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# From otium to opium (and back again?): Lockdown's leisure industry, hyper-synchronisation and the philosophy of walking<sup>†</sup>

Helen-Mary Cawood\* and Mark J. Amiradakis

Department of Philosophy, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

\*Correspondence: cawoodh@ufs.ac.za

**ABSTRACT:** This article provides an account of the cultural changes induced by the pandemic, and draws on the tradition of critical theory (especially the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, and Fromm) and the work of Bernard Stiegler to critically assess their impact. It is argued that the rise of online forms of consumption based around streaming have had a deleterious impact on the critical faculties of the individual, and argues that the practice of walking – as proposed by Frederic Gros – could potentially provide a remedy to the problems caused by the increase of uncritical cultural consumption. In this respect, it provides an original account of the relevance of both the tradition of critical theory and the work of Stiegler to the pandemic, together with providing a discussion around the act of walking as an active measure that one can implement in one's life to counteract and (hopefully) overcome the detrimental effects that the commodification of leisure time has fostered during the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** critical theory, hyper-synchronisation, pandemic, walking

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We do not belong to those who have ideas only among books, when stimulated by books. It is our habit to think outdoors – walking, leaping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or near the sea where even the trails become thoughtful (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 322).

## Introduction

Over 18 months after the pandemic known as COVID-19 hit the entire globe (from around March 2020), and various levels of lockdown were enforced on peoples around the world, studies are now being published on the effect of the various lockdowns on the changing of online (and offline) habits of individuals and to a large extent society as a whole. Early figures by *Forbes* magazine from the early stages of the different lockdowns showed online usage as having *increased by around 70% worldwide*, with streaming services having risen by more than 12% (Beech, 2020). The streaming of leisure activities such as online music concerts, sporting events, YouTube, Netflix and other television entertainment services, online gaming and social media in particular were all recorded as having significant surges in their traffic as a result of the restrictions enforced by the pandemic. By mid-2021, over a year after the onset of the pandemic, the statistics coming out of different countries regarding the uptick of digital engagement reinforced how the abovementioned online leisure activities, and others, had gained, and continued having, unprecedented popularity (see De et al.,

2020; Young, 2020; Panarese & Azzarita, 2021; Bilodeau et al., 2021; McClain et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2021; *Statista*, 2021).

At the same time, however, there were loud calls by many activists, organisations, governments and scientists to use the pandemic as a time to urgently rethink – and reimagine – the future of the planet (see Mair, 2020; Monbiot, 2020; Nobel Prize, 2020; Syed, 2020; Brady-Brown, 2021; Watts, 2020). Thought and action (praxis) was framed as being critical, particularly in the early stages of lockdown when initial salient effects on the Earth were noticed. On the positive side, for example, smog over big cities lifted, wildlife was seen reclaiming urban areas, many were able to work from home instead of having to waste hours commuting to their jobs; negatively, it exposed even deeper ideological divides around the world than anticipated, with global inequality amplified and populist governments using the pandemic to push their own agendas even further. However, as the pandemic enters its third year (or as its resultant influence on daily restrictions begins to lift), much of the initial hope for action seems to have dwindled and the loudest calls seem to yearn for “normality”, or in other words, what the world was like before the pandemic.

How did the vociferousness of the desire and promise of action towards change swing back to a nostalgic longing for how things were? One of the responses could be what Nietzsche (1968, p. 33) recognised, namely that “[t]he value of all morbid states consists in showing us under a magnifying glass certain states that, although normal, are barely visible in the normal state”. However, recognising and acknowledging these states that are “normal”, that become magnified in morbid times such

as during near-global lockdown, requires a necessary – and difficult – reaction, namely that of the crucial need for immediate action to change our lives, and by extension, the world. As Stiegler (2020a, p. 3) notes, such a period should result in

...the opportunity for a revaluation of silence, for the rhythms we give ourselves rather than those to which we bend, for a very parsimonious and reasoned practice of the media and of all that, coming from the outside, distracts the human being from being human...what Foucault called "techniques of the self".

This is obviously a complex issue to be studied, but this investigation would like to put forward a specific critical angle which draws from the work of Bernard Stiegler, the critical theorists and the French philosopher Frederic Gros to shed some useful light on this complex phenomenon. Subsequently, it will aim to provide a critical analysis of how the increased online habits of an overwhelming percentage of the human population have contributed directly towards what Stiegler refers to as the "hyper-synchronisation" (when time and space becomes synchronised in a single stream) of cultural consumption in the leisure industry which has had an insidious and inimical impact upon the modern individual and their sense of self. Following from the critical theorist's (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Fromm) rather scathing analysis of modern culture and the various leisure industries that have proliferated therein, as well as drawing from Stiegler's critical phenomenological analysis of these industries in the contemporary epoch, this investigation will argue how the notion of *otium* (Stiegler, 2011c), or use of leisure time to enrich oneself intellectually, became increasingly negated in the *negotium* of the commodification of free time during the pandemic. This technologically induced sense of negation (i.e. from *otium* to *negotium*) will then be considered as contributing to the breakdown of true individuation (which, for Stiegler [2009], is the process in which a person becomes an individual self, not only "becoming" in the sense of developing along with the quasi-causal flow, but rather against the flow not only in resistance, but also reinvention in and through others), as well as fostering the so-called "pathology of normalcy" (Fromm, 2002, p. 12) in which people have been increasingly compelled to conform to the norm of persistent online interaction in direct response to an increased sense of aloneness (or, in Stieglerian terms, the loss of the "feeling of existing" [Stiegler, 2009, p. 39]), and as such lose their willingness to act "differently" – or reinvent our mnemotechnical apparatus and the (individual and collective, that is, social and political) practices with which we make use of that apparatus.

