

**REAL LIFE**

# REPETITION

**“Against the Clock” by Maya Binyam**  
**“Time Capsules,” by Fuck Theory**  
**“Watch Again,” by Lydia Kiesling**  
**“Instant Replay,” by Monica Torres**

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REPETITION HAS A WAY OF METING OUT TIME; in recollection I have a way of meeting myself again, and giving me as I do the time of day. Restatements of a theme hold immense sway in figuring out why things, happening as they did, ever induced rapture or heartbreak, turning a lifelong project into a more digestible course. Histories demand, with tools or states altered, indulgence in reprisal, recasting, remembrance and riff. Music wouldn't be without memory; a record later reviewed can overtake olfaction in its talent for association; looped images can live somewhere between fact and déjà vu. In setting oneself on repeat it's intensity we're after; years click by, and housework seems more real that is never adequately put to rest. “No one ever told us we had to study our lives, make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history or music, that we should begin with the simple exercises first,” writes Adrienne Rich in “Transcendental Etude.” A more seasoned tail-devourer than I might attest that segments are always found changed under skin already consumed, split or shed. —SORAYA KING



# AGAINST THE CLOCK

Real-time depictions of September 11 and its aftermath serve the myth of white sovereignty by MAYA BINYAM

**O**VER AT THE Northeast Air Defense Sector's command center, the NORAD exercise is about to commence. Here is how it goes: Russian Bears are piercing the airspace up off Alaska. The Tupolev Tu-95, known colloquially as Bear, has propellers that move faster than the speed of sound, making it the loudest plane in the world. The bomber—booming, blade tips spinning—slips through Alaska's airspace like a pin, or a needle: the thing that does the pricking.

But the nick is just a simulation. Here is how the real thing goes: a plane, departing from Boston, blips green on an air traffic control

screen. It blips away—blinking over Boston, Worcester, Pittsfield—and then goes dead just outside Albany. The air traffic controller who's been monitoring the winks—their frequency, the speed—loses his shit. He calls the situation into his boss, who calls it into the Northeast Air Defense command center. An official takes the call, hears the news, then motions, anxiously, to his coworker, a woman, who is busy preparing for the Bears and their impending penetration. "I got a hijack on the phone," says the official. "This is sim?" she asks. "No," the man corrects. "This is real world. This is a no-shit hijack. It's Boston."

The woman goes to talk to her boss: “Sir, we have a real-world situation here.”

The simulation, the situation, the Bears, and the boss are from a movie. *United 93*, which premiered in 2006, depicts United Airlines Flight 93, one of the four flights hijacked on September 11, 2001. This is the flight on which passengers launched a counterattack. They improvised weapons—blunt knives made for cutting breakfast omelettes, boiling water meant for tea—and pushed the hot food cart into one hijacker, two hijackers, and finally into the cockpit, where they tried to gain control of the yoke. The airliner, intercepted, veered away from its intended target—the Capitol or White House, no one knows which—and nosedived into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing everyone on board.

This is a real-world situation, and so the drama is portrayed in real time, a filmic convention in which plot progression mimics linear time exactly. In this case, the movie begins in the hijackers’ motel room—precisely at Fajr, the morning call to prayer—and ends 110 minutes later, the hijacker-pilot yelling “Allahu Akbar,” the passenger-pilot grasping for control, and the plane, full of people, spiralling into green, the field, its death.

September 11 demands to be experienced live, which is why real time has become such a popular convention in American portrayals of the War on Terror. The TV show *24*, for example—which premiered in November 2001, ran for eight seasons, and is scheduled for a reprisal this winter—opens every hour-long episode with a single refrain: “Events occur in real time.” Each episode corresponds with a single hour in the day (5:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m., 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m., etc.), with each 24-episode season comprising a single day in the life of Jack Bauer, an agent employed by the fictional Counter Terrorist Unit. Seasons one through eight track a terrorist plot underway (nuclear bomb, suitcase bomb, dirty bomb) and Jack’s attempts to thwart it before the clock, quite literally, runs out. Time is denoted by a stopwatch, which ticks onward at the beginning and end of every commercial break.

Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty*, which tells “the story of history’s greatest manhunt for

the world’s most dangerous man,” has a ticking clock, too, though it isn’t introduced until the final 20 minutes of the hunt, when the man, Osama bin Laden, is almost dead. In the final moments of the film, the Special Activities Division (SAD) flies a group of U.S. Naval special agents to Bin Laden’s hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan. They land; unseal the doors of the compound with tiny, hand-held bombs; kill three men and one woman; shoot Bin Laden twice in the forehead; gather up the survivors, mostly children; bind their hands with zip ties; and then depart the way they came, Bin Laden sealed into a bag and stored safely in the body of a chopper. All in all, the filmed assault takes 15 minutes, corresponding, exactly, with Bin Laden’s real-life capture, his quick and unexpected demise.



IF THESE MOVING IMAGES share a perspective, it’s that of the forecaster: the person who controls the broadcast. Each employs the convention of realism to distend the myopia of real life. “September 11, 2001 was a day of unprecedented shock,” states the Executive Summary of the 9/11 Commission report. “The attacks of 9/11 were the biggest surprise in American history,” echoes George Packer. No one, in other words, saw the violence coming.

*United 93*, however, attempts to prove otherwise. “The big difference between this flight and the other three, of course,” writes Brendan O’Neill in a review for *Spiked*, “is that the passengers sensed what was going to happen.” The hijackers tasked with flying 93 were the only ones who missed their target that day, a malfunction lauded as victory and attributed to the victims of the crash, who, in death, became heroes. They saw what most Americans couldn’t, an impending attack, and prompted its arrest. If the assumption is that this foresight was unique—the thing that differentiated this flight from the rest, these passengers from normal civilians—it follows that anticipation, the sensibility in which

possible futures are felt as real in the present, can be manipulated as a tool of national security.

In their discussion of the temporal politics of emergency, Professors Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy and Adele E. Clarke write that anticipation “gives speculation the authority to act in the present.” Anticipatory regimes—political systems in which the *actual* is displaced by the *speculative*—“offer a future that may or may not arrive, but is always uncertain and yet is necessarily coming and so therefore always demanding a response.” The looming attack “sets the conditions of possibility for action in the present.” Civilians gather blunt knives, like a militia. They act as if the emergency has already arrived.

Most Americans, so it goes, didn’t feel a sense of emergency, and that’s why they suffered. In the Executive Summary of the 9/11 Commission compiled by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, officials lament this miscalculation: “We did not grasp the magnitude of a threat that had been gathering over time... this was a failure of policy, management, capability, and—above all—a failure of imagination.” Considering what was not predicted, they continue, “suggests possible ways to institutionalize imagination,” a project whose immediate aim is to instruct Americans to foresee their own death. But the 9/11 Commission is charged with providing tools for national security, not masochism, and so it follows that this prescribed reimagining is meant to be recuperative: It makes the possibility of attack feel real, yes, but only to galvanize defense. The anticipatory mode being institutionalized, then, isn’t one that predicts the perfect attack, but one that cements the possibility of perfect intelligence.

Real time offers a corrective; it encourages viewers to more responsibly make-believe. When applied to nationalist portrayals of attack, real time enacts a politics of presumption whose affective qualities are twofold. Viewers are encouraged, on one hand, to suspend disbelief: to indulge, if only momentarily, in the fantasy of an attack thwarted, a nation kept secure. On the other, they’re encouraged to believe fully in the powers of speculation: to understand future attacks as necessarily real, and looming, in order

to justify precautionary violence in the present.

When a civilian goes to the movies, she is presumed to relinquish subjectivity. But when the movie she chooses tells the story of a terrorist attack unfolding in real time, her panoptic vision, or ability to see danger as it approaches without fear of being harmed, mimics a superpower: surveillance. Like most networks of policing and imprisonment, surveillance is predictive: The state justifies its reach by codifying the anticipation of a possible catch. When asked why Guantanamo prisoners were being held without trial, for example, Secretary Rumsfeld answered that if they were not restrained, they were sure to kill again. The War on Terror, writes Judith Butler, “justifies itself endlessly in relation to the spectral infinity of its enemy.”

Like most filmic devices, real time postures as truth. And like most versions of the truth, it demands to be experienced live. But when the live experience is September 11 and the counterattacks launched in its name, bearing witness feels a lot like propaganda, or being made party to a regime that insists, despite all evidence, on the resilience of its sovereignty. The violence, put simply, gets to be a fiction. And if fiction is a kind of myth, something that can be manipulated to shine with a veneer of truth, then the promise of this particular fiction is what the real event, September 11, disproved: the triumph of a white nationalist agenda.



