

Jeremy Shaw:
Attention,
↪ Oblivion,
Jubilation

by Godfre Leung



Jeremy Shaw, stills from *Morning Has Broken*, 2001, single channel super 8 to DV, 3:30
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JOHANN KÖNIG, BERLIN



As labour moves outside the factory walls, it is increasingly difficult to maintain the fiction of any measure of the working day and thus separate the time of production from the time of reproduction, or work time from leisure time. There are no time clocks to punch on the terrain of biopolitical production; the proletariat produces in all its generality everywhere all day long.

– Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

*Praise with elation, praise ev'ry morning
 God's recreation of the new day.*

– Cat Stevens

Ravers Leaving the Factory

Jeremy Shaw's 2001 video *Morning Has Broken* sets footage of young people exiting a rave to Cat Stevens' song of the same name. Those ravers, outfitted with bead bracelets and many still lazily sucking on oversized pacifiers and toting glow sticks, pass through a queue of promoters – or at any rate, their minimum-wage or volunteer junk-flyer-peddling minions – as they enter the morning light. The ravers' fashions and accessories date the footage almost immediately, as does one single exiting raver talking on a flip phone. Today, he would be staring at and typing into his phone. They all would be.

Equally dated is the gauntlet that awaits our ravers. That information would be paperless now, already awaiting today's ravers on their phones. Moreover, today, the ravers would be tweeting, posting photos, "liking" and reposting others' posts; in short, doing the promoters' publicity for them.

In the decade leading up to *Morning Has Broken*, Italian neo-Marxist philosophers described a shift in working life away from the Fordist model of production to what Mario Tronti had a generation earlier called the "social factory": a regime of cognitive capitalism sustained by immaterial labour.¹ Simultaneous with the inadvertent coining of 21st century art's buzzwords by Berardi, Lazzarato, Marazzi, Negri and Virno in the '90s, two management consultants set about their own diagnosis of millennial capitalism, which they christened the "attention economy."² Attention, this diagnosis perceptively held, had superseded quantities of time as the most effective unit of labour to manage. Management, therefore, had to learn from the advertising industry's strategies to harness the perceptual-cognitive energy of consumers in order to maximize the value of labour by refracting workers' attention across multiple parallel or simultaneous tasks. The result of this paradigm shift, however, was not only a newly flexible workforce for which work internalized techniques of value-productive commodity consumption (*pace* Richard Florida); labour itself was outsourced to consumers in the form of a participatory capitalism wherein consumers' attention was not only required to interpret and psychologically internalize advertisements, but also to conceive of and disseminate them.³

Willing Street Teams of Capital

The ravers in *Morning Has Broken* are not leaving a literal factory, though they perhaps should be, given the history of rave culture's underground parties thrown in abandoned factories and warehouses that repurposed post-industrial landscapes as Ecstasy-fuelled dream worlds. Instead, Shaw's ravers are exiting the Plaza of Nations in Vancouver, BC, and the "rave" – Shaw's quotation marks, not mine – they were attending was totally above-ground and institutionally sanctioned: "directly downtown, police-endorsed [and in the former] Expo ['86] wasteland location."⁴

Within this displacement from factory to entertainment complex passes a history of capitalism masquerading as a history of cinema. Richard Koeck describes Louis Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895):

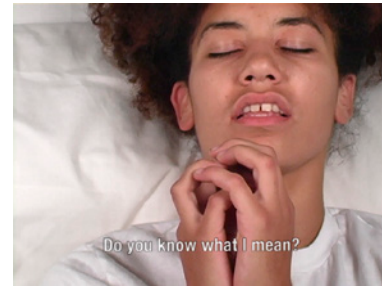
*... factory workers progress towards the camera through carefully framed gates, leaving the territory of work and entering the space of leisure time.*⁵

And here is Jonathan Beller on Sergei Eisenstein's *The Strike* (1925):

