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Social Media – New Masses / Updating to Remain the Same

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Social Media – New Masses / Updating to Remain the Same

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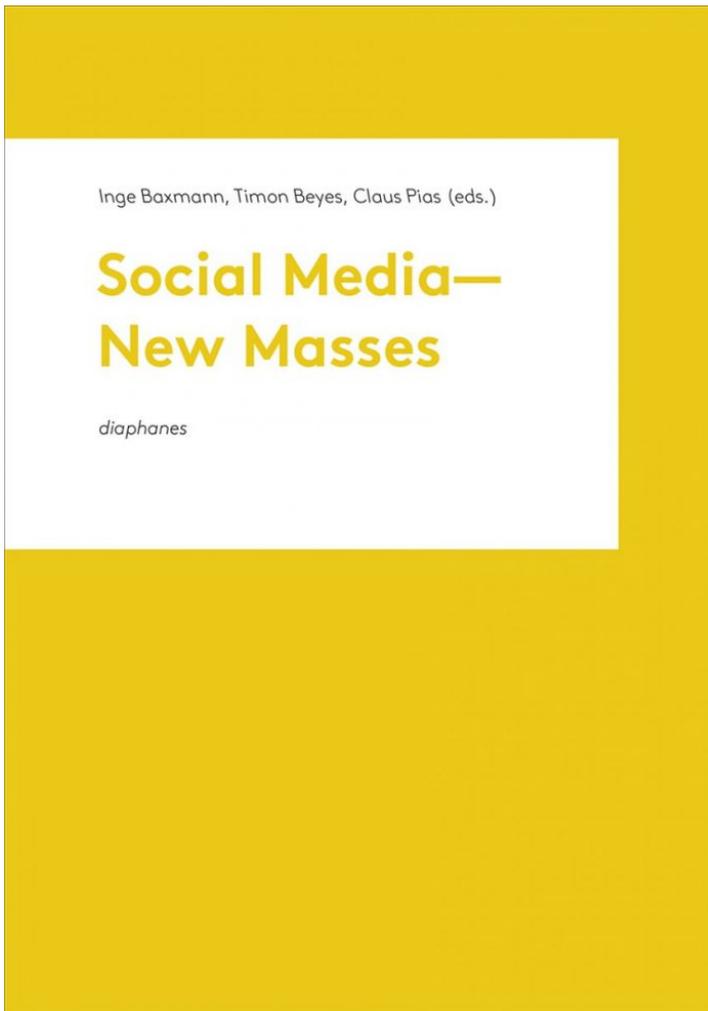
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Do we still live in a mass society? Does that foul spectre of the long and dark 20th century – the masses – extend into the 21st? We would perhaps like to believe that it does not. Or should we say *they* do not? Part of the anxiety over this strange socio-logical category can already be glimpsed from this, its grammatically-undecidable, ambiguous status, forever oscillating between the singular and the plural form. We would like to think that ours is not a ‘mass’ but a ‘network’ society. And this is true, provided we understand the network as a postmodern kind of pseudo-sociality always retreating from the threshold of community. Similarly, the concept of the masses represents this permanently liminal situation between belonging and non-belonging. It is in the bold exposition of this monstrous condition where the main heuristic value of the concept of the masses is to be sought.

Nearly all of the artistic and political experiments of the 20th century can be understood as so many responses to this historically unique problem of social form. And we continue to live its suspended outcome: all the ingredients that previously legitimated the label ‘mass society’ are still present, and in fact more intensely and globally so. Paraphrasing Marx’s famous wording, masses old and new continue to weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living – the billions of heat-emitting bodies that wander the globe and collide there, pushing it to the brink of planetary-scale ecological and social catastrophe. Then why does speaking of the masses nevertheless appear somewhat archaic and out of touch with the present *Zeitgeist*? Is there really such a clear differentiation between ‘the colorless crowd of classical modernity’ and the ‘colorful crowd of postmodernity’, as Peter Sloterdijk suggests?[1] Can we still speak of masses or crowds here? Conceding that, indeed, ‘the masses are not what they once were’, how does this contested category nevertheless still

apply to the globally networked present, in the form of online swarms, flash mobs, and multitudes?