While the first section of this investigation provides one with a critical analysis of the aforementioned scenario – i.e. of how the lockdown-anchored embedding of the digital leisure industries has facilitated a concentrated pathology of normalcy, in the latter section of this study it will be argued that contemporary leisure time still has the potential to open up a new sense of *otium* and, together with that, enrich individuals to become active agents in their own futures as well as the futures of others and the world. One of the potential leisure activities that could, for some, contribute to this sense of existential enrichment and invention is that of walking, particularly in the way that Gros (2014) envisions it, drawing from figures such as Henry David Thoreau and Friederich Nietzsche. As will be explicated, Gros introduces three freedoms that walking brings to the individual

and potentially society at large to imagine a different way of being in the world and ultimately to resist and transform (or reinvent) the status quo.

While this is merely one of many different approaches to this particular issue of opening up the time and space of the hyper-industrial leisure industries for the reflection necessary for a new relationship to time and space, and in that way open up new conversations and practices of invention (both individual and collective), we believe that it has enough weight in its proposals to warrant further investigation. This argument would, in further studies, need to be addressed in light of walking for leisure as often being an activity of privilege (focused on privileges of economy, able-bodiedness, masculinity, etc.), how such a theory could be "democratised" or "decolonised" to consider issues such as the demarcated spaces for walking and who is let in or shut out by such borders, the ecological awareness of the human in non-industrialised areas and other such critical engagements.

### The culture industry, one-dimensionality and consciousness

In this first section, we aim at addressing one of the effects of social and political confinement during the lockdowns in response to the pandemic, namely that of the increased influence of the digital culture and leisure industries on the sense of consciousness of the individual. This is crucial when considering the role that the attentional and retentive faculties of the individual play in relation to the digital mnemonic (or memory) technologies (mnemotechnologies) of the leisure industries and their potential or lack thereof for a process of individuation to take place, at least for the critical theorists and for Stiegler. It is argued that the unreflective consumption of commodified culture leads to what Fromm refers to as a pathology of normalcy, through which the willingness to act to bring about new individual and collective practices is severely stunted. Time and space beyond the mundane borders of work (*otium*) no longer hold the potential for development of the self in opposition to the "normal", but have themselves been collapsed into a constant stream of attentiveness to the culturally determined and retentiveness in relation to the capitalist mnemotechnologies of the hyper-industrial era.

During (and after) their time of exile in the USA, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse averred that modern culture was being increasingly developed under the dictates of a technologically administered rationality along with what Marcuse (2002) would later go on to identify as a pervasive sense of "one-dimensionality". As a result, the critical theorists viewed mass culture (or the culture industry) as a "central part of a new configuration of capitalist modernity which used culture, advertising, mass communications, and new forms of social control to induce consent and to reproduce the new forms of capitalist society" (Kellner, 2002, p. 8).

Viewed in this light, Horkheimer and Adorno (1997) aver that mass culture has become entirely commodified, standardised and administered from above (for the economic and political gain of an elite few). As such, Horkheimer and Adorno (1997) – like Marcuse (2002) – argue that while contemporary society may ostensibly claim to provide the modern individual with an improved and harmonious social order, in reality it abjectly fails to do so. It is this very failure that the critical theorists then term

as being "the triumph of pseudo-culture", which they believe has come to prevail in the modern world (Thomson, 2006, p. 74). If one considers the technological development (in leisure as well as educational and work capacities) and the resultant dependence upon these technologies cultivated during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, this insight by the critical theorists into uncritical technological progress becomes particularly alarming, as we shall see.

To effectively elaborate upon the matter of pseudo-culture (and the associated sense of pseudo-individuality that it engenders), the critical theorists aver that certain strategies have been deliberately adopted and implemented by the manufacturers and disseminators of cultural commodities and the broadcasters of mass media so as to induce a – near ubiquitous – sentiment of conformity and acquiescence in the wider public. Furthermore, the critical theorists argue that these strategies have all been designed in a rather duplicitous manner so as to *promote an ideology of consumption that is inherently aimed at promoting and propagating the values and ideals of the prevailing social order* – or a sense of "normalcy" determined by the status quo. The critical theorists make it clear that from their perspective, these cultural products are inherently designed to perpetuate a ceaseless cycle of consumption (and the concomitant production of waste), and in doing so, *they deliberately preclude any critical reflection on the part of those who are too busy consuming* (and then later discarding).

As such, the individual is lulled into believing that a sense of edification is being achieved – culturally speaking – through the consumption of personalised products, whereas in actual fact, all they are doing is sustaining an exploitative and consumption-oriented economic system which thrives on the ceaseless proliferation (and subsequent disposal) of predetermined products. It is clear that this argument could, without too much of a stretch, be extended to the supposedly personalised services offered by streaming apps as well as the social media experience, claiming to individualise the user's experience of these technologies while in fact determining (from above) their consumptive habits. Cultural transformation and edification is supposedly being offered, while in fact the result is a strictly tailored, pseudo-cultural consumptive experience that ends when the device or app is turned off or when funds run out.

As a result of this overwhelming scenario, it can be argued that the modern individual loses some – if not all – of their freedom (or autonomy in the Kantian sense) in relation to the matter of accepting or rejecting the various products proffered by the culture industry, along with those values, ideals and beliefs that are embedded in such products. Culture is valorised as creating an edified, engaged and reflective individual who transcends the mundane streams of the status quo, while in fact the consumption of culture in and through the culture industries leads to quite the opposite scenario. Such a critical analysis then compels Horkheimer and Adorno (1997) to assert that there is indubitably a powerful ideological attribute inherent to the culture industry (and its vast array of pseudo-individuated products), which they believe ultimately expends itself in the *idolisation of the prevailing order* (as opposed to an engaged and reflective engagement with how things are, and how they could potentially be – a major theme to be explored in this investigation).

