

# Ned Rossiter

# Geert Lovink

# Dreamful Computing

**Shintaro Miyazaki:** How would you define dreamful computing?

**Ned Rossiter/Geert Lovink:** We start with the end, the final words Bernard Stiegler wrote in the last English translation before he died, *The Age of Disruption* (2019): "In order to do politics today, we must dream."<sup>1</sup> We cast techniques of dreaming in relation to the media question that underscores cultures of computational capitalism. Social media users, particularly the younger ones, increasingly struggle to dream. They actually do not dream or simply cannot remember. It is not relevant here whether brain scans scientifically prove that they actually do dream. The resting brain can no longer make sense of the overload of images, likes, and updates, numbing the early 20th century realm of repressed desires. If the dream was once characterized as a "rhapsody of life," today's ecstatic feelings are overruled and distracted by constant scrolling and swiping. The future of the next generations is shredded in a context of climate catastrophe, chronic social stagnation and precarious working conditions, viral contagion, mental crises, war, and stultifying extractivist platform conditions, literally suffered by billions. This is causing a "strike" in both individual and collective imagination.

Our proposition of "dreamful computing" responds to these prevailing conditions.<sup>2</sup> How to recuperate the techniques of dreaming? What happens next once users become aware of how exactly they are a part - an object and component - of the computing process? How to unleash collective imagination again? Dreamful computing is a social technique that works against the "stack" of crises at the current conjuncture. Dreams, of course, can also turn into nightmares. For now, we wish to run with the idea of dreaming computationally otherwise. As we can no longer distinguish between the overnight reproduction of individual experience and the busy social channels that we're participating in during the day, we need to investigate how this plays out at the level of (the absence of) dreams. Can we devise new blueprints of how a machine works, how it produces and expresses economy and society, labor and life? Can we design computational systems that are non-exploitative, are not predicated on operational logics of extraction, and do not consign the generations to the drift of cognitive stupor, anxiety, and depression?

There's a techno-determinism that lurks within some of these questions. We don't shy away from acknowledging that this is the age of cosmotechnics.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, determining forces are better off identified and understood. The pervasiveness of techno-solutionism should not stop us from thinking technologically - both on the deepest philosophical level and in everyday life. We do not have a problem with the idea that technology "shapes" society. The same with any number of other passive expressions deployed across the fashions of theory such as affordances, affects, or agency. Just don't invoke that awfully taboo word, determinism! We like the way the idea of dreamful computing introduces an unconscious dimension to a technically determining system - and vice-versa. In the 21st century, technology and subjectivity can no longer be separated, and this makes the reading and use of pre-21st century authors a bit harder. There is no interior self anymore. Indeed, such a proposition and fabrication of psychology and humanism assumed technology and subjectivity were not always-already enmeshed and mutually constitutive. We need to rethink the idea of dreams and imagination as worlds specific to their own dynamics.

Decades of austerity, bullshit jobs, exhaustion, social and environmental collapse have taken their toll, especially on youth. With synapses sizzled by social media and data extractionism, dreamful computing emerges as a techno-social condition of possibility, of escape and futurity. Technology never has control of itself, but is prone to reverie, to a dark power it cannot command. In short, technology is subject to the flip side of itself, to unknown forces that subsist below the threshold of perception, consciousness, and decision. Machines dream of electric sheep. And we might as well populate those dreams with the whole bloody zoo. Why not? In this way, our dreamful computers take on any number of anima (Jung) that lurk within the soul of decisionism.