It is these types of questions that *Social Media – New Masses* (Zurich-Berlin: Diaphanes/University of Chicago Press, 2016), edited by Inge Baxmann, Timon Beyes, and Claus Pias, explores in a variety of ways, thinking anew the hermeneutic of the masses and the crowd in relation to today's global mediascapes. But rather than emphasising either masses or media, the book essentially revolves around the point where they meet, inquiring into the vicissitudes of their mutual implication, structurally and historically speaking. Doing so, it opens up to an international English-speaking audience articles that were initially published in German as *Soziale Medien – Neue Massen* by publishing house diaphanes, as a result of the Second Symposium of Media Studies of the German Research Society held in Lüneburg in 2012. However, due to its irreducibly German context with its strong reliance on media and systems theorists like Friedrich Kittler and Niklas Luhmann, navigating these conceptual landscapes by the uninitiated might prove a rather strenuous task. For this reason I do not quite share the confidence of Charles Ess when he remarks in one of the final commentaries that 'the book will quickly establish itself as a watershed publication in Media Studies' (p. 337).



Preceded by an extensive introduction outlining ten theses designed to reflect the thematic of the collection as a whole, the book is divided into three main parts, taking as its primary orientation the crowd, the media, and the public. Unfortunately, these introductory theses are quite convoluted and voiced in a layering of specialist jargon that require a veritable polymath (or rather, a German *Universalgelehrter*) to decipher, in a way that may prove to be an obstacle to readers unfamiliar with its at times quite obscure vocabulary. Luckily, the first part opens with a much more accessible article by Christian Borch on the counter-intuitive relevance of classical crowd theories by Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde for understanding contemporary forms

of sociality and collectivity. Rather than reducing the crowd to the rationality of its individual components as became standard in American sociology from the sixties onward, these classical crowd theorists hold on to the properly collective logic of crowd phenomena in terms of contagion, suggestion, and hypnosis. In the context of global digital media networks, an appreciation of this collective logic, as well as the increased role of mediation therein, seems to be making a comeback in various new materialisms and actor-network theories. A critical update of classical crowd theory might prove helpful in fleshing out the ramifications of these more recent approaches.

Following Borch's contribution are two articles that more specifically consider new forms of crowd-analysis in Facebook's Open Graph Protocol (Irina Kaldrack and Theo Röhle) and new algorithmic modes of identity management and control (Roland Meyer). The latter article stands out by the way it brings into critical contact the larger histories of biopower with more recent developments in big data and algorithmified forms of control, like new facial recognition techniques and real-time crowd monitoring. Relying on Agamben's notion of an 'identity without the person' the author traces how, from the 19th century onward, police methods of identification have served to disconnect identity from the person and its legal recognition as conceived in the Kantian and Hegelian traditions of political philosophy. These enlightenment forms of personhood have been cast aside as the dominant anchoring point of the social and economic order – or rather, has been increasingly fused with the biological features and characteristics of the body – a body that, as Meyer insists contra Agamben, is always already a collective, mass-body entangled in larger disciplinary and scientific *dispositifs*. By thus insisting on the collective dimension of the biopolitical body, the author shows how these two seemingly incompatible regimes are increasingly mapped onto each other and merged into a single apparatus of recognition. Increasingly, recognition (*Anerkennung*) converges with identification (*Wiedererkennung*).

The second part of the book extends these analyses with a specific focus on media as crowd mediators. Introducing this part, Claus Pias proposes to combine media-theoretical approaches that privilege the infrastructural materiality and operational effects of media technologies with more properly sociological and cultural analyses of the new modes of sociality, collectivity, and community that these new technologies enable. Especially illuminating in this part is Sebastian Vehlken's reconstruction of the discourses on and practical implementations of social simulation modeling as forms of 'reality

mining’ in projects like INDECT and FutureICT. The author historically contextualises these projects by discussing earlier dreams of social transparency and plasticity in Stafford Beer’s Sybersyn project in Allende’s Chile in the 1970s (p. 174).

