

Irmgard Emmelhainz

Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

01/11

e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

Life and society worldwide have been transformed by digital technology, including the fabrics of emotional relationships. Many believed the internet would be the largest ungoverned space in the world with unlimited emancipatory potential, and trusted Big Tech to make the world a better place. Yet power and capitalism filled that space with surveillance systems, the production of private capital, the monetization of data, and the control of human lives. Social media now shape daily life and many have lost faith in the possibility of a shared consensus reality. We are living in a scenario similar to one imagined by *Black Mirror*: our belief in digital communication and social media creates narcissistic personalities, selves dissociated and dislocated from their reflections online. Digital communication offers an opaque mirror that delivers egos without bodies, eliding alterity.

The collapse of reality, however, is not an unintended consequence of advancements in, for instance, artificial intelligence: it was the long-term objective of many technologists, who sought to create machines capable of transforming human consciousness (like drugs do). Communication has become a site for the extraction of surplus value, and images operate as both commodities and dispositives for this extraction. Moreover, data mediates our cognition, that is to say, the way in which we exist and perceive the world and others. The image – and the unlimited communication promised by constant imagery – have ceased to have emancipatory potential. Images place a veil over a world in which the isolated living dead, thirsty for stimulation and dopamine, give and collect likes on social media. Platform users exist according to the Silicon Valley utopian ideal of life's complete virtualization.

The internet, moreover, has radically changed the political communications game and must be considered a complex propaganda apparatus. Although a single Tweet can destroy someone's career, and fake news can start a real news cycle, meaning is subordinate to the circulation of vacuous content. The capitalist capture of data for profit does not rely on policing content; the production of capital only relies on the constant exchange and circulation of information. We don't yet know the full extent of the manipulation of companies such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon in the last two elections in the US or in other elections around the world. But it is undeniable that digital platforms are actively censoring content in the interests of particular political actors. For instance: in October 2020, Zoom canceled a meeting hosting Palestinian human rights activist Leila Khaled; a month before, Facebook and Twitter censored information detrimental to

Joseph Biden's presidential campaign. The same two companies intervened and shut down pro-Trump accounts in 2020, even Donald Trump's own Facebook and Twitter accounts.

After the attempted coup at the US Capitol on January 6, 2020, Facebook's recently instituted oversight board ruled that Trump had created "an environment where a serious risk of violence was possible." In this light, it seems likely that he will continue to be banned from the platform. According to journalist Shoshana Zuboff, however, this is insufficient, given that the oversight board's decision (whose work is supported by a \$130 million endowment from Facebook) follows years of inaction by CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who indulged and appeased Trump while entrenching what Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism."¹ A liberal might think that shutting up Trump and helping Biden is not bad, as they are actions that seemingly advance the interests of the Democratic Party. What is at stake here, however, is not whether the platforms take a "good" or "bad" stance on a particular issue; the problem is that they have immense unchecked power and can act as they please. Platforms are allowed to secretly extract behavioral data from users, whether or not users are aware, transforming the information into targeted ads, destroying privacy, changing human experience into data, altering elections, and reshaping human civilization. This structure can be termed the "cybernetic episteme," and

02/11

the new form of control, which goes beyond the previous regime of biopower, can be termed "neuropower."

According to its Greek etymology, an "episteme" is a system of understanding. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault uses the term "épistémè" to mean the nontemporal or a priori knowledge that grounds what is taken as truth in a given moment. Several epistemes coexist at a given time, as they constitute parts of various systems of power and knowledge. The cybernetic episteme, as defined by the collective Tiqqun some twenty years ago, describes our relationship to technology and machines (which are inseparable from the workings of capitalism).² The cybernetic episteme is based on the modern tenet of progress and human-led transcendence achieved through science and technology.

Under neuropower, the sensible gives way to cognitive pathologies. These pathologies depend on the consumption of content rather than the sharing of meaning. As Thomas Metzinger explains, the internet has become an integral part of how we model ourselves, as we use it for external memory storage, as a cognitive prosthesis, and for emotional self-regulation. This has radically changed the structure of conscious experience, creating a new form of waking consciousness that resembles "a mixture of dreaming, dementia, intoxication, and infantilization."³ Other effects of neuropower are



Still from Jean-Luc Godard's 2014 film *Adieu Au Langage*.

humans' growing invisibility to each other and a paroxysmal racism that infiltrates power, technology, culture, language, and work. For Franco "Bifo" Berardi, racism has become a "virus" that exacerbates fear – above all, the fear of extinction, which seems to have become one of the motors behind white supremacy in the world.⁴ Dissociated from our environment, alienated from each other, we are oblivious to the challenges that are being posed to humanity by the Capitalocene.

