

## BOOK REVIEW

**Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection** Tung-Hui Hu (2022) 288pp., \$US25 hardback, MIT Press, London, ISBN: 978-0-262-04711-1

Contrary to common sense, the experience of being lethargic is to be recommended in this digital age. Lethargy is a paradoxical plexus of non-actions, feelings, non-gestures and attitudes. When one sees lethargy as a feeling, it has negative connotations, just like melancholia, acedia and idleness. These experiences are part of a history of economic and religious morals that values productive and spiritually oriented actions. Moreover, these experiences have been directed at healing psychological and corporal malaise. As such, lethargy was a memory illness consisting of forgetting about oneself and turning into a non-productive body or disconnected soul. However, compared with burnout, which is an occupational phenomenon, digital lethargy describes the fragmented subject whose data are capitalized (pp.xxii–iv).

The book's Introduction briefly explains the place of lethargic experiences in relation to other better known experiences, such as depression. Digital lethargy seems to be an experience which suddenly appears along with digital capitalism. The proposal attaches importance to time experiences in relation to digital technologies; for example, productive time is the dominant time experience because of permanent connectedness. According to Hartmut Rosa (2013, 2015), modernity can be understood as a civilization project which accelerates every aspect of human life. One of its most important features is the transformative power of technology. In general terms, modern technology aims at not only accomplishing tasks more efficiently by replacing human beings, but also reducing the time and means required to accomplish the tasks. The most perceptible effect is the fragmentation of the experience of time and space. Tung-Hui Hu is a photograph collector of the consequences of modern digital technology. It is a fact that digital technology has transformed human basic experiences, such as communication, mobility and work. However, most research on technology, whether philosophical or social, assumes that humans and technology interact as if they are two metaphysical entities that affect each other in a myriad of ways. In this sense, human beings have the ability to control and limit the consequences of AI or robots. These studies have scarcely considered the possibility of not being able to counteract the agency of digital technology. Without being pessimistic, the author bases his argument on a non-dichotomous approach of subject-object to the increasing experiences produced by digital capitalism.

That said, readers may ask: what can yet another book offer on the effects of digital capitalism? This book is not a description of digital technology and its economic applications, nor is it an ethical treatise reflecting on the way humans interact with technology. In fact, the content has nothing to do with the problem of how one should confront the power structure in which digital technology is embedded; on the contrary. Readers will find no profuse conceptual analysis, but rather a theoretical insinuation that may not satisfy demanding thinkers. Nevertheless, the underlying method puts one in mind of such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Byung Chul Han and even Walter Benjamin with regard to the hermeneutics of modern experiences. Another key point is the book's quasi-phenomenological approach; the authors use the first person to explore their experiences in digital capitalism, even when they are elaborating on the experiences of others. Lethargy, the *leitmotif* of the book, is an experience that is researchable only by non-conceptual means. Here is where this work shows its strength. Across a variety of artworks, lethargy appears as a paradoxical experience in digital capitalism. Showing the hidden forces of neglected experiences, such as waiting, doing nothing, not moving, enduring or turning into an object (objecthood),

this work makes understandable the theoretical problems of being a subject in a capitalist age. Moreover, it is noticeable that the decolonial approach overlaps with experiences of non-European people in some passages. Nowadays, the social orthopedics of our age have their own vocabulary that identifies similar pathologies: depression and burnout. For the author, it is important to focus on lethargic experiences in the age of digital capitalism because they contain an unrealized potential to resist without taking control.

### Enduring Objecthood

Traditionally, modern metaphysics and moral philosophy theorize subjectivity in opposition to objects without the ability to direct their behavior. Moral subjects are featured by their agency, and this capacity is the surface on which both modern ethics and politics are based. Political resistance without this capacity would be absurd. In fact, social movements appeal to the capacity to confront oppression or change the course of the climate crisis caused by wrong decisions. In the context of digital technologies, we witness the counter movements of doing something other than just scrolling and watching photos in the most famous apps; for example, going deep into the forest without our personal devices in order to lose track of the digital world. These movements are called ‘digital detox’, and their purpose is to recover the equilibrium that has been lost through the constant presence of these devices. In other words, the resistance to the mediation of current technologies is by acting differently, taking decisions as if there were no technology or quitting technology as if it were an addiction to some substance. The author’s proposal defies the traditional understanding of subjectivity by pointing out that it can turn into an objective being. It is probably true that, on a daily basis, we live in use, just like washing machines. The line separating ‘in use’ and ‘being busy’ is a matter of economic perspective. The first term implies an object being used by someone, while the second is an active person who does not have leisure time. The experience of being like a used object and not an agent who is actually doing something is normal experience in the work structures of digital capitalism.