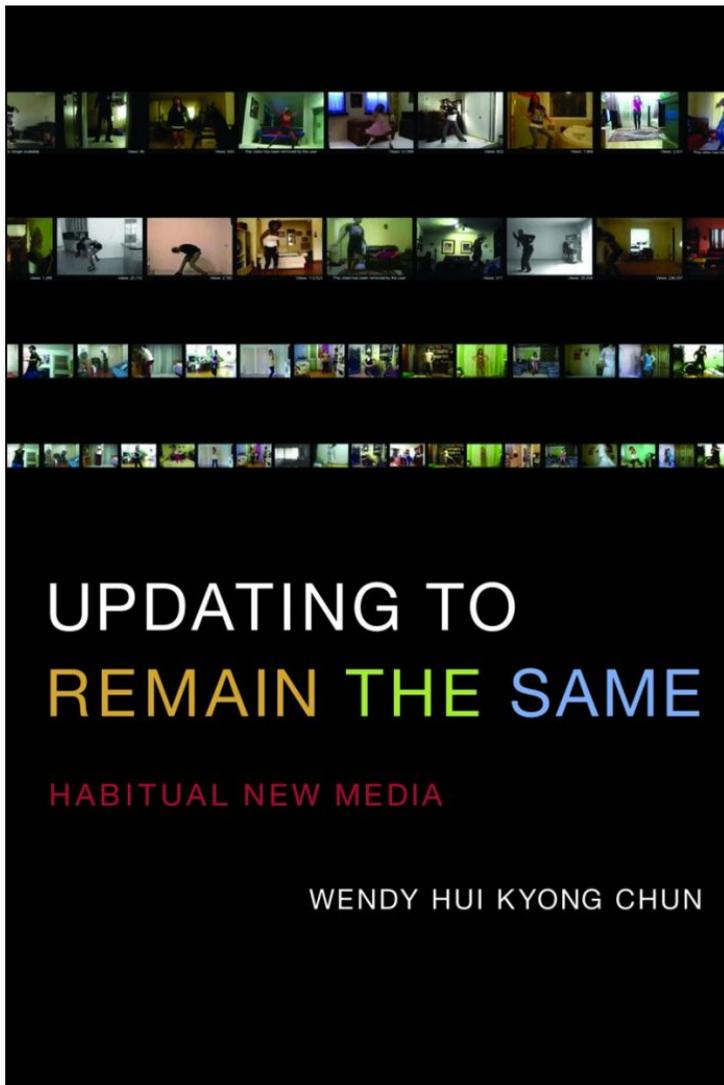
Two of the issues around which this part revolves is whether the internet should be considered a mass medium, and whether the discourse of crowds still makes sense in the context of digital media. As to the first issue, if periodicity and synchronicity of reception and the unidirectional transmission of content are considered necessary conditions for something to qualify as a mass medium, then the internet certainly does not and would thus require ‘a different set of analytical tools and methods’ (Pias p. 119; see also Wolfgang Hagen’s contribution). However, there is also a social and cultural dimension to the ‘mass’ in mass media. Modern forms of low popular entertainment, vernacular communication, and everyday consumption by the many rather than the few also define the mass attribute, and it is in this sense that the internet can obviously be regarded as such.

As to the question of crowds, it seems that the ontology of ‘networked individualism’ that underlies social media use precludes the formation of crowds. The personalised and individualised character of digital communication is such that the threshold where dispersed individuals transform into crowds is never reached – and to remain below it is in many ways a function by design. Another objection to the notion of online crowds is the obvious absence of physical co-presence. However, Carsten Stage (2013) has convincingly challenged the idea that crowds require physical co-presence, arguing with Le Bon’s classical conception of the crowd that affective unification and synchronisation represent more adequate criteria for defining crowd phenomena. Although valid only sporadically, these criteria nevertheless clear the way for thinking about digitally-mediated crowds as ‘affectively charged collectivities created via spontaneous interaction on various social media platforms’.[2]