1.

Under lockdown, internet-based technology became embedded in everyday life more than ever before. Zoom and other platforms became the matrix of a production model that exacerbates the power of technology over society. A new lockdown economy has emerged in this disembodied communication space, where knowledge is subsumed under the rules of capital accumulation. The pandemic has led to extreme alienation, to the point that privilege is defined as depending on invisible laborers to sustain forms of life. This means that a new "virtual working class" has emerged that can take basics like food, water, and electricity for granted, knowing that they do not have to risk their bodies to have these comforts.

Until 2016, digital technology promised access to all human knowledge, unlimited exchange, self-expression, democratization, participation, opportunities to make money, the acceleration of bureaucratic processes, and the means for grassroots and popular power to challenge governments and corporations. The peak of this alluring cyber-utopia came around 2010–11, when social media played a crucial role in the Occupy and Arab Spring movements. But in 2016, when Cambridge Analytica was revealed to have intervened in the US elections that brought Donald Trump to power, the public's belief in such technologies to change power structures began to shift. We witnessed the worldwide rise of right-wing governments and populist movements supported by wealth. Maurizio Ferraris has called this the era of "post-truth," when the deconstruction of a stable truth became an important political tool.⁵ In online public space, discourse has been shattered, truth has become indiscernible, and relativism has become the norm. The public sphere – the bastion of established and emerging democracies, bolstered by mass media – began to shatter.

Leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Jair Bolsonaro, and Narendra Modi have used digital communications to construct charismatic identities and disseminate populist messages, causing deep social and political polarization.

Politics has profoundly mutated: while minorities and people at the margins have found ways to validate their speech by expressing their perspectives, individualized propaganda has become the order of the day. Algorithms feed users the information they search for, resulting in personalized information bubbles designed to engage preexisting biases. Much of the news media now functions by monetizing user engagement through this type of targeting, which has led to new forms of intensified racism and other types of prejudice. Author Andrey Mir has termed this "postjournalism."⁶ He explains that, since mass media outlets have lost publicity revenue, they need to monetize engagement on the internet and do so by generating anger and hatred, usually directed at some specific group of people. For many, the news is the way to access the world, and rage has become currency: platforms drive and monetize anger as a mode of engagement.

A complex form of authoritarianism is emerging, linked to digital platforms owned by the powerful CEOs who make up the notorious "Silicon Six." Under the new authoritarianism, populations are no longer commanded: they are asked to participate, and in this simulation of involvement, the "ideology of connection" replaces the idea of social relations, neutralizing democratic demands from users to have control over their own lives, rights, and data. In this way, people are made passive.⁷ Cédric Durand explains the difference between the original conception of the World Wide Web and the subsequent development of closed platforms. The WWW began as a decentralized architecture in which a generic transaction protocol (http) and a uniform identification format (URI/URL) generated a space of *flat* content. In this space, human and nonhuman agents could have access to information without any third-party mediation. In contrast, closed platforms use application programming interfaces, or APIs, to mediate interaction, giving way to data loops in which interactions are more dense. The technical object that sustains this hierarchical architecture is the API, each of which is owned by a platform. On the one hand, big platforms, by way of APIs, offer apps that incorporate basic and indispensable data for users. On the other, platforms have access to the additional information generated by the API, such as user activity and buying habits. As the ecosystem grows in complexity, the platform is able to accumulate more and more data.⁸ We become more densely connected with each other and with the platforms every day, as our lives get more and more tied to the cloud. Our dependency on platforms provides the ground for technofeudalism. Historically, feudalism was

