Grizzling about Facebook

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You're all crazy. Every one of you. You just sit here, in your cosy little house, with your cold sodas and your Facebook pages, like it all matters. Like it's even real. But it's not! It's all going to burn and you're going to be nothing but bleached skulls. Don't you get it? You're dead! All of you are dead!

(Riley in 'Strange Things Happen')

Procrastinating one Sunday, I set aside a pile of print-outs from on-line media stories on the perils and inanities of Facebook and settled in for a serious read of the *South China Morning Post* (in hard copy, of course, with hot coffee on the side). You may need to know this great newspaper to appreciate my shock at finding therein a sententious editorial about Facebook ('Facebook no substitute for real world contact'). While it is a Murdoch property, criticised at times for a willingness to accommodate the pressures of Beijing, the *SCMP* is still a hard news-focussed paper, full of serious analysis of events around the world: it does not feature frothy columnists, and celebrity wardrobe malfunctions rarely make the front page. Yet here, with no context beyond a slight story about phishing attacks on Facebook, was one of those loopy, furious moral blares that in recent years I have come to associate with Australian newspapers: 'there is always superficiality to networking on the Web', the writer opined. If Facebook 'perhaps' helps us keep in touch with friends in faraway places, 'making new friends and maintaining old friendships requires effort, emotional commitment and contact in the real world. Facebook is no substitute for face time'.

My print-out collection is full of attempts like this to adjudicate what is and isn't real in the lives of hundreds of millions of people. Many of these pieces must be written (I surmise) by stressed-out journalists with no more access than I have to lots of personal 'face time'. As a Facebook user whose loved ones are often very far away, of course I disagree with the editorial's premises; anyone who thinks that social networking is a 'superficial' matter of clicking should explain to me (to begin with) in just what world the effort of making a photo album for friends and family does not involve emotional commitment; and in what kind of real world it counts as an evasion of contact to have an on-line party, or to send gifts, humour and words of comfort or affection to people across space and time. It would have to be a world without regard for writing

and reading, obviously: no love of letters, no emotional responses to rock art and cathedrals; no crying over novels and poems, either. Come to think of it, it might be a world without great newspapers (a prospect which some pundits no doubt have uncomfortably in mind).

Irritating as media grizzles about the failings of mediation may be (and the locution 'face time' bears witness to their sentimentality; what happened to the rest of the body?), I do not save these articles in order to disagree with them. For one thing, they're not that rational. Strong affect sprays about when older media attack new media that threaten their markets, and in particular when Murdoch newspapers wage culturally high-toned war on just those social networking sites that have been thumping MySpace, the site belonging to their proprietor (see Knight). A couple of weeks before the *SCMP* stooped to conquer Facebook (and a month before the use of Twitter to get news out in Tehran became a global story), the on-line *Australian* gloated, 'Time is Up for Twitter'. Hooking to a story that 60 per cent of new users give up tweeting within a month, this spiteful piece compared 'transitory technologies' to swine influenza; people 'build up resistance' to 'diseases that must mutate to infect ever most hosts' before 'spluttering out'. Print, in contrast, is a 'robust and portable' technology, 'information rich and never crashes—the platform for the online information age [sic] that you are reading now'. If the part about robustness and portability is true enough (while bringing to mind old jokes about the excellence of newsprint for wrapping fish and chips), the platform punch-line makes no sense except as a syntactically mangled blur of techno-clichés. There was a time—in another economy and before Mr. Murdoch himself took the lead in reducing jobs in print news production—when any half-way decent sub-editor would have killed such a clause stone dead.

What really interests me is the stories that older media (including television and the on-line versions of print media) tell about social networking, and the slightly nutty fervour that so often drives the telling. Given the now mainstream success of social networking sites, with people friending and following their Nannas and with Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign symbolically marking a new era of global-popular participation on-line, the commentariat are, in part, caught up in an apocalyptic moment of their own rhetorical making; in journalistic as in policy spruiking usage, new media talk has long proclaimed that one set of innovations will displace another—'death' of print, 'end' of the book. As anyone who works with media should know, reality is more complex. With technological change, old media find new uses or are reinvented interactively with new ones; arguably the most influential medium for politics in Australia at the end of the twentieth century was a telephone-radio hybrid, 'talk-back radio'. This is not to dismiss the sense of crisis engulfing the profession of journalism,

especially investigative reporting (Davies; Nichols and McChesney).¹ However, at the user's end their relative cheapness and accessibility to ordinary people continues to give old media a key role in narrating the advent of social changes related to new technology, and in shaping at least some of the initial popular understanding of new technologies themselves: once upon a time, people acquired their first 'memories' of cyberspace from a novel, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984).

I am by no means a new media scholar and my participation in on-line culture is enthusiastic only within a very limited zone. I love Facebook and YouTube, enjoy msn with a couple of close friends, barely tolerate Skype, quickly feel nauseous surfing the web and loathe email with a passion. However, since all media are mixed in their cultural make-up and social uses, it behoves me as a student of history in popular culture to observe how the tales being told of new media at any given time draw on familiar generic and rhetorical reserves that help render change intelligible to us as a mode of continuity. An example of this and one of my favourite Facebook put-downs is the outburst quoted above from Riley, the undercover girl from the future in the second season of the Fox network TV series, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Cracking under the strain of impersonating an alienated, pre-Judgment Day American teenager, Riley wheels on her bemused foster family in the kitchen one day and, with four viciously delivered metonyms ('just sit here', 'cosy little house', 'cold sodas', 'Facebook pages'), pours scorn all over their lives. In this moment, Facebook is absorbed into the store of belittling stereotypes of mindless suburban complacency that print media, film and, superbly, television (the suburban medium par excellence), have been producing—and donating to critical culture—for more than fifty years.

A swelling number of Facebook stories is available on-line. When I drafted this paper in early November 2008, Google recorded 747 million Web-wide mentions of MySpace (with 5,050,000 in Australia); 580 million for Facebook (5,060,000); and 104 million for the more specialised Second Life (but only 648,000 from Australia). I didn't think then of checking Twitter. By 19 May 2009, the respective figures were 858 million for MySpace (22 million in Australia); one and quarter *billion* for Facebook (37,500,000 in Australia); 177 million for Second Life (25,700,000 in Australia, a significant increase); and 511 million for Twitter (15,100,000 in Australia). There is no way of interpreting what the relative changes mean, or how many finger-wagging Murdoch editorials the Facebook numbers include, but the size of the overall increase in just a few months is impressive. At the same time, it has become rare for a day to go by without the major Australian newspapers featuring on-line at least one Facebook or

¹ For a review of Davies with a sceptical view of the model of journalism's history assumed by accounts of its imminent death, see Preston.

Twitter story. Sporadic checks while I was writing pulled up stories including a 'teen' saved from suicide by a Facebook friend, Facebook and cyber-bullying in girls' schools, Facebook and sexual 'recruitment' for NRL players, Facebook as a tool for Arab militants recruiting spies against Israel, the uses and pitfalls of Facebook for small business, and Facebook as a haven for Holocaust deniers.

While forming a very small part of the on-line discussion of social networking sites, these stories arise from news media efforts not only to catch a wave of popular interest while reporting actual incidents but also to shape collective perceptions of a wider phenomenon. In the process, journalists often draw on their rich professional reserves of reductively metonymic realism ('setting the scene', the 'character sketch') to cast social network users as *types* whose ways of acting are symptomatic or productive of diverse social ills: alongside terrorists and sexual predators there are always students uploading their mobile pics of boorishly drunken parties, 'stupid girls' sharing every detail of their vapid daily routines, and workers who boast about bludging but forget that they've friended their boss. As in folklore, each of these figures is sustained by a dense field of concrete examples both stellar (Hugh Grant and Bono for Facebook party uploads, MySpace's Paris Hilton or Twitter's Ashton Kutcher for cosmic triviality) and 'it-could-be-you' mundane (Kyle Doyle's 'SICKIE WOO' Facebook status update).² Simultaneously grounded in and abstracted from the real history of on-line culture, such figures 'stick' in media memory, powerfully eliciting recognition (the party animal, the princess, the slack worker) while drawing attention away from a myriad other practices thriving on the sites. Stereotypes are *forms of apprehension* rather than bad representations, and their force is to mobilize familiar knowledge to explain and absorb unfamiliar experience (Morris, *Identity* 143-44).

While the limitations of a morphological critique of popular culture have been argued many times (Morris, *Too Soon*; Morse), formal typing is a generative principle in popular culture itself. Media editorializing thrives on it and, as hard news-gathering receded as a journalistic practice during the Howard era, the readily available technique of consensus assertion through type ('the' ethnic lobby, 'the' Aboriginal industry, 'the' politically correct) organized columns of what became in those years a major genre of Australian social debate: grizzling, or 'fretful complaint'. The fretfulness is important. Most of the grizzling that

2 For tip of the iceberg indications of the Grant and Bono coverage see, respectively, Simpson and Bruce; Claburn. Parodied in the 2006 Pink music video 'Stupid Girls' and the inspiration for several pop songs about girly mega-narcissism, Paris Hilton's style of chronicling the micro-events of her affective and material consumption is canonical for the 'rich and famous' genre; Ashton Kutcher (husband of Demi Moore) is an actor whose use of Twitter is now metonymic of its trivial uses, thanks to the number of media stories that have been written about him. See 'Facebook "Sickie" Guy Facing Investigation' for the Story of Sydney AAPT call centre worker Kyle Doyle, whose boss reportedly spotted 'Kyle Doyle is not going to work, f*** it I'm still trashed. SICKIE WOO' on Doyle's profile; the incident is now an exemplary case for Human Resources training discourse on Facebook in the workplace (see Stokeley).

made it to press or to air in Howard's day was majoritarian complaint about the perduring cultural power of social minorities (Morris, *Too Soon* 219-33), and the *Macquarie Dictionary* reminds us that the first meaning of 'grizzle' is 'to become grey', a metonym of ageing and thus (in this social logic) of fading power. When I call you a grizzler, or when we 'have a good grizzle' together, more is involved than naming the act of complaint. The idea of grizzling includes an evaluation of the act itself as ineffective except at the level of emotional release. The release itself may be strong: grizzling is more aggressive than the also annoying but more pathetic acts of whingeing and whining. Grizzlers may have a bit of right on their side: when my Nanna said, 'stop whingeing', she meant, 'don't be a sook', while 'stop grizzling' meant, 'all right, now shut up and get on with it'. But the release is devalued as inadequate to the real or imagined provocation; to call a speech act 'grizzling' suggests a helpless as well as reiterative mode of criticism.

'Facebook no substitute for real world contact' is a grizzle in this sense. What on earth is supposed to follow from a declaration like that? If parents are being incited to pull the plug on their children, or to seize their mobile phones, will millions of adults also rush off-line to chat in a neighbouring office or across the back fence? What would happen in the 'real world' of our working lives if we did so? Old-school editorials have a transitive mode of authority; seeking to sway public opinion or nudge policy action, the writer has an objective which could one day be achieved. When an upscale paper like the *SCMP*—read by educated, over-employed, middle to upper class expats and locals working 15-hour days and more in a city that runs on financial services and transport logistics—makes a wildly inoperative call for its readers to abandon on-line socializing for more 'face time', a curiously sub-cultural mode of address conflicts with the mode of authority. This editorial networks with technophobes, concerned relatives or loved ones of 'teenagers' (and other types) who voluntarily spend too much time on-line, and people who just don't like Facebook; it predicates a real world in which people can choose how they spend how much of their time. Yet overwhelmingly in Hong Kong, as in many cities today, middle class people have borderless working lives and we spend most of our time, wherever we are, with computers. Facebook for me *is* real world contact. It's not the only kind I have but (*pace* Riley) it matters. In a day consumed by memos, reference-writing, refereeing tasks, managerial compliance chores and a never-ending stream of email, Facebook is my bit of heaven, a haven of warmth, silly fun and friendliness I can enter in an instant from my screen; contact there is real because it is diverse and unpredictable (unlike much of my work). To argue that another site is better for this purpose could make good critical sense, and to propose a legally enforceable maximum 40 hour week for 'knowledge workers'

would be even better. However, to urge me to spend more time off-line ('making new friends and maintaining old friendships') for the sheer good of my soul is a grizzle from those fairies at the bottom of the garden.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that all criticism of Facebook is grizzling. Serious legal, ethical and political issues are arising from or being intensified by the 'Facebook' phenomenon (to use a typifying metonym myself), in the process sharpening some of the challenging debates of our time; free speech and its limits, censorship, the right to privacy, the negotiation of social protocols for a transnational economy that thrives on difference as well as inequality, the relations between semiotic and other modes of violence, tensions between legal, communal and performative models of identity, the foundations of community, the power of corporations in our personal lives, and the technological transformation of work are just a few of these. Anyone who doubts their political import in many parts of the world might consider the case of Fouad Mourtada, a 26 year old IT engineer beaten and jailed for 3 years in Morocco for placing a spoof profile of Prince Moulay Rachid on Facebook,³ or, on a different scale, China's disabling of Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Blogspot, Tumblr, Live Journal, Hotmail and Bing in the lead-up to the twentieth anniversary on 4 June, 2009, of the massacre in Tiananmen Square (Flumenbaum). Given this range of weighty issues to address, grizzling is of interest for its capacity to foreground unsettling worries and questions that trail along in the mix unresolvably, like an insistent and recurring malaise.

For example, one familiar set of worries concerns the sociable personality and what it ought to be doing in the writer's world; does Facebook impair our ability to enjoy life and care for others off-line? Extensively debated in relation to manifest sub-cultures such as *Hikikomori* (see Jodice and Karmen) and *Otaku* (Lamarre) in Japan, anxiety about what it should mean to be human on an average day is hard to formulate plausibly now for larger populations. Thus an early grizzle by Bugeja about the implications of Facebook for university life (distraction in class, unwitting self-disclosure, inappropriate pictures, surveillance, commercial data gathering and identity theft)⁴ suggests in the course of a generally moderate discussion that there is a direct link between

3 See 'Three years for profiling a Moroccan prince on Facebook'. After an international campaign about the violations of Mourtada's rights during arrest, he was reportedly freed by 'royal grace' after 43 days of detention; <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/03/21/moroccan-blogsphere-on-fouad-mourtada-finally-free/>. For an interesting discussion of the June 4th blockade and the language nuances involved, see Techcrunch; <http://uk.techcrunch.com/2009/06/02/china-shuts-down-twitter-and-bing-in-lead-up-to-tiananmen-anniversary/>

4 By 'early', I mean that the publication of the article in early 2006 preceded the opening up of Facebook to mass use. Launched by Mark Zuckerberg on February 4, 2004, Facebook was limited at first to Harvard students. It expanded membership eligibility first to other Ivy League schools, then other universities, then high school networks in September, 2005, before opening to everyone over the age of 13 with a valid e-mail address on September 26, 2006.

the size of the university IT budget, a corresponding loss of faculty jobs, and a Facebook-driven proliferation of distracted, 'egocasting' student personalities: 'unless we reassess our high-tech priorities, issues associated with insensitivity, indiscretion, bias, and fabrication will consume us in higher education' ('Heads Up'). The night of the living dead is close at hand.

A related anxiety cluster invokes 'real' friendship in an effort to achieve an impossible norming of intimacy. Brusquely handled by the British judge who ruled in a 2008 harassment case that Facebook friends do not have to be friends 'in the traditional sense' (Emerson), concern about the authenticity of Facebook friendship is not only circulated in the press but relayed by ambivalent users of the site itself—like the sad case from Toronto with 700 Facebook friends who ended up drinking alone when he tried to organize a party (Niedzviecki). While this confession may simply tell us something about Toronto, or the author (I don't know that I'd drink with him either), narcissistic, instrumental or desperate friend-accumulation is also the subject of widely posted YouTube clips and a recurring discussion topic across the hundreds of 'Addicted to Facebook' groups on the site⁵—eliciting on one of these a well-turned, 14 stanza ballad, 'Can I be your Facebook Friend?':

Can I be your Facebook Friend?
 Friendship's new reality
 And we'll celebrate our union
 For all cyberspace to see

Can I be your Facebook Friend?
 Cause this friendship is unique
 We can hold a conversation
 And we never have to speak

If you add me as your friend
 I'll accept of course, and then
 I will sit here on your profile
 You won't hear from me again

This poem nicely catches the nuances of the 'Facebook addict' type: an anti-social, agoraphobic, 'low maintenance' lurker who is also a passive-aggressive and voyeuristic stalker accumulating useless social capital.

Were this to be taken literally as a realistic portrait of the average Facebook user, human community as we know it might really be at risk. As I write, Facebook claims more than 200 million users (averaging 120 friends each), of

5 There is also a small number of Facebook groups (13 as I write) dedicated to more or less expletive-laden versions of the topic, 'I Don't Know You But Let's be Facebook Friends'. Most of them show little or no sign of activity.

whom more than 100 million log on at least once a day, spending more than four billion minutes daily on the site worldwide.⁶ As one of those users (need I say?), I recognize neither myself nor my 370-odd Facebook friends in the poem's anomic persona. True, after the initial contact I rarely hear directly from the large number who are my ex-students or professional acquaintances, but I am sporadically aware of their lives and we are there for each other if the need or desire arises. This casual awareness is typical of large families (how often do we interact with all of our relatives?) and also of small communities; I spent my first twelve years of life in a town of 2,000 souls where absolutely nobody, not even the newsagent, was on regular speaking terms with everyone else. Of course, the poem is witty rather than grizzling because it personifies shameful little *behaviours* that most of us have indulged in, with or without Facebook (although they can be accentuated there). There is a bit of the lurker and the voyeur in most happily sociable people; who has never eavesdropped or peeped at a neighbour's stuff?

Familiar as they may be to people with wide-ranging lives on-line, these arguments need to be made; not everyone who uses email and visits web-sites is at ease with social networking. However, merely bristling at anti-Facebook stereotypes or mocking the malaise that prompts them risks buying in to an exaggerated view of what is new and distinctive about the experience the site provides, while ignoring the increased cross-cultural complexity of such malaise today. Concern about the future of sociability has been evolving in the West for more than a century, as the spread of a consumption-driven economy has distributed imperatives of self-marketing and self-display to ever-widening populations. Today, the deliberate inculcation of what Henri Lefebvre (1984) called 'controlled consumption' to drive economic growth in developing countries is carrying those imperatives across multiple societies with historically differing concepts of what counts as proper subjectivity. With a little adaptation, Veblen's 1899 work on the leisure class provides us with ample material for a rip-snorting essay on vicarious consumption and the 'predaceous temper' on Facebook. However, it is more illuminating to reread Veblen alongside detailed accounts by worried Chinese critics of the PRC's strategic production of consumerism and 'popular culture' after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour (see Wang) in 1992; Bao, for example, examines how behaviours, tastes and interests befitting new urban personality types were minutely modelled for the readers of a popular newspaper, *Shanghai Weekly*.

6 14 June 2009: <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=722621087&ref=profile#/press/info.php?statistics>
As a check on the reality-effect of the 'student orgy' stereotype, it is also worth noting that Facebook claims that more than two-thirds of its users are now outside of colleges, that about 70 per cent of users are now outside the United States, and that the fastest growing demographic is 35 years old and older.

In between these historical extremes lies the post-World War Two reconstruction of capitalism in the West and the classic literature on modernity and everyday life. In his Introduction to the 1984 edition of Lefebvre's *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1962), Wander points out just how much Lefebvre's account of consumerism as a bureaucratically 'controlled' terror spreading its principles of anxiety, repetition and compulsiveness through all aspects of life and into the soul learned from the earlier work of Fromm (1947) on 'the marketing orientation':

The modern world fosters a childlike personality, a person who constantly seeks and needs approval. ... Aimless, over-reactive, inconsistent, face aching at the end of the day from the ever-present and required smile, the marketing persona is of a piece with the modern world. (Wander in Lefebvre xiv)

At least one thing to be said for Facebook and other mobile socializing modes is that they take the ache out of smiling ('like'), although unfortunately they also transfer it from the face to the wrist or, in my case, the thumb: ☺

For Lefebvre, the febrile tedium of everyday life routines ('the quotidian') forms the underbelly or the 'verso' of the modern understood as 'what is novel, brilliant, paradoxical and bears the imprint of technicality and worldliness' (Lefebvre 24-5). I have no doubt that social networking sites are 'of a piece' with the modern world in Lefebvre's sense; given the vastness of his theory's horizon, how could they not be so? However, if we reduce Facebook or any other massive phenomenon to a pretext for revising classic theories of commodification and alienation, the question does arise why an ethnographically challenging 200 million people world-wide invest their energies in an activity that any adroit critic can easily portray as of a piece with their everyday pain and oppression (not to mention that of the workers who make computers and cope with the toxic waste). 'False consciousness' seems more than ever insufficient as an explanation; always vulnerable to the charge of implying (from a masterly position) that masses of people 'have yet to authentically experience their own lives' (Grossberg 365), ideological analysis has trouble accounting for the degree to which popular culture can incorporate its own ideological diagnostic—a topic that no doubt arises on the 500 Facebook groups devoted to aspects of 'Marxism'.

Within the great tradition of modern cultural critique, an aesthetically-minded alternative is to follow Lukács via Jameson (*Signatures* 9-34) or de Certeau (16) in seeking a utopian impulse in popular culture that reaches (even in Facebook) for a better future from the heart of reification, giving us pleasure in the process. The more creative Cultural Studies move today draws rather on sociology and aspects of ethnographic method to ask questions within a concrete and carefully

delimited social context about our often ambivalent *involvement* in popular culture—an approach that admits of empirically anchored and thus potentially surprising answers (Couldry; Gregg).⁷ Having a bet each way at the level of methodological principle, I lean far enough towards that old utopian quest to wonder whether Lefebvre’s excoriating account of the modern everyday as it displaces a culturally if not materially rich traditional life of ‘style’ (*Practice* 38) does not direct us now towards the wrong historical vast horizon.

Everyday life is not a human universal. For Lefebvre, the everyday is a modern historical product that wondrously ‘erupts’ into literature with the overwhelming triviality of that ‘epic twenty-four hours’ (3) recounted in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. A regime of living thickly composed of petty recurrences (‘gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements’ [18]), everyday life has a time-tabling, programming, numbering drive that divides up human experience; lived time, for example, splits into the ‘pledged’ time of work, ‘leisure’ (an allocated ‘break’ from the everyday), and steadily increasing ‘compulsive’ time spent satisfying ‘various demands other than work such as transport, official formalities, etc’ (53). Apt for fostering consumption as it multiplies our tasks, this distributive force breaks up the ‘unity of form, function and structure’ that for Lefebvre characterized ‘style’ in all the humble objects and social practices of traditional living (29-30). While French peasant cupboards varied in form and construction from place to place, their fitness for a cupboard’s purpose did not vary. I think of the Australian bush ‘meat safe’: my grandmother’s was cream and my mother’s cacky green, but they worked the same way, they were not obsolescent, and they kept the blowflies at bay.

Yet even as the destruction of style-based ways of life continues and as many millions of people struggle (not least in China) for a modicum of consumer comfort, perhaps in the over-developed world today it is everyday life rather than ‘style’ that is slowly breaking down—along with its repetitive, minutely layered routines that *differentiated* the gendered space-times of modern domestic and working experience. Invoking the Incas and Aztecs along with Greece and Rome, Lefebvre envisaged ‘the total absence of everyday life in a given community at a given time’ (29) and not all of his examples were from the ancient world; adolescents and students in particular, he noted, fear everyday life as a ‘vague potentiality’ known only through their parents (74). Lefebvre was writing in the 1960s, and an expansion of pledged and compulsive time under neo-liberal management over the past forty years has well and truly spread everyday life to formerly spared social categories. At the same time, though, I’m not sure that anyone who hangs round the house all day, a-rhythmically working and playing on-line in the same sloppy daks and trainers we wear to the shops, the gym or

7 Exemplary of this is Gregg’s forthcoming study (*Work’s Intimacy*) on the impact of being always available on-line on the lives of middle and lower middle class workers in Brisbane.

a meeting (or fluidly passing from E-bay to Wii Fit to compulsive email without leaving our screens) actually has an 'everyday life' in Lefebvre's *divisive* sense. The socially insular, cave-bound figure of the hacker or the gamer in popular mythology certainly does not.

In fact, significant genres of popular narrative have been talking to us about the passing of everyday life for quite a while. In our great paranoid epics about technologies of surveillance and perception, the hero must first be wrenched from a routine life that he finds either a little dull (Will Smith in *Enemy of the State*) or unbearable (Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*). His quest is then either to retrieve the normality that he now values more deeply, or to transcend it and to access the truth behind those meticulously programmed appearances; the Matrix is a totalisation of the everyday as Lefebvre understood it. In the overture to the *Matrix* trilogy (which, in passing, reveals just how much of a Platonist Jean Baudrillard can be), Neo needs only to conquer fear and jump out the window to leave 'Tom Anderson' and office life behind. In hundreds of lesser action films (a recent example is *Eagle Eye*), this physical leap of faith literalizes the passage from everyday life to a new reality, while the recurring line of dialogue, 'I just want my life back', marks the passage of a *question* about the stability of the everyday.

Zombie and vampire stories also share the central premise of an assault on everyday life. Differently preoccupied as they are with sustainability, both genres feature the losing battle of the uninfected to preserve a semblance of 'normal' life before joining the war for brute survival that fills the world of post-apocalyptic fiction, in which no everyday life remains (*The Road Warrior*, the *Resident Evil* series). The zombie apocalypse canon is the more absolutist about the relentlessness of this drift; if Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) adapted the Afro-Caribbean folklore marked as such in *White Zombie* (1932) to the setting of an American farm house under siege, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) memorably locked the remnant bearers of everyday life in the temple of Lefebvre's 'controlled consumption', a shopping mall—with an out-of-control consumption principle ravaging outside. Revisionist vampire stories have a more nuanced historical vision, holding out hope for an evolution in everyday life. Born into Veblen's world, Dracula was a very much an old school man of 'style' forced to deal with modern people (Van Helsing, Lucy); his descendants are historical border creatures who nightly negotiate the everyday, whether in romance (*Angel*, *True Blood*, *Twilight*) or as politics (*Blade*, the 'Joe Pitt' novels of Charlie Huston).

And then there is the *Terminator* franchise, with its eschatological framing of a girl's moment of contempt for a cosy little house, cold sodas and Facebook pages. The film series temporally stretches the mundane double consciousness of consumer modernity (knowing this way of life is not sustainable into the future,

we want this way of life to survive) into a war over history's direction between contending forces in both the present and the future. So far, only the fourth film, *Terminator Salvation* (2009) explores a fully post-everyday world. *Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) are 'wrenching out' stories, with Sarah Connor dragged in the first film from her big hair and ankle-warmer ordinariness, never to know everyday life again, while her son John is hiding out in Los Angeles at the start of the third. However, in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) everyone except the monomaniacal Sarah (and, of course, her liquid metal T-1000 enemy) is immersed in the everyday; under the tutelage of John Connor as a child, even the T-800 helper (Arnie) learns some of its routines. Linking to this film in particular, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* TV series makes John Connor's adolescence a study in psychic conflict between longing for an ordinary suburban life and knowing that (as Riley puts it) 'it's all going to burn'. What sets John apart as a leader here is not his awareness of the fire to come; in a fuzzy way, there is common knowledge around him of the unsustainability of our world. Rather, this version of John Connor stands out from his helpers (with the partial exception of Cameron, his studious Terminator guard) because he knows why people *care*, none the less, about cold sodas and cosy houses, 'like it all matters'. I doubt that John Connor could risk having a Facebook page, but I'm fairly sure that he'd want one.

Let me offer my own two or three cents about utopia and Facebook. First, Facebook is not all quizzes, 'hey babes' and pokes. Most negative media stories obsess about one or two features (photos and status updates in particular), but the point about Facebook is that it bundles together multiple functions and potential things to do. Most of us never use all of them, and other social networking platforms do some of these things better than Facebook does (MySpace for new music, Live Journal for communities, Ning for interest groups, Twitter for global converse and news as-it-happens ...), but what Facebook does well is *combine*: you can write private letters, play games, send gifts, do quizzes, circulate news, post notes, music and clips, share photos or research, test your knowledge, join groups and causes, make haiku-like allusions to your state of mind and chat on-line with friends, all in one place and time—restoring or relieving, according to need, the pattern of an everyday life. Facebook is on-line culture 'lite': this makes it an object of scorn for digital elitists and 'white noise' haters (see Tuttle), but it is also a source of its mainstream appeal. Corresponding to this variety of uses is the diversity of kinds of contact Facebook allows, with the relation between 'contact' and intimacy also having the potential to vary over time within each singular friendship. In this respect it follows the rhythms of 'real life' as a whole: as Lauren Berlant puts it, 'all kinds of emotional dependency and sustenance can flourish amongst people who only meet each other at one or a few points on the grid of the field of their life' ('Faceless Book').

Nothing flourishes for people who join Facebook and do nothing with it; passive or un-giving use of any network is rewarded in kind (Strohmeyer). As Thompson points out, a depth dimension to 'ambient awareness' accumulates only with time and aggregation. It does grow over time; Facebook has increased my affective quality of life, and not only because it offers a break from my academic service work. The collective stream of posts brings me word of books, articles, music, films, video clips and news that I would otherwise never discover. At a time of life when new involvements become more rare, I suddenly have digital penfriends with whom I exchange old-fashioned letters through Inbox (one of the least remarked features of Facebook), while an acquaintance from decades ago has become a dear friend whom I contact almost daily. Retrieving a joy of my childhood, when my father would bring home a 'two bob' chocolate on a Friday night and we'd listen to *The Goon Show* and *My Word* on the ABC, I play variants of Scrabble with friends on four continents throughout the day. Facebook also nudges me to remember more of my past than I am wont to do, as other people's actions unpredictably pull bits of our scattered lives together. There is more to this aspect than the nostalgia decried by Susan Dominus ('sometimes it seems like Facebook is the most back-ward looking innovation ever expected to change the future') and Steve Tuttle ('Goodbye, William and Mary alums I barely remember from 25 years ago'). Facebook has utopian force for me because it gently undoes the dissociative patterns I learned as a girl in pugnaciously 'real' Australian country towns; it lets me have family on the same plane as my ex-students, my friends who talk books, my colleagues in Hong Kong and Australia and friends who also post in Italian, French and Chinese. Directly because of Facebook, I was able to speak by phone to a much-loved cousin just before he died. If Facebook vanished overnight, I would experience grief.

Many users already express grief when the Facebook 'team' announces a 'redesign' or 'streamlining' of some aspect of the site.⁸ Grizzling about Facebook within Facebook itself is an activity that is too complex for cursory treatment here, but it is something I would research if I were a new media scholar. I'm generally not active in Facebook groups, but over the past year I have twice felt so upset about 'upgrades' that killed cherished features of 'my' on-line world that I, too, signed petitions and joined multiple versions of '1,000,000 Against the New Facebook Lay-Out'. Apart from the anger endemic to living passionately in an environment that the owner can alter at will (a condition a bit like being in love and a lot like being a tenant), most obnoxious to me is the Facebook doublespeak that coos about 'giving you more control' over your page, while flagrantly reducing that control as we are nudged to push ever more content from other media providers.

⁸ Wikipedia gives quite a detailed and well-referenced account of the major intra-Facebook controversies and the mode of their resolution: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Facebook#cite_note-43

The worse occasion for me was the September 2008 redesign; by forcing several added rounds of clicking, it separated the applications (and thus the display of signs received from friends) from the news feed, in time as well as visual space—thereby splitting memory and conservation from contemporaneity, the past from the flow of the present. Like most of my Hong Kong friends I had loved those gift-based apps and curated the images carefully as I once did scrapbooks of shoes and hairstyles from 1950s comics; some icons were beautiful and others were not, but all were mnemonic traces of events and personal stories. When Facebook began calling these ‘clutter’ (an aesthetic position shared by mostly American friends who always hid their stuff behind a corporate web page look), I realized that my affection for these apps was of a piece with growing up in what was once sniffily known in Australia as an ‘Irish house’—full of clutter, often dusty junk unappealing to behold but charged with the vitality of the souls who had given each object or left it behind. Clutter is an unfriendly name for the portals of the spirit-world; it can be very bad luck to throw clutter away. So I keep some of mine on Facebook, immured on that ‘Boxes’ page, but when I go there now it feels like visiting a cemetery rather than a home.

Groups formed to oppose Facebook initiatives can attract a couple of million people and they often complain of censorship and PRC-style technical interference from site administrators. The protests against the March 2009 remodelling of the Home page to make Facebook more like Twitter seem to have been a little more effective than those of 2008 in extracting modifications of an unpopular yet widely accepted site revision. Win or lose, though, perhaps it is this experience of joining with equally frustrated and grizzling strangers world-wide in a reiterative struggle with a transnationally effective corporate ‘state’ that exercises power through emotional blackmail (that is, hegemony; ‘if you don’t like it, leave!’) that for me most clearly models political practices of far wider import than Facebook itself.

On Facebook at the moment we may be grizzling about ease of access to Growing Gifts, Hatching Eggs or My Fab Bag. However, if it is more or less new for me to do this on-line, the mode of continuity that makes this small change intelligible is neither fictional nor derived from Western critical literature on the political potentials (and otherwise) of new media use. Rather, I understand it in an ordinary way through the growing power, in limited but I think expanding spheres, of the Chinese netizenry, which draws its effectiveness (in particular, against abuses of power in everyday life) as much from the culture of the political system that it inhabits and harasses as it does from the media it uses.⁹

9 For a threshold Chinese case in June 2009 that was somewhat submerged in international news media by the events simultaneously occurring in Tehran, see ‘Fending Off Demands for Sex’ for the widely publicised case of 21-year old Deng Yujiau, who was freed by a court after killing a Communist Party official who had tried to assault her.

Over-supplied as we are with representative government, Australians have been accustomed to thinking of Chinese political culture as remote. Yet as our own system intensifies its reliance not only on deal-making and 'spin' but on public cynicism about the possibility of truth and integrity in politics, I note that it is during the often but not always fruitless exercise of opposing Facebook's decisions and exposing what lies inside their rhetorical cocoon that Hong Kong's 'petitionary' style of public pressure activism as exercised within an unrepresentative, undemocratic mode of governance becomes, however briefly, a transnational norm. Petitioning may or may not be effective but over time it is the shared experience of a form of collective agency enabled by a broad and amorphous imagined community ('fellow Facebook users') that has significant utopian and practical potential.¹⁰ As culturally changing systems of political and corporate power reshape our lives in the West, we may have more to learn than we know from Chinese internet activism's capacity to trouble inaccessible and seemingly impregnable powers. In the meanwhile, having a good grizzle about Facebook can sometimes achieve a little more than we have learned to expect.

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