WHAT IS SO FRUSTRATING about these movies is being made spectator to white people’s delusions, the fantasy that they’re in control. They’re not in control. They do not have their shit together. Jack Bauer of *24*, for example, loses his wife, contracts a deadly virus, gets fired. Maya, the CIA analyst charged with gathering intelligence on Bin Laden, yells repeatedly at her coworkers, whom she believes are not doing enough to ensure Bin Laden’s capture; she takes a Sharpie to her boss’s window when

he doesn't do as he's promised, keeping track of each day that passes without action. In *United 93*, the chief of air traffic control hears screams coming from the cockpit. *We have no control*, he announces. *This is a national emergency*. The passengers, meanwhile, are trying to *take control*. *You've gotta get ahold of the controls. Get him off the controls*.

White people operate under the illusion that they're in control, which is why they get defensive when individuals who are supposedly under that illusory control recognize the delusion for what it is: racism. If real time obscures lines of power—normalizing both the anticipation of attack and the imperative to keep white nationalism secure—live streaming elucidates power's perforations, the ways in which white sovereignty is always already unreal.

Before police officers shot and killed 23-year-old Korryn Gaines, they filed—and were granted—an emergency request with Facebook and Instagram to deactivate her accounts, taking her live-stream video of the confrontation offline. Her followers were encouraging her to resist arrest. They were trying, in other words, to control the situation. According to Baltimore County Police Chief James Johnson, the spectators were getting in the way. They were ruining “the integrity of the negotiation process” by eliciting a future in which the police failed to exercise power. The anticipatory mode being acted upon, in other words, was one that predicted the preservation of black life. Police huffed the stream and took control of the situation, the negotiation, Korryn's body. They killed the woman whom black viewers were assembling to protect.

When live-streams of black pain can be used to invigorate the power of the police, the state likes to tune in. On July 12, when the black victim of a shooting uploaded footage of his black aggressor on Facebook Live, U.S. Marshals watched the video, issued seven felony warrants, and then tracked down and apprehended the suspect while he rode his hoverboard. Although the investigation is ongoing, authorities have not asked Facebook to remove the video.

Live videos of black suffering choked the internet this summer. Korryn Gaines filmed

the events that preceded her murder; Diamond Lavish Reynolds live-streamed footage of her boyfriend's unconscious body after police shot him four times; bystanders filmed the police-shooting of Alton Sterling and uploaded it to Facebook and Instagram, where it played automatically, on feeds, for weeks. This is not a simulation: Black and brown people suffer daily. Our pain is played live and on loop.

Real time simulates the immediacy of black suffering to make white hurt—and its compulsory complement, white healing—feel live. Black people are hurting, but because our pain is made into spectacle, we rarely get the healing we need. The state codifies the anticipation of black death; of white suffering, it demands remedial care.

White people like to think that their pain is exceptional, which is why they call it tragedy. September 11 was a tragedy, but it is not synonymous with white suffering. According to the Center for Disease Control, 215 black people and 445 non-black people of color died on 9/11. Undocumented migrants cleaned up these dead bodies, among others; they washed bones and ground them into powder. But because September 11 is rhetoricized as an attack on American sovereignty, and because American sovereignty is mythologized as white exceptionalism, the tragedy of that day is presumed to justify the ensuing panic, or, as White America likes to call it, precaution. “Sovereignty,” writes Butler, “extends its own power precisely through the tactical and permanent deferral of the law itself.”

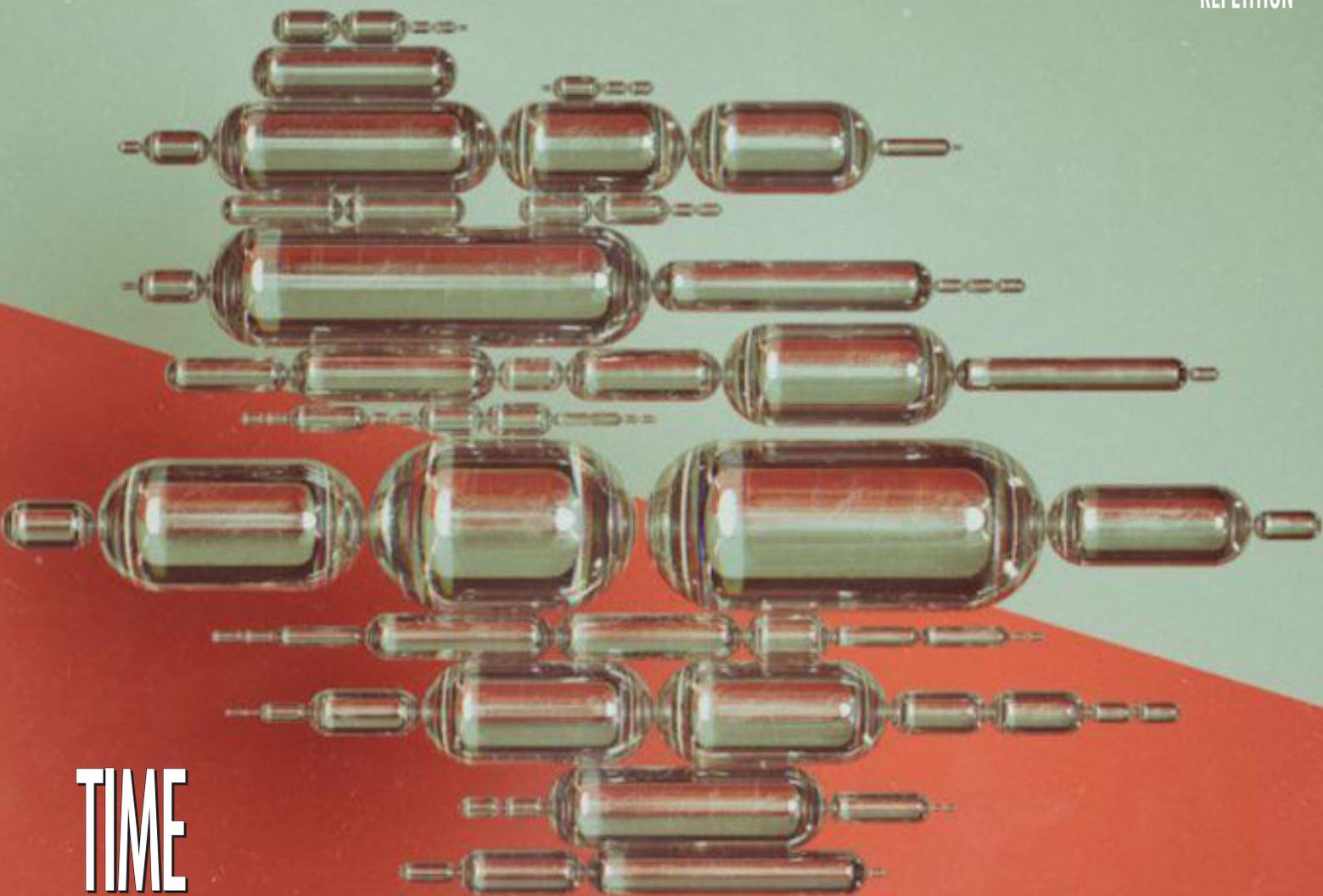
The events of September 11—aggregated and replayed, as if to appear live—amalgamate to form the single lens through which American grief is named and visualized. But the stream is just an imitation. Here is how the real thing goes. White suffering replays itself in our image, and uses this mimicry to justify the thing that hurts us: the state, its reach, a terror called resilience. •

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# TIME CAPSULES

Speed is of the essence,  
but the essence of value  
isn't speed by FUCK THEORY

IN ONE OF my favorite scenes from *Absolutely Fabulous*, Patsy Stone, the fashion editor and professional drug user played by the inimitable Joanna Lumley, comes to work in the morning and goes to a light box to look at contact sheets. She grabs a loupe, but instead of putting it to her eye and carefully examining the images she puts it up to her nose, runs it across the top row of the contact sheet, and sniffs loudly.

It's a sight gag first and an in-joke about the fashion world second, but it's also, maybe, a metaphor for the complex, ridiculous relationship between labor and drug use. A metonym? A parable. It's complicated.