To come to terms with what the critical theorists have argued above and how it relates to contemporary society's

techno-consumptive dependencies, one needs to be mindful of the fact that Horkheimer and Adorno (1997) perceived the production and transmission of media spectacles as an essential (albeit secondary) device through which contemporary society has managed to dominate the thought processes (primarily those of schematisation as outlined by Kant) of the individual (Kellner, 2002).

Marcuse (2002) extrapolates from this fascinating aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument when he notes that the result is, however, not a healthy form of adjustment for the individual to the societal environment in which they are required to operate, but rather a pervasive and persistent mimetic impulse, "an immediate identification of the individual with [their] society and, through it, with the society as a whole" (Marcuse, 2002, p. 12). For Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse then, the notions and domains of entertainment, leisure, relaxation and culture – within the framework of a one-dimensional culture industry – are designed to accustom and indoctrinate audiences into accepting the given state of extant society.

In relation to the above, Fromm (1969, p. 208) argues that as a direct result of the stifling conformity inherent to contemporary society, many individuals now feel obliged to adopt a psychological mechanism of escape, which he refers to as "automaton conformity". According to Fromm's (ibid.; emphasis added) analysis of this matter, the advantage of adopting such a mechanism resides in the fact that the person who relinquishes their individual sense of self and willingly "becomes an automaton", identical with the countless others that surround them, *"need not feel alone and anxious any more*. But the price he pays, however, is high; [as it ultimately equates with] *the loss of his self*". Stiegler similarly refers to this feeling as the existential despair relating to the loss of the "sensation of existing" (Selve & Stiegler, 2019), or "feeling of existing" (Stiegler, 2009, p. 39). As the sense of aloneness, or the loss of the sensation of existing increases, particularly in the context of the confinement of the individual to digitised forms of cultural consumption during the events of the past two years of COVID-19, it seems as if these arguments made by Fromm relating to the automated and conformist development of subjectivity have become concentrated. Such a stifling, stale and static state of affairs then leads Fromm (1969, p. 229; emphasis added) to state that "the substitution of pseudo acts for original acts of thinking, feeling and *willing*, leads eventually to the *replacement of the original self by a pseudo self*".

In Stieglerian terms, the "feeling of existing" is lost and replaced by a situation of *immonde*:

it's when you have the feeling that you cannot exist anymore. If you do not recognize yourself as existing, then you do not recognize what is around you. That is wordlessness, *l'immonde*, for you and I. And it can make you mad, unhappy, suicidal, or criminal (Selve & Stiegler, 2019).

Fromm (1969) thus considers automaton conformity to be a mechanism of escape from the extreme atomisation of modernity in which the individual feels anxious, alone and powerless, whether one is truly so or not. Pseudo-individuality thus lies at the heart of the notion of automaton conformity. This state is also referred to by Fromm (2002, p. 12) as the "pathology of normalcy". In this case, the boredom of the endless empty repetitions of modernity is satiated by a number of unproductive,

uncreative and unimaginative activities which have been offered to the individual by the culture industry as being meaningful and promising a unique or authentic experience, while in fact this industry feeds off the individual's desire to "escape from boredom" (Fromm, 1973, p. 244).

The danger of automaton conformity is subsequently not merely the loss of the self of the individual. Socially, the implications are also worrying. This is because the "pathology of normalcy" also leads to the dampening of the critical faculties of the individual in recognising her pathology, and with that *the will or desire to act and to want to actively change this state of affairs*. This is what Fromm (1969, p. 223) refers to as "pseudo-willing", as opposed to genuine willing. The pathology of normalcy thus also results in the loss of being willing to change things (through critical and judgement faculties), i.e. to change the world, especially if viewed from the perspective of the time of the pandemic and the critical calls for large-scale change. But how is it that the technological rationality of many of the online leisure industries has contributed to the abovementioned apathy towards the transformation of the status quo? The critical angle has been argued and one must now turn to a Stieglerian phenomenological understanding of this phenomenon. While Stiegler draws from the culture industry thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer and uses a similar kind of conceptual analysis to that of Fromm's notion of "automaton conformity" and the "pathology of normalcy", he furthers their arguments from an explicitly phenomenological paradigm to show how exactly the attentional and retentional faculties of the individual contribute towards the process of individuation and how, when these faculties are hijacked by the culture, programming and leisure industries, the process of individuation, or resistance and reinvention towards a future, is hobbled and in some cases reversed.

### ***The hijacking of the attentional/retentional economy in the 21st century***

According to theorists such as Jackson (2008), Stiegler (2010), Turkle (2011) and Vaidhyanathan (2018), the notion of attention is to be regarded as being a pivotal, if not constitutive, element in relation to an individual's sense of being-in-the-world (*Dasein* in the Heideggerian sense). In very rudimentary terms, this can be ascribed to the fact that it is the faculty of attention that actively stimulates one's consciousness and directs the thought process itself. Furthermore, Vaidhyanathan (2018, p. 80; emphasis added) goes on to note that "thought works in streams. If those streams are limited by duration or not allowed to stay steady and focused, *the power of that thought diminishes*".

To elucidate why or how this happens to be the case, Stiegler (2011b) opts to operate from a phenomenological perspective, drawing explicitly from – and then expanding upon – the works of Husserl's (and Kant's) insights into how consciousness actually functions. Stiegler (2011b) therefore begins by introducing the reader to the fact that according to Husserl's phenomenological analysis, conscious time is woven with what he (i.e. Husserl) refers to as *retentions* (i.e. that which is remembered and/or retained) and *protentions* (that towards which our anticipatory consciousness will be directed as a result of our personalised retentions), understood in relation to the "now"-point of the (perpetually moving) present of consciousness (Amiradakis, 2021).

