizing those passions that lead us to be active due to an

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increase in our potential. There can be no ethics without weakness, without being exposed to its emotions and tensions. This fragility or vulnerability will depend on activating a "specific capacity of the sensitive". Suely Rolnik coined the term "resonant body" for the capacity that "allows us to apprehend the world in its condition as a field of forces that are present in our body in the form of sensations" (2006: n.p.). According to Rolnik, current neuroscience claims that our sense-organs have both a cortical capacity and a subcortical capacity. The first is the most familiar to us, corresponding to perception, for "it allows us to apprehend the world in all its forms and then project upon them the representations we have available and so to attribute a sense." This aids the continued separation of subject and object in a relationship of externality. The subcortical corresponds to the resonant body, which understands the world in its field of forces that affect us. Here, the figures of subject and object are dissolved into each other, dissolving that which separates the body from the world. The paradox generated between the capacity of perception (cortical) and the resonance of the body (subcortical), brings about a tension where, for Rolnik, the act of creation may take place. The exercise of this dual sensitive capacity, whereby "the other" exists and the existence of oneself is modelled on the implications of the other's existence, is where the possibility of intensive intimacy opens up. It opens in a body that remains vulnerable to the other, and that would thus go from being a mere object for projecting preset images, to becoming a living presence[7].

The search for vulnerability, to access other subjectivities, urges us to revisit trauma and rethink it as a place where paradox, which is deployed in the heterotopic space, in the tension between subject and world, the intimate and the political[8], keeps the wound open, and keeps those tensions which hitherto permitted the acts of creation/resistance.

The current risk-controlled society is gripped by the spirit of positivity and its effect: an increase in efficiency. Art and love correspond - due to their both being exposed to vulnerability- with *other* risk areas, the uncontrolled ones, and with the ability *to show wounds*, paraphrasing Beuys[9]. This opening is still based on the traditional idea of suffering as a constituent and formative part of the subject's character. But in a society compelled to maximise profits, to the optimisation of resources and time, and an ongoing need for improvement (endorsed by positivity), there is barely place for suffering, as Eva Illouz (2014) rightly points out. The risk area is only useful as an economic metaphor for the enterprising. We have little time, so we must use it, manage it and invest it not only productively, in terms of the material, but also emotionally, and keeping feelings under control therefore becomes crucial. For example, as Žižek warns, the issue here is how to be in love without *falling* in love[10]. The permanent blocked state, where subcortical perception is now near-impossible, turns us, the subjects, into adventurers in controlled risk, protected from falling. The recent Swedish film, *Force Majeure* (2014), reminds us of this in the scene which sets up the plot of the film: the family, bourgeois, happy, safe, are eating together, during what must be a controlled avalanche. Being able to control otherwise unruly nature is a privilege which only one class enjoys, a class which needs to reconnect artificially with danger, albeit protected from it. According to the film, the manner in which fear and affects are treated, today, serves to highlight how forming a community has become almost impossible. Not even micro-family communities stand a chance, as even in these there is but room for just one style of commitment: the unipersonal kind. "And what it is the tragedy?", and Pasolini speaks again: "the tragedy is that human beings no longer exist; we only see strange artefacts that launch themselves at each other". The fireflies did not disappear at night, but rather in the light of "ferocious reflectors"

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(Didi-Huberman, 2012, p. 22).

Black mirror lenses

In 2011, Charlie Brooker delves into dystopia to portray or "frame" the relationship between emotion and technology in our society. "The National Anthem" is the first episode of the popular television series *Black Mirror*. Interestingly, the black mirror or claude glass was originally a tool commonly found in the pockets of the English landscape painters (from the seventeenth century onwards), used to frame landscapes; so, black mirrors, before the metaphor of switched-off screens, were used to tone down the reflected image. A similar simplification is carried out by the artist-kidnapper protagonist of this drama, the Turner Prize-winning Carlton Bloom. He decides to create the most-seen (simultaneously) work of art in history, confronting us with the possibility of a landscape made up of millions of people, glued to their screens for a pre-scheduled TV event. The event is constructed in the format of a "terrorist" threat, that is, by distorting the term referring here to that which terrifies, or frightens, which Quignard would say (2006) when he speaks of sex and which, in this case, is highly pertinent albeit somewhat obvious. In this television fable, Bloom kidnaps Princess Susannah, a famous and dear princess of the British royal family. In return, i.e. for her release, he asks for something hitherto unheard of: Prime Minister Michael Callow must have sexual intercourse with a pig, and this scene is to be broadcast live on British television. In order to prevent any camera trickery, he details, precisely, how it must be shot. If the Prime Minister does not comply with the request, Princess Susannah will be executed. The bizarre proposal puts on the table many of the complexities surrounding the current relations between images, feelings and information. The immediate reaction of the Prime Minister is to refuse, but his party forces him to give in, spurred on by social pressure, by the "viewers". As a result, the whole country is glued to their screens to see the symbol of state power carry out this humiliating act, in the episode's most simplified scene. The image is thus reduced to something between the obscene and the easy "joke" -and we know from Freud (2012) that jokes come from a shifting between signifiers and meanings. In the end, the artist commits suicide, the princess is released and the Prime Minister becomes a kind of porned-up Buster Keaton[11], his approval rating soars, he gets more "likes". However, in the privacy of his own home, his wife refuses to ever touch him again.

The episode, despite being obvious in parts, confronts us with many of our small, telecommunicated daily events. This little media fable doesn't reveal anything particularly new: the transition from citizen to spectator had already been announced to us; the shift towards a society where relationships are mediated by images is already commonplace. We need, however, and despite the fact that everything has already been foretold, to keep thinking about a society addicted to commenting and deprived from the elaboration of experience, far away from contemplation and listening, apart from their blinking rhythm of light and darkness which is essential to any form of thought or creation.