With drugs, as with sex, we've spent much of the 2000s publicly unraveling a set of naturalized correspondences with drugs. Just as "sex ed" taught us that promiscuity was a hell-bound domain of the STI-riddled outcast, so DARE taught us that the kind of people who "do" drugs are not the kind of people who go to college and have careers. With the advent of AIDS, especially, pleasure became regimented by an Old

Testament fear of pollution in which drug use and promiscuous sex were two faces of the same moral decay. Drug use, like promiscuity, was prominently antithetical to family, wealth, and all the other social hallmarks of success. Except it turns out that plenty of housewives love anal, and cocaine is ubiquitous among doctors completing their residency. Allegedly. The old oppositions just won't do anymore.

“Drugs,” as a category, is inadequate and dissatisfying. The same substance can be perfectly legal in some places and times and criminal in others (ketamine). Some substances are “scheduled” completely out of proportion to their effects and dangers, like marijuana, which remains formally a “Schedule I” drug despite being legal in much of the U.S. Others, like alcohol, are completely legal and absurdly widespread despite their socially awkward and often fatal effects. There's no meaningful correspondence between “drug” and “medication,” either. Ginger, available at many bodegas and most supermarkets, is better for clearing your sinuses than any number of pills you need a government-issued photo ID to buy at Walgreens. Is coca a drug if you just chew the leaves without processing them?

The questions get even sloppier if we define “productivity drugs” as substances that in some way enhance our capacity to act or ability to accomplish a task or tasks. By that measure, the banana you have before you go to the gym is a productivity-enhancing drug. That's silly, right? Okay, but what if the potassium from 12 bananas were extracted and put into pill form? Would that be a performance-enhancing drug? It's tempting to compose a theory of drug *forms* instead of drug use. Pills and needles call to mind “drugs” immediately but the two most widespread and acceptable drugs in our society are both usually *drinks*—caffeine and alcohol. Back when opium and cocaine were widespread and

acceptable they were often purchased from the pharmacist as “tinctures.” Perhaps the idea of a liquid is more socially palatable than the idea of a compressed powder. But I digress.

“Clearly,” wrote Gilles Deleuze in his 1978 essay “Two Questions On Drugs,” “no one knows what to do with drugs, not even the users. But no-one knows how to talk about them, ei-

## The prescription drugs that are most socially acceptable are also those that maximize our ability to live on time

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ther.” Neither of these statements turn out to be quite true. With drugs, as with sex, what people do and what people say rarely seem to correspond. This is perhaps because no issue or idea other than sex is situated at the intersection of *so many* overlapping and often competing systems of regimentation, classification, and prohibition. A “scientific” or “medical” categorization of drugs does not have the same agenda as a juridical or penal one; and by the same measure, the drugs that encourage and facilitate social well-being may not always be the drugs that encourage and facilitate your *own* well-being. All this is complicated by the fact that what we think of as distinct fields are often clouded by each other's clout. Faulty research can lead to widespread modifications of legal and investigative procedures, as the recent invalidation of FBI hair “tests” showed; political pressures can have great impact on “scientific knowledge.”

If drugs parallel sex in the complexity and self-contradiction of their conception, use, and

prohibition, perhaps that's because, like sex and sexuality, "drugs" span an enormous range of effects and activities, some immensely beneficial to the social order and others considerably less so. Like few other forces or concepts in our social existence, "sex" and "drugs" exemplify activity as a locus of will and agency. Simply put, it is impossible—as of now—for our society to continue to exist without both sex and drugs. And the forces that organize our lives have not—as of now—figured out how to give us access to sex and drugs to the degree necessary without also giving us access in ways that can and often do destroy us and extinguish our social utility. As of now, you remain, with few exceptions, the final adjudicator of moderation in your relationship to sex and to drugs. Situated at the intersection of subjective agency and systemic power, both concepts open onto the entire range of questions of what it means to be individual thinking entities in a social field. And in late capitalism, what it means to be an individual thinking entity is first and foremost existence as a laboring body exploited for its productive capacities.



DISCUSSING THE ADVENT OF Taylorism—or “scientific” labor management—the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote in the 1930s that “the American phenomenon [is] the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and of man ... Taylor is in fact expressing with brutal cynicism the purpose of American society—developing in the worker to the highest degree the automatic and mechanical attitudes, breaking up the old psycho-physical nexus of qualified professional work.” Technologies we might summarize as “drugs” have played a fundamental role in the 20th- and now 21st-century process of reshaping the human into a productive machine. Modern capitalism is unthinkable without the production, distribu-

tion, and consumption of caffeine, which enables millions of people to arrive at work at roughly the same time and have their brains switched on by the time they have to start “producing,” not to mention offering a crucial legal bump later in the day when the body’s internal cycle of waking and rest is often subordinate to the contractual obligations of employment.

The progress of capitalism for at least a hundred years now has corresponded with an increasingly successful and inventive system for regimenting the time, labor, expenditure, and corporeality of the worker. This regimentation includes modifying when people wake up, when they sleep, when they relax, and when they eat, not to mention when they fuck and shit. The social value and function of all drugs, including those we sometimes call “productivity drugs,” are closely linked with temporality and productive labor: Time is always a factor. The inability of the addict to “function in society” isn’t a feature of an innate moral failure so much as a symptom of the divergent relation to temporality that the drug user experiences. You’re up late, or you’re nodding off, or you need a fix, or you have to leave work to score, or your dealing doesn’t come on time, or you sleep in because you’re hung over, or you see pink elephants on the ceiling for 14 hours straight. With drugs as with sexual deviation, acceptability is linked with an ability to continue fulfilling your social obligations, to not damage yourself too visibly, and to avoid embarrassing yourself or anyone else *too* much. That includes, in many professions, letting your boss or your co-workers see just how much effort you’re putting into effortless success. On reflection, it’s astounding what proportion of those three imperatives has to do with doing things and being places *at the right time*. Be at work on time and get your work done on time and finish at the gym fast enough so you get to the concert on time and get to bed on time so you can be in the shower on time in the morning and get that lump checked in time before it turns into something and get your teeth cleaned regularly and respond neither too fast nor too slow to things people say and above all know when to stop, know how much is enough.

Morality, it turns out, is primarily a relationship between time and the body. It's this relationship with time which is affected by virtually every substance we might think of as a "drug." The government's "scheduling" process is less concerned with lethality, health, or risk than with the relationship of controlled substances to value-production, a half-scientific, half-ideological effort that is aided and abetted by the ad-buying and lobbying power of various drug-makers. The prescription drugs that are most socially acceptable are also those that maximize our ability to live on time in every sense of the word, whether that means coffee to get to the office on time or a laxative to get your bowels moving on time or a little bit of powder to keep you going for another hour until your friends are done having a good time. At the average social event, the fascinating sole exception to this generalization is alcohol, which deserves a separate essay regarding its relation to time and labor.

As the Human Machine Project progresses, the old correspondences of morality bend from necessity to avoid breaking. If you hang out around pill-takers of any stripe, really, you will eventually hear "Ambien stories." These stories vary wildly in content but uniformly involve various acts of sleep-activity, from walking to the convenience store for cigarettes even though you don't smoke to cooking a Thanksgiving meal in the middle of the night in July. These stories aren't remarkable for the "wildness" of their content, which tends to be weird rather than spectacular. There are plenty of other drugs that make you act equally odd—PCP straight-up

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**Drugs, as we're  
prescribed them,  
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doing anyway**

makes certain people psychotic—but you don't randomly hear "LSD stories" at dinner parties; nor do you often hear stories about other sleeping pills. What makes Ambien odd is that its effects are surprisingly varied *for a legally prescribed medication*. Its effects can run counter to a pharmaceutical definition of productivity: Drugs, as we're prescribed them, are for things we're supposed to be doing anyway, whether that's sleeping or working or exercising. Ambien is not illicit, and it rarely makes you do illicit things. It does, however, lead you to do things when you're not supposed to be doing them, which making it highly unusual for a socially-acceptable and widely prescribed drug.

When I was a graduate student, I felt incredibly "productive" if I sat up all night reading a book by one of my advisors. I felt considerably less productive if I sat up all night reading graphic novels. It is absolutely not a question of "production" in the sense of *making* things: You're supposed to take an Adderall to finish your homework, not to make 7,000 origami frogs in different color combinations. Which isn't to say that you couldn't drop out of school and start an Etsy shop for origami frogs; but that would be to translate what you do while on drugs back into the sign system of social exchange value, effectively eliminating any qualitative trace of the drug. The difference between regular frogs and frogs you made on Adderall is purely a difference of quantity: a fundamental social requirement of a "productivity drug" is that it leave no trace of its product, neither in the bloodstream of an Olympian nor in the addled syntax of a 4 a.m. sophomore essay. What we demand of "productivity drugs" over and above other legal drugs like alcohol and (basically) weed is a transparency of quality. What a productivity drug is supposed to produce is an abstract and purely qualitative "more." It isn't supposed to alter our behavior; it's supposed to increase our capacities.