We would like to ask why Freud and Jung - even more the bastard child of psychoanalysis - are almost nowhere to be found in digital media theory. The Deleuzo-Guattarian turn to schizo-analysis since the early 1980s is not a real answer to the occlusion of psychoanalysis as Freudo-Marxism never played a defining role in media theory in the first place. Film theory in the 1970s and 80s may be an exception. Aside from iconoclasts like Jean-Luc Godard and Christian Metz (France), Paul Willemen (UK-based, Flemish), and later Adrian Martin (Australia), little attention was given to the materialities of cinema and their relation to the imaginary. How to build the bridge between class consciousness, psychoanalysis, and semiotics was the central question back then. So what happened to that body of research and thinking that probed the dark recesses of the unconscious? For some time, perhaps up until the 70s, Freud and Marx provided the road-tested staples of any theoretical apparatus worth its name that set out to critique contemporary capitalism. Marx endures, and very strongly in

some circles. But not Freud, let alone Jung. As for the obscure Lacan, he pretty much ridiculed himself into non-existence. Please note: continental philosophy and its theoretical variants (structuralism, post-structuralism, critical theory) never really took the American strains of psychoanalysis seriously, which morphed all too easily into the 90s dot-com boom years of New Ageism and the self-help industry. Complaints of failing theory of the past aside, this leaves us empty-handed in an age where research into the workings of the techno-unconscious is now monopolized by corporate behavioral scientists and associated neuroscience labs.

How can we retrieve something from this now-degraded tradition of psychoanalysis? It's very understandable why media theory has long held an aversion to theorization of this kind. For the materialist traditions of media theory - and here we think chiefly of the work of Harold Innis and Friedrich Kittler - the study of media technologies has been first and foremost a study of the material properties and propensities of technical systems. For Innis, this connected to the question of space and time, power and civilization. And for Kittler, technology was always already tied to and determining of epistemology, history, and the archive. To introduce dreams into these sorts of approaches by way of psychoanalysis was anathema to the almost scientific task of breaking media down to its constitutive parts as a technique of assembling its outside, namely the world. At first glance, psychoanalysis was just a bit too feminine for these guys, perhaps. But in fact Kittler wrote quite extensively on Freud and Lacan. And also dreams. Innis, hardly at all.

For Kittler, dreams comprise the physiology of aesthetic media: "Dreams produce entoptic images that appear to the sleeper as defined shapes; intoxication produces sounds, rhythms, and dance figures, which emerge and vanish endlessly."<sup>4</sup> Continuing with his Nietzschean inquiry: "Senses that are endogenously stimulated give rise, in dreams, to a hallucinatory 'world of seeing'; in a state of intoxication, they produce a 'world of hearing'. They form, in physiological but not in technical terms, media in the modern sense. Media escape the standards of knowledge: only materiality counts - the conditions of emission and reception, and the frequency of signs." Media, understood this way, correspond with McLuhan's idea of extending the sensory repertoire of "man." But as dreams, such senses are encoded in ways specific to their own terms, their own grammars - forms of expression that entirely refuse regimes of reason. But this does not make dreams any less real. As Kittler notes of German-American psychologist, Hugo Münsterberg, "'every dream becomes real' at the movies." So where are our dreams of computational culture? What might they be?

If dreams are a stage for our unconscious, for our dirty secrets and perverse desires, how might (social) media be considered as a theater

from the other side? Let's also remember that dreams are the space where anxieties are unleashed and rehearse their own dream-play. Even if they are not resolved, dreams provide a vehicle of expression for our worries. In this way, dreamful media offer a much-needed reprieve for youth doubled-down with dread and anxiety – such pathologies can now be ditched and handed over to the dream machine. Be free of your worries, pass them on to the dreamful media. Now go take back your life!

Materialist traditions of media theory perhaps find comfort in a certain certainty that the concrete form of media offers. If that's the case, then we can surmise that such approaches are inherently (unconsciously) insecure insofar as they arrogate for their analyses the world as mediated surface made legible in its totality. Materialist approaches disavow uncertainty, contingency, noise. For this, we need a complementary media-theoretical apparatus, one we term dreamful media. This is a concept firmly rooted inside the social media rules of capitalist realism. Unfortunately, we need to leave the question unanswered here on how to bridge the gap between the world of classic media theory of 30-60 years ago and the vast reality of platform capitalism. But we can note that the linking term here, funnily enough, is still "media." While it may be tempting to dump the media concept altogether (because it is too slow, too partial, lacking the totality of terms such as infrastructure, stack, and platform), the dirty reality out there still sticks to the term, as the ongoing popularity of "social media" proves.