03/11

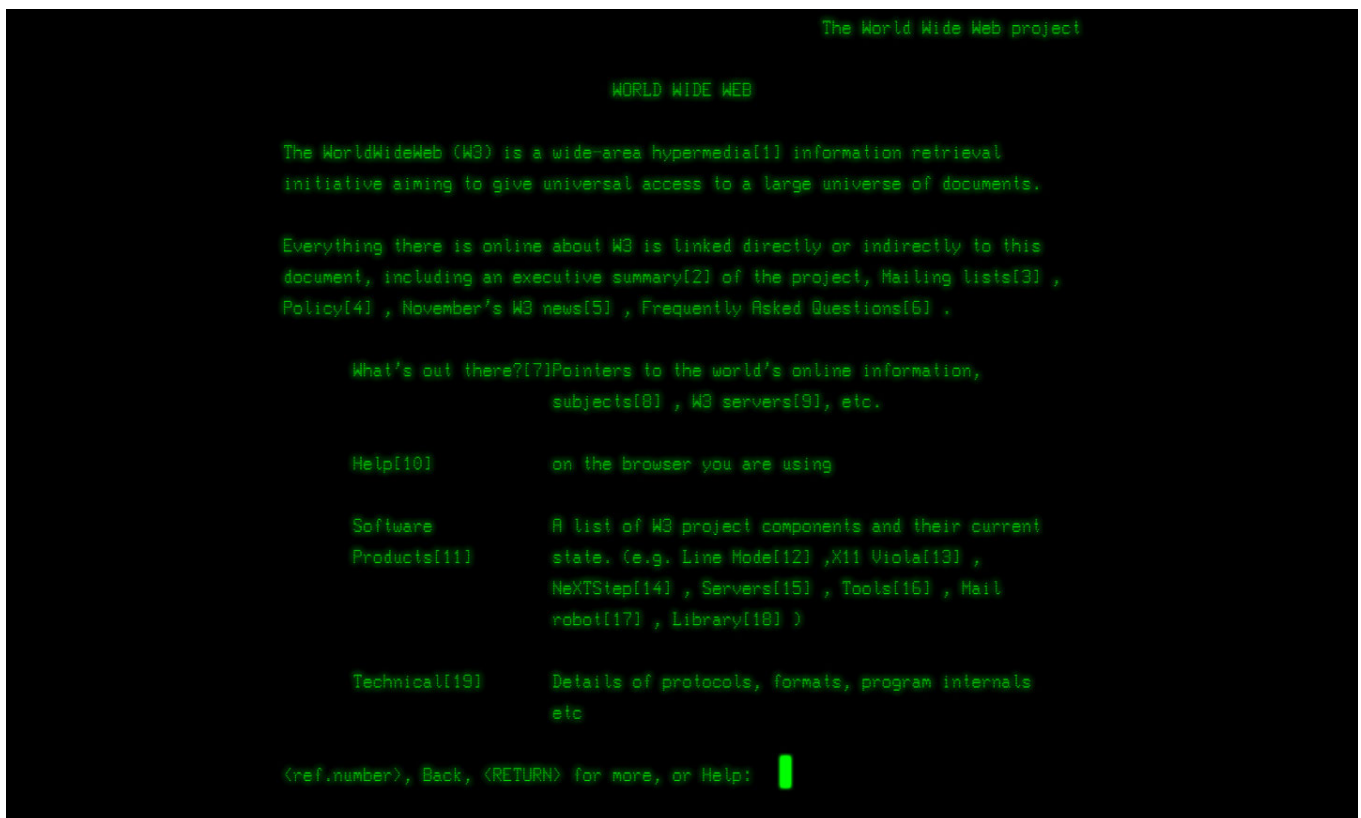
e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

characterized by a fundamental inequality that enabled the direct exploitation of peasants by lords. The lord was both the manager and master not only of the process of production, but of the entire process of social life. In today's technofeudalism, platform owners are the digital lords and users are the serfs. Rather than commodity production, these platforms are geared towards accumulation through rent, debt, and the privatization of the basic infrastructure that sustains our lives. What is at stake is no longer "true" or "fake" information but the cybernetic episteme upon which our lives and subjectivities have been built.