We are, alas, finite beings. We are finite in body, limited in extension. We are finite in perception, limited in mind. We are finite in life expectancy, limited in time. We can be awake for only a finite number of hours before sleep becomes necessary; we can only burn so many

calories before food becomes necessary. So fundamental is finitude to the human existence that the greatest philosopher who ever lived, Baruch Spinoza, made human finitude a cornerstone of his flawless metaphysical system, the *Ethics*, setting the finitude of humanity in glorious counterpoint to the flawless infinity of substance itself, *Deus sive Natura*. Finitude is the fundamental nature of the human condition. And god damn are there a lot of emails to respond to within the framework of that finitude.

How do we make more people do more things in less time? This is the problem with which the forces we can most easily designate as “Taylorist” have struggled for centuries, always in the shadow of the human body’s limitations, and which can be divided into two linked parts. One part was confronted in the first wave of the Industrial Revolution with the rise of automation and machine labor: *How do we reduce the time-cost of the productive action?* That is, how do we get X amount of labor in Y amount of time instead of Z amount of time, which it used to take? The other part was confronted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the Taylorists and Fordists whose primary question was not only reducing the time-cost of productive action but *reducing the amount of time lost to unproductive action*.

We like to think of perpetual distractedness as a fundamentally modern condition, but a certain degree of “lost time” is the inherent nature not only of labor but of life. A certain part of every day will be lost to pausing, to blinking, to pissing, to eating, to walking between the bedroom and the kitchen. As the basic ratio between the amount to do and the time to do it in continues to skew, modernity has invented for us a battery of techniques to address these two basic dimensions of the problem. And directly at the intersection of these two imperatives, doing things faster and wasting less time, are so-called “productivity drugs.” Behind the widespread use of these substances is the fantasy of the pure, undefinable, but ultimately quantifiable *more*, the pure capacity.

But this dream belies the necessary chain of cause and effect. A banana before the gym might

boost your performance, but it won’t boost anything if you don’t then go to the gym. The same is true of taking Ritalin if you don’t then do your homework. We are once again left with the basic problem of the limited individual mind, forced by the exigencies of reality to make decisions incessantly.



“ALL DRUGS,” SAYS DELEUZE, “involve speeds, modifications of speed, thresholds of perception, forms and movements.” We’ve already considered form and movement, however ironically. The fundamental questions here seem to be less of categorization or legality than of *speed and perception*. We can narrow our object to *those technologies of speed and perception which are consumed by the body in their use* (I call a technology anything that we know to increase the capacities of the body; it is, in its broadest sense, a means of doing things). A car is a technology of speed, but you put yourself in the car and not the car in yourself. Oculus Rift is a technology of perception, but it isn’t consumed in use nor does it enter the body.

We do many things with drugs, on drugs, and to drugs. But one of the things drugs do to us is show us the ways in which consciousness—and by extension subjectivity—complicates the process of quantification that stabilizes and organizes our shared social reality. This is where the question of speed comes in.

The quantifying logic of contemporary capitalism assumes a fundamental commensurability between the things we use to measure value. Time, money, and even the measurements by which objects—like energy, mass, volume, and speed—are quantified are symbols that help us compare unlike things with a nominal degree of consistency. You can only pay someone by the hour if you have some way to measure hours; you can only measure hours if there’s some recognized standard for their duration.

These networks of overlapping convention

not only help us measure and make sense of the world around us, they *are* the world around us, insofar as without them, we cannot conceive of the system of flows and exchanges that is global late capitalism.

We live in a world of relentless correspondences, constantly translating between measures of value to give coherence to our experiences and perceptions. But those fixed relations of value do not determine the world, they merely struggle to describe it, and our consciousness always strains to grasp the world more precisely than standardized units of measurement can allow. An hour is always the same length, yet an hour in the park on a Sunday seems to breeze by while an hour at work on a Monday ticks past so slowly that you could swear the clock was frozen. That feeling of sheer impossibility at the stubbornness of measurement is the sensation of the difference between time and duration: time being the division of events into discrete units of identical length, and duration being the condition of perception. Continuity is pure temporality; duration is behind time, it is infinity itself. To perceive a strain on continuity is to feel time overcoding and compressing duration, even as it resists. That last hour of work on a Friday crawls with painful slowness, but it's not over until the clock tells you it is, even if you're absolutely convinced it's been 90 minutes.

Your relationship to the clock on your desk has essentially three parts: your own sense of temporality; your own actions; and a social sense of temporality. What drugs do, to put it simply, is chop off one corner of that triangle. A "productive" drug is supposed to remove from the equation your own perception of temporality: It is supposed to make your body's action accord with a social construction of temporality. An "unproductive" drug, on the other hand, reaffirms the link between your body's activities and your own perception of temporality, ignoring or

overriding the social sense of time. The problem, of course, is that it is often the very same substance which can erode the usual triangulation in both directions. Popping that Adderall might help you get work done during that last Friday hour in the office, but it might also lead you to compulsively rearrange the icons on your desktop for 55 minutes of that hour.

There was a brief time when email was an

## What used to be specific events or activities, like answering emails, have gradually become ongoing processes

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activity, singular, like writing a letter or knitting a sweater or going to the gym. For me that window was roughly from 1996 to 2001 or 2002. That was the period during which email was something I sat down to do once or twice a day, sometimes once every three days. It was, with virtually no exception, a voluntary thing: nothing crucial or professional or legal or official happened over email back then. More importantly, email was a fundamentally *limited* thing. Some days there might be a few more messages than normal; some days a particularly heartfelt or exciting moment might prompt a longer-than-usual missive. But by and large, email was something you sat down to do and could finish in one sitting. That is no longer the case. Most of us check our email multiple times a day; many of us receive continuous, automatic notifications as new emails arrive. "Inbox zero" has long since ceased to be a daily reality and has become an aspirational goal. Email is one of the easiest examples of a widespread general phenomenon: With the assistance of portable

digital technology (okay, just say “smartphone”) what used to be specific events or activity have gradually become ongoing *processes*.

The thing with processes is that they don’t correspond to specific moments. When does a process happen? All the time. And as more and more of what used to be time-and-place-specific activities become all-the-time processes, it becomes increasingly impossible to alleviate the tension in your relationship to the clock, the feeling that things don’t quite line up right. In other words, as the affordances of modern science “disrupt” existing limitations on exchange by breaking it down into processes, it also makes increasingly untenable the ideological conventions that help convince us we’re in the right place at the right time. We’re not medicating to get more shit done; we’re medicating to get rid of that increasingly convincing sense that we’re really not supposed to be here doing this *at all*. What does it mean to “speed up” something that is a continuous process rather than an individual action taking a fixed amount of time? It means nothing but to overclock, to intensify; it can’t ever mean to end or conclude.



WE DO NOT YET know what the body can do. There’s no way to be sure what the upper and lower limits of its possible accomplishments are; there’s no way to prove that a feat would have been impossible without chemical enhancement. The thing with the abstract “more” promised by the fantasy of productivity drugs is that “more” is always potential until expressed in an action. Actions, however, occur within certain thresholds of identity and difference. It can be a little different every time, but it has to be similar enough to be the same action. So while the quantified “more” of productivity drugs is never a definite amount until after the fact, there is a finitude to the range of intensity an action can encompass before becoming another action. A pen can only cross the paper so fast without tearing it. A

baseball bat can only hit the chest so hard before breaking the ribs. Drug use is experienced as a modification of capacity within certain parameters; the basic consistency of these parameters is what makes it “the same” experience even though the intensity of the experience can be divergent in relation to itself. This is the variability of the experience.

We need to introduce a third axis of analysis along with *speed* and *perception: variability*. Consider the aforementioned psychoactives, acid and shrooms, whose effects are a little less predictable than weed, coke, or even ecstasy. You might trip quietly in a corner, making you weird but bearable. Or you might freak the fuck out, making you socially dysfunctional. The rigor of normalized social behavior in a particular group and the variability of an acceptable substance’s effects tend to be inversely proportionate.