In light of this, Stiegler (2011a) – drawing explicitly from the insights of Gilbert Simondon – argues that only through the dynamic interplay that occurs between the primary and secondary retentions, we are actually able to "individuate" ourselves. In very broad terms, Simondon's notion of psychic and collective individuation can be understood as the process by which one manages to constitute oneself as an "I" as opposed to a collective "we" (with which the "I" is nevertheless intimately associated). Through this process, the individual is thus able to create unique and personalised narratives pertaining directly to their experiences in their lifeworld (ibid.). In other words, psychic individuation, for Stiegler (2009, pp. 3–5), always at least partly means "to individuate for others", that is, "to exist for others" and "in others", and in light of and towards what does *not* exist (and is therefore never just "what is").

Over and above the aforementioned description, Stiegler makes it clear that there is also another set of secondary retentions that one inherits even though they are of experiences one has not directly lived through oneself. According to Stiegler (2011a, p. 112; emphasis added), this is the case for "everything of which I have been *told*, of that into which I have been *initiated*, or of that which I have been *taught*, of that which forms *education* and *instruction* and through which I *raise myself above myself*". He (2011a p. 112) maintains that such retentions are to be regarded as being both secondary – due to the fact that they have been "conceived, selected, projected and lived" by others, and as such, have constituted "their own pasts" – and collective as they are inherited by a collection of individuals (who may belong to a particular society, culture and/or tradition) as the past of a previous collection of individuals (who had once belonged to that particular society, culture and/or tradition). Very importantly, it is these collective secondary retentions that constitute what Stiegler (2011a, p. 112) refers to as a "pre-individual fund" that then effectively serves to acculturate, socialise, educate and orientate the individual, while also acting as collective secondary protentions – which then filter and influence where a particular group's collective consciousness will be directed in the future.

What the aforementioned excerpts are intended to highlight for the reader is the crucial Stieglerian insight that, over the course of human history, memory-technologies (mnemotechnologies) have come to play an increasingly important role in society as they have effectively served as a wealthy repository for those collective secondary retentions that have been accumulated over the course of time (i.e. history). As such, these mnemotechnologies (or tertiary retentions) have served to facilitate, foster and guide the attentional/retentional economy of both the individual and the larger collective within which the individual operates. Moreover, these technologies constitute a major source from where the individual, and society, can acquire those pre-individual funds through which the processes of acculturation, education and edification occur.

What is to be regarded as being of immense importance for Stiegler, and the outcomes of this particular study, is the fact that these mnemotechnologies – as tertiary retentions – have come to play an increasingly crucial role in the retentional/attentional economy of the contemporary individual and society at large. Thus, in what appears to be an updated, and phenomenologically modified version of Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry thesis, along with Marcuse's critique

of the ubiquitous sense of one-dimensionality that is plaguing society, Stiegler (2011a) argues that the mnemotechnologies of the contemporary era have essentially been usurped by the imperatives and ideologies of capitalistic gain. As such, Stiegler is of the unequivocal opinion that this has had an adverse and inimical impact upon the individual's attentional capacities, and by implication, their ability to acculturate, educate and edify themselves.

It is in relation to this pressing matter that Stiegler (2011a, p. 113; emphasis in the original) argues that

*the function of the culture and programming industries is to take control of these processes constituting collective secondary retentions. This control is achieved by replacing inherited pre-individual funds with what the culture and programming industries produce and through this substitution to cause the adoption of retentional funds conceived according to the needs of marketing.*

It is here that we begin to see a direct link to the nature of online participation and engagement of individuals in the various digital leisure industries that developed and burgeoned during the lockdown period, and the harnessing and channelling of attention that Stiegler has alluded to above.

According to Stiegler's (2011a) critical analysis, another major problem to arise as a direct result of this process is that the contemporary individual who is now constantly linked up to and connected with the vast array of mnemotechnologies that are associated with the "hyper-industrial" epoch (as was so vividly exemplified and experienced during the pandemic lockdown scenario) is quickly losing the ability to individuate himself. For Stiegler (2011a, p. 114; emphasis in original), this can be attributed to the fact that the contemporary individual is "internalizing the collective secondary retentions produced every day in production studios, in television studios, and in the *artificial living spaces* of reality television" – an elaboration on what Fromm refers to as "automaton conformity".

It can therefore be argued that what Stiegler's (2011a) critical analysis pertaining to the above elucidates is the fact that as mnemotechnologies, the contemporary programming and cultural industries are to be understood as being tertiary retentions. Thus, they still support access to the pre-individual funds of all psychic and collective individuation and as such, these technologies condition or influence how that individuation unfolds. However – and this is the crucial point for Stiegler (2011a, p. 118; emphasis added) – when such a process becomes (hyper)industrialised, tertiary retentions tend to become constituted by "technologies of control that ... make possible the hyper-synchronization of calculated conscious time, and the *decomposition of time itself*, that is, *of individuation*". What this then ultimately implies for Stiegler (2011a, p. 118; emphasis added) is that consciousnesses, and the bodies they inhabit as their behaviours, are

more and more woven by the same secondary retentions and tend to select the same primary retentions, and hence to *increasingly resemble one another*. Thus branded, they seem to have little to say, finding themselves meeting less and less often, and cast instead into their solitude in front of screens.

As such, Stiegler (2011c) argues that, via the near ubiquitous sense of hyper-synchronisation that prevails in the ever-online and interconnected society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is an increasing loss of individuation or singularity on the part of the contemporary subject. *resulting from the loss of individuation is a lack of "will"* which Stiegler (2011c) argues is *the basis of the process of belief, to bring about substantial change in the world, or "noetic invention"* (Stiegler, 2018, p. 179) – or, as Ross (in Stiegler, 2018, p. 31) interprets it, the "de-proletarianization and re-noetization" towards the Neganthropocene, in ecological terms.