Digital capitalism is a blueprint of traditional capitalism. The norms of digital capitalism – efficiency and optimization of production processes by AI and robots – squeeze time to the point that the supply chain functions uninterruptedly and continuously. In this labor situation, the role of humans in the production and distribution process is reduced to checking lists or checking that everything is in order. The first chapter shows that the panorama of upcoming jobs makes us think about the possibility of a scenario in which ‘bullshit jobs’, as David Graeber (2018) would call them, will be the norm. This kind of job is defined as a sort of absurd activity whose disappearance would hardly matter. The most intriguing effect of a bullshit job is the bore-out phenomenon. Burnout and bore-out are two sides of the same digital capitalistic coin. Tiredness, fatigue and weariness are some of the worker’s experiences. Thinkers, such as Byung Chul Han, would say that we find ourselves in an age of self-exploitation leading to an exhausted society. Days off are nowadays impossible because even taking a nap has the sole objective of recharging energies for the next day. All things considered, the book does not fully explore the relationship between time and objecthood.

The first chapter also describes how a German worker experiences the shift between productive time and moments where nothing happens. For the author, these moments elude the production machinery and make collateral time experiences, which have a liberating potential, possible; he sees an inchoate potential in these disjunctions of time where lethargy arises (pp.3–10). The German worker is supposed to be continuously in a rush, but she has to deal with pointless pauses – dead time – in which she waits and does not accomplish any specific task. At this point, the worker may react aggressively against the wasted time, because all of us expect to be productive and useful. The ‘solution’ suggested by the author is similar to the stoic acceptance to what one is unable to change. Melding with objects and turning into one of them means accepting that dead time can produce an aesthetic relationship with time. One sees time passing and consequently can perceive what was previously unnoticed.

### **Fragmented Subjectivity**

One of the psychological consequences of digital technology explored in this book is the fragmentation of subjectivity. In relation to experienced time, current technology burdens individuals by overstimulating them. Multifunctional devices invite us to think about our preferences, desires or thoughts, and therefore, to be ourselves. Paradoxically, the injunction to be yourself causes the fragmentation of the self (p.35). In an age of ubiquitous connection, people feel disconnected from themselves and others. Readers will find the reflections of the author in a great variety of artworks showing the glitched and bugged subjectivity of today. The diagnosis of the book is that lethargy is a blocked subjectivity in many different senses. Nevertheless, the inchoate potential of this feeling is the possibility of de-subjectivation in the interstices of politics.

At this point, the theory of recessive agency becomes the ethical base of the whole book; Chapter 2 analyzes these contradictions. As we can see, this is a passive rather than an active inward agency. Looking closer, the expression ‘doing nothing’ is seen to be an oxymoron (p.86). An individual who does nothing is someone idle, a vagrant, a person who refuses to work. Digital capitalism transforms this vagrancy into an asset: browsing idly or just carrying the phone around is capitalized by platforms. The author sees this paradoxical idleness as a way of resisting digital oppression. By increasing the feeling of disengagement and exhaustion, people are able to endure objecthood and wasted time, detuning themselves from this regimen. However, there is always the possibility of underperforming in order to resist. The argument encounters a theoretical obstacle if one hesitates to believe that doing nothing is practicable. As Giorgio Agamben has already pointed out, one of the tactics that political power uses is to render one’s potential to not act impossible. The moral dilemma that this strategy presents is that there will be either positive or negative consequences, such as gaining quality time but losing our jobs. When the author analyzes the work problems of other non-Western countries, such as Mexico, he may not realize that people are actually aware of the functioning of power structures. It would not be impolite to say that Latin American countries have been critically lethargic for centuries. Anglo-Saxon readers should dive into North and South American Spanish literature if they are keen on understanding other political experiences.