The "work" of Bloom, shown to the viewer-citizen, can only be information. The risk area (the vulnerability) in which art and affects are waged has mutated into pure spotlight. To achieve the framing, the distance needed to contemplate and develop experience, we might just need to bring back the landscapers' old utensil, the black mirror, the screen with no light, switched off.

And the saturated space of stimuli has been transformed, and dependence on it increases just as subcortical perception decreases until it is practically annulled. This link has left experience behind to fully focus on information, and this information is the only remaining trace, an illusion of contact forged at the

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simultaneity of the encounter with data, and with real time or topical events. In the episode of *Black Mirror*, the artist mutilates his finger, and with this action he also erases his fingerprint. The finger, which he then sends as false proof that he has cut off the princess's finger, is presented as just another one of the kidnapper's bizarre actions. However, both this act and his suicide are perhaps the most puzzling aspects of the episode.

The mourning for the demise of the creative subject's fingerprint on the work produced, which most of the twentieth century's artistic output maintains, as with the narrator's lack of influence on the story, seems to continue, somehow dormant. In addition to this distance, generated in part by new visual apparatus - photographic and cinematographic - are the issues associated with a different temporality and diffusion[12]. In this sense, the temporal relations have mutated and the submission that this real-time connection generates invariably leads to a double-bind: being expectant, but paralysed.

This continued state of contact with the present precludes any elaboration of memory, which in this way becomes an unsustainable operation. As Crary notes:

> [T]he 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 accessed on an everyday level ensure the systematic erasure of the past as part of the fantasmatic construction of the present (Crary 2013, p. 45).

And this fracture or erosion of memory prevents not only the activity of remembering, but also, and eminently linked to it, of imagination.

This is, ultimately, the aforementioned psychic work of encryption, which involves trauma, and which demands an exhausting additional energy from the subject. Tired and numbed by being connected 24/7, we swarm around information, histories and knowledge that will gradually come together, atrophying in the midst of a language flattened by its own literalness, by the lack of resonance; losing thereby the flashing light of the unpredictable, the fallible, the unstable, the vulnerable... a light that lets us listen, dream, imagine in the night, and which allows, above all, the encounter.

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Notes

[1] Benjamin, Walter (1993) "Sobre algunos temas en Baudelaire", in: Aguirre, Jesús (ed.), Benjamin, Walter. Poesía y capitalismo. Iluminaciones II, Madrid: Taurus. Also available online: www.philosophia.cl. (Escuela de Filosofía Universidad ARCIS) at http://www.rae.com.pt/wb3.pdf.

[2] «In 1974 Pasolini widely develops his theme of "cultural genocide". The real fascism, he says, is that waged against values, souls, languages, gestures, people's bodies. It is the one that "leads without executioners or mass executions, to the suppression of large parts of society itself" and that is why we must call genocide this [total] assimilation to the way and the quality of life of the bourgeoisie...» (Didi-Huberman, 2012, p. 21)

[3] For the concept epistemicide see Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Ramon Gosfroguel.

[4] The different nuances in the meanings of "shock" and "trauma" is a very extensive subject. Very briefly, when stating that within the field of art theory and its rapprochement to psychoanalytic approaches, shock tends to be used to refer to experiences and industrial-capitalist modes of perception, while trauma covers the imagination-fantasy dimension of a subject in a subsequent capitalist phase (see theorists like Foster or Seltzer). Here I will use the term trauma to take in both problems, and so I'll emply trauma in a broader sense, following the approach of theorists such as Ann Cvetkovich.

[5] The reconsiderations of "shock" in Benjamin's work arises from his reading on Freud; see his Essays on Charles Baudelaire. However, as I said, the nuances of terminology are changing, even within the work of each one of them. Here I defend, then, trauma as a place that could work to explore the tensions produced between subject and world, intimate-political, from a perspective that includes certain issues that affect the perceptual and affective. Briefly I'll also comment on other theoretical approaches, such as Herman or Rolnik, trying to open up an approach that, at least, manages to reflect the magnitude and scope of the issue.

[6] "In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. It is a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall."

[7] "Vulnerability is a condition for which the other ceases to be an object for projecting preset images and could become a living presence, with which we build our territories of existence and the changing contours of our subjectivity."

[8] Trauma is produced, as it is, in a liminal and heterotopic area; since apparently separate spaces converge in it, that trauma therefore also challenges the solidified positions of the binary regime.

[9] Zeige deine Wunde ("Show your wound"), Joseph Beuys, 1976.

[10] This comment is made by Žižek in a seminar The Commune of Alain Badiou (L'immanence des Vérités: les deux finitudes, the scission Subjective et le bonheur). In their dialogue, Žižek returns to this idea, raised by Badiou (2012). Considering the nuance that the expression can have in both French and English ("to fall in love", "tombe amoreux"), it literally takes us to a state of falling. This falling, understood as a crisis in the subject, by among other things questioning the limits to which he is being dragged, is what both philosophers argue should be avoided currently avoided, because, simply put, that "fall" would lead to a similar fall in the subject's productivity.

[11] The actor Buster Keaton is also known as The Great Stone Face, alluding to his impassive face, one of the keys to his humour. The reference to him relates to the recommendation, offered by the Prime Minister's adviser just before he goes into the room with the pig, of not revealing any emotion. On the other hand, the pseudonym Buster is also related to fall ("buster" is, in one of its colloquial meanings, "to fall") so typical in his gags.

[12] And in this way, to our involuntary memory can appear that image rescued by Benjamin (1993) of a thronging Baudelaire against the crowds, in which "the artist before succumbing screams of terror" and continues: "this mourning is the process of creation itself. Thus Baudelaire has placed the experience of shock in the center of his artistic work".

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