*Unaware of impending defeat, the workers use their life-energy to organize by word of mouth, by pamphleteering, and under the cover of art. During leisure time by the water, the handsome leaders argue and plot while reposed on an anchor. Their fraternal bond forged in working together for a common cause is perhaps, for Eisenstein, the libidinal core of a revolutionary society.*⁶

The fabric of the leisure time that was the phantasmagoric other of wage labour in the era of the Lumière brothers and early cinema, and in which Eisenstein would site the affective potentialities of political organization, no longer existed in 2001. In *Morning Has Broken*, not only did the factory no longer exist as the site of labour – now mobile and immaterial – but even the abandoned factory no longer existed as the appropriated site of heterotopic labour-turned-play. In Vancouver, post-1997, those former sites of work and play were becoming condos.

In place of those factories lay a techno-utopia in ruins. Rather than being stamped out, underground rave culture was being dragged into plain sight and wholly accessorized; the same era would see *The New Yorker's* John Seabrook write of "a system of status that values authenticity over



Jeremy Shaw, still from *DMT*, 2004 (Sarah), eight channel DV installation, independently looping videos, 6:47 – 21:02, dimensions variable
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JOHANN KÖNIG, BERLIN

quality, [in which] a Chemical Brothers t-shirt will get me further in many places than my father's suit."⁷ So too would that techno-utopia's strategies of organization – in Usenet discussion groups in the late 1980s and '90s – become the model for today's social network interfaces. The digital networks that once tactically constituted sub-culture's invisible pamphleteering would morph into indiscriminately visible and parasitically embeddable social media. In hindsight, the sides and backs of heads we see aimed at the exiting ravers, and the often disembodied hands proffering flyers in the ravers' lines of sight, marked a present through which those young proto-millennials had to pass: from social organization to the managing of social media presences, from Ecstasy to future working lives fuelled by performance-enhancing ADHD medication. In this passage, the temporal categories of work and leisure that industrial capitalism partitioned from the fabric of unalienated life dissolve, as the all-night party and the graveyard shift came in the succeeding decade not to constitute a clash between the hipster and the square – such as is at least hinted at in *Morning Has Broken* – but rather to collapse into one another.

At the turn of the millennium, Vancouver's video game industry was incubating in the technological shadow of the city's then-booming film industry. More than likely, many of *Morning Has Broken's* ravers were then becoming the precarious, interchangeable and ultimately disposable horde of coders, designers and beta testers that sustained that industry. And also more than likely, they were working either for free or virtually for free.⁸

Unwilful Oblivion

In a 2009 interview with Lars Bang Larsen, Jeremy Shaw states:

I really love the screensaver; it's like a dazed-induced worm-hole out of the mundanity of the office/workplace. When I first heard of DMT, it was referred to as the "businessman's drug" because of the fact that one could do it on their lunch break and return to work sober as if nothing had happened. So I like to think of the screensaver as an implementation of that quick trip out of your mind any time you stop working on the computer long enough for it to turn on.⁹

Shaw's *DMT* (2004) is a series of eight videos shot with a stationary camera depicting the heads – occasionally just the pillow – of subjects lying in a bed while under the influence of the titular drug. Synched to the video images are diegetic soundtracks, in which we hear the giggles, moans and occasionally murmurs of the subjects, as well as music Shaw had chosen to accompany their DMT trips. Laid over the video image are subtitles containing clumsy testimonials by those subjects attempting to describe their trips immediately after they had ended. The videos range from 5 to 23 minutes long, each beginning with the subject exhaling the hit of DMT and abruptly ending when the subject has come down. Three temporalities confront the viewer simultaneously: the subject's trip as originally recorded by the camera, the footage later viewed by the subject as she or he is describing it (this temporality itself bifurcated into the temporalities of the subject's literal encounter with the recorded image, the subject's memory and the diegesis of the subject's narration) and finally the playback of the video in the viewer's own present. One and the same footage is viewed three if not five times – in production, post-production and exhibition; as documentary and as memoir – and yet none of these viewings gives any meaningful perceptual access to what is seen by the closed and sometimes flickering eyelids on the screens. Visual perception has been divided into multiple cognitive tasks, each frustratingly without reward.