To fully come to terms with Stiegler's critical views pertaining to the aforementioned scenario, one needs to be briefly introduced to the crucial distinction that Stiegler makes between the notions of *otium* and *negotium*, and the role or impact that such notions have upon the world and the individual's sense of personal development. It is thus to these matters that we will now briefly turn our attention.

### **The otium and negotium of the leisure industry**

In terms of an individual's sense of personal development and edification, Stiegler (2011c) links the notions of self-love, individuation and genuine willing to the concept of *otium*. In his reconstruction of the term, the contemporary definition of *otium* refers to leisure time during which the practice of self-improvement and upliftment of an individual through self-care can take place, the process of which in fact makes up *culture*. *Negotium*, as a differentiated but interrelated term, refers in contemporary society to the non-existence of leisure time, in which there is an alienation of the self through a culture of need, as opposed to genuine individuation. In other words, *negotium* signifies the commodification of free time. Free time, ideally, should allow for the individual to take care of themselves and improve themselves through cultural enrichment; instead, in a hyper-industrial society, free time is seen as a precious commodity in which the capturing of attention which is not directed towards work becomes the target of the culture, programme and leisure industries. As such, leisure, or the use of one's free time, itself becomes externally determined.

Because the distribution of culture has been largely taken over by the industries of technology (as the critical theorists originally pointed out), Stiegler (2011c, p. 104) argues that these mnemotechnologies have become "instruments of voluntary servitude", in that leisure time in contemporary society has become the time of *negotium*. In other words, leisure time is no longer the space for the individual for time that is not filled by work commitments, during which one can engage in self-actualisation. Instead, the aim of the leisure industry is to control leisure time for the goal of "hyper-massification" (ibid.). As such, leisure itself becomes a facility of the programming and culture industries, which is

developing into a cultural and service-based capitalism that, via computer technology, *fabricates every element of our ways of living, transforming daily life in the sense of its immediate interests, standardizing existences through the means of "marketing concepts"...*and doing all of this while pursuing the convergence of the audio-visual, the informational and telecommunications (Stiegler, 2011c, p. 104; emphasis added).

Stiegler (2011c) thus laments that we have lost our *savoir-vivre*, or knowledge of how to live, of willingness, of belief in the value of individuation as well as the need for further individuation of the collective of self-actualising individuals.

Instead, *otium* has been replaced by *branding*, where "... the *branded* consumer internalizes a pale imitation of 'the representation of the world', which systematizes a sort of fashioning of the principal moments of their 'existence'", as well as "fashion", which effectively brands "...those who wear the brand, like an identificatory marker" (Stiegler, 2011c, p. 105; emphasis added). This is because individuals are stripped of individuality and thus become adherents to herd behaviour (Stiegler, 2011d). Stiegler (2011c, p. 110) frames it as follows:

Alone in front of my television, I can always tell myself that I am behaving individually, but the reality is that I am doing just the same as hundreds of thousands of viewers who watch the same programme – a fact of which, deep down, I am well aware.

One's attention, consciousness, care, love, willing, feeling and thinking are thus obstructed by the temporal objects produced by the programme and leisure industries. The argument then becomes that merely watching television or engaging in digital technologies during your leisure time undermines the very notion of leisure, in which one should be able to determine one's own free time. Furthermore, as many people in pandemic lockdown became more isolated from others and the world, they inevitably turned towards their television and computer screens, as the statistics on streaming and online engagement during the pandemic show, and as such became caught up in the hyper-synchronisation of consciousness, which has arguably led to the dis-individuation of the individual, instead becoming an automaton – conforming to herd behaviour and lacking the will or desire to act for the necessary reinvention of the world through new (and reimagined) individual and collective practices.

These pseudo-individuals lack, in Stieglerian terms, a sense of genuine feeling of existence and thus simultaneously lack a sense of individuating towards a future, which Stiegler (2011c) then argues manifests as a *loss of the image of a future*. The Kantian faculty of "willing" has become *action without thought*, and *rationalisations for action are pre-packaged and provided to the individual as a "service"*. This is the crux of the argument made in this section: the increased hyper-synchronisation of digital participation in online leisure activities, as has been recorded during lockdown, has led in part to a rather distorted form of true individuation. This pseudo-individuation process has been largely automated by the influence of the leisure industries and leads to a process, in which the will to act – to resist, reinvent and reimagine – is either undercut or willing, itself becomes pre-packaged and pre-determined.

As such, drawing from a critical Stieglerian view of the effect of the pandemic upon people's incessant online activities thus suggests that with the increased digital immersion of the self into the digitalised leisure industries mentioned above, there is a corresponding inimical effect upon the willingness of the individual to act in a future-orientated manner. Instead, there seems to be a global occurrence of a type of "pathology of normalcy" that has arisen with lockdown fatigue, the increased sense of aloneness related to it and the desire to return to

something "normal" instead of reinventing a new way of being in the world post pandemic.

However, to counter this bleak and somewhat despairing view of the way things seem to be, it must be maintained that there are many activities and practices (both online and offline) that could – and do – contribute towards the process of individuation, and with that, critical reflection upon the status quo and the willingness to act through recovery (of a sense of the slow and simple), resistance and renunciation, as will be expanded upon the following section. For, as Stiegler (2020a, p. 4) notes at the beginning of the pandemic while reflecting on similarities between the state of lockdown and his condition of confinement in prison, "[d]esper is also an experience, from which much can be learned...provided that we take care of it as what can, in certain circumstances, become a sublime form of energy".

### A liberatory philosophy of walking

With the above concerns relating to the accelerated and exaggerated state of hyper-synchronicity during the lockdown period, and the argument that it contributes not only to losing a feeling of existing (in the Stieglerian sense), but that consequently processes of genuine thinking, feeling and willing, in particular, are undercut when engagement with self and others (the process of individuation) and culture (*otium*) becomes over-mediated by mnemotechnologies relating specifically to the leisure industry, is there any hope for the critical individual, and collectives by extension, to reimagine and reinvent ways to act in order to change – in a life-affirming way – the way the world functioned from before the pandemic to after the pandemic?

