

BOOK REVIEW

The Twittering Machine, by Richard Seymour. Brooklyn, New York: Verso, 2020. \$26.95 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-1-78873-928-3. Pages: 1-250.

Reviewed by Mary Germaine¹

The original Twittering Machine, Paul Klee's 1922 painting, is a bleak scene. Pale blue and mauve washes make a flat background for four mechanical birds, squawking on a crank-operated wire as if to attract listeners of the ruddy pit below. This image is Richard Seymour's opening metaphor for social media, or as he calls it, the social industry: the extremely profitable trade Facebook, Google, and Twitter make with users, offering communication tools in exchange for their personal data. These platforms, though glowing brighter blue than Klee's watercolour, cast a similar menace. As today's foremost purveyors of fake news, fascist propaganda, bullying, trolls, and mobs of moral panic, Web 2.0 spurs on anxiety, depression and targeted violence IRL. While Seymour maintains that none of the above social ills are new or intrinsic to the internet, he argues that the social industry has capitalized on these crises in a way that has transformed society for the worse.

The social industry puts us in the centre of several paradoxes. Despite the endless opportunities to shop and "upvote," Seymour argues "[t]he machine is not a democracy, and it isn't even a market: we are neither customers nor voters" (62). Online, we don't have the rights of citizens nor the entitlement of a paying customer—even though we do pay the social industry, not with cash but with the most intimate information about our lives (our preferences, questions, location at any given time). We are used more than we are users of social media. Following computer scientist Jaron Lanier, Seymour describes users collectively as a digital serfdom (62) and he writes in an inflated first-person plural to further emphasize the magnitude of entanglement. The titles of the six chapters follows the same pattern: "We Are All..." "Connected," "Addicts," "Celebrities," "Trolls," "Liars," and "Dying." These chapters dissect the ways the social industry, like a machine meting out rewards and punishments to rats in cages, conditions our interactions with each other, the media, as well as our political process.

The glut of information that the web makes available has created a "furnace of meaning" (162) in which a caravan of refugees takes up the same amount of space—implicitly, the same significance—as Super Cute Cat Compilations. The randomness of the web, Seymour argues, makes traditional authorities appear arbitrary and flashy outbursts wildly popular. Insurrections (instigated by ISIS or by Donald Trump) may succeed or fail, but the machine always wins. Stacks of books, apps, and dollars have been made by addressing internet addiction. Seymour too makes "user" synonymous with "addict," but his focus is the textuality of the internet and so according to him, what we are addicted to is the writing—not the ping of a notification.

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He chooses an old word for this new phenomenon, concluding: “we are all scripturient”. Users are compelled to write into the cacophonous Twittering Machine, gambling their public image for attention, positive or negative, depending on their kink. In the Rat Park of neo-liberal isolation and alienation under late capitalism, social media have trained us to depend on web connections, even though our interactions online are not, in the direct sense, with other people but with the platform itself. We may think we are writing to our friends, but in reality we are writing into the Twittering Machine. Seymour conceptualizes the internet as an ever-expanding tome of selfies, shit posts, data, and code.

While novel, Seymour’s addiction as writing ignores the silent majority of users who do not or rarely write anything online. In the US, Pew Research found that 97 percent of Twitter content is generated by only 25 percent of users. And according to another PEW survey, of the bottom 90 percent of posters (the seldoms and nevers), nearly half use the platform daily. What, then, is the big draw for people who log in just to lurk? Not a compulsion to write, except in the general sense that scrollers “write” data by what they click on. Seymour doesn’t address silent users directly but does put an answer in front of us through his account of how the Twittering Machine “manages time differently” (65), counting the minutes, hours, or weeks since content was posted, rather than the clock time at which it was published.

The social industry projects a hyper-intense chronology. Seymour cites the neuroscientist Marc Lewis, who claims that “[f]or many addicts, the idea of facing the normal flow of time is unbearably depressing” (65) which leads them to seek out an anodyne. “Screen time,” I would argue, offers that sweet release; an alternative time, not text, is the real addictive substance of social media. While he doesn’t actually make this argument, Seymour adumbrates a similar idea with the image of a chronophage, a literal “time-eater”, a spiky, cricketoid mechanism that sits atop the Corpus Clock in Cambridge and claws the minutes into its scaly gut. The clock on which it feeds only occasionally shows the correct time. The chronophage is an apt metaphor for an industry that distorts reality and gobbles up the moments that make up our lives.

Seymour’s goal is an easy-reading essay, something you don’t need a PhD to appreciate. To keep the text clean, he keeps his references in the back pages. Besides copious news reports, Seymour cites the big names you’d expect—Marx, Freud, Foucault—some more thoughtfully than others. For example, he too briefly drops in Eve Sedgwick’s notion of paranoid reading without making its relevance clear (though paranoid reading is actually a helpful framework for Seymour’s own method of presenting evidence from a range of psychological, political, and economic sources to prove the social industry is out to get us). The research is sound, even if he trades some rigour for engaging, fast-paced rhetoric.

One criticism of a paranoid approach is that it provides little in the way of solutions to the problems that Seymour illuminates. The book begins with “the minimum utopian question: what else could we be doing with writing, if not this?” (17). Seymour’s musing does not get an answer in the end, I think, because the main issue is something more sinister than misspent literary energies. The social industry survives on our data entry labour, so maybe a strike would improve conditions (210), but without social media, organizing such a thing seems impossible.

And in any case, a strike would not solve the widespread addiction to our own exploitation. As Seymour himself points out, to break an addiction, a person must reinvent their way of being in the world (212). After reading the book, we are left with maximum utopian questions: how do we remake ourselves to better shoulder the injustice and ugliness around us, or remodel the world so that it's bearable?

Anyone with internet access has a stake in these questions. Seymour's tone often doomsday, but he supplies psychological, social, and economic evidence to justify the panic; it is nearly impossible to escape the call of the Twittering Machine. In the past few weeks, I've found myself reaching for this book over and over, believing the black rectangle on the front cover was my phone. I get the feeling I'm not the only one to make that mistake.

References

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