

**MANIFESTO OF TECHNOLOGICAL CULTURE: A CRITICALLY ANNOTATED
DEFENSE OF TECHNOLITANISM
-AND-
THE HOLLOW REVOLUTION: ALIENATION AND MANIPULATION
IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

by

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ABSTRACT

Manifesto of Technological Culture: a Critically Annotated Defense of

Technopolitanism- A critical analysis of our emerging technocracy unfolds through an annotated commentary on an imagined technocrat's manifesto. The essay contrasts the romanticization of technology's liberating qualities with a sober warning about its tendency towards oppression.

Keywords: technocracy; technology and culture; techne; faith in reason

The Hollow Revolution: Alienation and Manipulation in the Digital Age-

Approximately one third of the world's population uses the Internet. It is a communications platform that ostensibly defies political boundaries and social status, putting unprecedented amounts of information in the hands of all users equally. However, the Internet operates within a social and political context that influences the information it contains. Every online interaction is explicitly or tacitly attended by an imperative to buy, making commerce a key driving force of the Internet. The online user is a modern-day, digital proletariat, subject to exploitation by the corporate interests that have embraced the Internet. Themes of manipulation, alienation, and ahistoricism in the information age are examined through a principally Marxian lens.

Keywords: Internet; digital revolution; online communications; search engines; online commerce; utopian perspectives of the Internet

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Preface

In his *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard famously reduced the concept of postmodern to a single sentence: it is incredulity towards meta-narratives (xxiv). Postmodernism is marked by extreme resistance to universalizing ideologies under which diverse people are to be united.

This premise served as a springboard for the development of a Graduate Liberal Studies course at SFU in the fall of 2010. The course was entitled “Meta-Doctors of Modernity” and it sought to review, compare, and contrast the meta-narratives of three influential thinkers whose work underpinned significant, revolutionary ideologies that forever changed the course of Western history. These were: Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx.

The Meta-Doctors course opened up for me an inventory of compelling premises and a new critical vernacular to better conceptualize and articulate philosophical problems that had concerned me for many years. In particular, an examination of various works of Karl Marx provided me with an unexpected stimulus to delve deeper into problems concerning social hierarchies under market capitalism, exploitation of the labourer in contemporary society, as well as themes of alienation and the commodification of culture, all of which have become issues of central importance in my own personal life narrative.

The exploration of Marx led me to the works of the Frankfurt School, and, more generally, to the discipline of critical cultural theory. Throughout this exploration I came upon technology as a phenomenon that is inextricably linked to notions of both social domination and emancipation.

I also began to realize that, with varying degrees of agency, we all participate in the world of technology. Moreover, it became increasingly apparent that technology is not some sort of passive extension of human aims, like a toolbox of equipment at our disposal, but is rather an expression of human identity and an important foundation of our social structures. I have been motivated by the idea that an examination of technology may unearth important insights about how we participate (or don't participate) in society and how this participation is fraught with challenges that we must confront in order to preserve our identity.

In a sense, then, technology is a form of meta-narrative. It is a platform upon which billions of people are actively engaged and, explicitly or latently, technology influences everyone. Importantly, there are also ideologies of technology that permeate

culture. An example of such an ideology is faith in the intrinsic value of technology or, more specifically, the belief that technology contains inherent emancipatory potentialities.

The *Manifesto of Technological Culture* attempts to reveal the meta-narrative of technology with a particular focus on the challenges it presents to human identity.

The Manifesto of Technological Culture takes the concept of meta-narrative literally and offers an intensely dogmatic treatise of technocratic idealism. Critical annotation accompanies the treatise, providing sober perspectives on the shortcomings of the technocratic ideology. The essay is thus an exercise in contrast, pitting an unwavering defense of technology against a body of critical thought on the subject.

In the rousing, often soliloquizing spirit of other works intended to advance a social movement¹ the Manifesto evokes the singular vision of a passionate champion of technology. The exaltation of technology stops short of apotheosis, however, as it periodically acknowledges challenges presented by technology, which are nevertheless described as surmountable in due course. The critical annotation takes the form of systematic counter-argument in its presentation of an overview of authors that have challenged technology.

Broadly speaking, the Manifesto is intended to contrast an extreme example of what I perceive to be the current, dominant perspective of technology – which is often blithely optimistic – with some important critical principles that can help us avoid the dangers of such a wholesale giving-over to technology.

From the time of its original submission as a final course essay, the Manifesto has been expanded to include a lengthy discussion of technology's impact on our perceptions and experiences of time. In addition, the original, short discussion of the aesthetic implications of technology has been significantly expanded with a particular focus on how technology has an impact on the contemporary artist.

¹ Ex.: The Suprematist Manifesto (1926) or The Dadaist Manifesto (1918)

Manifesto of Technological Culture: A Critically Annotated Defense of Technopolitanism

On how time is made tangible

Technology is evolution induced by humankind. Far from removing man from nature, technology emulates the natural world in its unstoppable advance and, in so doing, binds man indissolubly to nature. Technology is thus a way into the world and not a means of shutting it out. Evolution unfolds over what has been aptly called *deep time*², to the passage of which only nature itself can bear witness. Man's fleeting experience of life in the universe can scarcely apprehend the measure of time required to either affect natural change in a species or to alter the very geography upon which man builds his synthetic world. Faced with these intangible measures of time, man dizzies and teeters along the edges of his understanding. But technology belongs to man and issues from him. It has always advanced at the hands of man, with outmoded tools and techniques yielding to newer ones as human knowledge, craft and experience grow.

Technology is a form of accelerated evolution that makes time visible and accessible to man. Technology is thus revelatory.³ It pays homage to nature by mirroring

² One of the earliest formulations of the concept of deep time is contained in James Hutton's 1788 essay *Theory of the Earth* in which he considers the slow process of erosion in the formation of the planet's unique topography: "The immense time necessarily required for this total destruction of the land, must not be opposed to that view of future events, which is indicated by the surest facts and most approved principles. Time, which measures every thing in our idea, and is often deficient to our schemes, is to nature endless and as nothing; it cannot limit that by which alone it had existence; and as the natural course of time, which to us seems infinite, cannot be bounded by any operation that may have an end, the progress of things upon this globe, that is, the course of nature, cannot be limited by time, which must proceed in a continual succession." (209).

³ This concept of revelation is strongly linked to Heidegger's definition of technology as first and most importantly a 'revealing' of certain truths of the world and, later, as a dangerous 'challenging' of nature in his *Question Concerning Technology*. For Heidegger, the question of technology is an essential one because it helps lay bare to us our fundamental, proximal relationship with nature. This is a relationship that cannot be expressed in the interpretation of technology as merely a pragmatic approach to problem solving. The primacy of the instrumentality of technology in our contemporary perspective (i.e. we use a microwave for the purpose of heating food or we use a calculator to solve mathematical problems) buries a much more essential truth about how technology reveals to us certain truths about the world and our place in it.

"Technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology. When we are seeking the essence of 'tree,' we have to become aware that That which pervades every tree, as tree, is not itself a tree that can be encountered among all the other trees. Likewise, the essence of technology is by no means anything technological. Thus we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of

perpetual cycles of birth and death. Relative to human finitude epochs of natural evolution are inconceivably long. But recast as the advance of technology, evolution reveals itself to man as the continuous interplay of obsolescence and succession.

On the invalidation of time through engagement with technology

Time is the looming horizon against which every human enterprise unfolds. Confronted by this horizon the choices we make adopt the character of 'opportunity costs': we will pursue this project and not the other; we must forfeit this opportunity if we are to embrace another. We all work to complete our life projects under an inevitable and constantly encroaching deadline.

Prima facie, it may seem that at the hands of technology the pressure of advancing time has been made exponentially and disproportionately manifest. A sophisticated and eminently portable digital calendar, provided by one's employer, for example, may burden us with the daunting list of appointments and obligations that fill the days ahead. In this case, the commitment of our future time is revealed to us with stark indifference by a piece of technology, our confrontation with such parceling of time reaffirming the finite and ultimately measurable nature of the hours and seconds of our lives. Further, the calendar device in question is responsible for opening the possibility of newer, more precise methods of time allocation, enabling the micromanagement of our days in the name of maximized productivity.

Meanwhile, a seemingly insurmountable quantity of information, all of it attended by a certain expectation by others for processing or response, follows us through our

technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it. Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology." (Heidegger 4)

To get at this problem Heidegger contrasts the technology of antiquity and modern technology. Citing the windmill as an example of the former, Heidegger describes how it 'reveals' nature to us in the turning of its blades. It is being acted upon, rather than acting, and in this reception of wind by the windmill, wind is laid bare to us. Modern technology, by contrast, is a 'challenging' of nature. Heidegger describes it this way: "The revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such. But does this not hold true for the old windmill as well? No. Its sails do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind's blowing...In contrast, a tract of land is challenged into the putting out of coal and ore." (14).

lives, transmitted from various sources and made available to us on a variety of platforms.

Such are the realities of contemporary life for many.

However, for every instance of technology's demands on our time there is an equal or greater example of technology challenging, if not overcoming, the encroachment of time, thereby alleviating its pressure on us. At all turns technology may be employed to tackle time's nefarious designs on humankind.

Through technology we continue to gain remarkable ground in the fight for improving over longevity. Diseases and health afflictions of many descriptions succumb to the curative properties of our technologies, prolonging life or, put another way, defying time. In addition, a constantly evolving understanding of what ails us permits an anticipatory strategy of self-preservation that takes the form of prevention. It is the happy outcome of prevention that an ailment is not afforded the time requisite for its destructive tendencies to take hold. In this case the effects of time are thus nullified by technology.

We employ technology to improve the safety of our lives, fostering greater security against known threats while combatting the negative trappings associated with different modes of living.

Through our technology we enable ourselves to traverse great distances, both geographic and interplanetary, in relatively little time. Such expedited passage across space, the facility of which increases commensurate to the sophistication of our technology, affords in one modern lifetime an understanding of the physical universe that would have been unfathomable to previous generations of humankind.

Indeed, the epistemic implications of technology are significant. More published knowledge is available to us now than our brains can possibly process, let alone retain. In light of this conundrum man has created a technological solution with the proliferation of information retention and sharing devices. Many of these devices may be accessed anywhere and at any time, permitting us to extract a particular artifact from the canon of human knowledge when it suits us best. Pejoratively, we would speak of this phenomenon as having rendered information both transient and disposable. After all, what is the compelling motivation to retain knowledge first-hand when it may be so easily summoned by artificial means?

Conversely, it is possible to speak of this phenomenon of unprecedented information readiness as fundamentally and positively transformative of the quality of our time. Armed with the sum total of knowledge unearthed by humankind, we approach the

daily challenges of our lives with a new confidence. The practical application of such knowledge permits the rapid and sound resolution of these challenges, affording us time to refocus our energy on tasks of greater significance to us. Knowledge amassed and transmitted by technology thus contributes quantitatively to human understanding and qualitatively to the enrichment of human life.

Within a single human generation, three, four, perhaps even more generations of an apparatus will prevail. We expedite antiquity through innovation as the vanguard devices and techniques of our childhood are rapidly transformed into anachronisms. Such speedy transformation has the effect of stripping material objects of their sentimental weight. If a tool breaks, an array of replacements is at the ready. Manufacture has been adjusted to reflect the ebb and flow of acquisition and divestiture that marks contemporary consumer behaviour. Rare today is the article that will accompany us through significant portions of our lives. Technology thereby steels us against the empty sentimentality reserved for objects by intentionally designing them with their imminent replacements already in mind.

Critics might here interject charges of decadence, by suggesting that ubiquitous material transience has the insidious effect of rendering our culture disposable; surrounded by the temporary at all turns, we cease to invest in our world the necessary care required to give it meaning.⁴ To such charges we respond that this narrow perspective is every bit as vapid as the imagined disposable culture these critics describe. Far from resulting in the wholesale elimination of meaning, the rapid obsolescence of material items shines a bright light on the vital distinction between that which is truly disposable and that which is enduring. Through the desacralization of the material we reveal the substantial.

⁴ “The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. Ever since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the market-place they had already possessed something of this quality. But then they sought after profit only indirectly, over and above their autonomous essence. New on the part of the culture industry is the direct and undisguised primacy of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy in its most typical products.” (Adorno 99). Adorno is here talking about the nature of cultural forms, things like music, film, architecture, high and low art, etc. that have taken on the primary character of products in the marketplace. Beyond direct comment on these cultural forms, however, this passage opens up the important general idea that the products we encounter are indelibly imprinted with a profit motive; they are efficient products for the advancement of commerce first, and products with a particular practical application second. This is certainly evident in the transient material goods celebrated in the Manifesto. If the tendency is to manufacture and market temporary goods that will require replacement in comparably short order, where do we hope to find the “enduring” goods against which we may contrast and reveal the disposable?

Finally, we have formulated, and continue to advance, remarkable technical calculi for the processing and interpretation of complex data. We may now calculate the once incalculable with breakneck speed and accuracy. The unfathomably large has been algorithmically reduced to a tangible measure, which may then be manipulated and bent into directions that suit our technological designs. Without such calculi man feels dwarfed by the universe, absorbed without ceremony into its infinite extensions; relative to the indefinite context of space-time our lives appear to us as not only finite, but indeed, tragically short. However, equipped with technology we illuminate the abyss of the universe's extensions, approaching its infinite geography and duration with the symbolic shorthand of a mathematics that renders the unknowable both tangible and familiar⁵. The universe is thus reduced to fit within our epistemic framework and time's tireless absorption of man is accordingly enervated.

⁵ "Gradually reduced to nothing by the various tools of transport and instantaneous communication, the geophysical environment is undergoing an alarming diminishing of its 'depth of field' and this is degrading man's relationship with his environment. *The optical density of the landscape* is rapidly evaporating, producing confusion between the *apparent* horizon, which is the backdrop of all action, and the *deep* horizon of our collective imagination; and so one last horizon of visibility comes into view, *the transapparent horizon*, a product of the optical (optoelectronic and acoustic) magnifications of man's natural domain". (Virilio 22)

The 'advanced calculi' described in the Manifesto as a means of symbolically reducing the universe to tangible terms for humankind is, for Paul Virilio, the cause of a profound crisis of perspective. This crisis he calls "dromospheric pollution", which involves the loss of our ability to understand the fundamental *here and now* that we inhabit because of a forgetting of, or loss of sight of, the spatial and temporal exteriority of the universe. We lose sight of our spatial and temporal orientation within the universe because of our immersion in technology that increasingly permits us to experience life 'telepresently' (such as during a video conference, for instance, in which I am at once in my office in Vancouver and in the offices of my colleagues, via digital transmission, in, say Mumbai). Telepresence turns on its head our conventional understanding of the traversing of distances, both in terms of the geographic space we are permitted to travel across without actually embarking on a physical voyage, as well as in terms of the instantaneity of passage between two points of traditionally significant distance.

Moreover, as technology permits us further exploration of the bounds of our universe, we are required to adopt a new language of measurement to make sense of spatial and temporal distances of enormous magnitude. Speaking in terms of 'light years', for example, enables us to quantify passage between two points of space-time that cannot be adequately described by conventional units of measurement. However, this new vernacular has the unhappy consequence of causing us to lose sight of our orientation in physical space-time.

Unlike the mastery of the infinite described as a positive outcome in the Manifesto, Virilio maintains that the consequence of reducing the universe by means of technology results in a dire restriction of man's essential freedom.

"With the real-time transmitting and receiving power of the various signals alienating the nature of time distances, the active optics of electromagnetic waves *exploits* the depth of field, the very

In all these cases, the advance of technology quells the once inescapable encroachment of time.

On the absence of purpose

We must remind those who object to the use of the term 'advance' to not conflate its meaning with that of another term, namely, 'progress'. Like the evolution of nature, the evolution of technology is not bound to some *telos* and therefore cannot be legitimately criticized for losing sight of its original aims or overstepping its rightful boundaries.

When we speak of the 'advance of technology' we have in mind nothing more than technology's evident tendency to learn from its own shortcomings and to subsequently ameliorate, adapt and reinvent itself based on this learning.⁶

The conceptual liberation of technology from teleology must surely hobble those objections asserting technology's dangerous closed system in which means are transformed into ends. These objections allege that technology rebuffs enquiry into its inherent value by dismissing any thoughts or efforts that do not promote its own aims.

reality of our own world to the point of reducing it to nothing, or next to nothing, thereby leading to a catastrophic sense of incarceration now that humanity is literally deprived of horizon." (40-41).

It is the nature of dromospheric pollution that as we reduce the universe with our technology, we lose our freedom within it.

⁶ Marcuse might agree with this assertion of the self-ameliorating nature of technology, but he would not laud it. He speaks in *One Dimensional Man* of contemporary industrial society's fight against the "pacification of existence" through an orientation towards rationality- a world based on facts and figures rather than on subjective wants and needs. "Pacification" here means an existence in which man's struggle with nature and with other men would not be grounded in economic control, that is, in domination of the means of production on the one hand contrasted with scarcity on the other.

"Validated by the accomplishments of science and technology, justified by its growing productivity, the status quo defies all transcendence. Faced with the possibility of pacification on the grounds of its technical and intellectual achievements, the mature industrial society closes itself against this alternative. Operationalism, in theory and practice, becomes the theory and practice of containment. Underneath its obvious dynamics, this society is a thoroughly static system of life: self-propelling in its oppressive productivity and in its beneficial coordination." (Marcuse 17). In other words, rather than apply its rationality (through technology, for instance) to the abolition of scarcity or economic dominion, modern industrial society goes in precisely the opposite direction, applying its rationality towards modes of control. In Marcuse's view, technology's advance is not man's advance, but rather part of his assured assimilation into the status quo.

Further, the argument continues, technological advance is so overwhelming that man himself, its very custodian, has apparently succumbed to it; he has been trampled under foot so severely that he can scarcely muster a critical thought with respect to it. For if he could, he would begin to apprehend technology's wholesale corruption of everything that is of intrinsic value and would behold the pitting of man against man in the pursuit of indifferent and calculated dominion over nature.

To remain circumspect with regard to the innate value of technology or to ordain for it a tightly restricted domain is to espouse a self-defeating misanthropy. For what is technology but a material realization of man's essential constructive tendencies? We are a thoughtful and imaginative species with a profound and indissoluble connection with nature. It is precisely this connection with nature that compels us to engage with her through tireless observation, experimentation, and humble imitation. From this program issues our technology.

An environmentalist might proffer images of waterfowl, for instance, despoiled by crude oil and submit these as evidence of technology run amok. Certainly examples abound of human ingenuity employed towards nefarious aims. But to cite the extreme applications of our technology as evidence of its fundamental adulteration is to sell short our species. After all, is nature defined only by her awesome rage or is she rather a nurturer who has at one time or another provided for all species? We refuse to accept that humankind is only as good as its worst example. The question is quantitative, not qualitative. Of seven billion human beings on the planet it is inevitable that technology should be periodically misused or that all people should not enjoy its benefits. It does not follow that technology is itself contemptible.

But what of this 'itself' of which we have now spoken twice, as if it were a thing separate from our own experience? We may be permitted to speak of technology as a thing-in-itself precisely because it is inseparable from us. We may proclaim the autonomy of one or more of our characteristics in order to better understand it. We speak of our passion, our conscience, our fears, etc., as if these phenomena somehow exist outside of us. In the same vein, so too may we speak of our telephone or our automobile: these are things-in-themselves that we nevertheless acknowledge issue from and help constitute one identity.

We can draw an analogy to extracting a pearl from an oyster to marvel at its beauty; we behold in our technology all that is remarkable about ourselves. By contrast,

we see in the imperfections of technology the unrealized potential of man. We continually learn from the externalized representation of our own ingenuity.

If technology and mankind are inseparable, which is to say the former may only issue from the latter, and that issuing is a fundamental defining element of the latter, then the absence of teleology in technology also points to the absence of teleology in mankind. The growing secularization of our age is a coming-to-terms with this absence of purpose, abated by the exponential growth of technology that marks contemporary life.

Technopolitanism defined

Technology is not merely an aggregation of devices, nor is it simply the set of techniques and processes that enable the manufacture of material goods. At its essential level, technology is an engagement on the part of man with the provisions of nature.

This engagement does not have the character of exploitation but rather of enhancement. To be sure, nature provides no shortage of raw materials that do not require the ingenuity of man to achieve their best expression. We do not deny the pure and proximal pleasure that nature affords us in a tree-ripened apple, for example, or in the respite offered by the shade of a tree on a sunny day. However, it is undeniable that man's engagement with nature's countless and oftentimes disparate elements yields new combinations, compounds, and operations that are nothing short of remarkable. And, because they are realized through man's capacity for abstraction, these remarkable outcomes may aptly be described as supra-natural. They hail from nature in their constituent parts and yet they stand outside of nature in their wholeness, at home now only in the domain of man.

Here emerges a necessary contradiction of human existence: through technology, we are distinguished from nature. We may even be said to transcend it insofar as nature cannot deliver ready-made the technologies we realize with the very resources she makes available to us. But in the same breath that we proclaim our transcendence, so too must we concede our inescapable contingency. We age, we die. We are bound to the earth by the force of gravity that prevails upon us. In this way, our transcendence is heteronomous; we may step outside of nature so long as nature permits us to.

We would do well to cast our net wider when we define technology and include any activity whatsoever that is marked by man's harnessing of raw goods for the material realization of his vision. Aristotle called this broad harnessing of the earth's resources the *techne*. He distinguished the *techne* from the *episteme*, or the pursuits of the mind. Thought, as employed by the intelligence, was a nobler pursuit than praxis in the Aristotelian model. Moreover, Aristotle understood the *techne* to be linked to a *telos*; every harnessing was for the sake of some practical end.⁷ We disagree with Aristotle on the qualitative subordination of the *techne* to the *episteme*, and we deny any purposive essence to technology. However, we embrace his inclusion of the arts, of trades, and of crafts under the umbrella of technology. We will thus adopt the term *techne* with a nod to Aristotle in order to distance ourselves from the prejudices and preconceptions that attend the term 'technology' in contemporary use.

Society, willingly or grudgingly, is at all turns entrenched in *techne*. Those of us who do not reject this state of affairs and who not only participate willingly in it, but wish to see it extended into every corner of the universe - a universe that continues to be made more accessible to us daily through *techne*⁸ - we are the *technopolites*, after the

⁷ "For we all suppose that what we know scientifically does not even admit of being otherwise; and whenever what admits of being otherwise escaped observation, we do not notice whether it is or is not. Hence what is known scientifically is by necessity". (Aristotle 151).

"Every craft is concerned with coming to be; and the exercise of the craft is the study of how something that admits of being and not being comes to be, something whose origin is in the producer and not in the product. For a craft is not concerned with things that are or come to be by necessity." (153).

In other words, science concerns itself with the eternal and the universal, while craft concerns itself with particular and the subjective. In the same chapter, Aristotle speaks of the contrast between 'production' and 'action'. Production has as its end something beyond itself, whereas action is in its own right an end. Craft is marked by production and intelligence is marked by action. "Intelligence is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being." (154).

Of note, here, is not just that intelligence and craft are essentially disparate, but that intelligence is, in fact, bound to a sort of practical human ethics, while craft is not. Absent in the Manifesto's account of the 'broader meaning' of technology captured by the term 'techne' is any reference to its ethical value. There is much talk of *techne* as a material expression of man's greatest traits, but in the absence of a practical knowledge of good and bad, Aristotle would not have seen it this way.

⁸ "New limits and technical oppressions have taken the place of the older, natural constraints, and we certainly cannot aver that much has been gained. The problem is deeper- the operation of Technique is the contrary of freedom, an operation of determinism and necessity. Technique is an ensemble of rational and efficient practices; a collection of orders, schemas, and mechanisms. All of this expresses very well a necessary order and a determinate process, but one into which

technopolis in which is revealed man's essential tendencies, qualities, and abilities. That which is associated with our advocacy for the beneficence and promise of *techne* is *technopolitan*. *Technopolitanism* is the understanding of man's essence as rooted in *techne*.

On the Aesthetic dimension of *techne*

Only the myopia of extreme cynicism can prevent the apprehension of the beauty of the technopolitan age. Every epoch of our history has captured in its art the prevalent lifeworld of that time. In antiquity, epic battles and deference to a fearsome pantheon of gods supplied rich thematic content to the artist. The renaissance bore witness to the ascension of realism and perspective in order to extract man's relationship with nature, community and God from the exclusive domain of the Church, and the enlightenment disenchanting the forests, as it were, with reason and experimentation.

What is the lifeworld of the technopolitan age represented by our art?

To begin, it is a world marked by limitless inspiration; the known universe is now the artist's muse and lies in wait at his fingertips. The sum total of recorded experience is revealed to the artist through technology, inviting his interpretation. Creation is thus limited only by the constraints of the artist's own imagination. It is a feeble criticism to condemn the aesthetic of the technopolitan age because it is marked by the direct influence of technology upon the artist. Technology lays bare the universe to the artist, delivering its wonders to him like so many models for portraiture.⁹

freedom, unorthodoxy, and the sphere of the gratuitous and spontaneous cannot penetrate....The more technical actions increase in society, the more human autonomy and initiative diminish." (Ellul 402).

The Manifesto is careful to extend the meaning of technology with the use of the term *techne*, presumably to avert this criticism, which seems to speak only to the sort of technology that is the product of cold mathematical calculability. However, Ellul's *technique*, is a broader concept too, referring to all of the practices and operations that are employed by man in his exploitation of any available resources towards some valued end. Still, one gets the sense that Ellul would not include art, say, in his technique.

⁹ "With the sounds that come forth from his mouth in childish babble, with the images that haunt him...eventually with many other different kinds of sounds and images and forms and structures, man found the means of internalizing the external world and of externalizing his internal world. Long before man had achieved any degree of causal insight or rational order, long before he had conceived of the operation of impersonal forces, he had developed in the arts a special means of perpetuating, of recalling, or sharing with others his own essential experience of life." (Mumford 17). Lewis Mumford here describes art as a primal human undertaking, a highly subjective and

It is also a world of unprecedented use of media. With each passing epoch, new media are introduced to the artist's inventory. The age of technopolitanism is no different. Our age is marked by the nimble tools of digital design, for example, which heighten our creative potential to unprecedented levels by permitting infinite iterations of our artistic vision within vast new worlds of our own design.¹⁰

The technopolitan world is a highly connected, fundamentally communicative global community in which ideas enjoy unprecedented orbit. Such a climate provides exceptional opportunity for vastly different artistic traditions to converge, each enriching the other with its unique principles, techniques, and examples, cultivating a community of richly informed artists under an ever growing canon of aesthetic knowledge.¹¹

personal symbiosis between the external world and the internal world of the artist. Mumford seems to conceive of art as something pre-technological. He allows for the many 'forms and structures' necessary for the artist to bring into being his artistic vision, but this is not to say that the world as mediated by technology provides the artist with suitable creative fodder, as the Manifesto suggests. "We might say further, then, to differentiate between art and technics, that art is that part of technics which bears the fullest imprint of the human personality; technics is that manifestation of art from which a larger part of the human personality has been excluded, in order to further the mechanical process." (21).

And, "...we can understand the limitations of science and technics, since they are by intention an expression of that part of the personality from which emotion and feeling and desire and sympathy – the stuff of both life and art – have been eliminated." (22).

Technology presents to the artist a mediated perspective of nature, one in which the rational, mechanical, functional aspects of the human personality – those aspects that are anathema to art – are prevalent. Mumford would not see the technopolitan lifeworld as a rich source of artistic inspiration.

¹⁰ Computer software permits for endless mutations of an original design across multiple platforms, such that a hand sketch of a man, for instance, may be extracted from one environment (a digital 'canvas', say) and placed quickly and with relative ease into a video game environment, an animated film, a three-dimensional engineering model, etc. Ostensibly, this technology is at the service of the artist, a new tool at his disposal for the realization of his artistic vision. In the case of digital design, which is a relatively new form of 'art', the vision of the artist (designer) still precedes the technology he employs to realize it.

Lewis Mumford, however, suggests that art produced through such a medium does not permit an authentic expression of human artistry.

"...the canons of machine art are precision, economy, slickness, severity, restriction to the essential, and whenever these canons are violated...the result is not the humanization of the machine but its debasement". (81).

¹¹ "The prevailing antithesis between art and science, which rends the two apart as areas of culture in order to make them jointly manageable as areas of culture, finally causes them, through their internal tendencies as exact opposites, to converge. Science, in its neopositivist interpretation, becomes aestheticism, a system of isolated signs devoid of any intention transcending the system; it becomes the game which mathematicians have long since proudly

Further, it is a world that has given rise to an undeniable interdependence of man and nature. For much of the history of humankind nature has acted upon us almost unilaterally. For undefined millennia we were at all turns subject to the whims of nature's operations, which are indifferent to the schemes of man. As technology has developed, we have greatly minimized the net effects of nature's operations upon us, a clear instinct for self-preservation guiding our way. Now, our technology has the ability to act upon nature in a significant way, to alter her very course, in fact, creating a relationship of mutual dependence.

The artist, through the act of artistic creation, which is today so thoroughly entrenched in technology, directly exercises his influence on the very world that gives him his creative cues. The technopolitan artist wields more significant influence over the natural world than any of his predecessors; within him resides at once the power to create and to destroy.

Like humankind generally, however, with greater influence also comes greater responsibility to act in accordance with the principles of self-preservation; the annihilation of the natural world remains the annihilation of man.

THE ESSENTIAL TENETS OF THE TECHNEPOLITE

1. Man engages with nature through techne.

This relationship is not a form of mediation. Man takes his cues directly from nature's raw gifts; no greater immediacy is possible.¹²

declared their activity to be. Meanwhile, art as integral replication has pledged itself to positivist science, even in its specific techniques. It becomes, indeed, the world over again, an ideological doubling, a compliant reproduction." (Horkheimer, Adorno 13). Under this formulation, art and the technology that facilitates its transmission in the technopolitan age are one in the same. The notion of a connected community of artists sharing ideas and advancing aesthetic principles on a global platform is illusory. 'Artists' are simply a subset of a single dominant tendency towards the replication and preservation of technological (scientific, rational, etc.) ideals.

¹² In this "essential tenet" and in the section *On the Absence of Purpose* above, wherein it is postulated that "nature compels us to engage with her through tireless observation, experimentation, and humble imitation", the Manifesto seems to channel Francis Bacon:

"Man is the helper and interpreter of nature. He can only act and understand in so far as by working upon her or observing her he has come to perceive her order. Beyond this he has neither knowledge nor power. For there is no strength that can break the causal chain: Nature cannot be conquered but by obeying her." (Bacon 17).

2. Every man takes part in techne, but not every man is a technepolite.

Naïve attempts to return to a simpler time or cautiously withhold our assent to the introduction of new technologies¹³ betray a fundamental misapprehension about man's essence and defy the technepolitan spirit. Moreover, such attempts hamper the advance of techne to the detriment of our entire species.

3. Technepolitanism is a form of humanism.

It does not despise other species but it also cannot ignore the incontrovertible evidence of man's superior capacities. Man stands alone in his supra-natural relation to the world.

Techne is not exempt, however, from employment in the hurtful schemes of men. A man is capable of horrific acts against other men and other creatures. That he should harness his uniquely human abilities to inflict the greatest pain on his adversaries is no wonder.

4. The dire situation of overpopulation faced by contemporary man is fallaciously attributed to techne.

Techne has assisted man in living longer and has given life to men who had been forsaken by nature. In equal measure, techne may prevent life, end life, or shorten it. Man's defiance in the face of mortality may indeed cause him to employ techne in the delay of the inevitable, but this tendency is not essential to techne itself.

5. The solution to problems arising from the negative employment of techne is not a withdrawal from the technepolitan spirit, but rather a retrenching of it.¹⁴

¹³ A human pattern, a human measure, a human tempo, above all, a human goal must transform the activities and processes of technics, curbing them, when they become dangerous to man's development, even cutting them off for a while...until the appropriate political instruments and social institutions had been created for directing technics into the channels of human development." (Mumford 14).

¹⁴ "The micropolitics of technology gives rise to movements so different from traditional politics they are easily misinterpreted. Neither ideologies nor clienteles hold them together, but the very technical networks they challenge. The goals of these struggles are also new. Democratization of

The battle should never be facilely construed as the pitting of faith in 'devices' against faith in nature. If we are to concede that man has the ability to remedy all ills, we must concede that techne is to be employed in all remedies, as it is the material realization of his ingenuity and capacity for abstraction.

You may object here and say that man does not believe he has the remedy for all ills, that his retreat from techne reveals precisely the opposite. But the withdrawal from techne is thought to be a remedy, after all, and however misguided, it nevertheless points to man's belief that he has discerned a proper course of action. But it is absurd to suggest that passivity, a form of inaction, is a course of action. Passivity is of no consequence to any problem. If man is convinced that a deliberate measure is required of him, he must employ techne; he cannot sit idly by and expect his inaction to remedy anything.

6. Man's subjection to the unstoppable and independent march of techne is a myth.¹⁵

modern technically mediated organizations is not fundamentally about the distribution of wealth nor even formal administrative authority, but concerns the structure of communicative practices." (Feenberg 120). Fundamentally, for Feenberg the solution to problems that arise from technology lies within the amelioration, or repurposing, of that same technology. To affect this amelioration he turns to those who are closest to the problematic technology: the entrenched experts with the technical ability to modify the technology and/or those laypersons for whom the problem presented by the technology is of most immediate concern. Change affected at this specialized level of concern he calls 'micropolitics' and for him it represents the surest form of political agency for the individual living in a technocratic age.

"Who are the public actors involved in this new type of politics? Not citizens as such, but individuals who are directly affected by a particular technical decision. Only in the local situation are non-professionals likely to be motivated to learn enough about a technical situation to intervene. Lay activists who are bound together by a shared problem such as a threat to their neighbourhood or an incurable chronic illness develop a situated knowledge as they confront the issues. They may provoke technical controversies in an attempt to influence public opinion" (120). In cases where technology is perceived to act contrary to the interests of human beings, Feenberg's notion of agency and the Manifesto's advocacy of a retrenching of technology unite in the following sense: both perspectives maintain that within technology exists a means of self-correction that need only be exploited by those with the technical expertise or immediate need to seize it. In this way, political agency never aims to actually dismantle the technocracy, but rather fine tune specific applications of technology to make them more tolerable.

¹⁵ "Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination...For the present the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society. These adverse effects, however, should not be attributed to technology itself but to its function within the economy today. Any need which might escape the central control is repressed by that of individual consciousness. The step

Only man or nature can subjugate man. If man should encounter limitations to his liberties at the hand of techne, he must blame either himself or the man who has employed techne to this effect. Techne fails and dissolves when removed from the hands of its authors. There is no domain divorced from man that belongs to techne alone.

That nature subjugates man is self-evident and was adopted as one of our earliest principles in this manifesto.

7. Power is not hopelessly relegated to those who control the means of production.¹⁶

Diligence, collusion between men of diverse talents, and an embracing of the technepolitan spirit can disrupt any balance of power. It is on this principle that governments ought to be founded. But the legitimacy of this principle comes in its praxis. Systemic corruption and inequity must be swiftly met with insurrection.

from telephone to radio has clearly distinguished the roles. The former liberally permitted the participant to play the role of subject. The latter democratically makes everyone into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs..." (Horkheimer, Adorno 101). In this model, man's own consciousness has been conditioned by the authoritarian nature of the prevailing order. He holds himself in check, his individual needs replaced by the needs of the mass culture. Technology serves the rationalized & individualized economy in universalizing life experience. It is disingenuous to suggest that man has only himself to blame for subjugation by technology when his own consciousness has from the first day been conditioned to preclude even the recognition of subjugation. You cannot champion a need that you do not recognize you have.

¹⁶ "By subjecting everything particular to its discipline, it (enlightenment) left the uncomprehended whole free to rebound as mastery over things against the life and consciousness of human beings. But a true praxis capable of overturning the status quo depends on theory's refusal to yield to the oblivion in which society allows thought to ossify. It is not the material preconditions of fulfillment, unfettered technology as such, which makes fulfillment uncertain...The fault lies in a social context which induces blindness." (33). It is not the absence of sufficient technology that precludes the overturning of the dominant social order, but rather a society in which the subjective needs and wants of its people has been frozen in time, usurped by the wholesale pursuit of dominion over nature or, at least, those forces of nature that restrict the freedoms of man. In other words, technology cannot induce revolution since it is merely an instrument of a general social order bent not on satisfying particular human aims, but rather on conquering the remaining influence of nature on man. Man will not take up arms against the prevailing social order precisely because that order is perceived to satisfy the universal needs of man.

Ignorance of the operations and techniques of the technopolis are akin to ignorance of the political systems under which one is 'willingly' governed. A failure to participate in the technopolis in a meaningful way will lead men to subjugation much faster than a failure to exercise one's vote or a failure to assemble lawfully for the sake of protest.

The means of production are thus well within everyone's grasp, techne being the vehicle to affect meaningful change and available to all men.

Preface

The Hollow Revolution takes as its point of departure a reading of Marx as a champion of the everyman, of which today's user of technology is an example. The essay draws on traditionally Marxian themes in its analysis of 'virtual living', a concept defined as the increasing amount of time spent immersed in digital environments.

While Marx is cited from time to time in this essay, it is has typically not been my practice to use numerous, specific passages from his various works to validate my views or invalidate those arguments I present on behalf of 'the other side' of the Internet debate. Rather, I have attempted to write this essay by drawing on the broad thematic legacy that Marxian thought has left behind. For the purposes of the analysis that follows, I define that legacy as a critical vernacular for the examination and description of social and cultural relations in our contemporary capitalist economy. Accordingly, I credit the Marxian tradition for the themes of alienation, exploitation, and manipulation that inform these pages. Additionally, these themes are further revealed through the inclusion of references to key thinkers in the Marxian tradition, including members of the Frankfurt School and other critical theorists.

The essay hones in quite specifically on the Internet and the hypothesis that there is a disparity between its great emancipatory promise and its actual application as a powerful tool of modern commerce. The problem of widespread exploitation and manipulation through digital communication, at the hands of corporations, forms a core thematic thread throughout the essay.

My approach in *The Hollow Revolution* has been to cite specific examples of online experiences and phenomena and then filter them through a critical lens to reveal inconsistencies between what we believe is taking place when we engage with the Internet and what may actually be taking place.

In appropriately Marxian terms, I acknowledge that I approach the subject of digital communications from within a particular social and historical context. For more than a decade I have worked as a product marketer, engaged with the creation of advertising, public relations, social media, and digital campaigns designed to influence the purchasing behaviour of consumers. Accordingly, I have witnessed the rapid and ubiquitous integration of the Internet into the repertoire of marketing applications and the birth of the much-lauded 'Web 2.0'. Privy to the techniques of information seeding and

manipulation in digital environments in the name of product sales and brand awareness, I have cultivated a decidedly suspicious approach to engagement with the Internet. For this reason, the interpretation of digital living contained in *The Hollow Revolution* tends towards the polemical and undoubtedly reflects some of my personal experiences with online culture.

Since its original submission, *The Hollow Revolution* has been extended to include a discussion of utopian ideas related to the Internet. In addition, the essay now includes a more serious analysis of how communications between individuals online is heavily mediated through the creation of digital personae.

The Hollow Revolution: Alienation and Manipulation in the Digital Age

According to an automatically updating algorithmic calculator employed by the US Census Bureau¹⁷ nearly 7.1 billion people now occupy the planet.

Of them, 2.4 billion- or approximately 34%- are Internet users¹⁸.

In the history of civilization the Internet is unrivalled in its potential to share information globally, spawn uncensored conversations, mobilize empathy and action towards injustice, and unite diverse people in the celebration of ideas.

However, as we explore certain characteristics both inherent to, and resulting from the proliferation of Internet use, we will reveal that these potentialities are theoretical at best and most certainly unrealized. In fact, in practice these potentialities amount to little more than rationalizations by the capitalist stakeholders that influence the content and experience of the Internet.

I contend that in its current state the Internet is principally a powerful, self-sustaining platform for commerce and represents a great stride forward for modern capitalism. But when we take into account the profound repercussions of ubiquitous “virtual living”¹⁹ it becomes plausible to suggest that the Internet may well be capitalism’s last push before it either ascends to indissoluble dominion or crumbles under the weight of its own decadence.

Under the guise of democratic self-expression the Internet could be said to foster rampant narcissism. Far from serving as a unifying force, it encourages fickle and fleeting allegiances to trends and the most popular spokespeople for those trends. Meanwhile, criticism and condemnation are levied by the loyalists of opposing trends based on scant evidence and self-interest. In the name of socialization the Internet facilitates surveillance on a massive scale, while its ubiquitous entertainment properties ensure that no social movements of any substance mobilize; the world’s Internet users

¹⁷ “US & World Population Clocks: Current Population Clock”, accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>.

¹⁸ “Internet World Stats 2012”, accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

¹⁹ This term will come up repeatedly, as will the term “virtual culture”, i.e. the amalgam of those who live virtually. This term attempts to capture the essence of regular Internet use, in which participants adopt some form of online persona based on the fragments of their identity they choose to publicly project, and absorb information from others who do the same thing. “Virtual” distinguishes the sort of experience one finds online with “actual” or “traditional” culture in which one interacts in physical space with other people.

are too engrossed in vapid diversions to affect any revolutionary change. All of this fosters a degraded, virtual environment of human exchange, an amorphous technological *agora* in which ideas do not so much stimulate debate on their own merit as they do compete for popularity and drive dubious, superficial fraternity.

Before the reader begins to suspect that this is to be a sensational polemic employing the same manner of sweeping, ill-founded generalizations that are too often encountered on the Internet, let us now turn our attention to the subject of commerce, which attends every moment spent online- latently and manifestly- and commodifies our time. In so doing we will begin to attempt to ground our criticisms in demonstrable phenomena. Note: It bears acknowledging that the statistics about internet use cited above suggest that two thirds of the world's population still does not use the internet, to which a criticism about the scope and relevance of this analysis might be reasonably offered. The influence of the Internet extends well beyond the Western tradition and significant pockets of Internet users are to be found in every culture on the planet. In fact, Europe and North America combined have less Internet users than Asia²⁰. However, as we will examine the Internet phenomenon against the horizon of Marxian themes and thinkers in the Marxian tradition, it will be sufficient for our purposes here to consider the impact of the Internet on the Western tradition specifically, and, within that tradition, to focus on the phenomenon of capitalist hegemony and its effects on individual identity.

Let us first consider the way in which information is made available to Internet users: more than 200 million active websites host information of varying quality and quantity on countless subjects. The intentional Internet user can access any one of these websites directly by simply entering the desired URL into her web browser's address bar. However, the sheer volume of information available begs further exploration.

Enter the mighty Google. Google is a search engine that consistently ranks as the number one most visited website in the world by a lofty margin.²¹ Google has earned this rank by developing search technology that instantly scans through the millions of websites and billions of pages within these sites for content that most precisely - and perhaps more to the point, most popularly - matches our search criterion. It is a

²⁰ "Internet World Stats 2012: Internet Users in the World", accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

²¹ "Top Sites", accessed February 23, 2013, <http://alexa.com>.

remarkably handy tool and, partly due to its minimalist digital design and lack of any apparent call to action beyond its plain search box, appears to be a relatively innocuous service that has earned the loyal patronage of virtually every online surfer.

Other top websites with significant followings include so-called “social media” sites such as Facebook and Twitter. These websites allow people to stay in touch with select acquaintances via typically short bursts of written conversation, and permit for the sharing of other Internet content between users via links, video uploads, photographs, etc. Significantly, Facebook and Twitter are equipped with search engines of their own which now both rank among the top five search methods on the Internet in North America. The key take-away here is that the vast majority of users regularly employ search engine technology to navigate their way through a daunting digital landscape. Three of the top five Internet sites in the world are employed for search purposes. Through the use of search engines, web surfers are participating in a \$30B annual business (Yu). This business is known as “organic search” because the sale originates by means of the user’s deliberate search terms and not through a redirection to a commerce site from the clicking of an online advertisement. In short, the business aspect of organic search involves a user’s online passage from entering search criteria into an established search engine, to sifting through a series of results that have been delivered as relevant, to eventually making some form of purchase of a product or service.

Before interpreting the significance of this phenomenon it will be helpful to consider an ancillary one, namely, the practice of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) or “writing for the web”. When search engines scan content for relevant results they send virtual “spiders” out into the vast ether to crawl around and explore the web. The spiders are attracted by a number of programming factors in selecting the results they transmit back, aside from the obvious “exact match” to your search terms, which often occurs millions of times per search. Chief among these factors are: where your search terms appear within a website (i.e. are they in the home page, a graphic banner, buried several layers deep within the site, etc); how recently those search terms have been posted within the site (the more current, the more likely they are to appear high in the list of search results); and how the site that contains your search terms is “trending”, which is to say, is the site already popular among other Internet users or a frequent source of material for previous/similar searches?

The technology that supports the relationship between search engines and SEO is incredibly sophisticated but the core idea is simple: it is possible to write and design

content for a website that will rank higher in search results than other websites. In other words, the information represented by a website can be manipulated to give it a better chance at generating a sale within the lucrative world of organic search. It is no surprise that SEO is a standard weapon in the marketing arsenal of businesses participating in the digital age.

An Internet user's search for information is intrinsically connected to a sales imperative. The influence of commerce underlies what we see each and every time we simply look for content. Further, once we have selected content to view, that content itself has most often²² been constructed, worded, effectively *manipulated* in such a way as to promote a high search engine ranking with a view to a commercial exchange²³ of some sort. Curiosity and its subject, information, have been commoditized, co-opted even, by a sophisticated technological platform that is historically unparalleled in its reach. Claims to the effect that the Internet is an egalitarian vehicle for the transmission of information dissipate once its distinctly capitalist designs have been unearthed.

It is also worth noting that as Internet users continue to turn to the search engines of the most popular social networking websites to seek information, they are effectively extracting search results from a database of peer-generated content. This is significant because the content in question is often lacking any verifiable source and most almost certainly has not been vetted for accuracy by any authority. In other words, it is possible for corporations and other organizations with special interests to seed content on all manner of subjects in top social networking websites, which the vast majority of Internet users will then encounter as 'information' when they perform their online searches. The very nature of information is therefore changing in the digital age and it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain to what degree online information has been mediated. Google, far and away the most used platform on the entire Internet, is a multi-billion dollar conglomerate publicly traded on the Nasdaq exchange. Its proprietary information-sourcing technology is highly transferable to other applications-

²² "Most often" by virtue of where it ranked in our search results, which as we know achieves its ranking through SEO. We are more apt to select a result near the top of the list than sift through tens of thousands of results for just the right content.

²³ To be clear, most websites do not contain a formal platform for commerce in the traditional sense in which a consumer product or service is exchanged for payment. However, a high search engine ranking translates into higher site traffic. In turn, higher traffic makes a website more saleable to advertisers who often seek to reach the most people possible with their advertisements. In this way, even ostensibly non-commercial websites compete within a commercial framework.

which include mobile phone technology, satellite mapping, Internet usage analytics, virtual office software suites, its own social networking platform and more- and it continuously collects and examines the demographic data of its global users for the sake of making better informed business decisions. It is becoming a highly effective, self-contained capitalist ecosystem in its own right. Google is but one of several entrepreneurial powerhouses that have fully seized the commercial potential of the Internet.

The exploitive quality discussed here takes on another dimension when we recall Karl Marx's concept of surplus labour, that portion of the proletariat's working contract defined as the exchange of his saleable labour for wages, wherein his labour no longer belongs to him but rather directly feeds his employer's profits. In *Capital*, III Marx makes the following comment about the sort of exploitation of surplus labour that best favours the capitalist's aims: "But notably, it is prolongation of the working day, this invention of modern industry, which increases the mass of appropriated surplus-labour without essentially altering the proportion of the employed labour-power to the constant capital set in motion by it, and which rather tends to reduce this capital relatively." (Marx 113)

In other words, by extending the working day the capitalist has found a way to exploit the value of the worker's efforts without incurring any loss of value in operational capital. The Internet provides a new riff on the surplus labour idea in that the contemporary proletariat spends time over and above his workday engaging with a system that advances the aims of the bourgeoisie, namely financial profits at the expense of the labourer. "Surfing the net" has become one of mankind's favourite pastimes and yet at every turn we are urged to spend our money, investing it back into the very system we seek to escape through the ostensibly liberating online experience. It is a grimly ironic notion that the capitalist system has devised an exploitive mechanism of commerce that is willingly, sometimes obsessively, pursued by the proletariat²⁴.

²⁴ Theodor Adorno picks up this line of thought with razor sharp insight in his essay *Free Time*. According to Adorno, the activities in which we engage in our 'free time' are of a nearly indistinguishable character from the sort of manipulative and alienating activities in which we engage in the workplace for the advancement of the capitalist imperative. Time away from the workplace is not time spent advancing our own aims with the pursuit of knowledge and culture, but is rather a further entrenching of the values of excessive consumption and vacuous escapism: "If we suppose with Marx that in bourgeois society labour power has become a commodity in which labour is consequently reified, then the expression 'hobby' amounts to a paradox: that human condition which sees itself as the opposite of reification, the oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system, has itself been reified just like the rigid distinction between labour and free time. The latter is a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life." (Adorno 189).

Reflect as well on the nature of Internet capital. Beyond the labour required to program the platforms by which the proletariat may engage in commerce during “her own time”, there is virtually no capital cost to this virtual extended workday. Modern capitalism has found in online commerce an ideal tool for the promotion and exploitation of surplus labour.

There is something particularly insidious about the Internet’s absorption of human intellectual pursuits and conversation into the designs of commerce. It could be because on the surface the marvel of this technology is its indiscriminate accessibility. By its very definition, the Internet fosters the idea of human *interconnectivity*; there are no limits to the number of networks that can be digitally connected, allowing users of the web to transcend the physical and geographical boundaries that might otherwise prevent them from engaging with others in “the real world”. There seems to be an enduring belief in its benevolence, as if one’s ability to easily interact with others, to consume endless content and to speak one’s mind to a limitless audience has somehow allowed one to step outside of any restrictive system, economic, social, political, or otherwise; there is an illusion of autonomy that facilitates the continued perversion of knowledge. The chimera of emancipation through information upheld by the capitalist authors of online systems has effectively cloaked the exploitive nature of the Internet. Alternatively we must concede that there has been a global acquiescence to the inevitable “price of admission” inherent in the dissemination of information. Either way, we are left to contend with a commanding and increasingly universal tool in the promotion of commercial interests, which focus on sales and profits.

Now that we have set the basic framework for the idea that the Internet is a tool of the capitalist paradigm, let us turn our attention to more specific ways in which the average user- the proletariat of the digital age- is exploited by its charms. In 2007 a You Tube account holder posting videos under the mantle “ijustine” uploaded a self-directed, roughly 90-second clip concerning a mobile phone bill she received from telecommunications giant AT&T. The video shows ijustine leafing through a detailed 300-page invoice that had to be delivered to her in a box.²⁵ The intent of the clip was to outrage the viewer with the absurdity of such an enormous phone bill and, presumably, draw our attention to the paper waste perpetrated by AT&T. ijustine’s unpolished personal video received 3.3 million views and apparently prompted AT&T to change its

²⁵ “iPhone Bill”, last modified August 13, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdULhkh6yeA>.

billing procedure to a more eco-friendly digital platform²⁶. In another celebrated online consumer victory, popular bicycle lock manufacturer Kryptonite became the subject of relentless media attention as consumer videos were posted on various forums demonstrating how their impenetrable locks could be sprung with a common disposable pen. The videos rapidly gained notoriety and prompted mainstream media outlets including the *New York Times* (Polgreen) to scrutinize the company and demand reparative action. Kryptonite responded by organizing a free lock exchange for all products vulnerable to the pen jimmying technique. Ostensibly in both of these examples and countless others that populate online lore, consumer outcry resulted in direct action from the corporate culprit. News of David's win over Goliath spreads like wildfire through the online community and the consumer felt vindicated in light of effecting real change. So triumphant did the consumer feel in the wake of these cases, in fact, that the dawn of a new Internet culture - The Web 2.0 - was proclaimed.

Deceptively empowering platforms like You Tube with its intuitive self-production technology, Facebook with its unfathomably large social network, Yelp with its short and punchy product reviews created by consumers and shared with peers - all of these serve to reinforce the misguided notion that the balance of power has shifted in favour of the consumer. The so-called "new media", the argument goes, fosters conversation and dispenses with prescriptive marketing. Companies must earn our loyalty or lose our patronage, with the added nuisance of having to contend with easily transmitted tirades against their brand if they have sufficiently disappointed us. Upon closer inspection, however, we begin to see a different picture emerge. *Prima facie*, the outcomes of the AT&T and Kryptonite bicycle lock examples seem to demonstrate consumer victories. But in what way did those companies actually lose? In what way did their businesses change?

I would suggest they didn't lose at all, but rather gained powerful consumer research and brand exposure. I do think each of these businesses changed in the wake of public scrutiny, but only in the sense that they acknowledged a new development opportunity and acted on it. Was the AT&T brand damaged by 3.3 million people watching ijustine's 90 second diatribe, only to discover that the company responded to

²⁶ I say 'apparently' because AT&T's response to the video was to announce a shift to online billing to quell mounting public outcry to ijustine's video, but presumably that shift was in the works already given the cumbersome and costly nature of paper billing, postage and handling. This idea will take on real significance as we examine the implications of these consumer "victories" in the following pages.

public criticism with a positive change? I doubt it. In fact, ijustine supplied them with a viral commercial watched by millions of active and engaged consumers who walked away from the situation with the knowledge that the phone company had dispensed with print billing.

The dissatisfaction of the proletariat - no matter how vocal- has become little more than free business intelligence for savvy companies. It is absorbed as an improvement to operational efficiencies under the auspices of consumer empathy and transparency. Once again, the proletariat is made to feel like she is in control, but really her voice simply strengthens the exploitive power of capitalist commerce. Each consumer-focused “Internet sensation” supplies business with a keener sense of how to sell its wares and make ready-endorsed operational improvements along the way. As in the case of our search engine analysis we see that the notion of consumer empowerment is actually a resource in capitalism’s new digital approach that masks exploitation under the guise of user-defined progress.

The co-opting of proletarian discontent into business strategy is only one barrier to the legitimization of the term “new media”. Another major barrier is the emerging cynicism towards the visual language that populates the Internet.

At every turn the user is confronted with imagery, from brand graphics to the candid family moments of other users. The ease of transmission of photography and other visual media through digital platforms has translated into a landscape of endless imagery, navigation through which bombards the senses and eventually steels one against the mediocre. The sheer volume of visuals we encounter online desensitizes us to images that are not particularly engaging or don’t have a personal relevance. The vast majority of what we see becomes disposable.

As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to reach each other in anything but a technically mediated way through our online communications because the volume of information we must wade through to find engaging content is increasing exponentially; there is simply no time to give each other the benefit of the doubt when it comes to processing the information we share on the Internet. We have become producers of consumable content²⁷ and have done so on an enormous scale. As our

²⁷ This is a happy outcome for the advertisers and owners of the social websites we employ to tell our stories. Imagine an unpaid workforce of content producers constantly improving the quality of your website, making it attractive to new users and ensuring loyalty among existing users; there is arguably no greater example of a low overhead, high return business model.

social networks expand, the content we are exposed to increases exponentially, making it impossible to process everything our 'friends' offer to us. Where once a family photo album housed a deliberate selection of meaningful moments, now entire memory cards of digital photos are "shared" via online platforms and the onus is on the other members of the photo-sharing platform to sift through reams of distinctly average content to find the odd "gem".

More than this, the phenomenon of hardening ourselves to the endless barrage of visual content we encounter online also results in a peculiar kind of rift between people that is rooted in criticism. Walter Benjamin offers some helpful insights into this idea in his analysis of the film actor:

...the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of the critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing. (Benjamin 222)

Similarly, as we relate to each other increasingly through digital communication we are removing ourselves from the experience of the subject that is depicted in shared imagery and begin to relate to each other's imagery directly, as objects for review in their own right. "That's a great picture of you" in response to a photograph one sees on someone's Facebook profile, for instance, is a purely qualitative statement that betrays an assessment of the visual object that has been encountered. The more we relate to each other through shared online imagery, the more we are removed from each other as people, as subjects for whom the imagery that has been shared has relevance and context in the history of our lives.

But perhaps the most relevant consideration in the new visual landscape is the ease of manipulation to which images are subject and of which we are at all times aware in reviewing online content. The ubiquity of programs that enable a user of even limited technical prowess to alter and edit photographs and video content- original works or the works of others interchangeably- creates a constant skepticism about the authenticity of what we see. Remarkable images encountered online are often attended by comments about their nature as "shopped" (i.e. altered with the Adobe corporation's proprietary Photoshop software). The constant doubt, no matter how latent and soft, that surrounds

every user-generated communication published online seems to be an insurmountable barrier to the realization of the consumer as the “new media”. There is no sense of historical authority to support any claim or image used to express an idea or support a report. John Berger says the following: “The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images...A people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history.” (Berger 26) Following Berger’s claim about the loss of the past, we could say that the term “New Media” appears to be hollow and designed to instill in the consumer a false sense of social agency and influence. Without the required context, or “historical situation” as Berger phrases it, our increasing preference to communicate with each other in the digital world greatly limits our ability to act together towards any meaningful objective. The notion of the absence of historical consciousness in our virtual culture could help explain the wildfire popularity of the Internet. Such an absence suggests a certain timeless quality to the online experience. Without a historical context, there is no ability of the Internet user to ground his behaviour or situation in a shared social experience. Without a sense of past he has little insight into the future and his present seems to him to alien and uncertain. The perception of the Internet as a shared global community, drawing participants from diverse cultures and histories, only superficially captures the reality of the online experience. The Internet is fundamentally ephemeral; it is a landscape in which the principal shared experience is alienation, which is a dubious foundation for community. The examination of cyberutopianism that follows expands this idea further.

In his book *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* Evgeny Morozov explores the disparity between the great optimism associated with the Internet’s revolutionary potential and its actual ability to effect social change. Morozov speaks directly to the sort of ahistorical experience of the Internet that we have described above, implicating a superficial grasp of complex social context for the almost delusional idealism related to the Internet’s emancipatory potential. Morozov calls this idealism ‘cyberutopianism’, a common condition of the digital age in which those afflicted seem to conveniently ignore that just as the Internet may facilitate transparent and fruitful dialogue, so too may it advance the aims of commerce and totalitarianism by means of online surveillance, intelligence gathering, the seeding of propaganda and misinformation, and sophisticated new digital tools for censorship.

If the Internet is reshaping the very nature and culture of antigovernment resistance and dissent, shifting it away from real-world practices and toward anonymous virtual spaces, it will also have significant consequences for the scale and tempo of the protest movement, not all of them positive. That's an insight that has been lost on most observers of the political power of the Internet. Refusing to acknowledge that the Web can actually strengthen rather than undermine authoritarian regimes is extremely irresponsible and ultimately results in bad policy, if only because it gives policymakers false confidence that the only things they need to be doing are proactive—rather than reactive—in nature. (Morozov 28).

The real danger identified by Morozov is that so-called 'cyberutopianism' blinds us to the many perils of Internet use. Encouraged by the notion that every time we log on to the Web we are participating in some a global communicative revolution in which the very act of accessing information somehow shields us against its oppressive tendencies, we approach the Internet naively and without adequate understanding. We see in the Internet a powerful tool for global communication, which it is, but we fail to recognize that this tool does not operate in a vacuum; it is always at the disposal of actors situated within a particular historical context and is accordingly subject to various applications and corruptions at the hands of others.

So strongly do we embrace the perceived intrinsic emancipatory qualities of the Internet that we throw caution to the wind when we engage with online technology. We are unlikely to give a stranger who approaches us on the street intimate details about our lives, including our home address, phone number, the names, ages and images of our children, place of employment, etc. and yet somehow if the request for such information has been framed within the architecture of social networking, we will make it available to the world at large. We have conceptually divorced the Internet from the social context in which it is situated, a context in which real dangers of exploitation and manipulation exist. It is not surprising, then, that corporate engagement with the Internet is so prevalent. What better platform for the advancement of capitalism than one upon which consumers willingly supply invaluable personal data²⁸ that make highly effective targeted sales strategies possible?

²⁸ "As the Web becomes more social, we are poised to share more data about ourselves, often forgetting about the risks involved. Most disturbingly, we do so voluntarily, not least because we often find such sharing beneficial.... Today's digitized, nimble, and highly social surveillance has little in common with the methods practiced by Stasi and KGB in 1989. The fact that there are more ways to produce and disseminate data has not overloaded the censorship apparatus, which has simply adapted to this new age by profiting from the same techniques—customization, decentralization, and smart aggregation—that have propelled the growth of the Internet. The ability

Let us now turn to Herbert Marcuse for an additional insight into why the peculiar ahistoricism of the Internet has such significant appeal. Marcuse's chapter 'The Aesthetic Dimension' in *Eros and Civilization* effectively roots the cause of contemporary alienation in the subjugation of human sensuousness to reason (Marcuse, *Eros* 170). This subjugation, he argues, can be mitigated by what he calls "the play impulse" which is a term he borrows from Schiller; it is the means by which mankind will be able to extricate itself from this debilitating contemporary existential crisis. This crisis has been brought about by a society that has valued reason above all else, directing the faculty of reason into productivity through labour, and has therefore used reason as a sort of repressive yoke to restrain the human spirit, which is essentially aesthetic in nature. If we allow the play impulse to spark a revolution in our approach to the world, this repressive tendency will be defeated and we can be fulfilled in the realization of our nature. The outcome of such a revolution, as Marcuse describes it, is: "(1) The transformation of toil (labour) into play, and of repressive productivity into 'display' (2) The self-sublimation of sensuousness (of the sensuous impulse) and the de-sublimation of reason (3) The conquest of time in so far as time is destructive of lasting gratification" (Marcuse, *Eros* 176)

It is this third outcome that concerns our current analysis the most. Time is itself repressive in that it delimits the scope of our play impulse, of our aesthetic nature. We are at all times aware that our play is finite. This knowledge continually impinges on our play and restrains us from fully giving ourselves over to it. But the Internet, recall, is a timeless environment. It is a domain that lends itself well to the play impulse and permits us the insouciant pursuit of our aesthetic nature. It is the conqueror of time we have been seeking. We might describe the Internet- with its overwhelmingly diverse content, visual language, and virtual culture that cannot mobilize a people towards any substantive, reasonable aim- as a place that facilitates "unproductive" and "useless" play; we can say the Internet "just plays with reality" (Marcuse, *Eros* 178). Marcuse's analysis of the loss of human sensuousness under contemporary labour conditions draws heavily on the Marxian notion of alienation, in which the labourer toils in an increasingly mechanized, systematized, and inhuman environment. In such an environment it is a struggle to prevent his identity from being absorbed as just another element in the scheme of production. Marcuse's solution is to exalt the sensuous.

to speak and make connections comes with costs, and those costs may not always be worth the benefits." (Morozov 177).

In his essay 'Hiding Behind the Screen', Roger Scruton levies a criticism against the Internet's tendency to remove people from real interaction with each other, thereby impeding their self-realization as beings, the essence of which is essentially developed by means of social interaction and all the uncertainties and contingencies it entails.

Scruton says:

...increasingly, the screen is taking over- ceasing to be a medium of communication between real people who exist elsewhere, and becoming...the only place where they relate in any coherent way to others. This next stage is evident in the "avatar" phenomenon, in which people create virtual characters in virtual worlds as proxies for themselves...Instead of being a means to augment relationships that exist outside of it, the Internet could become the sole arena of social life- but an unreal life involving unreal people. The thought of this reawakens all of those once-fashionable claims of alienation and the fetishism of commodities of which Marx and his followers accused capitalist society. (Scruton 48)

There is indeed something distinctly chimerical about 'friendships' between avatars. Avatars are, after all, just second-order symbols of their sentient owners. Of course, in some cases there is an existing friendship that was cultivated in the real world of direct human-to-human interaction that underlies the digital relationship between avatars. However, as it is commonplace for users of social networks to have hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of digital 'friends' it follows that the real world relationship that serves as a foundation for the digital one is necessarily shallow. Further, it is in the very nature of the social media experience to encourage friendships between avatars the owners of which have no direct relationship outside of the digital environment. These online friendships between real world strangers are commonly forged on the basis of shared interests or shared connections (i.e. my 'friend' is also your 'friend', ergo we ought to be friends too).

Importantly, the avatar itself is an idealized symbol of its owner; it represents a projected identity the attributes of which may not correspond to any that are grounded in reality. Thus it is possible to have largely fictitious 'characters' communicating with each other online. The identity of the underlying human author of an online communication is, in other words, mediated by a digital persona.

This virtualization of relationships is a form of alienation of the human being from himself; in disguise, he increasingly engages not only with an 'other' the true identity of which will never be known to him, but with an idealized 'self' as well. The transition from

a world of real human interaction to a world of digitized interaction creates an increasing reliance on the avatar for self-identification.

Further, digital encounters lack the immediacy of real world relationships and thus relieve the participants of the opportunity for engagement in the sort of non-verbal communication that can reveal so much about the other: phenomena like countenance, mannerisms, comportment, etc. can all greatly contribute to the interpretation of language.²⁹ Oftentimes, online relationships rely entirely on the interpretation of written verbal communications between the participants: unassisted by direct human-to-human communicative cues and wholly divorced from any context that might have been afforded by a history of interaction between us in the real world, I can know you only to the extent that I have interpreted your words in a manner consistent with the meaning you intended.

We have been using the term ‘avatar’ – strictly speaking, just the pictorial symbol for an online user - to remain consistent with Scruton’s discourse; however, I have in mind here as well the broader set of professed interests, pursuits, and activities that are commonly associated with the avatar. These publicly revealed attributes are typically called a ‘profile’ and help comprise an online user’s *digital identity*, alongside the avatar. It is important to note that a digital identity is often a blend of traditionally biographical information and the various affiliations identified by the user. Such affiliations typically include other users, groups of users with shared interests or hobbies, and, increasingly, the products associated with those interests. Nowhere is this blend of personal and commercial relationships as seamless as on Facebook, the billion-plus member, international social networking juggernaut. Facebook members actively participate in the creation of digital identities comprised of affiliations and preferences (called “likes”) that include both people and products. In the same online session a user may ‘like’ a friend’s most recent photo and a company’s latest product development. We now engage simultaneously with the symbolic representations of both human beings and consumer

²⁹ Scruton describes it this way: “In the once normal conditions of human contact, people became friends by being in each other’s presence, understanding all the many subtle signals, verbal and bodily, whereby another testifies to his character, emotions, and intentions, and building affection and trust in tandem.... People building friendship in this way are strongly aware that they appear to the other as the other appears to them. The other’s face is a mirror in which they see their own. Precisely because attention is fixed on the other there is an opportunity for self-knowledge and self-discovery, for that expanding freedom in the presence of the other which is one of the joys of human life.” (Scruton 50).

products, granting each the same level of attention (the “like”) seemingly without differentiation. Online users find in each other’s mutually professed affiliations and preferences a form of kinship; I like brand X and user Y and if you do too, then we have sufficient grounds for an online relationship in which you, a virtual identity that remains digitally undifferentiated from my most intimate real world relations, may enjoy my “friendship”.

Human identity is not only mediated by the digital experience, but by corporate influence as well; our identity is being reduced to the sum of our ‘likes’.

To conclude our analysis I would like to add another Marxian perspective, however outmoded, by turning back to Marcuse, particularly with respect to an idea taken from his *One Dimensional Man*.

A significant extension of virtual culture can be found in the phenomenon of the “smart phone” or “PDA”. These mobile devices enable us to carry staggering and likely unnecessary amounts of information around with us everywhere. Today, so long as one of our affiliate network service providers can find us from outer space, we can access the Internet, our entertaining & streamlined applications, and email functionality. We wait in foot-tapping exasperation for the flight attendant to announce that we may turn our mobile devices back on as we taxi across the tarmac. Through our personal data devices we can all sit in a crowded room “amongst” each other but at no point “with” each other as our thumbs race across our touch screens to virtually engage in...whatever. Mobile culture as an extension of online culture is likely an essay unto itself, but I am particularly interested in the corruption of language one encounters as a result of its popularity. Through text messages we butcher grammar to allow for the quick transmission of ideas. Our emails sent from PDAs typically contain a standardized disclaimer at the bottom that has been installed by the manufacturer. They usually say something to the effect of: “Please excuse any typo’s (sic). Message sent from my Blackberry.” Twitter, a favourite application of iPhone users, limits each bit of correspondence to 140 characters, resulting in all manner of language bastardizations including the use of symbols that are designed to draw another user’s attention to a particular word or phrase within one’s message. Marcuse writes:

...linguistic abridgements indicate an abridgement of thought which they in turn fortify and promote...If the linguistic behaviour blocks conceptual development, if it militates against abstraction and mediation, if it surrenders to the immediate facts,

it repels recognition of the factors behind the facts, and thus repels recognition of the facts, and of their historical content. (Marcuse, *One Dimensional* 97)

The flaw in the evolution of an information-driven device like a smart phone, is that the style of interaction with information it promotes, actually serves to diminish our understanding of it. To process and transmit the volume of information available to us at any given moment, we must undermine its nature, assailing it with grammatical corruptions and abridgements that scarcely preserve even the fundamental idea behind the thing we are trying to convey. This last idea has brought us to a fitting place for a conclusion to our analysis. So many choices unfold in our virtual culture at any given moment that the idea of choice itself loses meaning. Instead of becoming empowered through choice, we become further entrenched in a system of exploitation. Our choices simply allow us to navigate through the ether in one direction or another. But the options are artificial options because the ether itself is not as nebulous as first appears. It is contained by, if not grounded in, a powerful system of commerce that underpins and guides every move we make online. Whether it was part of a deliberate strategy or the result of an intrinsic characteristic within the system, it was a shining moment in the history of global capitalism when an informational tool of such ostensible magnitude proved to be too great in scope to unify or empower a people.

I don't know where the Internet will go from here. Perhaps the Internet is a self-sustaining tool of global capitalism that provides adequate soma to the masses to remain unchallenged. Or maybe it fosters such alienation and empty promise that consumers of virtual culture will catch on one day to the most pervasive tool of repression yet and unite in monumental change as Marx predicted.

Our analysis of the Internet has revealed a number of immanent tendencies that seem inconsistent with common perceptions about the network's power as a tool of positive social, cultural, and intellectual advancement. The thought legacy of critical theorists has helped guide us as we turned a critical eye to these tendencies. Ultimately, I believe that it is the ability to remain critical that is the most important weapon in the fight against the exploitive and alienating tendencies of the digital age. As billions of human beings now engage daily with the Internet, it is more important than ever before to understand what underpins that engagement. For all its promise of a global communicative revolution, the Internet nevertheless contains a number of pitfalls, which, if left unchecked, have the ability to advance the aims of a purely capitalist agenda.

Marx envisioned revolution as a means to bring diverse members of the exploited class together for the betterment of their working and cultural lives. Under this definition the Internet does not qualify as a revolution. However, given its tremendous reach and popularity, it may well be a revolution of another kind. It is revolutionary in its acceleration of the status quo, breathing new life into an ages-old system of exploitation. It bears the promise of empowerment when in fact it achieves the wholesale absorption of human interests into the goals of commerce. In this way the Internet is revolutionary indeed. It is an empty promise of epic proportions. It is a cultural black hole into which history, time, fact, knowledge, solidarity and even rebellion disappear. It is a hollow revolution.

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