The cybernetic episteme is premised upon modernity's enclosure of experience. In modern epistemology, which is the precondition of the cybernetic episteme, the self is externalized and experienced at a remove from the body. Perception is centered on the brain and eyes instead of the whole body, separating sensation from reason. The self's relationship with the world is mediated through mirrors, camera lenses, the canvas, the microscope, and mathematical models.⁹ The cybernetic episteme, moreover, is inextricable from colonialism, which entails dispossession, dislocation, dissociation, and appropriation. Ariella Azoulay has called the

logic underpinning these processes "the shutter"; this logic is materialized in photographic technology that separates humans from objects, self from the world, and people from their lands. The shutter is the principle of imperialism by which campaigns of plunder have left people both worldless and objectless. For Azoulay, the logic of the shutter was invented centuries before photography gave it a technological apparatus, and it enabled the dispossession of non-Western peoples in tandem with the accumulation of visual and material wealth in archives and museums in the West.¹⁰

The cybernetic episteme is likewise conceptually constituted by this shutter, since it relies on capturing, naming, moving, and archiving subjects – as does imperialism. In this regard, the cybernetic episteme naturalizes the mediation of the self; it creates not only the condition of detachment from the world, but allows the appropriation of the cultures of others, as well as the dissolution of collective being. The shutter is akin to Heidegger's *Gestell* or "representation," which goes hand in hand with Eurocentrism and Anthropocentrism. The *Gestell* and the shutter both imply that the world and experience have become representation,



The first website at CERN, and in the world, was dedicated to the World Wide Web project itself and was hosted on Berners-Lee's NeXT computer. Photo: screenshot of the recreated page. In 2013, CERN launched a project to restore this first ever website which can be browsed here: <http://info.cern.ch>. Copyright: CERN, some rights reserved.

through an aesthetic order in which what is produced as artifice becomes the reality of experience.

In a 2017 Facebook promo video for a new virtual reality technology, Mark Zuckerberg and his colleague Rachel Frank tele-transported themselves to Puerto Rico after a devastating flood. They intended to showcase the potential of the new technology, but instead revealed its inherent violence. The ability to transport oneself to faraway places “as if” one’s body were present gives the illusion that one we can make a difference in the world through technology.¹¹ Another example, in a different register of colonial modernity is that way Western museums allow visitors to “transport” themselves by observing objects looted from elsewhere, like the Pergamon Museum in Berlin where museumgoers can roam around the Ishtar Gate, which has been on display in the museum since 1930. In a section of Ariella Azoulay’s video *Undocumented: Unlearning Imperial Plunder* (2020), she films actual visitors to the Pergamon while noting that dislocation is the essence of (imperial) modernity. The VR museum visitor is at the center of a world, but they are not really *there* (an effect similar to the dispositive of perspective in painting). For globalized Western

culture, the ground for vision, enlightenment, culture, and even social change is the dislocation and disappearance of bodies.¹²

Disembodiment and dislocation are also fundamental epistemological premises of transhumanist Silicon Valley ideology. In this ideology, the teleology of secular modern individualism culminates in the uploading of a person’s mind to a new biological, artificial, or biological-artificial body. The utopian goal of expanding and preserving human consciousness is physically and spiritually achieved. Transhumanism is the dream of enhancing the human body through technology, and ultimately escaping human suffering by transcending the “errors” of death and aging.

Posthumanism takes things a step further: its goal is to immortalize consciousness by uploading it to a robotic or synthetic body. Posthumanism does away with the biological dimension of the self, fundamentally altering what it means to be “human.” In both trans- and posthumanism, technology promises to give us the divine attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience, making humans into “pure consciousness,” achieving a kind of individual and secular transcendence. In the first episode of the British TV series *Years and Years*

05/11



Gordon Pask's *The Colloquy of Mobiles* displayed at the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition at ICA London in 1968.

(2019), Bethany, an adolescent whose face is hidden behind a 3D emoji mask, announces to her parents that she is “transhuman.” She declares: “I don’t want to be flesh. I want to escape this thing and become digital, I want to live forever as information.” Eventually Bethany becomes a hero with transhuman superpowers: her mechanized eyes and brain, which are connected to all the data in the world, allow her to make visible the horrors that the British government have perpetrated in a refugee camp. This techno-utopian narrative implies a democratic ideology, insofar as one political goal of democracy is to make visible the ordeals of oppressed minorities – in this case through virtual disembodiment.