Andy Warhol's *Screen Test* films of the early 1960s, *DMT*'s most direct reference point, collapse the filmed event and

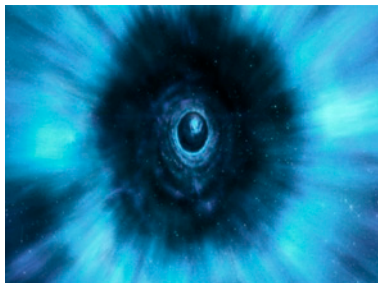
the event of viewing into a continuous present. Because little happens in the films,

[the viewer's] attention unavoidably moves "out" of the film to awareness of its physical context and the current time and space of its presentation – a functional boredom. But in Warhol we also discover the value of a new cinematic concept, that of representational equivalence in duration. . . . Experience of the film's length can be used as a direct analogue for the film's interior duration, that of its minimal action. This analogue is made possible by the nearly one-to-one equivalence between the length of filming and the screening.¹⁰

Warhol further stretched the viewer's experience of the present – and with it, the indexical recorded past – by projecting his early silent films a third slower than the rate at which they were filmed, interjecting into the rhythms of the Factory the hypnotic but only liminally perceptible flicker of moving images.¹¹ In contrast, the video images of *DMT* do not flicker; the only flicker is in the eyelids of the subjects on their DMT trips, signalling visions and experiences that are made mysterious to the viewer. Audible in the soundtracks are passages from the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*, Brian Eno's *Before and After Science* (its exquisite second side, to be exact), Slowdive's *Sowrlaki* and Fennesz's *Venice* – these are four of the most precise and sonically rich albums I know of – and yet buried within the soundscapes of Shaw's documentary field recordings, the viewer hears neither those albums as they sounded, in all their richness, in that room at that time, nor more significantly what those albums would sound like to someone on DMT.

Walter Benjamin famously prophesied that filmic montage's aesthetic of distraction would dialectically motivate awareness of the habitual operations of the perceiver's "optical unconscious" and therefore awaken society from capitalism's phantasmagoric dream worlds. Presently, the materialist tactic that Benjamin called "reception in a state of distraction" is known as multitasking. This cognitive labour underlies artistic practices such as Shaw's that fall under the paradigm of post-production, both in their much-discussed management of pre-existing cultural forms, and in the viewer's complementary management of the many perceptual tasks required to decode (and re-code) post-produced art. As the gallery-ready artist becomes indistinguishable from the iMovie/YouTube user, the fate of judgment is a red herring.¹² The dissolving of aesthetic categories multiplies exponentially the demands placed on the media consumer's attention, which is the real stake, as post-production and its regime of attention – always, everywhere, at once – extend generally as perceptual models of everyday life. Whether highly paid and salaried, precarious, an unpaid internship or "for fun"; whether a function of debt, opportunity cost or perhaps "only" Internet addiction, these kinds of value-productive labour that receive culture in a state of multitasking are coerced. With work and leisure now indistinguishable, that coercion becomes infinitely extensible, giving us the biopolitical regimen of the 24/7 workday.

Jeremy Shaw, still from *This Transition Will Never End*, 2008
– present, single channel video,
silent, dimensions variable
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND
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Shaw's 2014 video work *Quickeners* is a mock-educational filmstrip detailing a psychological condition, termed Human Atavism Syndrome, afflicting a species of evolutionary "quantum humans" in an indeterminate future after the extinction of homo sapiens. Quantum humans exist in a state of total technological interconnection and are governed by a *telos* that has dispensed with extra-rational imperatives such as spirituality and non-productive activities such as music, dance and the arts.¹³ Those living with Human Atavism Syndrome, however, participate in revivals of alternative American religious practices – dancing, speaking in tongues, snake-handling and faith healing – in pursuit of "pure cathartic transcendence" and "a momentary but complete loss of direct neural connection to the Hive."

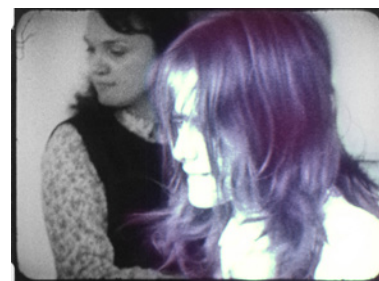
That *Quickeners* is an allegory of cognitive capitalism is obvious. Structurally, it also models it. *Quickeners* continues the pursuit of oblivion thematized in *Morning Has Broken*, *DMT* and *TTWNE*, and furthermore continues the parafictional strategy of Shaw's 2010 performance *I Am a Laser/Scream Like a Baby*, in which a scientific lecture on laser technologies unexpectedly turns into an electronic dance music performance. Carrie Lambert-Beatty has diagnosed parafiction as a structural condition of contemporary artistic practice:

Parafictioneers produce and manage plausibility. But plausibility (as opposed to accuracy) is not an attribute of a story or image, but of its encounter with viewers, whose various configurations of knowledge and "horizons of expectation" determine whether something is plausible to them. While something similar is true of any artwork – that its meaning is produced in the encounter with the spectator – a parafiction creates a specific multiplicity.¹⁴

Something approximating the experiential reward not given in *DMT* came a few years later in another video series, *This Transition Will Never End* (2008–), which Shaw describes as "an ongoing archive of appropriated footage culled from a wide variety of movies and television in which a vortex, or any such tunnel-like or spiralling image, is used to represent the slippage of time or a transition from one reality to another." *TTWNE* exploits a common point between science fiction, LSD kitsch and factory pre-set screensavers and suggests that "dropping out" in the present is more a lapse in concentration – the computer-bound worker staring aimlessly at a screen that mimics the "wandering" of her attention – than a refusal of the proverbial "straight world." LSD, the chemical avatar of 1960s (white middle-class) emancipation, was defined by its long duration and its altering of the user's experience of that duration, sometimes stretched, at other times accelerated. *DMT*, which takes effect almost immediately and generally ranges from 5 to 20 minutes when smoked, compresses the usual hours-long psychedelic experience, resulting in a greater ratio of intensity-to-duration. This intensity of the trip, however, is not a function of the subject's devotion to spiritual-sensual exploration, but rather of the condition of being "on the clock" and therefore within the rhythm of working life; *DMT* is only acid for those who don't have the time. Accordingly, the sensation, as described by the subjects in *DMT*, seems to be best characterized as para-temporal: a temporary disconnection from the forward movement of time.

Viewed within the lens of working life, *DMT* might therefore be neither a performance-enhancing nor recreational drug. It might rather be medication: a momentary but necessary reprieve from 24/7 capitalism. A work break, after all, is not the same thing as leisure time. In an economy whose scarcest and most exploited resource is attention, the site of resistance lies in the inverse of attention: oblivion. *TTWNE*'s motif of time-travel is operative here: the "trip" is travelling from one point in time to another, without having experienced what was in between. Shaw's allegory of the screensaver, however, implies that this oblivion, far from being an aesthetic strategy, nor either a political tactic, might rather be involuntary: the time warp of the screensaver is a function of exhaustion, of a deficit of attention.

Jeremy Shaw, stills from *Quickeners*, 2014, single channel 16 mm to HD video, 36:40
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JOHANN KÖNIG, BERLIN





Jeremy Shaw, *I Am a Laser / Scream Like a Baby*, 2010,
performance at Art Basel Salons, approx. 15 min
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JOHANN KÖNIG, BERLIN

If the museum is indeed a factory, as in Hito Steyerl's formulation, the value-productive labour performed in the museum-turned-social factory is not only the distribution of attention across multiplicities of screens split into yet more screens, but also a kind of cognitive labour through which viewers manage multiple parallel plausibilities. Within works by artists as diverse as Tameka Norris, Aliza Shvarts and Renzo Martens, and projects from positions as disparate as The Atlas Group and Donelle Woolford, plausibilities that fall between fiction and reality must be managed and re-managed, expectations continually updated and recalibrated, through the course of the viewing experience.¹⁵ *IAAL/SLAB* and *Quickeners* both require the viewer to manage plausibilities – *Is the science real or made up? The footage real or staged? Is the fiction itself another fiction? Where's the wink?* – but both works also offer to the viewer a reprieve from this cognitive labour in the form of the former's EDM performance and the latter's representation of the Syndrome sufferers' "quickening" (about which I will say no more, so as not to give away the ending). In both cases, fiction and parafiction recede, yielding to audiovisual experiences analogous to the lost rave of *Morning Has Broken* or the unseen visions and unheard music in *DMT*.

Shaw's EDM performance and his *Quickeners*' quickening both simultaneously thematize and pursue a kind of experience for which ecstasy – a term sometimes used in relation to his work – is inadequate.¹⁶ The correct term, I submit, is jubilation: etymologically, the affective state of having one's debts forgiven. Here, what is owed is attention, economically and technologically coerced, biopolitically disciplined. However, like all jubilees, the jubilation in *IAAL/SLAB* is temporary. As Shaw's EDM performance ends, the lecture recommences matter-of-factly, as if the musical performance were only a practical demonstration. That jubilant performance is, therefore, retroactively recoded as part of *IAAL/SLAB*'s larger parafictional conceit. At the end of a series of subtitled testimonials by sufferers of Human Atavism Syndrome, one quantum human reports: "I am exhibiting symptoms of H.A.S. but am not yet moved by any inclination to believe. So, I am confident that the Hive will soon quantify the syndrome and we'll all be back on the Hive, completely."

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Endnotes

Many thanks to Bailey Ogle for her research assistance.

- Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale [Workers and Capital]* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966).
- Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).
- Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," in *Social Text* 18:2 (2000).
- Email correspondence with the author, December 30, 2014.
- Richard Koeck, "A Cinematic Time and Motion Study," in *Time & Motion: Redefining Working Life*, eds. Emily Gee and Jeremy Myerson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 97. Emphasis in the original.
- Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth University Press, 2006), 100.
- John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 47.
- Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, "'EA Spouse' and the Crisis of Video Game Labour: Enjoyment, Exclusion, Exploitation, Exodus," in *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31:3 (2006). <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1771/1893>
- Lars Bang Larsen, "PCP: Pop/Conceptual/Psychedelic," in *C Magazine* 101 (Spring 2009), 19.
- Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1977), 94. When Le Grice wrote this, it was not yet widely acknowledged that the projection of Warhol's films, at silent speed, was in fact at a ratio of 2:3 to the frame-rate at which they were filmed (at sound speed).
- Douglas Crimp, "Our Kind of Movie": *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 142–143. In a manner of speaking, the aesthetic "pay-off" of the *Screen Tests* is tied to an aesthetic of endurance, in which the perception of durational time and film's material registering of it in recording/projection, albeit slowed in the latter, transvalues boredom into something that exceeds the abstract quantified time of the industrial workday. These films, and Warhol's early silent *Factory* films in general, might also imply that to experience factory time askew (i.e., on speed) is to submit to that same aesthetic of endurance and, in a perversely Zen-like manner, be also rewarded with a higher plane of sensation achieved through physical and/or cognitive stamina.
- "Everyone is an artist." – Richard Florida
- They also are immortal; in Shaw's dystopia, even death doesn't exist as a release from the 24/7 workday's productive demands.
- Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," in *October* 129 (Summer 2009), 72–73. Emphasis in the original.
- To provide a very brief list, qualifying conditions of those plausibilities include degrees of sincerity, commitment, criticality, cynicism, irony, satire and good and bad faith.
- If one accepts the art historical truism that Baroque ecstasy thematized a transcendence of early-modern capitalism and its emergent Protestant ethic, then surely it is the wrong word here.