A plethora of articles have been published on how to "switch off" or "unplug" oneself from being constantly online, while meditation, exercise, learning musical instruments and crafting (brewing beer and gin, bread-making, cooking, knitting and embroidery, metal making and other such crafts) reached new heights of popularity during the pandemic. However, a realistic concern relating to many of these activities of leisure is that they themselves have been popularised and thus commodified on social media (such as on Tik-Tok and YouTube) by the very leisure industry we are trying to disengage from. The critical thinker might in fact begin to wonder whether there are any activities in our contemporary age that can resist the synchronicity of the digital collapse of time and space, and also whether they can bring about a non-commodified experience of presence which the theorists above all contend is essential to the process of individuation. It is our opinion that there are many, of which only one will now be addressed. To begin with, it is important to note that most of these processes of resistance and reimagination involve what can be referred to as rhythmical or liturgical practices, the reinvention of our mnemotechnical apparatuses and the social and political practices with which we make use of those apparatuses, and the interplay between what Stiegler, referencing Karl Popper, refers to the first, second and third worlds. In this context, the first world refers to the physical states of the world, the second refers to the mental states of the subject, while the third is composed "especially of scientific and poetic thoughts and of works of art" (Popper, in Stiegler, 2020b, pp. 1–2).

Furthermore, Stiegler (2018) argues that the politics of resistance to the status quo is not truly sufficient to bring about significant individual and social change, but rather that we should instead engage in processes of noetic invention or reinvention of the practices by which we make use of mnemotechnical apparatuses. However, it will be argued that for such a reinvention to take place, there first needs to be an act of resistance on the part of the individual to the process of relentless forward motion, an interruption, a moment of saying "no!" and as such creating a space for reflection and imagining how to proceed. It will also be argued that in the freedom of walking, a space of resistance will open up that is itself a door into the third world, one that is creative, imaginative, poetic and embodied, and that only such spaces of resistance can allow the individual to step out of the hyper-synchronous flow and imagine new processes of individuation through which one can reinvent actions towards self, others and the world. It is from a number of insights from Frederic Gros' *A Philosophy of Walking* (2014) that the following section on the freedoms of walking will draw.

For Gros, walking is one of those activities that can indeed be understood as an act of resistance to the abovementioned collapse of the diachronic nature of cardinality and calendarity, as well as contributing to experiencing presence of the self. The nature of this kind of walking, for Gros, is similar to what is often referred to as hiking. It occurs outdoors in so-called "nature". There is an element of solitude to it (not that one need necessarily walk alone) and, importantly, it is non-instrumentalised. In other words, the pleasure experienced in the activity is in the act of walking itself, not in competition with self or others, or walking a certain amount of steps, for example. However, one assumes that Gros uses the term "walking" instead of "hiking" because he wants to relate it to the activity of moving slowly in nature with oneself, as opposed to what a popular conception of hiking entails, which is commodified by the leisure industry through branding and the promotion of products deemed as "essential" for the experience of hiking, such as particular branded shoes and gear, constantly upgrading one's GPS watch, determined food choices, expensive guides and routes, Instagrammable views and so on.

In fact, walking, for Gros (2014), offers at least three "freedoms" which are intrinsically linked to many of the critiques of the consumption of culture and the elevated hijacking of the attentive/retentive faculties during the pandemic, as outlined earlier above. While these insights are certainly not the only freedoms linked to walking, and neither are they confined to the practice of walking, they do, however, open up the discussion relating to possible ways of resisting the hyper-synchronicity of the digital leisure industries and create a space in which distance is created from having one's thoughts directed by algorithms, and in which "...the mind has shaken off its harness, is snorting and kicking up heels like a colt in a meadow" (Kenneth Grahame, in Popova, 2018). It is in such solitude – as Stiegler also recognised during his time in prison – that one's own thoughts can be given a voice as they are not merely being sublimated, but are free from social restraints in that moment. This has been affirmed over and over again by various thinkers from different walks of life. Wendell Berry notes in his essay *What Are People For?* (1990, p. 11) that "[t]rue solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation. One's inner voices

become audible...In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives".

For Grahame (in Popova, 2018), "[t]his emancipation is only attained in solitude [in walking], the solitude which the unseen companions demand before they will come out and talk to you; for, be he who may, if there is another fellow present, your mind has to trot between shafts". And as famously declared by Nietzsche (1974, p. 322),

[w]e do not belong to those who have ideas only among books, when stimulated by books. It is our habit to think outdoors – walking, leaping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or near the sea where even the trails become thoughtful.

Listening to and hearing oneself, allowing oneself to give expression to one's own thoughts and resisting societal obligations and the often-invasive voices of others, seems, for many great thinkers, to come from "a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned" (Solnit, 2000, p. 18). And one practice in which such a state is achieved is that of walking.

First, Gros (2014, p. 14) points to a "suspensive freedom" found in walking, which is a freedom of *resistance*. Suspensive, in this case, is a moment in which distance is created between oneself and the demands of the external world and follows from disruption. What this means is that in walking, one is suspended first from the "illusions about the essential" (ibid.), or in other words, the things we believe are essential to everyday life such as the speed of transport, a wide selection of food or products to choose from, different technological gadgets, or more recently, the internet. As it is suspensive, it is also temporary, in that one returns to them after the activity, whence

...the old inertias are back at once: speed, neglect of the self, of others, excitement and fatigue. The appeal of simplicity has lasted for the time of a hike. "The fresh air's done you good." A blink of liberation, and straight back to the grindstone (Gros, 2014, p. 16).