In contrast to this techno-utopian narrative, science fiction – especially cyberpunk literature – generally portrays transhumanism as a nightmarish apocalyptic scenario of social control and individual subjection. Several episodes of *Black Mirror* do this, for example. But what *Black Mirror* and *Years and Years* have in common is that technological advances and the increasing symbiosis between humans and machines are associated with political, economic, and social instability. In reality, “mind uploading” has attracted millions of dollars of investment from the billionaires of Silicon Valley and beyond. In a mixture of engineering and enlightenment, consciousness is now being hacked through biofeedback techniques, meditation practices, and microdosing drugs. Many critics have observed that the utopian ideology of transhumanism underpins the Valley’s culture of “move fast, break things, and make as much money as possible.” Technologies aiming to expand human consciousness are rooted in purely extractivist, capitalist values. In this sense, cybernetics is a political project on a planetary scale. As described by Tiqqun, cybernetics is a gigantic “abstract machine” made up of binary machines deployed by empire, and a form of political sovereignty that has merged with the capitalist extractivist project.

2.

In the pre-cybernetic era – that is to say, before the 1940s – machines were intended to emulate humans; their actions resembled human behavior, but ostensibly without intent or emotions. This is why Donna Haraway describes pre-cybernetic machines as “haunted.”¹³ They seemed animated by ghosts, reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s automaton that was inhabited by a hunchbacked dwarf. Machines were not self-moving, self-designing, or autonomous. They could not achieve human dreams, only mock them. In turn, humans related to machines by using or acting upon them: switching them on or off, using them as tools to achieve an end.

Today, the relationship between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication in a feedback loop. Early machines were led; today, machines lead us.¹⁴ This does not mean that machines have simply become humanized through the proliferation of androids. Rather, humans have surrendered consciousness to AI, becoming obedient and predictable. In the twenty-first century, machines have blurred the distinction between the artificial and human mind, not only because machines can imitate human functions, but because humans have become increasingly passive, since we are now subject to neuroware.

Within the cybernetic episteme, it is no longer enough to talk about a “control society”; we must talk instead about a composite of interlinked forms of oppression (exploitation, alienation, and domination), in tandem with extreme securitarianism. Another way to see the cybernetic episteme is as the reconceptualization of social worlds into information-processing systems. Practices of computation are used to produce new organizational and infrastructural apparatuses, which in turn create value and profit by exploiting and disposing of human life. Social worlds are subsumed into technologies through techniques such as statistical forecasting and data modeling.

The cybernetic episteme stems from a world brought into being by Europeans; this world began with the discovery of the “new world” and the creation of empires and colonies (which coincided with the scientific revolution). In this sense, the cybernetic episteme is inseparable from the Western civilizing project for the whole world, which connected disparate places through technologies like the telegraph and steam shipping, often powered by the extraction of fossil fuels like coal. This project has culminated in globalization as the deregulation and financialization of world economies.¹⁵

The Western civilization project, based on Enlightenment values including equality, peaceful public life, access to modern science, the rule of law, democracy, and technological progress, involved the creation of infrastructure to unify nations and the world.¹⁶ We can call this infrastructure the “technosphere.” The technosphere comprises not only digital technology but all machines, factories, computers, cars, buildings, railways, and mobility infrastructure, as well as systems of food production, resource extraction, and energy distribution. Today, the infrastructure of the world – the technosphere – is shaped by information, which means that the world we inhabit is designed by data.¹⁷

The technosphere is a supplement humans

06/11

e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

have created to help overcome the limits of “human nature” insofar as humans cannot live independently from structures geared towards sustaining life. The technosphere has promised to enable us to increase production and reproduction with less human effort. Moreover, the technosphere is also regarded as the main tool humans have to fight decay, entropy, and death, since it comprises all the structures humans have built to keep themselves alive on the planet. The total mass of the technosphere amounts to fifty kilos for every square meter of earth’s surface – a total of thirty trillion tons, which coexists with the diminishing hydrosphere (water, the frozen polar regions) and the biosphere (all of earth’s living organisms).¹⁸ The ultimate price of the technosphere is global warming and environmental devastation. Like humans, the technosphere needs external energy input, which is not sustainable as long as it comes from fossil fuels that will eventually be depleted.