What “productivity drugs” *do*, in short, is alter the perceived relationship between subjective time and universal time. Of the three axes, *perception*, *speed*, and *variability*, they are substances that have limited variability and largely alter the perception of a single relationship, that of consciousness to time. “Productivity drugs” are those drugs whose effects are largely on the axis of speed: They make you do things faster. But because they are designed to make you do what you were already going to do, they can’t ensure in any meaningful way that the “productivity” that results from them is consistent with monetary forms of value-production. That’s because the relationship between productive labor and social value is complicated by the niggling insistence of something we tend to call *consciousness*: the set of drives and impulses that you understand as your own, as well, “you.”

The use of drugs in human society is as old as our society itself, but it has always corresponded to the logic of the ritual, of the event. The extreme drunkenness on New Year’s Eve; the three-day ayahuasca retreat; the one time a year you do acid in the middle of the desert: these all correspond with ceremonial or at least socially acknowledged opportunities to disrupt the rhythm of daily life and its accompanying mores. Alcohol and ayahuasca and LSD can be

*qualitatively* disruptive (they can alter perception radically) to the precise degree to which the person who consumes them can afford to detach from the *qualitative* system of continuous value-production for the duration of the disruption. That's why more and more rich people are crowding Burning Man; who else can afford the time off and the cost of travel? The ubiquity of productivity drugs, on the other hand, is determined by their capacity to affect quantities and *presumably* leave qualities untouched. To fulfill that function, they must be as predictable in their effects as possible; they must affect speed, but leave variability and perception largely untouched.

What we want from drugs, from a social perspective, is certainty: We want to know we'll be able to get all this work done; we want to know our roll will peak at the same time as our friends when we go out. The logic of temporal social organization is much the same. What drugs give us, instead, is capacity: an extension of our abilities and our range, whether that means the range of motor actions our body can perform or the range of social settings we are comfortable experiencing ourselves in. What drugs do to and for us has almost entirely to do with the material world, with its relative speeds and perceptions, but what we *want* from drugs has almost entirely to do with the mind. We want drugs to alleviate our anxiety. Instead they increase our capacity to do what we're anxious about.

Meanwhile, for all the immense labyrinth of quantification that surrounds drugs, certainty and precision in their use remain under the purview of consciousness. You have to remember to take your birth control for it to work; you have to decide how much Adderall you need that day to get shit done and how much will leave you tapping your feet and looking at your nails for an hour and a half; and you have to remember to take the fucking Molly when everyone else does and not be the greedy bitch doing a line alone in the bathroom at the pregame and finding out 45 minutes later everyone took theirs while you were in there. Drugs are meted out to use in what are probably the most precise units of measurement we encounter in daily life. What other sub-

stances do you need exactly 25 milligrams of? The massive discursive and industrial apparatus that brings us this precision is unable for all its efforts and threats and promises to uncouple the effects of its measurements from the vicissitudes and needs of human nature.

Even when some of those vicissitudes and needs are met or matched by activity, we have another problem: We still don't have a way to fully uncouple the activities undertaken by a body with enhanced capacities from the deliberate determination of individual consciousness. *Someone's* individual consciousness. You could be made into a pure flesh automaton, but someone or something would still have to tell you what to do, and you would still have to be able to do it. What we are experiencing as a "lack of productivity" is not an inability to perform labor so much as an inability to determine which form of productive action we're even supposed to be performing in the first place. The *pharmakon* we are prescribed enhances the capacities of the body; the problem we seek to address is the weight of encroaching anxiety on the mind. Which is why, with all our productivity drugs, we still manage to be less productive than ever: because buying bigger speakers doesn't improve the sound if all that's playing is static.



ONCE, IN THE VAGUE long-ago between prehistory and modernity, time was secondary to activity and event. Before winter was the months between December and March, it was the cold, dead part of the year. Before there were 24 hours in a day there were alternating phases of light and dark. It is not the fact of quantified time that gives rise to seasons, cycles, and events: It is the recurrence of events at what we perceive to be fixed intervals that gives rise to the idea of blank, empty, divisible time. The fact that different cultures have different numbers of days in a month and in a year—the fact that some calendars are lunar and some are solar—is plentiful indication

of the fact that quantified time is nothing but our imprecise effort to precisely divide and measure the intervals at which we experience cyclic events, and not a fixed fact of existence. Before the advent of quantified time, “work” was something you did when appropriate to the activity, not when the clock said so. A fisherman went to work at the hour best suited to catching fish; a baker timed his baking to match when people would show up in the morning expecting bread; a person with a seasonal job had nothing to do in between seasons. But as the web of translatable quantification spreads across the world, activities come to align not with our perception of the world’s time but our idea of social time.

Productivity drugs don’t take a “normal” or “average” person and “boost” their productivity. That is not their nature. Their true nature, miserably notwithstanding, is to struggle to patch up the gap between our body’s capacities and the social idea of those capacities. Productivity drugs may incidentally help us make things; but they are *prescribed* to help us resolve the cognitive tension between what we’re doing and what we think we *should* be doing. Productivity drugs, in short, are better ethics through chemistry.

The question whether one *should* take productivity drugs is an asinine one, to be honest. *Should* we be driving cars? No, we should be preserving the planet. But that is a scope of ethical speculation considerably beyond our current purposes. Instead we can conclude by returning one last time to the question of *cost*. As with most cures demanded by anxiety rather than by the body’s need, productivity drugs incur costs that are often hidden. That’s the cost of doing business with an entity that was stupid enough to evolve the capacity for surviving despite continuous anxiety: It might be so worried about getting a solid day’s work done that it will spend two or three days tracking down the drugs to do it. The time you spend worrying someone will find out you’re taking something and the time you may or may not spend worrying whether you’re taking too much are also examples of labor time lost to anxiety, potentially defeating the purpose of the drug in the first place. People are pretty ridiculous that way. And meanwhile

all that capacity, all that abstract “more,” is sitting there, waiting to be used while you worry someone will notice.

Take “productivity drugs” if you want. Just keep an eye on two basic things: How happy are you with the “product” you’re producing, and what is the *sum cost* of the drug? That doesn’t just mean what you pay out of pocket when you pick up your prescription; it also means: How much time do you spend trying to track it down? How many days are you hung over and incapacitated after you go crazy with it? If Ritalin lets you do five hours of work in three hours, but you spend four hours the next morning rehydrating in the dark because your head hurts, that pill has actually cost you an hour. At that point, the only thing that still counts is the specificity of the actions accomplished in those three hours of peak speed craze. Was the work too urgent to wait? Was the payment higher if it was finished sooner? Were you really really excited and really wanted to get it done and email a picture of it finished to someone? Did you find the conversation at that party absolutely fascinating and work a half-day of jaw pain from all the teeth grinding the next morning? These are the subjective dimension of value that are not only impossibly and absolutely subjective but also irreducibly contextual.

The question of drug use will never be separate from the questions of agency and of the ability of the mind to rationally adjudicate its own best interest; the anxiety induced in us by these questions can be alleviated but not answered by using drugs. In short, my answer to the question “Should I take Adderall and do X” rarely differs from my answer to the question “Should I do X.” If you shouldn’t do it, you shouldn’t do it faster or longer, either. And if you *do* do it, whether you should be doing it or not, make sure to stay hydrated, get plenty of rest, and eat a banana. •

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*Fuck Theory* is a New York-based scholar and critical thinker. Not critical like critique, but critical like don’t leave home without it. For more, there’s Tumblr.

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# WATCH AGAIN

When going through your binge-viewing history feels like replaying your own serial domestic drama **by LYDIA KIESLING**

**F**IRST USED THE Netflix “Viewing Activity” page in 2013, when *My Little Pony* kept showing up under “Recently Watched.” After confirming that some unknown person was doing unauthorized viewing of *My Little Pony*, I changed the password and closed the log, finding it sinister that all my viewing history was contained in one irrefutable record. My attitude toward my own metrics was, roughly speaking, that anything there was to really know about myself

was something I didn’t really want to know.

Several life events have taken place in the intervening years. The most significant is that I had a baby, an experience which involved an unexpected amount of data analysis. First I wanted to become pregnant, so I spent time scrutinizing a calendar, trying to draw conclusions about my body from inscrutable signs. Once I was pregnant, there was data everywhere. My blood was run through an algorithm that spat out the

odds of calamity. Glucose was measured, and the beats of the fetal heart. Data brought order to the chaos of the baby's early weeks, when you are supposed to keep track of how much it is eating and for how long, how many diapers, how many scoops of formula or which breast.

The baby also caused me to quit my job, not to spend more time with it, but because I found my particular arrangement of working in an office and caring for a baby and writing on the internet untenable. So I started working from home as an editor and a freelance writer, and my baby goes to day-care, but for slightly less time than she once did. Now that I don't go to an office I'm convinced my acquaintances don't really believe I'm working; sometimes I don't believe it myself. My work calendar and my home calendar are the same, I notice: I record a doctor's appointment, a deadline, an informational interview, an X where I might have ovulated. I've become cautiously curious about some of the trails I leave behind. As I consider the new topography of my mostly homebound days, I decide to return to the Netflix Viewing Activity.

Since I've been home it feels like I've been watching more TV. It's not actually a TV, but my laptop, which is also where I work; the corporeality behind our everyday phrases changes at a slower pace than the technology we use ("I don't own a TV" is an absurdly threadbare humble-brag in 2016). Our mementos signify differently too, in the 21st century. I was surprised first to see the Netflix log as a sentimental object, wrought from years of my own life. Pleasingly, the page scrolls all the way down—no clicking through—to the account's creation in 2007, when my now-husband and I moved in together. It is kind, as archives go—much gentler than,

god forbid, your old emails. It's a map marked with pins: Here's where we bought a discount projector from Costco to watch movies on the wall (*The Outlaw Josey Wales*). Here's where I made our wedding invitations (*Lost*). Here's where our baby was six days old (*Black Mirror*, episode one). This last is especially poignant. I want nothing more than to remember those early days, and I will take any road that leads me to them. The Netflix log does it; I see the three of

## I was surprised to see the Netflix log as a sentimental object, wrought from years of my own life. It is kind, as archives go

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us on the couch in the dark, the projection flickering on the wall. The baby lies on me; I drink wine; I feel everything very keenly. I have a little lock of her hair in a box, but memory doesn't adhere to it exactly the same way.

How many of our future mementos, I wonder, will be digital, and how will we interpret and store them? The terse iPhone Notes retained in my laptop grant access to surprisingly vivid memories I'm desperate to keep. A list of names we thought about. The timing of contractions. The night my milk came in. Her first fever and what we did about it. I switched phones recently and I can't bring myself to get rid of the old device because it has the stupid Baby Tracker app on it, with which I dutifully noted her first weeks of eating, sleeping, excreting. People of our parents' generation never tire of telling us that today's par-

ents are distracted, overstimulated, overburdened with information. And yes, I dislike the idea of tracking my movements toward future improvement. But I love these random access memories—these maps of days otherwise lost to time.

Less dreamy, from Netflix I also learned that in the last five months, which is how long I have been working from home, I have watched 196 episodes of *The Office*. I have watched 28 episodes of *Mad Men* and 34 episodes of *Arrested Development*. These add up to about 106 hours of TV, not including those things I watched at night with my husband using other means (Amazon Prime or someone's HBO Go). In the six months prior, when I worked in an office, I logged just 61 hours on a variation of the same shows, with some *Parks and Recreation* thrown in.

Certainly when you work from home there are more opportunities for dicking around. But my truly wasted time is accounted for: Like most freelancers, the way I dick around during work time is to go on Twitter and feel jealous, whereas if I'm watching Netflix, I'm simultaneously doing housework. Specifically, I am folding laundry, cooking food, doing dishes, changing the cat litter, vacuuming, spot-cleaning the carpet, looking at random pieces of paper and deciding where they should go. I am organizing the closet. I am putting puzzle pieces back inside the puzzle boxes and stacking the puzzle boxes against the wall. The only way I can do these things, it seems, is with the soothing tones of *The Office* droning in the back—71 hours' worth of it.

The amount of time doesn't seem depraved, but I feel depraved, primarily because I have

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**I'm accustomed to  
thinking about tasks  
as things you  
complete and forget  
about, like films**

seen every single one of these episodes before—many, many times. I can anticipate too many lines, with parts of my brain I could have used for so many other things. I like to reread books, and that doesn't feel wrong. But *The Office* is dumb, I think. Why do I watch it so much? While the age of streaming video has ushered in the age of seemingly limitless new shows to watch, it has also guaranteed me an infinite viewing loop, an entire series now behaving as an extended Vine. The smorgasbord that Netflix et al. make available has paradoxically caused me to watch *more* of *less* programming.

Just as I refer to “watching Netflix” as “watching TV,” so, evidently, do old metaphors and patterns assert themselves in content. When I think about women watching TV and doing housework, I think of soap operas, women standing in front of the ironing board while some drama plays out on a screen. In 1979, USC professor Tania Modleski faulted her peers for ignoring soap operas as a rich site of information both about narrative practices and women's lives in her essay “The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas.” She found something essentially feminine in the form, “a unique narrative pleasure” that accords “closely with the rhythms of women's lives in the home.” Critics, feminist and otherwise, had decried the thrall of women to the “progress without progression” represented by soaps, but Modleski found something to admire about the formal possibilities of neverendingness: Housewives were accustomed to a constant hum of activity that was constantly being interrupted, a constraint that soap operas had to work around and which they replicated in plot developments. “Like the (ideal) mother in the home,” she wrote, “we are kept interested in a number of events at once and are denied the luxury of a total and prolonged absorption.”

Modleski's essay is almost 40 years old, and the contours of my life—my particular combination of privilege and constraint—are very different than those of the women she describes. Nonetheless, I found curious resonance in the essay. The worst thing about housework, I always think, is that it doesn't end. No sooner have you made everything tidy than you dirty a dish, or

drop your laundry in the corner, leave a glass on a table. I'm accustomed to thinking about tasks as things you complete and forget about, like films. But the season of "finished" housework is vanishingly short, like the life of a gnat. You have to find a way to enjoy the process, or you are doomed to disappointment as you seek to enjoy its fleeting effects. It's a serial mini-drama, completely predictable, often maddening.

I was surprised to see the origins of the shows I watch in soap operas as Modleski describes them. She claimed in 1979 that "soap operas may be in the vanguard not just of TV art but of all popular narrative art," and this seems borne out in our century. Matt Zoller Seitz recently wrote that "all serialized dramas ultimately owe their existence to the daytime soap opera, an open-ended form." Modleski quotes another scholar, Horace Newcomb, who observes that serial soaps "offer us depictions of people in situations which grow and change over time, allowing for a greater 'audience involvement, a sense of becoming a part of the lives and actions of the characters they see.'" Certainly the Netflix log indicates an overall household drift away from movies to shows. (It's a long time since that first screening of *The Outlaw Josey Wales*.)

If today's seriality is a legacy of the soap opera, even the content seems to have recycled and repeated in curious ways. Modleski in 1979 listed some of the "most frequent themes" of daytime TV, which are spread around all over my go-to shows: "the great sacrifice" (Pam, also Jim); "the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse" (Pete and Trudy); "marrying her for her money, respectability" (Ken); "the unwed mother" (Angela, also Joan); "deceptions about the paternity of children" (Angela, Joan); "career vs. housewife" (Betty and Francine); "the

alcoholic woman" (Meredith). And what is *Arrested Development* if not a comic version of Modleski's charge that the soap opera presents "the viewer with a picture of a family which, though it is always in the process of breaking down, stays together no matter how intolerable its situation may get."

Seitz argued that the neverending drama "is being supplanted by stories that have more shape, more obvious beginnings and endpoints." This gestures, he posits, toward our need for finiteness in a chaotic world. I still cling to the endless shows, but it's in their repetition that

## Soap operas are a form suited to the rhythms of domestic labor, but I still feel guilty. As it happens, that is also a legacy of soap operas

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they bring me the most comfort. The care I feel for characters is amplified by the open-ended form; but perhaps speaking to Seitz's point, the not-caring, too, is amplified by the reassurance of foreknowledge, the relegation to background that repetition allows. It's the comfort of one kind of neverendingness combined with the comfort of another, one that I've imposed.

I know now, thanks to Modleski, that it is a form defined by and suited to the rhythms of domestic labor, but I still feel guilty about my particular method of consuming it. As it happens, the feeling of guilt is also a legacy of the soap opera days; it may, in fact, be integral to women's television consumption. Marsha Cassidy, in writes of a deliberate move by the television industry to reduce the distracted state that the soap opera format encouraged. Studios and ad-

vertisers worried that women's habit of watching television while doing light housework, as they once did with radio, reduced the opportunities to sell them things during commercial breaks. Studios found themselves "trapped between marketing the medium as a work companion for women during the day—and alarming advertisers—or furthering viewing habits that could be censured for promoting sloth and idleness in homemakers—by luring more women to the couch." Ultimately, money talked, and the couch, and its attendant sloth and idleness, was presented as a deserved indulgence: "All right, ladies, out of the kitchen, into the living room. Turn the TV set on now!" went one radio promo. But it was always laced with guilt: One NBC executive suspected "the major deterrent" to watching daytime shows was "the feeling of guilt it arouses."

Couch shame inflected the daytime viewing experience. Louise Spence, in *Watching Daytime Soap Operas*, paints a picture of researchers who invoke "images of the socially inept, the rejected, those with low self-worth or an incomplete identity: the psychologically needy. It is assumed that their lives are otherwise uneventful, unrewarding, or insufficient." The viewer is "captured by the evils of banality" represented by her soap opera "addiction." The women Spence interviewed for her book invariably spoke of their viewing habits as though they were taboo. The television was "trash," they told her, maybe because it was something they were doing when they could have been doing something else. I understand how they feel. On Reddit I find people like me: "Does anyone else just watch *The Office* on continuous loop?" (Yes.) "When binge-watching *The Office*, what episodes do you skip over?" ("Scott's Tots," "The Mafia," "Grief Counseling," "The Banker," "China.") I worry that the habit is the mark of a weak and ever-weakening character, or, most worryingly, of a sick one. From the "Depression" subreddit: "Does anyone else watch the same shows over and over again to find comfort in them?" (Yes.)

The *Atlantic* tells me that we re-watch for reasons of nostalgia, or self-discovery: "Reengaging with the same object, even just once, allows a reworking of experiences as consumers consider their own particular enjoyments and understand-

ings of choices they have made." When I think about the choices I've made, the TV themes I return to again and again seem somewhat on the nose, psychologically speaking. They highlight certain voids left by abdication from office life. I find myself drawn to Don Draper's forceful, unjust expressions of masculine professional power. "There's not one thing you've done here that I couldn't live without," I declaim to the cats while I fold laundry or send an editing email. I cringe when Betty's dad tells her, "You're a housecat. You're very important, and you have little to do." *The Office*, meanwhile, gives me an office, a highly problematic one like many offices of my experience. (Who will answer for Jan's character arc, a great crime against feminism? Why doesn't Pam finish that goddamn art program? Why does love, for Pam and Jim, mean the alternating sacrifice of their professional interests?)

I rearranged my day-to-day life because I wanted to be an "art monster," a basically self-explanatory term coined by Jenny Offill, but also because I wanted a serene home, reasonably clean, put to rights during the afternoon and enjoyed at night. I wanted a pediatrician appointment to not be a logistical clusterfuck. All cultural narratives point to the incompatibility of art monsters and domesticity, but I didn't care. So, like soap operas, like most women who would be art monsters, I am working within a particular set of circumstances, embellishing on patterns, trying to make the narrative most out of the format of my day. My digital trail, what I choose to investigate, anyway, tells its own story: that I'm highly sentimental, a little obsessive, a little basic. It tells me I need the soothing repetition of Michael Scott's buffoonery, Don Draper's reinventions, Jim and Pam's love. It seems I'm in good, or at least broad company. It seems, for the moment, I'm happy here. •

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# INSTANT REPLAY

The most powerful gifs are more than the sum of their repeated parts by MONICA TORRES

**A** YEAR AGO, FOLLOWING an independent journalist's crusade, immense public pressure, and a court order, Chicago police finally released video of an officer fatally shooting 17-year-old Laquan McDonald. Hours before its release, the officer was charged with first-degree murder. As soon as the video was made public, it was being published, downloaded, screengrabbed, and reblogged across news sites and social-media platforms. But if you were on Twitter that night

and you follow the *Daily Beast*, you would have been exposed to McDonald's death not as a story, a video, or a still, but rather as a tweeted gif.

The default for gifs on Twitter is to autoplay, and many users do not opt out. I was among them. There was no warning that I was about to see something graphic and disturbing, as there was on the cable networks that were also showing the video. The gif of McDonald's death was instead indiscriminately injected in between my banal tweets about Thanksgiving prep. Unmoored from even minimal context, the gif felt cheap and tawdry, with each loop replay increasing some engagement metric, while righteously confronting nothing.

The *Daily Beast's* action sparked immediate outcry among Twitter users and sites like the Root and Colorlines. For one thing, McDonald's mother didn't want video released. Her private grief was made public. But the gif took it even further, creating a grotesque play in which a young black man was always living his last moments, over and over again.

By collapsing time, creating a world with no beginning or end, gifs can reproduce trauma's symptoms—feelings of isolation, repetition compulsion, and a state of bodily helplessness as your mind moves beyond your control. After trauma occurs, memories from the event can loop back and intrude on one's consciousness days or years later, at the most inconvenient times, at the most innocuous suggestion. As Lori Daub describes in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, "Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect." This is why years after being falsely accused of burglary, my mother still gets anxious at the sight of a police car, forced to relive the worst day of her life. It's why for veterans with post-traumatic stress syndrome, war never ends. It's why a gif that isolates Laquan McDonald's fatal shooting into repeating frames is a decision that reproduces the emotionally isolating, never-ending trauma of black lives not mattering.

Shortly after the outcry about the McDonald gif, the site took the tweet down, with editor at large Goldie Taylor making this explanation, also in a tweet: "By tweeting a gif, we unintentionally trivialized a death. We are deleting." (Her apology has since been deleted.)

The incident raises the question of whether gifs, simply by virtue of their formal qualities, are inherently trivializing. What effects does looping video of a news event have on what it represents and how it is consumed? Can a gif be serious?

Thanks to their engaging movement and internet-native feel, gifs have become ubiquitous across news sites and social media alike. Twitter

and even old mainstays like Microsoft Outlook have added gif extensions, recognizing users' need to communicate "facepalm" with a loop. In personal contexts, gifs are widely accepted as fun shorthand for such reactions: My friend texts me about her job; I answer with gifs of Kim Kardashian cry-faces. But there are limits. Even the editorial director of Giphy, a popular online gif repository, said, when asked what reaction gif he might send to someone who found out their sibling had died, that he'd rather give the person a call.

Similar limits seem to apply in news contexts. Gifs have become mainstays in sports and politics coverage because they can distill the essence of these competitions into a few arresting looped frames, as in this breakdown of the minutiae of how Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney lost her gold. The 2016 presidential debates yielded a flood of gifs examining the minutiae of Donald Trump's mouth breathing and Hillary Clinton's blinking, on the idea that looping the slightest of gestures can reveal something surprising within the manicured machine of an election campaign.

Given the broad appeal of gifs, startups have sought ways to further distribute and monetize them. But the same liveliness, immediacy, and novelty that make gifs so attractive to startups and news organizations also make their use in more sober contexts jarring. When gifs delve into breaking-news tragedies—police shootings, natural disasters, terrorism—they tend to cross the fine line between confronting horror and exploiting it. Without the cushion of context, a gif can land like a punch. When *Gawker* posted a gif of a Spanish train derailing in 2013, readers said they felt unprepared for their visceral reaction. "I think gifs are for cats, not seeing the last moments of nearly a hundred lives," one wrote.

Sometimes a visceral reaction is the point: Activists and journalists have long attempted to force people to visually confront the horrors of oppression and white supremacy. When Mamie Till-Mobley's son Emmett was brutally murdered, she allowed his mutilated body to be photographed and published in *Jet* magazine, hoping to shock people out of their complacency. It was

an intrusion into people's daily lives to remind them to stay woke. In this same tradition, antique collector James Allen collected photos and postcards of lynchings across America, 145 of which were published in 2000 as *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. These revealed how racist spectacle was packaged and sold as keepsakes: "Lust propelled their commercial reproduction and distribution, facilitating the endless replay of anguish," Allen notes. "Even dead, the victims were without sanctuary."

But the images circulated of Laquan McDonald's death are hard to assimilate to this tradition, and not only because his mother did not authorize their distribution. In its gif form, the disturbing video of his death had become a puppet show, and McDonald a marionette, made to rise and fall, ridden with bullets 16 times, then 32, then 48, and on and on. Unlike a video clip, which is buffered by a lead-up and at least has an end point, a gif isolates the most traumatic moments and continues replaying them indefinitely, without warning and without your permission.

To be marked in this way in American culture—to be looped in a gif, to be put on display as "animated" at the behest of audiences—is, as Laur Jackson has argued (following Sianne Ngai), to be racialized, othered:

On one hand, one's humanity is conditional on the capacity to be animated—for bodies to whom humanity is not a given. On the other literal hand, a body animated looks utterly unnatural, puppet-like, revealing the desperation and labor underlying the humanizing project as well as turning "the racial body ... into comic spectacle," to quote again from Ngai.

For black bodies, being "animated"—a condition that gifs, by nature of their form, automatical-

ly impose—already marks you as other. Ngai analyzed how Harriet Beecher Stowe's characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were purposefully written with animated vernacular to racialize their speech and provoke white readers' empathy. But it's a hollow caring, because these bodies have been marked for others to use. On an infinite loop in gifs, this hyperanimation re-enacts the spectacle for our consumption, puppets made to rise and fall, victims without sanctuary. They mimic Allen's lynching postcards, but without the critical context his curation and commen-

## By collapsing time, gifs can reproduce trauma's symptoms: isolation, repetition compulsion, and a state of bodily helplessness

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tary provides. In looping, the larger context is cropped out and we are left with only the most inflammatory, most affecting moment. This distillation, by definition, exploits and subtracts the context to extract an event's viral essence.

These looping spectacles seem to deny that the bodies on display have minds, that they have subjective integrity. Similarly, Ngai, in commenting on Sasha Torres's 1990s-era discussion about how people of color were depicted on live TV, points out how the affect of "liveness" in the medium depends on appropriating black experience and offering it as a commodified object. As we speed toward new technologies that promise even more immediacy, gifs like the one depicting McDonald's death serve as case studies on what not to do. Perpetually suspended between two states, gifs of black death are both alive and not alive. They should remain in purgatory, unseen.



GIFS HAVE A FAR different effect than mere single-play video. It's the looping that gives gifs their life. But given the troubling ramifications of how gifs Pinocchio subjects and intensify their objectification, can they be used to bear witness? Is, say, looping cute images of cats really the only ethically acceptable use for cultural gifs?

As Tumblr fan communities have long understood, there are political uses for gifs that rely on remixing rather than merely reiterating. Bringing together multiple images from different sources into a gif set can create a new vision that is as effective as any isolated news gif could ever be.

The most powerful gifs use the power of repetition and timing and spacing to persuade you to believe in something more than the sum of its repeated parts. In this, they work like comic books, whose panels, as Scott McCloud wrote in *Understanding Comics*, “fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments” in order to achieve the rhythm of a story. By animating images and words in side-by-side boxes, gif sets similarly invite us to bridge the gaps between the real and the imagined, presenting utopian possibilities and creating alternatives to the dominant modes of seeing the world.

A good gif maker understands that there are many truths and use all the tools gifs put at their disposal—moving images, spacing, overlaid text, timing—to give their version convincing context.

Where photos hold memories frozen rictus-still and videos put directors at the mercy of B-roll footage, gifs cut straight to the heart of the action. The spaces between gifs in gif sets invite not confusion at the lack of continuity but viewer participation in sewing the story together. The frames are both moving and held in place; they capture attention with their dynamism and like a comic book, each frame builds upon the momentum of the previous one.

Yes, you could write a long essay about why Beyoncé's self-titled album was a game changer for the music industry—but you can also sum up your feels succinctly in a gif. You can sum up rage

too. Katy Perry's racist performance at the 2013 American Music Awards can get remixed by a gif maker who edits out her lyrics and overlays gifs of her Orientalist performance with text reading “racist mumbling” and “racist belting.”

Potentially more patient and more open than media products with end points, looping gifs, given the right non-sensationalized context, can teach us to dwell and pay attention to the emotional reality within moving bodies that inhabit the frames. Watching an entire TV season compressed into the most meaningful frames of contact between characters, it becomes clear that the written and spoken word is not always needed—bodies betray desires. If you don't notice how characters' hands brush against each other, a gif forgives you and rewinds the story once more.

Before Tumblr, before LiveJournal, before I could AIM chat fan theories to my friends, I would lay down in the back of Mami's van on long road trips, close the end of a book, and dream up better alternatives to what the canon provided me. Once you dare to accept, as Hilton Als has said, that reality itself is a form of fiction, you are no longer just a participant in a story. You are free to be your own creator, and you can begin to reshape dominant narratives. Now, in gif sets, these sorts of alternatives proliferate. There are black Tony Starks, female Doctor Whos, and Harry Potter worlds set in 1920s Harlem.

These are examples of racebending, a clapback to whitewashing, that responds to all-white casting by imagining people of color into the stories that they were written out of. It embodies media theorist Henry Jenkins's claim that fan fiction can repair “the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk.” Exposing the structured absence of people of color in media by fixing it yourself becomes a visual indictment on behalf of every person the original creators failed to include.

Unlike a video clip, a gif invites you to sit, watch the world respool, and let your mind wonder: What if? What if Aldis Hodge portrayed Tony Stark? Or as the tags to this gif set on Tumblr framed it, #because like imagine being a little black boy growing up so so so smart and so so so

alone. Or in the words of another user's reblogging endorsement: #GOD#YES #you just never see a POC in that kind of archetype #tony stark is a power fantasy reserved for white men.

A good racebent gif set visualizes a world for fans to build upon and makes it more immediate than text-only fan fiction. As an online-native media form, gifs are born ready to be circulated, and on a platform like Tumblr, the story they convey gets chewed, reblogged, and remade better in collaboration.

#Memehistory, an idea started by @TylerIAm in March, uses gifs to make resonances between past actions and potential echoes in the present. Pairing a gif of the superhero Black Panther running with a caption about Jesse Owens outrunning his white competition at the 1936 Olympics brilliantly re-imagines a world that should have been, in which Owens is acknowledged as the superhero President Roosevelt never admitted he was.

Gif makers can also be post-production editors that make arguments about who gets centered in the frame. On Tumblr, theladybadass created gifs of the 1963 March on Washington, amazingly condensing the 15-hour event into nine loops, each of which holds women as central: women splashing their feet, women fixing their caps, women singing together, always present.

"Women, particularly women of color, are so often ignored that I wanted to create a space specifically for them," Tabitha Bianca Brown, the creator of theladybadass, explained. By distilling her argument into its sharpest frames, her gif set becomes an intervention into the too-often ignored presence of women in the Civil Rights Movement. Each looping replay anchors you deeper in the past, bringing it closer to our present.

We already know that words are untrustworthy, that there are gulfs between what we mean and say. It can seem to take a man shooting a boy who's already on the ground to give himself away. A police dashboard camera video that's missing audio and time logs shows that videos are no more pure representations of truth than gifs and are subject to just as much manipulation—more dangerous, given that it is not as obvious.

A powerful gif masters the fraught spaces in

our subconscious, manipulating the eye to see beyond our boxed imagination. With each loop, the heartbeat gets louder and we get closer to believing the gif is alive. It puts your hand on the pulse. You see visions of better futures. You see ghosts.

In the case of traumatizing gifs like that of the killing of Laquan McDonald, they are like Frankenstein's monster: a poor decision made by human hands that does not reinvent the future or inform the present but rather, crudely reduces a boy's humanity into jerkily moving parts.

But in skilled hands, a gif can be magic. Recognizing this, Giphy CEO Alex Chung and Paul Pfeiffer presented Giphnosis in 2013 at Rhizome's Seven on Seven conference in New York to call attention to how minds are reprogrammed through gifs. "Giphnosis is happening. It's called news media," Pfeiffer said. Using the looping image that the *New York Times* posted of the Boston Marathon bombers on its website as an example, Chung explained that watching that image over and over "has a pronounced effect on the way you think about the world, [the way] you think about people in backpacks ... We're being constantly programmed by media, by everything on the internet, because everything now is looped."

To counterbalance this looping horror, the pair offered Giphnosis, a (now defunct) website for users to download screensaver gifs designed to condition you toward and away from particular emotions. Pfeiffer said he was inspired by how he thinks dreams prepare oneself against danger.

When the idea of gifs was presented as self-help therapy, the audience laughed. But that's because the full power and danger within a loop has yet to be fully appreciated. The powerful magic or potential curse of a gif is in what it dares you to imagine, and what it can convince you to believe. Now you see me, now you don't. We're just getting started. •

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