Chapter 4 analyzes another important aspect of the fragmentation by lethargy and its facet of dissolution. Becoming an object-like subject who does not counteract oppressing forces becomes relieved, but opaque. The author criticizes straightforwardly the topographic approach of Sigmund Freud. This theory defends the concept of unconscious forces that can be released in order to free the true self of an individual. The task of a psychoanalyst is to free these unconscious desires and beliefs that cannot emerge due to cultural repressions. Digital technology is like a psychoanalyst who pushes his patient to discover who he really is and make him an asset. However, digital capitalism provokes more paradoxes: while individuals interact with AI, their identity not only merges with it, but also becomes hybrid (p.126). This problem seems quite interesting because even if we are not cyborgs literally speaking, we merge with our devices and construct our identities. It would be interesting to develop the upcoming subjectivities who will not recognise the difference between the experience of actual time-space and the merged experience of time-space with hyper-intelligent devices. Nevertheless, the author stresses the possibility of being like a ‘black box’ or a shell in order to inwardly resist the oppressive forces threatening us. The key point in this part is that personhood and identity can be flexible and changeable, not only a core that should be defended. The ethical objective of living with a fragmented subjectivity is to show the malleability of our existence dominated by digital capitalism.

### **Do Nothing**

The last part of the book (Chapter 5) presents another layer of lethargic experiences. What happens when people are not able to do anything about their economic or political conditions? These people are incapable of resisting oppression not because they are extremely busy at work or studying at

university, but because they have an excess of time; nothing happens and time just dissipates in front of their very eyes (p.152). However, doing nothing is a source of anxiety and concern. The author stresses that standing still can be understood as political resistance. Digital capitalism counts every click people make. The author paraphrases Gilles Deleuze on societies of control: we can expect a future in which devices will never lose track of us, our movements and gestures in an open space without barriers. This is what Hu calls the next stage after societies of discipline, characterized by confining people to prisons, hospitals or schools. The strategy of intentionally standing still in the context of a strike is only possible if one has enough education to understand such an ambiguous meaning.

On the other hand, Hu succeeds in showing the contradictions in non-Western societies. Latin American countries function with discipline, control and more recently, with digital surveillance: as Hu says, new control societies interface with old-fashioned settler colonialism. The history of ancient Mexicans, written by Spanish colonizers, makes much of their laziness and weariness when it comes to working. For this reason, it is important to note that work has been built – at least in these countries – on an oppressive structure using different techniques and power technologies. The street performances of a Puerto Rico choreographer reclaim the right to be collectively idle. Therefore, creating moments of deadlock lets individuals experience lethargy as a sort of resistance to the rhythms that digital capitalism imposes. Moments where nothing seems to happen are part of a system of slow transformation. However, it is equally important to notice that these lethargic practices should be spread beyond an ephemeral petit-bourgeois artistic practice of resistance.

The lethargic practices explored in this book survive within capitalism. It is remarkable how literature, performances and films counteract the oppressive forces of digital power. Furthermore, the focus on time experiences makes evident the lack of research on the transformation of time mediated by digital technology. On the other hand, for non-specialized readers, the large literary and film analysis, accompanied by digressions and comments, can be misleading. Generally speaking, the theoretical frame for analyzing time overlooks such important authors as Edmund Husserl, Bernard Stiegler, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Hartmut Rosa and Henri Bergson. Unsurprisingly, the postscript of the book provides the reader with a Heideggerian reflection on recuperating basic experiences through art in opposition to the technique.

## References

- Agamben, G. (2010) *Nudities*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA.
- Benjamin, W. (1979) *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Penguin, Harmondsworth UK.
- Bergson, H. (2013) *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.
- Foucault, M. (1975) *Surveiller et punir*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris.
- Graeber, D. (2018) *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Han, B. (2015) *The Burnout Society*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA.
- Heidegger, M. (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Garland Publishing, New York.
- Husserl, E. (2001) *Psychologie phénoménologique (1925–1928)*, Vrin, Paris.
- Jankélévitch, V. (2017) *L'aventure, l'ennui, le sérieux*, Flammarion, Paris.
- Rosa, H. and Scheuerman, W. (eds) (2009) *High-speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power and Modernity*, Pennsylvania University Press, University Park PA.

Rosa, H. (2013) *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (tr.Trejo-Mathys, J.), Columbia University Press, New York.

Rosa, H. (2016) *Resonanz: Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin.

Stiegler, B. (1994) *La technique et le temps*, Fayard, Paris.

*Luis E. Juárez Avena*  
*Universidad del Valle de México*  
*luis\_juarez@my.uvm.edu.mx*