In present discourses on the digital, the crowd also returns in the celebrative form of crowd intelligence, hive minds, and online swarms. Inspired by the various material and affective turns in social and cultural research, Carolin Wiedemann’s contribution traces the genesis of the hacktivist collective Anonymous from 4chan to its involvement in global political affairs like WikiLeaks. Using Eugene Thacker’s typology of new forms of collectivity that all share the fact that they are decentralised, self-organising and ‘post-representational’, namely *swarms*, *networks* and *multitudes*, the author shows

that Anonymous is best understood as a hybrid of both network and swarm, where the latter may momentarily materialise from the former to specific *ad hoc* ends, transforming connectivity into collectivity, or what Thacker calls a 'living network'. [3]

The notion of the network is also at the center of concerns that comprise Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Massachusetts: MIT Press 2016). Like *Social Media – New Masses* it revolves around the meeting point between media and masses. As the neoliberal paradigm for imagining and managing the social, networks reconfigure the masses as individually traceable, competitive and precarious prosumers, each followed by its shadowy and unshakeable data double. Doing so, Chun's recent work serves the overarching aim of the trilogy of which it is the final part, namely to provide insight into 'how computers emerged as a form of mass media to end mass media by replacing the mass with the new, the "we" with the YOU' (p. 18).



Updating to Remain the Same is an engaging book about the wonderful creepiness and leakiness of our present global digital-media conjuncture. New media are creepy and leaky in the way all things are that are passionately promiscuous: they illicitly cross and mess with existing boundaries and hierarchies – under the pressure of the attention economy, political deliberation melts into gossip and conspiracy theorising, personalised infotainment becomes a dystopian portal to mass surveillance, as the boring and banal everyday suddenly transforms to become revolutionary contagion.

Preceded by *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (2008) and *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (2013), the present work contains not a single, unified argument but a broad-ranging network of speculative meditations on several interrelated themes and inquiries, including the question why the figure of the network seems to provide such a strong image to cognitively map what Jodi Dean dubbed ‘communicative capitalism’. Whereas *Control and Freedom* asked how technologies of control became sold as machines of freedom, by which freedom itself became increasingly understood in terms of control, *Programmed Visions* focused on the transition from memory to storage, looking at the centrality of computer hardware and software to increasingly hegemonic neoliberal governance paradigms on a global scale.

Updating to Remain the Same builds on this already extensive research programme by philosophically exploring the possibilities for existentially inhabiting the new networked vulnerabilities and precarious forms of digital life enabled by new media, thus refusing to succumb to the desire for sovereignty through security or privacy. The first part (Imagined Networks, Glocal Connections) explores how and why the idea of the network has proven such a resilient trope for imagining the present. The second part (Privately Public: The Internet’s Perverse Subjects) traces the inversion of privacy and publicity in digital culture, issuing in what Chun calls ‘N(YOU) media’.

In an interlude curiously placed at the very beginning of the book, Chun reconstructs what she argues is the radical transformation of the social in the 20th century, from a diffuse and uniform THEY to a fully differentiated and transparent YOU, understood as the ideal subject (small ‘s’ sovereign) of neoliberal governance in the digital era, whose main role is to produce ‘YOUs value’ through its subjects’ incessant networking. At the dawn of the 21st century, the image of the chaotic crowd or the opaque mass is exorcised in favor of the cleaner and rational image of the network as the technologically augmented self-organisation of communicatively interacting individuals. Networks reconfigure online interaction in terms of personal use, and this complementarity of entrepreneurial self and network is essential to the social ontology implicit in platform capitalism, where the personalised profile becomes the cultural equivalent of the sociometric profiling by various government and corporate actors.

In the second part of the book, Chun proposes an ethics of vulnerability and the public right to loiter that counters the current focus on the protection of the private and the personal in current (neo)liberal discourses on privacy

and security. Faced with the problem of how to inhabit the seemingly uninhabitable spaces of the web, where habit becomes addiction and where outing, shaming, and exposure are omnipresent, where can we find ‘the modes of inhabitation they still shelter’? Critical of the implicit stigmatisation of the desire for sociality and communication inherent to those who mourn the eclipse of privacy, based as it is on ‘outdated notions of domesticity’ and the bourgeois edifice of personal autonomy, Chun instead proposes a right to publicity without being outed and permanently stored, summarised as an ethos of fore-giving based on a right ‘to be vulnerable and not attacked’ (p. 18).

The notion of loitering as the material *modus operandi* of this ethos – the act of strolling or waiting around without apparent purpose in a public (or semi-private) place – is taken from *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011). The authors of this book argue that for women in India and elsewhere to claim their citizenship, they must insist on the right to take risks and be radically included without having to meet any prior demands or ends set by others (typically men), which means making themselves (in) public in a dialogical relation to others on an equal basis. Rather than a negative and dangerous side-effect of urban environments, anonymity and radical publicness can actually enable new forms of politically emancipatory agency and citizenship, as it tends to suspend stratifications of identity along existing private-public boundaries. Loitering is ephemeral, risky, and anonymous in precisely this sense, and as such proves to be a very promising concept to move beyond the beaten paths of contemporary debates on the effects of digital media, as these continue to oscillate between the demand of incessant connectivity as a form of individual empowerment and the demand of immunity therefrom. Instead, by accelerating the demand for a certain way of anonymous and vulnerable co-publicness, claiming the right to loiter casts new light on the dilemma that while disconnection from digital media reproduces certain forms of precarity, permanent immersion in them equally produces other – perhaps even more invasive – forms of precarity, in ways that we only now start to recognize and question.

In many ways, the work of American media artist Natalie Bookchin perfectly captures what is at stake in both books discussed here. A snapshot from her work titled *Mass Ornament* from 2009 actually figures quite prominently on the cover of *Updating to Remain the Same*. The same work also makes an appearance in *Social Media – New Masses*, in Sascha Simon’s article on new

digital forms of mass customisation. A multi-screen installation, *Mass Ornament* choreographs hundreds of dance performance videos posted on YouTube by users who, even more than Siegfried Kracauer's famous Tiller girls to which the title of the work refers, might not be explicitly aware of each other's activity but nevertheless operate in a common space, forming an 'anonymous figure'. Out of the mass archive that is YouTube, Bookchin constructs a serialised visual assemblage that questions the relation between the individual and the collective in today's digital media networks. By selecting, editing, and composing these videos in this way, she traces the contours of an unconscious collectivity in the very heart of a media environment normally understood as hyper-individualistic. These dancers filming themselves in their own private rooms are actually 'part of something larger than their separate selves'.^[4]

However, this is not to say that this collective dimension only exists by the grace of the artist's activity. As Jodi Dean has shown in the case of selfies and image macros, what appears at first glance as the pinnacle of individualism on second inspection reveals a 'commoning of faces' oriented not so much to the affirmation of individual identity but to the selfie form as a template of vernacular expression.^[5] This is also true for the dance videos Bookchin choreographs, where each move always already incorporates and anticipates another, by an other. For Chun, Bookchin's video installations reveal plurality in singularity, and collectivity in individuality (p. 163). Individuality is shaped from 'an originary multiplicity' to which it must return, rather than severing itself from it. Seemingly personal gestures, facial expressions, never belong to me but are individuated from a reservoir of common visual and gestural components. Thus, in the very precise and beautiful statement by Bertolt Brecht, 'Man does not become man again by stepping forth from the masses but by sinking deeper into them.'^[6]

In her work, Bookchin inquires at what point historical forms resonate with contemporary ones, tracing structural similarities while also attending to what is irreducibly different about the mass phenomena of 1930s Weimar modernity and contemporary global media culture. If Kracauer's Tiller girls reflected capitalist modernity and the Fordist organisation of the laboring bodies of the industrial proletariat into mechanized collectives, Bookchin's protagonists exemplify the neoliberal, post-Fordist organisation of labor as prosumers of a freelancing, entrepreneurial precariat.^[7] And yet the mass still asserts itself through these single performers and their viewers in ever new social, cultural, and political configurations. Both books reviewed here

contribute in no small way to an understanding of what is at stake in the interface where media and masses collide.

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Notes

- [1] Sloterdijk 2009.
- [2] Stage 2013, p. 1.
- [3] Thacker 2004.
- [4] Bookchin 2009.
- [5] Dean 2016.
- [6] Brecht 1977, p. 69.
- [7] Bookchin 2009.