From this standpoint, the cybernetic episteme represents the gradual merging of human activity into the activity of what we have built and surrounded ourselves with. Much of this built environment is invisible.¹⁹ Infrastructure and data are partially occult

07/11

because we are alienated from them, even as we are produced and managed by them. The invisible infrastructure that sustains our lives is what matters politically right now. And insofar as the technosphere is cybernetic, it is inextricable from capitalism and politics.

3.

Human communication is at the center of the cybernetic global order. The neural system of globalized networked society is digital communication. In a 1975 film called *Comment ça va?*, Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard discuss the “illness” of information. They begin with an image of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, published in the leftist newspaper *Libération*. At the time, photojournalistic images had begun to proliferate as a form of information, and Godard and Miéville critique *Libération* (the most left-wing newspaper in Europe in those days) for failing to include the reader in the creation and dissemination of information. They ask: “How is it that things enter and exit the machine?” (*Comment ça va de l’entrée à la sortie de la machine?*). This question is about how ideas, words, discourses, human interaction, and images become information and then reach readers and viewers.

In *Comment ça va?*, mass media represents



Gerardo Contreras, *Disrupción* (Disruption), 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Parallel /// Oaxaca. Although digital innovation seems to inherit the foundational logic of various cosmogonies, it is at a disadvantage with disruption, which is an exercise closer to business methods. Innovation refers to the introduction of a new thing, while disruption is a consequence, blowing up a thing and breaking it. When something explodes, smaller particles of that something appear, as if they were egos multiplied into shards of glass. These fragments of Tezcatlipoca are shown as a refractile invocation of the Lord of destiny, perhaps with the pretense question the disciplinary uses of the technology.

an illness that has killed communication and language. Last year, Godard updated his critique of the media in an interview posted to Instagram. He stated: “Plato’s cave has been fixed on paper/screen.” For Godard, the consequence of the becoming-information of communication and language is the loss of ambiguity in communication. Digital technology has infiltrated every aspect of existence, and the margin of error between the transmission and the reception of a message has been eliminated by mediatization and digitization. For Godard, digital communication denies the force of the image or the word because it eliminates redundancy, misunderstanding, the possibility of reading between the lines, and the possibility of alterity.

In a more recent film of his – *Adieu au langage* from 2014 – Godard suggests that digital media have destroyed face-to-face communication. He asks: What kind of self could emerge in a time when objects and bodies are disfigurable and refigurable through virtual manipulation?²⁰ Godard posits that the origins of today’s totalitarianism can be traced to the interruption of interior experience by the spectacle. In the film, Godard features a lengthy quote from Philippe Sollers explaining that the spectacle “cuts off” the subject from its interior life – a process that is, paradoxically, highly seductive.²¹ Furthermore, for Godard digital communication creates a new form of isolated solitude where people lack ties to others. In this light, technology has not become an extension of man, as Marshall McLuhan predicted, but has instead attained autonomy from man, since digital media can communicate amongst themselves without human mediation. For Godard, this means that the “face-to-face” encounter – a basic form of human relation that is the foundation of ethics – is no longer possible.

Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and sociologist, comes to similar conclusions: daily conversations no longer involve eye contact, and face-to-face discussion has been replaced by words on a screen.²² According to Turkle, texts, tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram messages, and Snapchats split our attention and diminish our capacity for empathy. They have created new codes of etiquette; no longer do we feel restrained from reaching for our phones in the presence of other people. This new etiquette entrenches a culture of individualism and isolation from each other. This isolation cultivates the perfect ground for fascism.

The digitization of communication not only has political and communal consequences. It also affects the neuroplastic potential of the living brain. The cybernetic episteme reshapes

our working memory by rearranging its contents. As Warren Neidich writes, the new focus of power is not only the false reproduction of the past (the manipulation of the archive), but the manipulation of our working memory – the type of memory that influences our decision-making. Authoritarian neuropower wants nothing less than to shape our future memory, argues Neidich.²³