The temporariness of the hike may not be the reinventive action that Stiegler demands for true individuation, instead it is a disruptive moment in which an alternative may be imagined, and it is arguably in small acts of imagination that alternative futures may be conceived of.

As Gros notes, with walking, we are reliant on our legs to carry us, what we have in our rucksacks (such as food and water), the knowledge and intuition we have about ourselves in nature (relating to the weather, wildlife and how one's body is feeling) and having to improvise using one's imagination (if the weather should turn nasty, for example, or the best path to choose). Because of all the possible and unknown variants involved in setting out for a walk, one is also alienated from the kind of speed we both expect and are used to in our everyday lives, such as with transport, acquiring facts, or uploading photos to the internet. This is also part of the suspensive nature of walking – slowing down both physically and in terms of having to rely on oneself to think things through and intuit certain decisions and resultant actions to take.

A final suspension then – following that of illusions about the essential and the alienation from speed – is that of belonging to the "web of exchange" (Gros, 2014, p. 15). Gros notes that the simplicity of re-evaluating what is truly essential, as well as the



act of slowing down, is often seen as deprivation; the walker, however,

considers it a liberation to be disentangled from the web of exchanges, no longer reduced to a junction in the network redistributing information, images and goods; to see that these things have only the reality and importance you give them (ibid.).

This kind of freedom is directly linked to resisting the phenomenon of hyper-synchronicity inherent in much of the digital engagement in leisure time which was indubitably exacerbated during lockdown and has shown no signs of letting up in light of the economies of new digital technologies. Slowing down movement, being present in a particular space, disengaged from the pace of everyday life and being removed from the "web of exchange" inherent in much of the leisure industry is thus a form of suspensive freedom that is found in the activity (and act) of non-instrumentalised walking.

The second freedom which Gros (2014) finds in walking is that of the freedom to remove oneself from the expectations of society. This is an inherently *rebellious* act of freedom, whereas the suspensive freedom is one of resistance. Where suspensive freedom is temporary, allowing oneself to have a taste of certain freedoms that are simple in relation to the quagmire of what contemporary life considers necessary, removing oneself from the expectations of society involves moving beyond oneself in actually breaking down the boundaries of societal convention or expectation by in fact transcending this outer limit of the self. In other words, this form of freedom involves becoming a self that does not have to be limited by the "normal", or determined conceptions of identity (how we do and are expected to identify ourselves); identity is thus transcended for genuine individuation to occur. This is because, for Gros, being *someone* is a social obligation. We are often expected to think, act and feel defined by certain frames, whether political, generational, ideological, etc. By absorbing that externally determined identity into oneself as the primary way of defining or describing oneself (for example, "I am progressive and progressives feel or think about things or act in x way, therefore I must too"), one is placing limits on the process of individuation that could unfold, and instead, one is prostrating oneself to a condition of automated subjectivity.

While walking, these boundaries of identity tend to become secondary to simply being with and in oneself, a sensation of existing. Even the distinction between self and nature becomes moot, as one comes to feel oneself in nature and nature in oneself. Humanity, as an ontologically separate being from nature, is rejected. Ideally, as these boundaries of identity are broken down, the acts of genuine feeling, thinking and willing become arts that are practised, reflected upon, changed, refined and declared in new and imaginative ways, without being at least somewhat determined by obligatory social identities. It is in this freedom, at least for Gros (2014, p. 20), that a dream can be glimpsed, "...walking to express rejection of a rotten, polluted, alienating, shabby civilization". In this dream is the idea of a new humanity that needs to be brought about by the willingness of people to act in original ways not determined wholly by societal expectations.

This revolutionary act of rejecting the contemporary status quo then relates to the third freedom found in walking, namely the freedom of *renunciation* (Gros, 2014). Such a freedom follows

on from the stages of learning (as a child, scholar, etc., where one learns of the world), production and social respect (as one learns to care for oneself and family through production and consumption – not only of goods but also societal expectations), contemplation and meditation (as one begins to question this way of living as being "normal" and reflect upon different ways of being in the world), resulting finally in a pilgrimage that induces the harmonisation of the self with the world. One can glimpse it on long hikes, Gros indicates, when one focuses completely on the presence of the body, the mind and the environment. This freedom is not related to age, as Gros finds it in the lives of many philosophers, poets and writers who died young, but rather to the various stages that could potentially come about when one is able to suspend one's interaction with the speed and space of everyday life – especially as it takes place online, one's journey to reject social obligations and become an individual and ultimately renunciate this way of life in favour of reinventing different way of living.

This journey that allows one to move from reflection to recognising oneself as being part of a greater natural world (as opposed to separate from it) can arguably be found through walking. From Thoreau, a walker himself, Gros (2014, p. 109) finds a truth in walking, saying that "[t]he true direction of walking is not towards otherness (other worlds, other faces, other cultures, other civilizations); it is towards the edge of civilized worlds, whatever they may be". In prodding at the boundaries of what at a certain time constitutes progress and the pinnacle of civilisation, new questions can be asked and reflected upon, such as how to re-engage with the mnemotechnologies of our time to act towards a different future. Stiegler (2020a) notes that contemplative solitude, such as that which he experienced in the confinement of lockdown, if one is able to disrupt the constant flows of digital technologies long enough for genuine reflection, has the potential to reimagine different possibilities,

...a new way of conceiving the city and its inhabitants that could be possible thanks to digital technology, on cooking and urban agriculture, on energy, on mobility, in the experimental context of a contributory economy based on the revaluation of knowledge and locality in close relationship with the inhabitants.

As such, the act of walking may not itself be the solution towards which critical reflection is pointing; one can hardly expect the entire human population to suddenly begin walking to change their way of living in the world. However, what it certainly does is open up a space of resistance through disruption of the hyper-synchronicity of Stiegler's hyper-industrial society. This space is absolutely crucial for a reflective and creative voice to be empowered, for a moment of rebellion against the expectations of normalcy, and potentially the renunciation of the projection of an expected way of living. Stiegler (2020a, p. 3) himself recognises the importance of such a space, which for him was experienced in confinement, but which could also be found in the act of walking, saying that "a number of things are interrupted, and this moment can make it possible to create opportunities for reflection, both individually and collectively, if this is accompanied a little".

In other words, the *negotium* is first consciously suspended, then rejected and then renounced. The non-existence of leisure time through its commodification becomes non-determined through the presence of the self in the experience of walking.

Walking, as they say, "empties the mind". In another way, walking fills the mind with a different sense of purpose. Not connected with ideas or doctrines, not in the sense of a head full of phrases, quotations, theories: but full of the world's presence. That presence which, during the walk, in successive strata, has been deposited in the soul throughout the day (Gros, 2014, p. 112).

This is the practice of self-care and upliftment that takes place through self-love, features of the contemporary *otium* as defined earlier by Stiegler (2011c). Stiegler conceives of this process as *culture*, a culture that has not been industrialised and commodified as in Horkheimer and Adorno's *culture industry* thesis, but rather a culture based on the ideals of the development of the intellectual faculties (albeit through a medium of physical activity), a culture of self-elevation. It is a liturgical and rhythmical practice where the self negotiates between the different retentions (primary, secondary and tertiary) and protentions, without being over-determined by mnemotechnologies of a digital nature.

What are the possibilities of reimagining our relation to these mnemotechnical processes in a different capacity in which they are not over-determined by the goal of consumptive culture? For Stiegler (2020a, p. 3), the response is to reflect on our ways of living in a digital realm and the need for genuine psychic and collective individuation and the possibility of reimagining a new way of living through reinvention, which at times can include drawing from the past as opposed to trying to blindly stumble into an undefined future. He writes that

[t]his can lead to a return to the memory and meaning of things we used to do in the past, including family practices that have been lost, which are also educational practices – in the kitchen for example. Starting from such questions, we can reflect on what it means to do something together – and on the dangers that smartphones present for young and old alike: the danger of making us forget. From there, we can then come to ask ourselves, individually and collectively, why if we shouldn't reconnect to these earlier ways of life, without for all that reliving what we did in the twentieth century.

As noted earlier, Stiegler (2011c) links the conception of *otium* as the process of thinking theory as practice and vice versa to the "potential to act". Likewise, for Fromm (2002), this conception of walking as an *otium* challenges the "pathology of normalcy" in breaking the boredom of empty repetitions of modernity and the desire to escape therefrom through unproductive, uncreative and unimaginative activities, as found more often than not in the contemporary leisure industry and intensified in hyper-industrial society's digitalisation. This is of utmost importance because for Fromm the pathology of normalcy reduces the individual's willingness to act and thus change the status quo. If this process of pseudo-willing (as opposed to genuine willing) becomes amplified through the hyper-synchronisation of leisure time, the capacity of the willingness to act is simultaneously hamstrung, resulting in a society of apathy in bringing about real change.

## Conclusion

The central focus of the argument presented above is that a discussion about the effects of the online leisure industry, as

distinguished from leisure activities (online or offline), needs to be reflected upon when trying to understand the general sense of apathy when it comes to authentic action relating to changing the world (and one's sense of self) after the pandemic. In the first few months of the various lockdowns, there seemed to be a tangible sense of momentum building up in terms of creating a driving narrative of the necessity of urgent change, driven largely by the visible positives (such as environmental renewal) and salient negatives (such as blatant abuse of power and socio-economic inequality) that was brought to the forefront of popular media. However, that sense of optimism of bringing about widespread social awareness of these issues followed by large-scale action soon faded. At the same time, many of the leisure activities that people had engaged in at the beginning of lockdown, with the intent of improving themselves by learning musical instruments or a new craft, were absorbed by the leisure industry, monetised and ultimately commodified.

The argument of this article is that this trend should not merely be brushed aside as a coincidence, but should rather be considered as a real and rather frightening phenomenon from the theoretical perspective of the critical theorists and the phenomenology of Stiegler. Their argument shows a persuasive link between the commodification of leisure time, the hyper-synchronised collapse of this time and space as found in the digital streams dominating hyper-industrial society and the erosion of genuine thinking and will among people to act towards the future. The potential of the *otium*, or the use of free time to enrich and uplift oneself, seems to have instead become an opium during the latter stages of the pandemic thus far, creating a lullaby to induce a languor of their critical and reflective faculties. The desire to return to "normal", i.e. the pre-pandemic way of life, has become a socially pathological state of mind.

Gros and other walkers, however, believe that the process of walking offers a few different ways of liberating oneself from this status quo and in this process allowing for the becoming of individuals that recognise the external pressures of society to live in a cycle of production, consumption and speed. From this disruption and resistance allowing insight into a moment of a different way of being in the world, we can reflect on how to resist it, rebel against it and ultimately renounce it, if we so choose. For Gros (2014, p. 117), Thoreau embodied the potential of walking in his life lived as resistance and radical choice,

...working only for what was necessary, walking daily at length, avoiding entanglement in the social game – was quickly judged by others (the upright, the hardworking, the propertied) to be pretty peculiar. However, it was combined with a quest for truth and authenticity. Seeking truth means going beyond appearances. It means denouncing manners and mores, traditions, the everyday, as so many conventions, hypocrisies and lies.

In the rhythm of walking, in the repetition of taking one step after another, the mind is brought into the heart and it becomes the exercise of a state of concentration (Gros, 2014). It is in this state that the self can be reflective, can begin to imagine something different, can challenge the boundaries of socially determined or expected identities and, hopefully, act.

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