Digital media consist of hardware, software, and databases, quietly processing automated algorithms and machine learning in the background, ruling our lives from a distance. Power operations have moved to the invisible, meta-sensual level of the subconscious pulverized by the dopamine-draining effects of life hitched to computational systems. This is the material base of our focus on dreaming. Dreams summarize and process this material given, trying to craft fragmented narratives from our unconscious state of metaphysical distraction spawned by our busy and dispersed techno-social everyday life. It could be that we cannot yet grasp the narrative structures of our 21st century dream culture. The collective glue of our social myths has been shattered with the rise of individualization and globalization of labor and life. It may no longer be the fear of darkness, wild animals such as dragons, or the return of ancestors in the form of renegades, tricksters, sages, and heroes that populate accounts of the collective unconscious and primal desire transcribed into dream diaries. What is technological dreaming today? What role does repressed sexuality play in the dreamworld of our lives? Does it summarize video game cultures? What are today's archetypes? Indeed, do we still have archetypes? Can we produce genuinely new ones?

Can the dream itself become too chaotic and thus fail to process and summarize the traumas of everyday life? How can dreams process the overload of sensorial input, news and social media updates, advertisements, and lifestyle advice? There's a rising consensus that machine learning processes and neural networks are designed to address the problem of pattern detection from the mess of data. But there's a self-referential logic at work here. The machine feeds the machine, which feeds the machine. Meanwhile, the poor suffering dolt of a human subject is left to scramble through the disorientation and confusion of their derailed world.

This is where dreaming media come in. Not as some silly savior riding along on a white horse named Silver. But rather as an antidote to the dog shit techno-visions pumped out of Silicon Valley, pieced together in Chinese labor farms, packaged up by a destroyed worker humping packages around the maze of Amazon warehouses, and delivered to you by a platform driver under the pump to cram their quota if they want to make that sub-optimum wage for the day. No more. Dreamful media put an end to the trajectory that only goes in one direction: human suffering and annihilation on a planetary scale. Dreamful media is a proposition, a speculative concept of media design as such. A classic Adilkno UTO (unidentified theoretical object) in that sense.<sup>5</sup> They do not exist (yet, or never will).

**Shintaro Miyazaki:** How is dreamful computing different from, let's say, supercomputing or high-performance computing?

**Ned Rossiter/Geert Lovink:** Supercomputing and high-performance computing are narcissistic machines. They are computational technologies designed to solve computational problems. Not problems that tarry with our nightmares, problems of the non-computational kind that at once precede and condition the possibility of super or high-performance computing. Dreamful computing requires a subversive, paradigmatic change as it is antithetical to calculation and control, the two primary features of contemporary computational systems and featured in the Hollywood/Silicon Valley 3D and VR worlds. This is the "countering" dimension of dreamful computing, which unleashes taboo and repression from the constraints of computational systems of measure. Dreamful computing is not about holding the world to account. But rather setting it free.

This takes us back to the media question in the 21st century in which media forms have multiplied, disaggregated, and their content remediated to the extent that some enthuse at the prospect of a planetary mushroom computer. For us, asking the media question today is to inquire into technical logics not predicated on calculation, measure, pre-emption, and control. We know where the unholy integration of media and digital networks took us. Can we please do a better job?

Such a study attends to the history of communication media and transport technologies and the production of knowledge and society. The media question in the 19th and 20th centuries was concerned with how media were tied to the governance of populations and cultivation of perception. The media question straddled the nexus between politics and aesthetics. The study of digital cultures subsists within a general episteme that abandons politics for aesthetics. A quick survey of media studies within Anglophone and German academies signals three dominant strands: media philosophy and cultural studies, media sociology including data analytics, and environmental media a.k.a. infrastructure studies. All unwittingly vacate the scene of the political understood as sites of struggle. The strategic question "what's to be done?" is left to the social sciences, op-ed writers, and young start-up entrepreneurs. Sad and confused, dull and uninspiring. Most humanities academics struggle with decades-old tech and thus limit themselves as outsiders to the administrative task of measuring the social, ethical, cultural and, more recently, environmental impact of "digitalization" and "platformization."

Dreaming media reintroduce the media question to grapple with an epistemic horizon not captured by computational calculation, not accounted for by systems of measure, and not sufficiently complex to deal with the nuanced desires of the human soul. In this regard, dreaming media are a form of negative media. They negate the world "as it should be" defined, at least, by computational media of calibration and control.

**Shintaro Miyazaki:** I have too many thoughts and questions... Let's concentrate on the most important for me: How could we make sure that these dreams won't become toxic and turn into nightmares? Here we would need to remember two forgotten threads of media theory, also inspired by Freud/Jung and Marx: Firstly the Felix Guattari, Antonio Negri, Franco "Bifo" Berardi thread. Guattari was even influential on Kittler. And there has been a whole circle of *Anti-Oedipus* readers in West Germany, amongst them also my German media studies teacher Georg Christoph Tholen, who edited a collection called *Schizo-Schleichwege* around 1980/81. It seems that all this disappeared somehow later, also in his own writing and thinking. But he coined what we call the "strong, emphatic" meaning of medium/media, which is surely similar to your media question. The emphatic definition of medium tries to analyze media beyond their instrumentality, but gives them some sort of autonomy/agency, which goes beyond their designs.

**Ned Rossiter/Geert Lovink:** Like many, we spent time in the 80s and 90s immersed in texts by Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Benjamin, along with writings by feminist theorists like Toril Moi, Cixous, Kristeva, Bracha Ettinger, Elizabeth Grosz, among others. Ned loved reading novels by Marguerite Duras (such an erotic economy of expression!) and Georges

Bataille. Michel Leiris remains a favorite of Ned's. Also Michel Serres, of course. Klaus Theweleit is another. Geert was probably more German-oriented. We read across anthropology, political theory, cultural studies, social theory, art theory, film theory. On it goes. The excursion into theory never ends. The key lesson: avoid hair-splitting exercises in sectarian theory wars and its non-violent yet boring comparative studies - what's K's interpretation of L, why not read X with Y, what would have happened if C had read D? These are all signs of stagnation and withdrawal, when theory loses its edge because there's only academic careers at stake. Whatever else, don't ever engage in the mind-numbing pursuit of template theory, applying this or that "approach" to your objects of study.

For many years, we take an entirely opposite line: problems and concepts as co-emergent and specific to their conjunctural situation. Sabotage any attempt to reduce theory as a self-referential activity of the few, the initiated that read the "right" books. Does that sort of academy exist these days anymore anyway, outside a few exclusive humanities departments in the US and perhaps Europe? Like our Sydney friend Brett Neilson, we tend to read philosophy texts as technical manuals, and technical manuals as resources for the production on concepts. More than anything, we set out to craft concepts alive to the world as we find it. And this, of course, is also and always a technical world. In general, the theory circles have no clue about the rise of the computer, let alone the internet, and actively shied away from a critical involvement with that development. An exception here is Kittler, of course, but he also ignored the network part of computability. Instead, we focus on that generation of old audio-visual and print media and the question of organization up to today.

**Shintaro Miyazaki:** Where do you situate "countering" in dreamful computing? How would you situate dreamful computing within countering and how would you imagine its role? This could also again in my terms hint to counter-histories since the media question that straddled the politico-aesthetic nexus was not always lost and certainly not everywhere.

**Ned Rossiter/Geert Lovink:** Dreamful computing counters logics of schizo-productivity and endless capital accumulation (Bifo).<sup>6</sup> Why? Because we are in a period of transition, of what Stiegler calls "negentropy" precipitated by an overload of entropy, of chaos and disorder as the human species-being and planetary life propel toward extinction and degrowth. So dreamful computing are forms of contradictory media, as all media are, except that unlike logics of production where media "produce" messages, meaning, economies, social relations, archives, and so forth, dreamful computing produce nothing. They are media without a trace. Non-indexical media. In this way, dreamful computing are post-post-media. If post-media are about the

mediation of relations (see, for example, the rise of research on environmental media), which all media always are anyway, then post-post-media (a truly awful term) are a kind of anti-media. This is not to suppose we enter an epoch of pure populism, where the interface of mediation disappears and we have perfect interoperability and totally seamless connection and enmeshment. That's the stupid dream of logistical media such as SAP and all the rest. At its core, dreamful computing are anti-calculation machines that have the unique quality to drift off into oblivion. We don't need no correlations. This new class of media do not measure, are not accountable, and do not strive to optimize performance with the goal of maximizing efficiencies. Dreamful computing goes against of all this. No measures, no accounting, no optimization. Dreamful computing, if anything, are splendid exercises in the production of nothing. They revel in the generation of inefficiencies.

Both efficiencies and inefficiencies are about time. Media always organize time and space in ways coextensive with the technics of communication and the materiality of technology. Again, we return to our earlier interest in this interview to the idea of non-materialist theories of computational media. Here we are not talking about theories of affect, sensation, and so forth, even if these properly speak to media aesthetics. But rather, our interest is in designing theories that don't disavow the uncertainty, noise, and contingency of the situation of media. Insofar as dreamful computing organize time as inefficiencies, we can begin our inquiry into dreamful computing by asking the question of time. This serves also as a practice of method. Since dreamful computing are by definition elusive to the point of perhaps not even or ever existing, we can nonetheless make a start by searching for temporalities that counter or refuse the regimes of time-as-efficiency, borne out by the reign of logistical media, for example, in our current epoch. Such a method is, effectively, one of reverse engineering: once we know the temporality of dreamful computing, we are then in a position to start reconstructing the properties specific to such modes of communication and relation.

We might as well return to the writings of Freud to see what he has to say about the time of dreams. Or Bergson, who interestingly wrote a quite obscure book on dreams. Or reread Frederik van Eeden's *Dromenboek* in order to strengthen our mental clarity. Or reverse the situation with Carlos Castaneda, who stated that life is a dream, or a sequence of dreams, and enter the omniverse through the Doors of Perception, Huxley-style. Or consider how Aboriginal "dream-time" might be understood as a form of media that governs, makes "law," that bears upon social relations, kinship, the movement across space, the time of seasons, the life-world of spirits, of ancestors who speak to and give guidance for the generations in the present. These are among the many conceptual resources we might draw on in constructing a theory of



dreamful computation. But first and foremost, we stay with Bernard Stiegler who worked on the dream topic in the last phase of his life. He notes how each century is marked as a unit of time based on the decimal system within a Christian paradigm of "the West." The passing of each century is "in some way always the end of a world, given that a world is always also localized and temporalized by an epoch that comes to pass on and in a geographical area." Dreamful computing is always on the verge of the end. Dreams come and they go, disappearing with the light of the day. Dreamful computing might be understood as the passing of worlds in the dark of the night. What are those worlds of possibility? Dreams made computational are dreams with a potential retention effect. Not stored in databases awaiting extraction and transformation in the form of the production of value. But dreams that refuse to go away in the face of the so-called light of reason (Enlightenment). Dreams that linger as a signal, that replicate and spawn collective desires for life not captured by technologies of calculation.

**Shintaro Miyazaki:** Is dreamful computing something you do on a community or even group-basis or regionally or even globally? How to relate to the tension between unifying logic/applications and its material operations/implications in particularity/locality?

**Ned Rossiter/Geert Lovink:** Dream research has long questioned the reduction of dreaming to the self. While dreams process the world, they also have the capacity to create new worlds (including dystopias, of course). While we retreat into a world of its own, what we find there is anything but singular, no matter how weird, intense, erotic, violent it is out there. We have long said farewell to the normal-abnormal distinction, but what does that mean in this technical age?

Key to the dream topic in the first part of the 20th century was the technique of interpretation: spreading it out on the table, in a sense tearing it apart, revealing its symbols and meanings. This is the hermeneutic act, which psychoanalysis mastered like few other disciplines. Hermeneutics is powerful because of the narratives it not only uncovers but in the act of uncovering, tells and recasts. It creates narratives. However, dreams today will have to be searchable, build linkages. In part this is also a semiotic exercise: the art of reading the signs. Which is an act of decision, of closing down the floating life of the signifier and committing to the production of meaning, beyond good and evil.

One of the big tasks in communication and PR degrees is to teach students to tell stories again. Public relations long ago gave up on teaching the art of crafting narratives. We need to confront that tendency of vocational education. It is powerful to return to narrative, but is it still possible? Are such objectives a regressive

or liberating strategy? When you're struggling to hold down multiple gig-jobs, it's easier to press "start" on whatever slogan generators and let machines punch out the prose. Meaning no longer transmits as narrative but rather the wash of affect, of symbols of feeling, of atmospheres. Cognitive capacity is the price paid for narratives made by machines. The mental mess social media are creating has been researched but not its effects on dreams. The next step is to design dreaming media as an answer to the dire situation in terms of the absence of collective imagination.

The assault on consciousness by the speed of signals (social media, info-capitalism) produces an entirely depleted unconscious. The effect: no more dreams. If there's a correlation between media and dreams (what Stiegler calls *exo-somatization*, or the exteriorization of dreams), then we need to design media that organize the intense fragmentation of noise (entropy, for Stiegler). This may indeed mean crafting new narratives, but not in the infantile discourse of "storytelling" that pervades many media studies degrees. Crucially, "the faculty of dreaming is the condition of the faculty of knowing."<sup>7</sup> Without dreams, we surrender the ability to know, to orientate ourselves in this world. And crucially, to retain the autonomy of decision.

As wonderfully distilled in the foreword to Bergson's book on dreams: "Out of astrology grew astronomy. Out of oneiromancy has grown - nothing." Dreamful computation excels in the production of nothing. They are media of the empty dream, the zero-sum dream, the one that may or may not have happened but can no longer be recalled, not even after training the mind in personal memory or dream retrieval. The dream can be registered as brain activity, however, that promptly dissipates into something it always was: electric noise.

In his essay on Ludwig Binswanger's "Dream and Existence," Foucault notes that dreams have their own laws, dynamic powers, specific structures, imaginaries, density, even a divine will.<sup>8</sup> Stiegler also picks up on this text, highlighting Binswanger's observation of the commonness of flying dreams. Such dreams are among the most thrilling and ecstatic on the rare occasions they slide into our dreaming life. The flying dreams of Amazon drone delivery patents are only ever depressing. Video may have killed the radio star, but Amazon kills dreams with its delivery media. Maybe the future of media theory and the dream research are one and the same, or maybe not. Only the techno-social mediated dream will make the renaissance of dreaming possible. This is our project.

(Interview, conducted online, Germany-France, July 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, transl. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

- 2 Thanks to Shintaro Miyazaki for guiding us toward the idea of dreamful computing. See Shintaro Miyazaki, "Dreamful Computing – A Very Short Provocation," *Engines of Difference: Interdisciplinary Voices in Critical Computing*, 2 March 2021, available at <https://enginesofdifference.org/2021/03/02/dreamful-computing-a-very-short-provocation/>.
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