If the nervous system of cybernetics is digital communication, at the center of digital communication is desire. Mark Fisher devoted his last lectures at Goldsmiths in 2017 to this subject. During one lecture, he played for his students a famous Apple TV commercial from 1984, directed by Ridley Scott and originally broadcast during the Superbowl. In an overt reference to George Orwell’s novel *1984*, the commercial depicts a dreary, repressive control society. This society is seemingly liberated when a buxom blonde woman tosses a sledgehammer at a large screen broadcasting the image of an authoritarian figure, causing the screen to explode. The commercial ends with these lines crawling across the screen: “On January 24, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like 1984.” Fisher observes that the video counterposes top-down bureaucratic control to upstart entrepreneurialism. The dreary control society depicted in the commercial is an allusion to not only the Soviet Union, but also IBM, the dominant computer maker at the time. Apple posits itself as the dynamic, colorful new company that will liberate society from dreary IBM, ushering in a new, more vibrant world order. This new world order will fulfill our (capitalist) desires in a way that the communist world cannot. As Fisher suggests, we now live in that world of libidinal capitalism.²⁴

Elsewhere Fisher writes that what drives the circulation of information is the user’s desire to make one more connection, to leave one more reply, to keep on clicking. Capitalism persists because cyberspace is already under our skin, writes Fisher; to retreat from it would be like trying to retreat into some nonexistent precapitalist imaginary. In his view, we believe we have as much a chance of escaping capitalism as we do of crawling back inside our mother’s womb.²⁵

5.

By means of the cybernetic episteme, Silicon Valley has shaped the world we all live in. As we are poisoned equally by microplastics and fake news, losing our grasp of a shared reality, the “Silicon Six” – as Sacha Baron Cohen called the titans of Silicon Valley in a 2019 speech – propagate algorithm-fueled fear, propaganda, lies, and hate in the name of profit. As Baron

08/11

e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

Cohen pointed out, the major online platforms largely avoid the kind of regulation and accountability that other media companies are subject to. “This is ideological imperialism,” he said. “Six unelected individuals in Silicon Valley impos[e] their vision on the rest of the world, unaccountable to any government, and acting as if they are above the law.”²⁶ He called digital platforms the greatest propaganda machine in history.

Democratic institutions have failed to reign in the information chaos and the destruction of the public sphere. As Shoshana Zuboff argues, we inhabit a communications sphere that is no longer a public sphere.²⁷ She describes this situation as an “epistemic coup” that has taken place in four stages: First, by way of companies gathering personal data about us and then claiming it as their own private property. Second, through data inequality, which means that companies know more than we do. Third, through the epistemic chaos created by algorithms. And fourth, through the institutionalization of this new episteme and the erosion of democratic governance.²⁸

Baron Cohen observes that people can take a stand against platforms by recognizing our power to boycott them. (One example is the mass defection from WhatsApp to Telegram when the former announced that would share its user data with Facebook.) But we also need to defend the existence of facts and a shared reality, understanding the world not as something we see but as something we inhabit – treating life not as something we have, but as something we live. Anti-platform strategies might be accused of Luddism, but they are not necessarily opposed to technology – only to certain uses of technology.

It is also crucial that we regard the cybernetic episteme as inextricable from a broader malaise: humanity’s relationship to life and the planet is a toxic one. The very technologies that supposedly enable us to read, think, flourish, and desire are destroying the world we inhabit.²⁹

People continue to yearn for commonality, mutuality, and something to share. But the culture we currently share is largely mediated by repressive, profit-driven digital platforms. This is why we need to flee from the invasion of images, to distinguish between image and reality, and to affirm the opacity of the world and the ambiguity of language. We need to resist platform monopoly through presence, embodiment, immediacy, and human memory. We need to find ways to create life as opposed to turning it into data, combine emotional and intellectual knowledge, and regard visceral gut feelings as a form of human consciousness. We need to learn

to exist in symbiosis with others and with the environment, not dislocated, uprooted, and detached.³⁰

×

Versions of this text have been presented at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, invited by Eshrat Erfranian; at KHIO, Oslo, invited by Sara Eliassen; and at the conference Políticas de la voluntad, poéticas del cobijo, University of Arizona, May 2021.

09/11

e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

Irmgard Emmelhainz is an independent translator, writer, researcher, and lecturer based in Mexico City. Her book *Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking* was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2019. The translated expanded version of *The Tyranny of Common Sense: Mexico's Neoliberal Conversion* is coming out this fall with SUNY Press, and so is *Toxic Loves, Impossible Futures: Feminist Lives as Resistance* (Vanderbilt). She is a member of the SNCA in Mexico (National System for Arts Creators).

10/11

e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Irmgard Emmelhainz
 Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth

- 1 Shoshana Zuboff, "Facebook's Oversight Board is Not Enough. The Government Has to Regulate Big Tech," *Democracy Now!*, May 6, 2021 https://www.democracynow.org/2021/5/6/donald_trump_facebook_ban.
- 2 Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*, trans. Robert Hurley (2000; Semiotext(e), 2020).
- 3 Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (Basic Books, 2009), 234.
- 4 Franco Berardi, "Destino Manifiesto," *Effimera*, August 25, 2021 <http://effimera.org/destino-manifiesto-di-franco-bifo-berardi/>.
- 5 Maruzzio Ferraris, *La posverdad y otros enigmas* (Alianza Editorial, 2019).
- 6 Andrei Mir, *Postjournalism and the Death of Newspapers: The Media After Trump: Manufacturing Anger and Polarization* (Toronto, 2020). Quoted in Murtaza Hussain, "How to Understand the Rage Economy," *The Intercept*, February 13, 2021 <https://theintercept.com/2021/02/13/news-rage-economy-postjournalism-andrey-mir/>.
- 7 Mark Fisher, "Touch Screen Culture," *Absolute Gegenwart*, ed. Marcus Quent (Merve, 2016), 54–74.
- 8 Cédric Durand, "Tecnofeudalismo: la nueva gleba digital," *Vientosur*, no. 173, January 29, 2021 <https://vientosur.info/tecnofeudalismo-la-nueva-gleba-digital/>.
- 9 Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthesis and the End of the Contemporary* (Jap Spam Books, 2020).
- 10 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2020).
- 11 The Facebook promo video was shown and discussed by Hito Steyerl during her lecture "Bubble Vision," Penny Stamps Distinguished Speakers Series, University of Michigan, January 30, 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1Qhy0_PCjs.
- 12 Steyerl, "Bubble Vision."
- 13 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Socialist Review*, no. 80 (1985).
- 14 Robert Heinelein, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction," *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Robert Latham (Bloomsbury, 2017), 298.
- 15 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "World-Making, 'Mass' Poverty, and the Problem of Scale," *e-flux journal*, no. 114 (December 2020) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/114/366191/world-making-mass-poverty-and-the-problem-of-scale/>.
- 16 Chakrabarty, "World-Making."
- 17 See *Technosphere Magazine*, no. 1, "#Metabolic Systems" (2016) <https://technosphere-magazine.hkw.de/>.
- 18 "#Metabolic Systems."
- 19 Hito Steyerl, "How to Build a Sustainable Art World," interview by Despina Zefkili, *Okula*, October 18, 2019 <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/hito-steyerl/>.
- 20 James S. Williams, *Encounters With Godard: Ethics, Aesthetics Politics* (State University of New York Press, 2016), 83. See also Steven Shaviro's thoughts on the music video for Grace Jones's song "Corporate Cannibal," from his blog *The Pinocchio Theory*, July 23, 2008 <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=653>.
- 21 See Ted Frent, "Adieu au langage – Goodbye to Language: A Works Cited," *Notebook*, October 12, 2014 <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/adieu-au-langage-goodbye-to-language-a-works-cited>.
- 22 Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin, 2016).
- 23 Warren Neidich, introduction to *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism* (Archive Books, 2021), 23.
- 24 Mark Fisher, *Postcapitalist Desire: The Final Lectures* (Repeater, 2021).
- 25 Fisher, "Touch Screen Culture."
- 26 See <https://digitalwellbeing.org/silicon-six-as-greatest-pro-paganda-machine-in-history-baron-cohen-speech-top-quotes-video-and-transcript/>.
- 27 Shoshana Zuboff, "We Can Have

Facebook or Democracy in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism. Not Both," *Democracy Now!*, May 26, 2021
https://www.democracynow.org/2021/5/26/shoshana_zuboff_we_can_have_facebook.

28
Shoshana Zuboff, "The Coup We Are Not Talking About," *New York Times*, January 29, 2021.

29
Bernard Stiegler, *Neganthropocene*, trans. Daniel Ross (Open Humanities Press, 2018).

30
Caroline Jones, "Questioning the Cranial Paradigm," *Edge Cast*, June 19, 2019
https://www.edge.org/conversation/caroline_a_jones-questioning-the-cranial-paradigm.

11/11

e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth