

For Christen Diane Clifford, with love.

Telesthesia

Communication, Culture, and Class

McKenzie Wark

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Game and Play in Everyday Life

Gijón, Spain

“Has Your Life Become a Game of Chance?” This is a headline I found once in *Time* magazine. The story begins: “The people in Washington have turned your life into a series of spins of the wheel that begin with day care and end with retirement . . . Washington has structured the game just as any gambling house would, so there are few winners but a lot more losers.”¹ This is just the first in a long series I could assemble of instances in which we talk about life as if it had become a game. These days, the game is everywhere and nowhere, overflowing the special times and places that once defined it as a game.

Take for instance the sustained popularity of “reality TV” shows, where reality is presented as if it were a game. On *Average Joe*, regular guys compete against each other, and then against “hunks,” for the affections of a cheerleader. On *The Apprentice*, entrepreneurs and B-school types compete to be Donald Trump’s minion. As Breton and Cohen write: “By manufacturing game-worlds into which they slot their non-actor casts, creating pressurized and untested environments, where people are manipulated in cruel and extreme ways and begin to display the confusion and loss of perspective of the incarcerated, these productions use their power without adequate or sufficiently transparent checks and safeguards.”² That sounds like a description of everyday life.

Warfare seems more and more like a game. In his memoir of the first Gulf War, General Schwarzkopf tells the story about

running simulations of the war before it began, using, as it turns out, the same commercial simulation software as the Iraqis. The simulations continued after Operation Desert Shield commenced. Schwarzkopf recounts having the communiqués labels “actual” and “simulation” so that he and his staff could tell them apart.³

Of course, theory seems more and more of a game. Just as athletes have their signature moves, so too does Slavoj Žižek. His opening move for playing the theory game is to flip conventional wisdom over and read it backwards. Here’s an example:

It is . . . not the fantasy of a purely aseptic war run as a video game behind computer screens that protects us from the reality of the face-to-face killing of another person; on the contrary, it is this fantasy of a face-to-face encounter with an enemy killed bloodily that we construct in order to escape the Real of the depersonalized war turned into an anonymous technological operation.⁴

I think he has something there, but the Žižekian move can just as easily be applied to what theorists do. It is not the fantasy of theory as just a language game that protects it from doing real work on real stuff; it is the fantasy of real work and real stuff that protects us from the Real that scholarship is just a language game. And so: everything appears as if it were a game – everyday life, working life, warfare, knowledge, perhaps even love. And when we fail at any of these relentless, zero-sum competitions, we can flee to Vegas, and put our trust in another kind of game, where luck rather than competition rules.

These experiences seem disturbingly like Georges Perec’s dystopian novel *W*.⁵ This book is a memoir of Perec’s childhood, hiding from the Nazis, within which he also reconstructs his childhood fantasy of a seemingly utopian island called *W*, which is organized around a complete devotion to an Olympic spirit of sporting competition. As Perec’s account of *W* unfolds, we discover more and more of a dark side to its Olympian ideals. *W*’s athletes compete not to win but to live. *W* seems less and less to describe the logic of games, but more of the camps, both of which in Perec’s book end up being the same thing. If one is worth nothing more than one’s rank against a competitor, one is eventually worth nothing. The competitive life is a living death.

The critical literature on games is not very extensive, and indeed, Perec's novel is better than some. On the theory front, there are four classics worth mentioning. Two of them are Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, and Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*, both rather eccentric books. The third and fourth, even stranger, I will come back to later. From Huizinga we might take the idea that play is the primary category. While games formalize and regulate play, they may also reduce it to repetition. Games may be play in its decadent form.

From Caillois we may take the idea that there are different types of games. He offers a four-part classification: *agon*, *alea*, *mimesis*, and *ilinx*, or: games of competition, of luck, of make-believe, and of vertigo. Writing in the context of postwar reconstruction, Caillois has a strong preference for *agon* and *alea*, and sees *mimesis* and *ilinx* as dangerous forms of the play because they lack strong rules and limits. For Caillois, the roots of fascism are in play without limits. In our time, a world made up of games of *agon* and *alea* seems actually to have been realized, but in a somewhat uneven fashion. For the emerging ruling class, the game is *agon*, a competition. For the rest of us, it is *alea*, as the *Time* article suggests. We play a game we cannot master, never quite knowing the rules.

This critical preference of Caillois for the strongly rule-bound game over the free and open play was reversed in the sixties. In the United States, the New Games movement produced games of minimal rules aimed at creating cooperative play. *Earthball* would be a perfect example. Bernard DeKoven came up with the idea of the well-played game. Even competitive games only work if the players cooperate on playing well. DeKoven: "Playing well has to be the general state."⁶

In Europe, a more sustained critique emerged out of a rereading of Huizinga, Georges Bataille, Marx, and the historic avant-gardes of Dada and Surrealism. For Guy Debord, leader of the Situationists, the revolutionary task was to make the entire space of the city a space for play, overthrowing the alienating division between work and "leisure." For his sometime ally Constant, the goal was the construction of whole new urban structures for facilitating play, a project he called *New Babylon*. Both were influenced by the reading of Huizinga and Caillois to be found in the work of Henri Lefebvre, who took everyday life to be a domain within

which groups sallied forth and challenged each other. For Lefebvre, the challenge was to modern life what the gift was to the ancients.⁷

Now is a good time to revisit this critical tradition, which makes play a central category in the critique of the military-entertainment complex, which calls it to account for its corruption of everyday life with the game. Against Caillois, we might argue that the problem is not too few rule-bound games, but too many of them. There is no longer any escape or retreat from an all-inclusive game space. Against the sixties play radicals, we might argue that play doesn't exist in its pure form. The being of the game and the becoming of play produce each other. In other words we might generalize Derrida's argument in "Structure, Sign and Play."⁸

If the emphasis has to fall somewhere, however, it is best to treat play as the primary category, and game as the supplement. Brian Massumi's *Parables of the Virtual* is useful here. The game is not the condition of existence of play, but vice versa. If play is pure difference, the game marks and sorts play into differences that differentiate according to the same principle. Massumi's example is soccer. The play itself is a flux that ripples through the field, and cannot be neatly distributed into objects and subjects. But the play always comes to rest in a digital result. The ball is in or out, the player offside or not, the team scores or doesn't. The game is a space in which becoming is reduced to being, flux to neat divisions between subjects and objects.⁹ One plays not only at an interface, but as an interface.

This is an elusive point, but a key one. It helps us understand why games are the form culture assumes in the digital age. We live in an era when a new ruling class is emerging, one that requires a new form of private property, no longer tracts of land or factories and inventories, but what the Raqs Media Collective calls "rainforests of ideas."¹⁰ As Steven Shaviro writes, "Digitization goes hand in hand with privatization. It's our version of what Marx called primitive accumulation."¹¹

The emergence of the intensive vector of the digital, but in particular the digital constrained within the bounds of property and strategy, is what lies behind the proliferation of the game, or more particularly of the game as *agon* and *alea*. As Jackson Lears argues in his book *Something for Nothing*, there has always been

a tension in American culture between *agon* and *alea*, between predestination and the luck of the gods, between Protestant and animist. What we see in our time is that *agon* and *alea* move, in Raymond Williams's terms, from being residual to dominant cultural forms.¹²

This is because we are at the point where the homology between property, strategy, and the digital becomes the basis for the whole organization of life. That every aspect of being should be bounded, discrete, and finite is the order of the day. The chess board or the tennis court are the models for a digital world only now coming into being as a third nature, a general and abstract space, a universal game space.

The lines aren't drawn in powdered chalk on the freshly cut lawn; they are drawn invisibly by global positioning satellites. For what is GPS if not the very surface of the planet itself as a total chess board, every inch rendered discrete, finite, and bounded. The surface of the earth is no longer a topography, a space of writing, of maps and titles. It is a topology, the space of the *logos* itself, if of a somewhat limited and particular kind.¹³

The whole surface of the globe becomes a game space, or rather, two overlaid and overlapping game spaces, of commodity-space and strategy-space, of desire and security. There is a strategy-space and a commodity-space. We are living through an era in which the strategy-space dominates. The invasion of Iraq might stand as an emblem of it. But under the Clinton administration, to which some look back with nostalgia, what we may have seen is really just the predominance of the commodity-space, otherwise known as the "level playing field" of the free market economy.

It caused something of a sensation when the United States army started using an online computer game as a recruiting tool. You can download the first-person shooter *America's Army* free from the Internet. What is less noticed is how games allegorize the ideological kernel of game space as a way of life into other areas of the everyday. It is not "violence" that is intrinsic to games, but the logic of the digital, of difference restricted to the discrete and finite.

Defenders of games sometimes point to non-violent games like *The Sims* as evidence that game culture cannot be reduced to the question of violence. But maybe what is of more interest is what *America's Army* and *The Sims* have in common – the collapsing

of the whole of life into the digital, and the extension of the principles of the digital to the whole of life.

Spoiler alert! Orson Scott Card's sci-fi novel *Ender's Game* is a favorite with military simulation types, and no wonder.¹⁴ It's a novel about training children to fight some alien enemy, and the story of one child in particular, brutalized by boot camp, then set to playing endless simulated wars on computer games against the aliens. Only it turns out it was no simulation: what the child thinks was the training exercise was the war. And it is the war. The *form* of the digital game, irrespective of content, is now the form of everyday life itself.

Now I don't want to suggest that all games are a bad thing. Rather, I want to return to Huizinga's line of inquiry, as to whether a given game culture is an enabler of play in its protean, creative sense, or if it is a decadent form that merely induces play to repetition. This is where the question of property comes back into focus. Marx once said that the people make history, but not with the means of their own choosing. Now one might say: the people create play, but not in the games of their own choosing.

Games, when they become decadent, trap play and repeat it as endless variations of the same. Or, one might say, a decadent game extends the digital to the point that it excludes any other kind of difference. Writing in the 1950s, Situationists thought that play offered some kind of critical leverage against the social factory, against the extension of the commodity form to the whole of everyday life. They invented practices of play, in and against the city, as a step toward the imagining of a new city, built for less mediocre games.

What they had not foreseen was that play of this kind could be captured and made a functional component of commodification. Rather than being a process that invents new forms, play is now captured and made functional for the same forms, over and over: the forms of commodity-space and strategy-space. The analog of play calls into being the digital of the game. But the question is whether the digital then suppresses or enables difference.

The space within which the Situationists discovered new possibilities of play was an addressable space, the space of the city. Children of the war years, they knew all about aerial surveillance and its consequences.¹⁵ And yet they discovered play not only within but against an addressable space. The wager of

twenty-first-century avant-gardes is that the addressable spaces of the intensive and extensive vector can also be spaces of play, both in and against the digital.

Henry Jenkins famously celebrates play within the space of what he calls “convergence culture.”¹⁶ Culture industry artifacts, whether fantasy novels, TV series, games, or comics, become the raw material for the creation of new stories, or of communities, in which the consumer becomes the producer. But is this not just the **vulture industry** at work? Parallel to the outsourcing of producing the hardware to China is the “insourcing” of the production of “content” to the leisure hours of their own consumers. This is play in the space of the vector, but not against it. A little different is the path that stretches from the Electronic Disturbance Theater and Etoy to 4Chan, Anonymous, LulzSec, Wikileaks, and other more or less anonymous or pseudonymous groups who, like the Situationists, play in and against addressable space.¹⁷

Caillois was right to warn against the dangers of the fantasy of pure play, and the pure play of fantasy. Play does not know when to stop – as anyone who has been around small children has surely discovered. His privileging of *alea* and *agon* against *mimesis* and *ilinx* seems particularly aimed at Georges Bataille, who even in the postwar period was still hankering after rituals that could abolish the self and touch the absent presence of the absolute.¹⁸ But, on the other hand, Caillois did not foresee the opposite danger: that the bounds and limits of the game would come to coexist, via a digital technicity, with a regime of property, and that this game space would become a totality.

The online version of *The Sims* was not popular, at least in part because newbie players were treated as “marks” by “griefers” who scammed them the minute they entered the game. The con, who cheats in real-life games, is a persona who advances along the lines of the vector. The “mark” is named after Ben Marks, who invented the “Big Store” con, using fake store fronts in frontier railway towns. Graham Parker: “The stores thrived in the heyday of the American railroads and had a symbiotic relationship with the burgeoning infrastructure as it sped across America . . . Marks was the first criminal to advance the mobile parasitic logic of the railroad grafter to match the ambitions of the host.”¹⁹

The difference between game space as it is coming to being in reality and the ideology of the game is that in the ideology game

space is a “level playing field” where the fittest survive; in actual game space, the big players have the umpire in their pocket. Exploitation today is a matter of meeting our opponents as if on a level playing field, but where they can change the rules to suit themselves. This is the meaning of “deregulation” – that the state is no longer even notionally the umpire.

This became particularly clear after the 2008 financial crisis. Most of the banks were bailed out on a largely no-questions-asked basis, while ordinary mortgage holders received only token assistance. If you bet a few hundred thousand on your house and lost, you were just a mark who lost. If you bet a few hundred million on mortgage-backed securities, your bad bet was covered.

David Graeber points out that, historically, debt crises are solved at the expense of debt holders, so that economic activity can resume again.²⁰ But this was not the case in Europe or the United States after 2008. The bond holders ruled. The two productive factions of the vectoral class, the strategic and the logistic, were held hostage by a third, which uses the power of the vector to secure control of flows not only of money in all of its forms, but flows of information about values.

Imagine you are playing a video game. There are things to avoid in this game, and things to find. Some things lower your score and some raise it. Only problem is, your opponent knows where they are and what their value is before you do. Worse, your opponent is your source of information about some of those values, and might not always tell you straight. The decadence of the overdeveloped world is this gaming of the game. It is as if the ball boys and umpires all had bets on the match and acted in their own interests, not the interests of the game. Leonard Cohen called it: “Everybody knows the dice are loaded. We all roll with our fingers crossed.”

Two politics of the game suggest themselves. First, a reformist one, in which the state resumes its role as natural umpire of the game. One accepts the enclosure of the commons in strategy-space and commodity-space, but insists that the major players play the game by the same rules as everyone else. One should not be able to attack other countries unprovoked unless the UN allows it. The financial wing of the vectoral class ought not to game the game in its own interests and at the expense of creative investment. In this vision, play is still subordinated to the game. History becomes

a matter of the ever-expanding and ever-deepening of a game space that is called upon to coincide with its own ideology.

But there might be another vision, in which the digital is freed from its identity within property, and the capacity to create game spaces becomes a new commons. Play, freed from a tyrannical and falsely universal game space, might then revert to the role Huizinga always thought it should have, as the engine of difference, oscillating between antipodes, the means of production of difference itself.

The Occupy Wall Street events of 2011 might be thought of as just such a “play,” not to mention, on a much vaster scale, the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt that preceded them. These were occupations not just of concrete places but of abstract ones as well, situations in which a commons appeared, at least for a while. Of course, it is all about the endgame in such circumstances. What counts are the moves after such openings, and in these and many other cases, game space trumped open play in the end. But still, one can’t but keep trying. The “great game” isn’t Afghanistan any more, although that is part of it.²¹ The great game is the game against those who would game game space itself, and put an end to that play which invents new rules.

So far I have been looking at game space “from above” as it were, like aerial surveillance. But what does it feel like to roll with your fingers crossed? A terrific example of the phenomenology of play is a book by David Sudnow called *Pilgrim in the Microworld*.²² It is the third of our classic texts. A former ethnomethodologist, Sudnow found himself for obscure reasons outside the profession of sociology, making a living as a piano teacher. He even had his own distinctive method for this. *Pilgrim in the Microworld* is as detailed and nuanced an ethnography of the experience of play, and of one’s relation to play in a digital world, as one could hope for, but it stays close to experiential frame. This offers a point of departure for taking the point of view of the gamer seriously, but working out from it, grasping the whole landscape of the military–entertainment complex from the point of view of one of the key personas that it has called into being.

Sudnow chronicles, step by step, how he became a gamer. It’s the story of how he internalizes the goals of the game itself, how he trains his senses, and tunes his motor skills into his senses, and

his senses into the feedback loop of the game. None of which is a conscious action. Like learning the piano, it’s a kind of athletics, a shaping of the nerves and muscles, of carving neural pathways to speed the interaction of human with inhuman circuits. It’s about a training in cycles of effort and reward, where these cycles become predictable loops. The gamer lives for quantifiable rewards. The persona, or rather the interface, of the gamer is the carapace which makes this training appear meaningful to the awareness of the body so trained.

The fourth classic book about games, alongside Sudnow, Caillois and Huizinga, is surely Bernard Suits’s *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*.²³ Writers on games often refer to its robust definition of the category of game, but neglect two other things about it, of which the least strange is that it ends with a description of utopia. It addresses that gamer awareness and asks about a larger reward for play than a score within a game.

Somewhat more startling is that this utopia is described by the fabled grasshopper of the title. Or, rather, by the acolytes of the grasshopper. The grasshopper preferred to play rather than to store up food for the winter, and died. His students are ants, who attempt to reconstruct his Socratic dialogues like so many insect Platos. Already, in Suits, there is a sense that the good life is at some remove. In the overdeveloped world, it seems that if one were to rewrite this work it would have to be the other way around – it is the ants that die, and we are all grasshoppers. Play is all we consume; even as play consumes us.

But perhaps even this striking work is now from another time. Galloway and Thacker: “networks involve a shift in scale, one in which the central concern is no longer the action of individuated agents or nodes in a network. Instead what matters more and more is the very distribution and dispersal of action throughout the network.”²⁴ What is called for are personas which, unlike the ant and the grasshopper, don’t return back to the integrity of a whole body on the one hand with a technology on the other. Rather, personas are specific, local, non-phenomenological.

Critical theory has learned to embrace a range of personas. It came to terms with its own petit bourgeois origins once it did not identify itself automatically with the party of the working class. It broke out of an anodyne humanism to understand a variety not only of class personas, but those of gender, race, sexuality. But

why stop there? Why not embrace also those personas thrown up late in modernity? Why not embrace those that are not personas relating subjects to each other, but subjects and objects – interfaces?

Two interfaces come to mind as particularly interesting: the **gamer** and the **hacker**. Both are products of the military–entertainment complex. Both engage centrally with questions of play. The hacker still has remnants of the romantic idea of free, creative play, play that invokes its own rules. The gamer as an interface has the virtue of stepping away from such an idea of an interface as self-acknowledged legislator. The gamer plays within the game, as given. The gamer is an antipodal figure, playing against the game from within.

Gamer and hacker are the interfaces advocated by Caillois and Huizinga, respectively. Each has something to say to the other. The game as end in itself can become decadent, the gamer narrowly focused, perhaps tempted to cheat – to game the game. The hacker, on the other hand, has a tendency to ramble, to head off into the wilderness, to become unbounded from the constraints that shape play’s anti-productivity in a paradoxically productive direction.

This would be to move in the contrary direction, to the now established field of game studies, which takes its cue from the work of Ian Bogost, under the banner of “proceduralism.”²⁵ Bogost rightly insists that games are defined by their unique formal properties. Whatever values a game communicates are embedded in the design of the procedures for playing it. This has the effect, however, of privileging the game *designer* as the author of the rule-set and the procedures it generates. Bogost takes a step forward in identifying the formal qualities of the game, but a step backwards toward reviving the persona of its author. Needless to say, game designers are attracted to the procedural point of view, even if it aligns them with other servants of vectoral power as architects of game space rather than collaborators in that praxis that would try to game the system – or hack it. We shall see soon enough who has history on their side.

10

The Gift Shop at the End of History

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The linguistic turn, the reign of the signifier, the art of simulation, the semiotics of everyday life, the society of the spectacle: the postmodern seems to come down to a wild proliferation of signs. Perhaps this is just a misdiagnosis. Perhaps it’s just a matter of taking one’s news feed to be representative of the zeitgeist. Terry Eagleton: “cultural theory’s inflation of the role of language [is] an error native to intellectuals, as melancholia is endemic among clowns.”¹

So what was the postmodern? By the early twenty-first century the very term was something that even undergrads had learned was passé, like that bad haircut you had at a certain naive stage in your life. But it is precisely this abject, forlorn quality of the postmodern that now needs an analysis. To foreshadow a little: perhaps it was, with the best of intentions, if not the best of results, an attempt to resolve two vexing questions. The first is: what can we make of history? The second is: what has history made of us? As to what history is, and who we are – both these questions hinge on some other questions.

The postmodern proliferation of the sign is not so much a symptom as a syndrome. It is itself a cluster of heterogeneous signs which all have a family resemblance to each other, yet which cannot be reduced to a unity or dismissed as a random collection of differences. Some, but not all, may have a common

ditional rights. What the lord expropriated was often in kind. But when farmers confront pastoralists, land has become the private property of the pastoralist class. Farmers are dispossessed of all traditional rights. They pay rent in cash rather than in kind.

The transformation of peasants into farmers and lords into pastoralists is still going on today. Class conflict over the privatization of land is still the dominant class struggle in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. But this class conflict finds itself intertwined with another, between capitalists and workers. So, if we unpack the somewhat ahistorical category of “capitalism,” we find already two axes of class conflict, and four classes, forming alliances and negotiating with each other over the course of three centuries.

If there are two axes of class conflict, two kinds of ruling class, two kinds of labor – why not a third? I think Negri and Kroker are right to insist that something is changing, that the commodity form is mutating. Where I differ is in arguing not that labor has changed, or that there is a new kind of potentially dominating class, but rather that there is a whole new axis of class conflict, which pits a new kind of ruling class against a new kind of productive class.

The new ruling class I call the vectoralist class rather than the virtual class. Unlike Kroker, I don’t want to offer up the concept of the virtual to the enemy. Like Negri, I want to preserve a more strongly optimistic, forward-looking critical theory. So this chapter concludes with the vectoralist class, so called because they control the vectors along which information circulates. They own the means of realizing the value of information – and information emerges as a concept precisely because it can be quantified, valued, and owned.²³ In the following chapter, I shall turn to some examples of the kinds of companies that might be considered exemplars of this new ruling class.

13

The Vectoral Class and Its Antipodes

Redmond, Washington

Each era in the development of the commodity economy has its emblematic business. Think of the dark satanic mills of laissez-faire capitalism, or the Fordist assembly line that replaced it. Each has its typical products, from the cheap cotton goods of the former to the T-model of the latter. What then might be the emblematic firms, products, or processes of commodity production in its vectoral stage?

Put the term “chinese factory” into your search engine and it yields pictures recognizably connected to earlier ones of the satanic mills or the assembly line, but with one small difference. The pictures often have the industrial-sublime aesthetic of images of Fordist factories – the repeated rows of machines and workers stretching into infinity. If anything the factories are a bit smaller than the blast furnaces and refineries one can also easily find in digital pictures with a bit of searching. The difference is that the Chinese workers are often elaborately clothed not only to keep hair from getting caught in machines, but to keep any detritus of the body from flaking off into the sometimes minute labors they are performing. While the factory itself remains vast and orderly, at least part of the object of labor becomes minute and delicate.

Consider for a moment not these images but the fact that one can so easily search for them. What makes that possible? Search for the term “server farm” and the results show a similar industrial

sublime to the rows of Chinese factory workers, but now the difference is that in pictures of server farms there are rarely any humans visible at all. Just rows and rows of servers and cables, as if they worked all by themselves. As if they weren't themselves made in factories, by intricate meshings of flesh and machine. As if they weren't kept running by other hands and brains.

If you want pictures of how or where things are made, you have to search for them, even if you don't have to search very far. If you want pictures of the emblematic products and their logos that these factories make – those are probably visible right now, wherever you are. If you are reading this book, chances are you live in a world where the names of Google, Apple, Nokia, and their rivals and competitors swim by the eye on most days.

In an odd loop back to the vectors of the eighteenth century, Google filed a patent for server farms of the seas.¹ If the overdeveloped world needs fish farms, then why not nautical server "farms"? The idea seems to have a few benefits. One is getting the servers closer to customers, overcoming certain geopolitical limits that still remain to the trajectories of vectors. The floating farms also generate their own power from the motion of the sea. The brilliant brands of third nature would like us all to think they are different from the nature-destroying industries of the old industrial order, but this is hardly the case.

Considered as an emblem of the vectoral class, how does Google's business actually work? Google is the prime example of how the vulture industry supplants the culture industry. Google doesn't make all that much information that is either useful or entertaining. It just connects you to it. It takes a vast industrial infrastructure to do it – witness the server farms, floating or not – but it doesn't involve actually making the information you desire. Google's business is in that sense parasitic. It sells advertising, like the broadcast version of the culture industries. But it doesn't offer any entertainment to attract its flickers of neural presence. It really assumes we will entertain each other, while Google collects the rent.

This is very different from the strategy pursued by Apple. Famous for its beautifully designed computers, laptops, phones, and other devices, the problem for Apple is that the production of these sorts of machines – in China and elsewhere – has become something of a commodity business. It's hard to charge a premium

for such devices when ones that are as good or almost as good can be bought "off-brand" for less. So Apple has to invest in its brand. Apple has to become meaningful in the "discourse" of the time.

Apple's other strategy is to make the devices portals to a marketplace. The device connects you seamlessly to a world of movies, tunes, books, and games, not to mention "apps" that do all sorts of handy things. It is not free, but it's convenient, and that is worth something. Meanwhile, Apple extracts a rent from all the third parties who want to sell stuff in their marketplace.

Both Google and Apple are *Fortune* 500 companies. In 2011 Apple was ranked number 35 and Google was 92. The list is a mix of mostly familiar names, some of whom grew to massive size in a previous era – ExxonMobil (at number 2), General Motors (8) – and some of whom got big precisely at the transition toward third nature: Hewlett Packard (11), Verizon (16). Some are identified with bricks-and-mortar second-nature economy but got big at this through the power of the vector. Walmart (1) is a key example. The comparative advantage of Walmart, besides ruthless control of labor costs, was logistics. The company was built around control of the whole supply chain, from pulling a carrot out of the dirt or a T-shirt off a loom, all the way into the hands of the customer.

Some of the top companies owe their fortunes to control of strategy-space more than than commodity-space: Boeing (36), United Technologies (44), Lockheed Martin (52). These companies still make incredibly expensive things using the most sophisticated manufacturing technologies, but in order to make them, the whole process, from design to project management to the control of machine tools, is increasingly digital.

Some companies aren't obviously in the information business: Proctor & Gamble (26), Pfizer (31), and Merck (53) are mostly in the drug business. The drug business, like the chemical business, is only partly about making things. It is also about the manipulation of the chemical and biological worlds to produce compounds that can be patented, and that can be shown to have some therapeutic or industrial use. Some companies have survived through the whole development of the ruling class through three phases, from pastoralist to capitalist to vectoralist. Archer Daniels Midland (39) would be a classic example. Once it was in the food business,

then it was in the processed food business, then it was in the genetically modified organism business.

Each of these companies is a fascinating story, even more amazing than the business press generally makes out. It's a see-saw saga of luck and talent, of competition and coercion, of business acumen and state subsidy, of intercorporate shenanigans and class conflict. Each company has particular interests tied to its perceived vulnerabilities. Sometimes these interests conflict with each other. Old-style culture industries such as News Corp (83) are hardly fans of the vulture-industry strategies of Google. News Corp is still interested in ways to rope off its "intellectual property" so that it can sell its own ads alongside it, rather than have Google "pirate" that content and sell the ads for its own benefit.

On the other hand, Google has had to move fast to keep up with the refinement of the vector as the devices become more portable and cellular telephony replaces landlines. Hence its investment in Android, which it intends to be to Apple's closed world of hardware and software what Windows by Microsoft (38) once was. Needless to say, Microsoft has its own ideas, and has an operating system for handhelds to rival Apple and Google, and tried to take on Google's search engine with one called Bing.

Companies also form shifting alliances and mount expensive campaigns against each other, using their vast portfolios of patents as pawns in the game. These are not unlike feudal titles, which the courts rather than the Court is obliged to adjudicate. A minor industry sprang up just around opportunistic legal challenges to the ownership of intellectual property. Given how arcane and expensive this can be, open-source licensing can in some situations be a viable business strategy, even a political strategy. It works to create a space between competing interests to grow a market for services, but it also works to create a *modus vivendi* with the hacker class.

The struggle between capital and labor produced its own compromise formations, of which the welfare state is the key instance. Labor forced capital to socialize part of the surplus. Much of this came under the heading of mutual interest. The rentier class of urban landlords might not like it, but social housing keeps down a key component of labor costs for everyone else. Education and healthcare likewise maintained the quality of labor at a time

when capital was held captive to some extent within national boundaries.

The virtuous circle of Fordism could accept partial socialization of the surplus, so long as rising productivity of labor could support rising wages, which gave labor the purchasing power to clear the markets by buying back the larger portion of what it had itself made in the first place. All of which went swimmingly until the rate of improvement of productivity went into decline, leading among other things to the temporary return of the Political around 1968.²

The solution to the problem was, in a word, *telesthesia*. The vector becomes much more flexible, elaborate, refined in its flows of data. It is no longer necessary to cluster related parts of the production process physically near each other. The vector opens the way to a spatial disaggregation of production. It isn't the multitude that fled the scene. It was capital.

With capital no longer captive within the same spatial envelope of the nation-state as labor, the ruling class has less and less interest in its life-support systems. There is always another pool of labor, elsewhere. In the overdeveloped world, the welfare states slowly unravel. Meanwhile whole new manufacturing economies bloom, on an unprecedented scale, but elsewhere. In this sense, the great age of capitalism only just gets going as the twentieth century ends.

Capital still produces its familiar landscapes, only now in gigantic form: container ports, road and rail links, industrial parks, dormitory suburbs with their serried rows of tower blocks. Tributary towns manufacturing components cluster around transport links. Other transport links bring in raw materials. Follow back along these lines and there are the vast open-cut mines for coal or iron ore or bauxite. Far from going away in the postmodern age, all this is being built on a bigger scale than ever before. If you have ever seen an open-cut coal mine, like a city in negative, building down rather than up, it is hard to take seriously too much talk of the Political (or of Culture). Politics is to mining what a butterfly is to a dragline.

And yet this vast production of second nature, and the extraction of resources out of what was once nature that it entails, is in turn the object of a more fluid but pervasive third nature. That the vectoralist class has replaced the capitalist class as the

dominant exploiting class can be seen in the form that the leading corporations take. These firms divest themselves of their productive capacity, as this is no longer a source of power. They rely on a competing mass of capitalist contractors for the manufacture of their products.

Their power lies in monopolizing intellectual property – patents, copyrights, and trademarks – and the means of reproducing their value: the vectors of communication. The privatization of information becomes the dominant, rather than a subsidiary, aspect of commodified life. Naomi Klein: “There is a certain logic to this progression: first, a select group of manufacturers transcend their connection to earthbound products, then, with marketing elevated as the pinnacle of their business, they attempt to alter marketing’s social status as a commercial interruption and replace it with seamless integration.”³

As private property advances from land to capital to information, property itself becomes more abstract. Capital as property frees land from its spatial fixity. Information as property frees capital from its fixity in a particular object. This abstraction of property makes property itself something amenable to accelerated innovation – and conflict. Class conflict fragments, but creeps into any and every relation that becomes a relation of property. The property question, the basis of class, becomes the question asked everywhere, of everything. If “class” appears absent to the apologists of our time, it is not because it has become just another in a series of antagonisms and articulations, but on the contrary because it has become the unacknowledged structuring principle of a third nature that organizes the play of identities as differences.

The hacker class arises out of the transformation of information into property, in the form of intellectual property, including patents, trademarks, copyright, publicity rights, and the moral right of authors. The vectoralist class goes out of its way to court the hacker class ideologically, to insist on the essential complementarity of the ownership of information and the production of new information.

This might lead some – such as Kroker – to blur the distinction between the hacker class and the vectoralist class. One can recognize the contours of this ideology in the fetishizing of the entrepreneur and of technology, where the whole question of labor is

ignored, or sublimated into a discourse on “creativity,” of work as play, play as work. As Kirschenbaum’s case makes clear, hackers and vectoralists are far from sharing a common interest.

There is an essential difference between the hacker class and the vectoralist class. The hacker hacks, producing new knowledge, new culture, new science – but does not own the means of realizing the value of what it creates. The vectoralist class produces nothing new. Its function is to render everything equivalent, to commodify the new. It owns the means of realizing the value of the new. The hacker ends up selling his or her labor, one way or another, to the vectoralist class. Intellectual property, while it is presented as the defense of the rights of producers of the new, is in actuality about maintaining the rights not of producers but of owners of information.

The hacker class includes anyone who creates new information, in any media. It includes not only musicians, writers, and filmmakers, but also chemists, biologists, philosophers – anyone who produces new information, including Marxist or post-Marxist theorists. The products of hackers’ labor may be even more differentiated than the products of workers’ labor or farmers’ labor, but the commodity form renders them equivalent. X words from my book are worth Y tunes from your album are worth Z amount of the royalties on your patent. To the vectoralist class, all these things are merely part of a portfolio of intellectual property that these days often accounts for a substantial part of the “assets” of a company.

The hacker class makes new information; the vectoralist class turns it into private property. Information is a strange thing, as theologically subtle as the commodity was to Marx. It has a peculiar ontological property. Information is never immaterial. Information cannot *not* be embodied. It has no existence outside of the material. It is not an ideal or a ghost or a spirit. (Although it may give rise to these as mystifications.) And yet information’s relation to the material is radically contingent. This contingency is only now starting to be fully realized. The coming of the digital is the realization, in every sense of the word, of the arbitrary relation between information and its materiality, of which the arbitrary relation of signifier to signified is but a special case.

Everyday life confirms this. I could make you a copy of this text, and the information in it, or rather the potential for

information in it, which would then be on a CD in your possession. And yet it would still be “right here,” on my hard drive. Now isn’t that strange? My possession of information does not deprive you of it. Whatever information is, it escapes the bounds of any particular materiality. That is its unique ontological promise, now fully realizable in the digital. As much as it might alarm Polity Press, you may have downloaded this text for free as a PDF from the Internet.

Information has then at least one very strange property. It can escape scarcity. And it is this property that makes it very troubling for that other kind of property – private property – which is all about the maintenance of scarcity. Information is what economists call a “non-rivalrous good” – a term that is clearly an oxymoron. Information poses not only an intellectual challenge but an historical challenge to economic thought. The challenge is not only to think what else it could be, but to practice the production and reproduction of information otherwise.

The new ontological properties that information introduces into the world bring forth, as a reaction, new kinds of property relation in the legal sense – what we now call “intellectual property” – another oxymoron. As I would understand it, intellectual property grows out of, but is distinct from, patents, copyrights, and trademarks. Intellectual property is the tendency to turn socially negotiable rights into private property rights. The enormous ramping-up of intellectual property talk results from the contradiction between the newly realized potential of information to escape from scarcity and the commercial interests of those who want to stuff it back into the limits that scarcity and the commodity would impose.

The ontological property form of information is as socially produced as its legal property form. The question is how and why these two senses of “property” have come into conflict. The question is why, if “information wants to be free” in the ontological sense, it is “everywhere in chains,” in the legal sense.⁴ Coming from a certain mode of the Marxist tradition, I can’t help but see the law as superstructural, as reactive, and most particularly as a terrain upon which class interests negotiate.⁵ In particular, I am interested in law as a terrain where successive ruling-class interests manage the transition from one mode of production to another. This might sound rather “vulgar,” but

perhaps in this case it is the reality of the situation that is vulgar, not the theory.

Where the capitalist class found it useful for information to remain relatively free, in the interests of the expansion of production and consumption as a whole, the vectoralist class initially insisted on the enforcement of strict private property rights over information. One might gauge the relative strengths of these rival ruling classes by looking at the state of intellectual property law. One might gauge the preponderance of capitalist and vectoralist interest within a given firm by looking at its policies on the technical and legal enforcement of intellectual property law. One might gauge the place in the development process of a particular country by the way it responds to the demands from the overdeveloped world for the enforcement of international agreements on these “rights.” In short: by extending the logic of class analysis, one can show how, far from being relegated to the dustbin of history, class is alive and well in our times, even if in forms we have hardly begun to name.

We can account for the obsession with enforcing intellectual property law in class terms. It is in the interests of an emerging ruling class. We can account then for the ideologies of information as property also. James Boyle suggests that there is a tension between the idea of maximizing the “efficiency” of the economy as a whole and producing “incentives” for information creators/owners.⁶ To be “vulgar”: the shift from the former to the latter is the shift from capitalist to vectoralist thinking about the place of information in the economy, from peripheral to central. But what is striking is that despite legal and ideological coercion, information still wants to be free. Its legal properties clash with its ontological properties. So, on the one hand, we see increasingly vigorous attempts to outlaw the free sharing of information; and, on the other, we see the persistence of file-sharing and piracy. How can we account for this tension?

This is the nexus where one might reinvent a kind of critical theory. A critical theory is one that thinks in terms not only of the actual but also of the virtual. The virtual could be thought of as the grounds of possibility. The virtual is what makes the possible possible. Where this critical theory might begin is by saying that perhaps what this tension over information signifies is that we have finally found the point where we can escape from material

scarcity, and from all economies of scarcity. Perhaps we have found the one domain in which we could realize a certain "utopian" promise: "to each according to their needs; from each according to their abilities."

That is what I believe. And I don't think I am alone. There is, as Marcel Mauss observed a long time ago, a latent class instinct that all the products of science and culture really ought to belong to the people as something held in common, indeed as what is common. Mauss: "One likes to assert that they are the product of the collective mind as much as the individual mind. Everyone wishes them to fall into the public domain or join the general circulation of wealth as quickly as possible."⁷ The public is not "pirating" anyone else's property. It just does not recognize the new enclosures of information within private property as legitimate.

File-sharing is a social movement in all but name. It rarely announces itself as a social movement, but then I don't think that is uncommon. Likewise, I think that the gift relation in culture and knowledge has been alive and well and resisting commodification for centuries. Only now it may finally have found an ally in the digital means for reproducing information, so that one's possession of it can be the possession of all. The technicity that makes possible the abstraction of information from its material substrate is not only calling into being something that can be captured by regimes of economic value or legal jurisdiction, but something that can escape them.

This brings us back to the hacker class. If there is a gift exchange that is alive and well among the people, will the producers of information as property side with that people, or with the vectoralist class? That is the question for our times. This is what is at stake in the struggle between the principle that "information wants to be free," and all that ideological talk about "incentives" versus "efficiencies" and other attempts to deny the radical ontological nature of information itself. The hacker class has a choice to make. Either it sides with the vectoralist class, or it realizes that intellectual property does not protect producers of information; it protects owners of information. And who – in the long run – comes to own information? Those who own the means of production, the means of realizing its value. The ideological move is to blur this distinction between producer and owner, when in reality

the hacker, like the worker or the farmer, has to sell the product of her labor to those who own the means of realizing its value.

As those of us from the antipodes know: commodification has always been global. "Globalization" is nothing new – except perhaps to those in the overdeveloped world who have started to feel the effects of it only lately, with the breakdown of the Fordist or corporatist state and its attendant Keynesian class compromise between capital and labor. But I think that the rise of the vectoralist class gives us a handle on the form that the globalization of the commodity form took in the late twentieth century.

It is the vectoralist class that produces the means of establishing a global division of labor. It develops the vectoral production process, where information is separated from its material embodiment, thus allowing the materiality of production to be spatially separated from the information that governs its form. And so we end up with a new global division of labor, in which the old capitalist firms of the overdeveloped world mutate into vectoralist firms by shedding their productive capacity. Manufacturing becomes the specialty of the underdeveloped world; the overdeveloped world manages the brands, husbands the patents, and enforces the copyrights. Unequal exchange is no longer between a capitalist economy in the North and a pastoralist economy in the South; it is between a vectoralist economy in the North and a capitalist economy in the South. But the vectoral goes one better: it scrambles the once relatively homogeneous economic spaces within various nation-states. One can find the underdeveloped world now in Mississippi, and the overdeveloped world in Bangalore.

This process is complex and contradictory. The paradox of our times is that both the privatization of information, and the expansion of an informal commons, are happening at the same time. What might give us hope is the very fragility of the vectoralist position, which runs counter to the ontological properties of information itself, and can only protect its interests by a massive ramping up of the level of legal coercion. Where land lends itself to "natural monopoly" and the extraction of rents, this gets harder and harder as property becomes more and more abstract. And now we arrive at the very brittle monopolies of the vectoral economy. The very means of producing and reproducing information that it creates are the forces of its own undoing.

There is an alternative model to both the absolute commodification of information and its piracy. (Piracy, after all, is merely the reversal of Proudhon's dictum "property is theft" – it makes theft property.) The alternative is the gift economy. As John Frow has argued, rather than the gift being a pure, ideal, and harmonious state existing prior to the commodity, it is the commodity's necessary double.⁸ But I think that the coming of the digital opens up a new possibility for the gift to distance itself from the commodity. What one can create, on the Internet, for example, is the abstract gift relation. If the traditional gift always involved a giver and a receiver who are known to each other, who obligate each other, the abstract gift involves no such particular obligation. When one gives information within the networks, the obligation one invokes is something common, not something particular. One invokes the gift as something abstract. This is the as yet unrealized potential of third nature.

This seems to me to point toward an ethics – a hacker ethics – and also a hacker politics. If critical theory is to resist becoming merely *hypocritical theory*, it has to engage with its own means of production and distribution. A hacker politics is one of participating in, and endeavoring to create, both technically and culturally, abstract gift relations, within which information can not only want to be free, but can become free.

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From Disco Marxism to Praxis (Object Oriented)

Delhi, India

From the outside it looked like Occupy Wall Street. There were tents and a free library. There were signs that said things like END WAR ON WORKERS. The curious part was that the police seemed to be protecting the occupation, rather than protecting property owners from the occupation. That's because it wasn't part of the OCCUPY social movement spreading like wildfire around the country at the time, seizing public space and opening "general assemblies" to practice some kind of popular politics. It was a set for the long-running TV show *Law and Order*, which was doing an "occupation" themed episode.

A case could be made that *Law and Order* is one of the few segments of prime-time television that actually deals in any way with American politics. While news has become mostly infotainment, and current affairs has pretty much ceased to exist, *Law and Order* actually broaches sensitive and topical material. This was not how the people who descended upon the set and tried to take it over saw things, however. "We made it so they could not exploit us and that is awesome," as one actual occupier put it.¹ Perhaps the producers of *Law and Order*, that bastion of the old broadcast media form, did not anticipate how effective social networking could be as a way of quickly mobilizing people without the kind of advance logistics involved in running a film shoot. At least a hundred real occupiers descended quickly on the set, and

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After Politics: To the Vector, the Spoils

New York, New York

Politics is always a matter of both images and vectors. For there to be politics, somebody needs to persuade someone else that a certain power is legitimate, that a certain course of action is in their interests, that a certain policy is just, or that a certain leader is worthy. But persuasion is not enough. Political actors and their actions require coordination. People need to be brought together to act in concert. Politics, in short, is always mediated in this double sense: image and vector. And so the question arises as to what effect changes in vectoral form – the rise of the Internet, for example – might have on the possibilities for political action. Some imagine the Internet changes everything, in politics as in everything else. Some, like Michael Walzer, are more skeptical.¹ Teasing out what does and doesn't change in politics when the media form changes turns out to be a subtle thing.

One way to understand the impact of the Internet is to compare it to the relation of previous vectoral regimes with politics. Modern politics takes place within three successive regimes. The first regime is the postal service and print. The second regime is telephony and broadcast (radio, then television). The third regime is the cellphone and the Internet. This is, of course, rather crude. Media and communication cannot be so neatly periodized. New media do not replace but rather displace old media. One could enter many other caveats. Nevertheless, certain tendencies are at work.

The vectoral can be broken down into two aspects: media and communication. Take the successive coordinating communication forms: post, telephone, cellphone. The speed increases, as does the “bandwidth.” More can be conveyed faster. But between the telephone and the cellphone is a significant break. Communication is no longer between fixed points but mobile points. Those points are no longer households but individuals. It no longer makes any sense to list a “home” phone and an “office” phone. The cellphone is both – and neither. It breaks down the distinction between public and private space. After cyberspace comes – let's call it – cellspace.²

Let's have a look now at media form rather than communication form. Here there is a different story. Between the print form and the broadcast form there is massive consolidation and centralization of senders, and a corresponding expansion of receivers, to cover pretty much the whole of the United States. This starts to break down, not with the Internet but with an intermediate form – cable television. Cable starts a segmentation of audiences that the Internet only accelerates. In this respect, it is a partial return to the kind of media form of the pre-broadcast era.

The distinction between media (newspaper, television) and communication (post, telephone) becomes less clear in the era of the Internet and the cellphone. Both have the flexible point-to-point routing of the post, but can also support the one-to-many communications characteristic of mass print or broadcast media. The means of motivating and of mobilizing are no longer quite so separate.

All else being equal, the spoils of political office will be in the hands of those best able to exploit the distinctive envelope of possibilities of a given media regime. This has always been the case. There is no politics prior to media or outside of communication. All that changes are the available strategies. It's true enough that these days it is hard to get elected if you don't look good on TV. In a previous era, it would have been impossible to get elected without looking good riding a horse. If looking good on TV were all there was to it, then John Edwards would have become the 42nd President of the United States.

Using the available media and communication forms to best effect is a mark of political genius. Franklin Roosevelt did not resort to the fireside chat via radio very often, but when he did he

showed a real understanding of the fact that radio was a domestic and household form.³ Where most politicians still used radio as if shouting to a crowded hall, FDR knew that to be on radio was to be a guest in people's homes. Reagan extended this sensibility to television. It sounds obvious, but try watching videos of Ted Kennedy shouting at you from the screen as if addressing a union hall, and try to resist the temptation to turn down the volume.

Howard Dean's campaign for the 2004 Democratic Presidential primary ran aground when a video circulated of him on stage letting rip with a seemingly psychopathic roar. Seen on the small screen, in close-up, he did look rather nutty. It was hard not to wince or chortle. But Dean was appearing before a large and noisy crowd at a public gathering. His gestures would not have seemed so crazy to people in that audience. The problem was in negotiating between the two terrains, the physically present and the mediated one.

Ronald Reagan had a personal genius for the television medium, honed through his years as pitchman for *Fortune* 500 giant General Electric.⁴ His public appearances were carefully calibrated to work also as mediated images. From Roosevelt, he took the model of the fireside chat and perfected it for the television era, appearing as a gracious guest in the living room rather than a shouting demagogue.

The Reagan era Republican Party possessed a quite different advantage in computerized direct-mail campaigning. It used the old media of the post to good effect by gathering detailed data on the habits of households and tailoring direct-mail campaigns accordingly. Got a subscription to *Guns and Ammo*? Here's a message from your friends at the NRA. It was the beginning of a sophisticated use of the database, borrowed from other forms of direct marketing.

It's possible that the relative success of the Democrats in 2008 was enabled at least in part by a canny use of the Internet and the cellphone. The Dems' Internet strategy dates to the Howard Dean campaign and its use of meetup.org to bring Democrats together socially, as a modest secular alternative to the ability of the Republicans to mobilize via the conservative churches.⁵ It is also well known that the 2008 Obama presidential campaign took care to harvest cellphone numbers at rallies, so that the cellphone could be used as a broadcast platform. While the Republican robocalls

languished unheard on obsolete landline answering machines, Democratic text messages prompted voters, wherever they happened to be on the day, to the polls.

Long before the electoral tide turned against the Republicans in 2008, the media tide turned. This would require a more subtle analysis – one that went beyond media form alone, to consider form in relation to rhetorical strategy. With Republican domination of talk radio and the ubiquity of Fox News, Democratic counter-media had to take a different tack. At the level of media form, the rise of the blogosphere is worth a mention. Of course there is a right-wing as well as a left-wing blogosphere. But where the right-wing blogs cannibalized existing media attention, the left-wing blogs filled a real vacuum, and in a way that Al Gore's *Current* cable network and *Air America* failed to do.

The key rhetorical move has to do with affect.⁶ Put simply, the right has a monopoly on angry derision. One can't compete with shockjock Rush Limbaugh and *Faux News* sockpuppets like Bill O'Reilly on that terrain. Ironic distance never quite worked as counter-affect, despite the best efforts of TV comedian Jon Stewart. Nor did parody, although one might plausibly date the endgame for the Bush junta to Stephen Colbert's scorcher of a roast at the 2006 White House Correspondent's Dinner. As Simon Critchley has pointed out, the rhetorical genius of the Obama campaign was to co-opt faith and color it with the affect of hope rather than anger.⁷ But for this strategy to work required a harnessing of new and old media that, while it has precedents in Dean's failed primary bid, was relatively new.

Part of it was a judicious filtering and enabling of more or less spontaneous propaganda efforts. The Shepard Fairey HOPE poster and will.i.am's "Yes we can" song and video are key examples. While not exactly "roots" media – both are by media professionals – they are not top-down productions blasted into people's awareness with strategic ad buys. Rather, they circulated laterally, via email, blogs, YouTube. Of the thousands of media productions, amateur and professional, official and unofficial, these were the ones that selected themselves at least in part via popular Internet filtering as iconic markers of the campaign.⁸

But good media are worthless without the means of communication to mobilize voters. This is where the cellphone and the Internet come into play. The Obama campaign was able to

mobilize secular people with secular means (if with spiritual affect). The cellphone, in particular, is worth examining in this context. The Internet is still something of a household or organization-bound device. It is as useful to the religious right as to anyone else. It is perhaps even more useful in households that are patriarchal in structure. But the cellphone is different. It is ideal for mobilizing young voters, or those whose identities are not defined by the authority of Church or household “fathers.”

Like many other industries, politics has replaced labor with capital where it is cheaper to do so. Digital era campaigning does away with the need for some of the local knowledge once carefully guarded by local political machines. The votes that carried Obama into the White House came from the exurbs, the edge cities, where the network of social organization is not dense and the megachurch looms as the only solution to this social deficit.⁹ You can blast these places with broadcast ads, but what probably had the most effect was the door-to-door get-out-the-vote effort, the logistics of which are best handled by the Internet and cellphone.

All this is expensive. Hence the significance of Howard Dean’s emphasis on the Internet as a fund-raising tool. It is still easier to raise money in big chunks from wealthy donors, but anything that reduces the cost of raising money in small amounts from a wide base is to be welcomed. It changes, if only slightly, the class composition of influence within the party. The Internet is the political weapon of choice of the educated, white-collar working class, not to mention the hacker class.

Every vector creates a space of possibilities for political action. Political actors discover these affordances by trial and error. The effects are often subtle and complicated. The media’s discourse about itself favors stories in which new media forms are always revolutionary, which prompts counter-narratives which conclude that there is nothing new under the sun. The real story is always more interesting.

After the election of President Obama in 2008, the rules of the game changed somewhat, and corporations found themselves free to spend unlimited sums of money without even necessarily declaring themselves. The courts took the view that since corporations are “people” too, they should not be limited in the amount of money they spend to speak their minds. “Freedom of speech” collapses back into market freedom.

Stephen Colbert highlighted how the new rules worked by forming his own “Superpac” to fund comic political ads, seemingly just for the hell of it. Political campaigning started to look more obviously like what it has long been anyway: a branch of marketing. Richard Nixon allegedly said that one campaigns in poetry and governs in prose. These days one campaigns in tweets and governs in status updates. Fox News turned the most television talent in the Republican Party into viewer-bait, amassing a giant cable audience to sell to its advertisers.¹⁰ Politics becomes a genre of the aesthetic economy, and one imbued with the interests of the class that rules it.

Hence one of the new Four Freedoms might be not freedom of speech, but freedom from speeches. Not that freedom of speech is a bad thing, but the complicated liberal discourse on the nuances of the term seems entirely bypassed by “conservative” jurists, for whom law has no meaning other than as the rules of the road for the circulation of capital at maximum velocity. The celebrated oratory of President Obama turned out to be just so many empty words. The speechifying that will be most heard is that which is most eloquently paid for.

Does politics still exist? Or does it go the way of all those other practices and artifacts of second nature? Open your laptop or turn on your computer and you will see a “desktop” with maybe some “files” on it, maybe a “trash can” down in the corner. Maybe your browser opens on a “face book” and maybe you will read “books” on it or watch a “film.” Yet none of these things actually exists. They are just dead skins for new creations, ways of making the vectoral seem familiar. Perhaps politics is another such dead skin. To the vector, the spoils.

overdeveloped world a few inches leftwards. Perhaps it can put back on the agenda the only worthy goal modernity ever had: the incremental overcoming of unnecessary suffering.

Even if it is defeated, and neo-fascism has its day, the best university is right now open around me. This one is, if not free, then taking donations in kind. The occupation is a living workshop in “communism,” but also in the gift economy of exchange. Every day, people buy stuff and convert it back into gifts to total strangers. Every day, people discover solidarity through camping together, cooking together, and picking up the trash. Every day, people take time out from their jobs or caring for their families just to be in an occupied space. All that is as valuable as the General Assembly.

Not a few will have an existential crisis there. In those moments when the cops are not there to confront, and there’s nothing to buy – what the hell is one supposed to do? What is one supposed to be? This is the source of the strange psychogeography of occupied space. These spaces are poorly equipped, shoddily built exemplars of something remarkable: that there could be other social relations, besides finance, security, and the commodity. And that if any of this stuff is remotely scalable, then why do we even need this ruling class at all?

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Last Words and Key Words

If there is a story that sums up what this book is all about, it is this one: “We’re not quite sure what happened yet,” claimed General Robert Kehler of the US Strategic Command. What was certain was that a computer virus infected the remote “cockpits” at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, which control pilotless drone aircraft all over the world. Kehler said the virus had entered “from the wild,” meaning it was not specifically targeted at the Creech Base installation.

A defense official told the media that the virus was a credential stealer “routinely used to steal login and password data from people who gamble or play games like *Mafia Wars* online.”¹ While it is possible the infection happened through the use of hard drives that were infected elsewhere and then connected to the cockpit computers, this does not entirely rule out the possibility that pilots charged with flying armed drones play *Mafia Wars* in their down time on their “office” computers – just like everybody else who has to do drone-like labor in cubicle farms around the planet.

In this story three uses of the vector come together. First, the vector as means of deploying force at a distance – the pilotless drone. Second, the vector as space for creative reappropriation – the virus. Third, the vector as space for games as means to soak up excess boredom – *Mafia Wars*.

All three aspects of the vector appear here in less than ideal forms. There is something sinister about pilotless drones, that new

symbol of power which projects itself without risking itself. This kind of killing makes a mafia "hit" look like a sacred act by comparison. *Mafia Wars* is a casual game, successful but banal to anyone with an interest in the aesthetics of games. The virus is a routine hack, neither creative nor aimed at anything of worth besides stealing logins, no doubt to be used to set up zombie server farms to send out spam or something even less interesting.

Still, the coincidence of these three aspects of the vectoral gives pause for thought, as it is not a bad emblem of the shape of an emerging world. Like any new world, this one confronts us with the problem of description. Its contours and forms are not quite what we are familiar with. It appears as either radically other or is all too quickly assimilated to the familiar. What seems other can really just be a shade of difference; what seems familiar can actually be very, very strange. The event more often than not reveals mistakes of both kinds.

One way of proceeding then is to work on language, on making language itself both strange and familiar in new ways, trying to fit the contours of the strange and familiar within language to the contours of the strange and familiar in the world observed in the wake of weird global media events, be they big or small. What follows here, by way of a conclusion, is a summary of the language created over the course of *Telesthesia*. William Blake preferred to create his own "system" to being enslaved by someone else's. In the same spirit I don't advocate adopting these terms, but rather the creation of new ones, when and where they appear to describe this impending world.

Abstraction: The plane upon which concrete particulars can be arrayed in relation to each other. Language is an abstraction; phonemes are concrete. A road or rail or flight-path infrastructure is an abstraction. The vehicles and their paths are concrete. The telegraph is an abstraction; so too is the Internet. Abstractions are not concepts or ideas. They are real. They are more real than the concrete, as they are the condition under which concrete particulars can be related to each other.

Addressable: The locating of a place or a thing or information so that it can be reliably retrieved from that location, or so that something can be sent to that location. The postal system is based on making physical space addressable. So too does global

positioning. Computers have memories that are addressable. Chunks of information can be stored and retrieved even though they do not necessarily occupy a particular physical address.

Aesthetic economy: A materialist analysis of the power of perceptions and the perceptions of power. It understands both economic and cultural matters through the same lens: namely, the material form of their relations and the forms of property imposed upon them.

Antipodality: The experience of being neither here nor there. An antipode is the other foot. It presupposed a pair of poles and a relation between them. Antipodality is the tendency for this relation between poles to become unanchored from particular places and to become a general condition. Australia and New Zealand are the antipodes in relation to Britain as the metropole, but antipodality can come into being between any two points, even points that are in motion, provided there is a means to make a relation between them.

Cellspace: Mobile telephony makes cellspace perceivable as an abstract terrain of addressable nodes, both in physical space and computer space, in which data and commands can be routed in principle between any addressable spaces. Its advance on cyberspace is that its physical nodes become almost as freely addressable as its computer space. Its nodes can be fully mobile, so long as the network of cells which manage data flow and current physical address don't fail. Cellspace, incidentally, records the telemetry of mobile bodies equipped with transmitting devices. It thus greatly expands the available data on the state and location of objects or subjects, further incorporating them in game space.

Cyberspace: The Internet makes cyberspace perceivable as an abstract terrain of addressable spaces, both in physical space and computer memory, in which data and commands can be routed in principle between any addressable spaces.

Gamer: A kind of interface that perceives its relation to others as one of rivalry based on a measurable score, and which treats its relation to its environment as a challenge in which its success or failure is measurable.

Game space: The making over of the world as a field in which any and every relation can yield a value in a game, with no remainder. A world in which there is nothing outside the playing of

games. Game space divides into commodity-space, strategy-space and other such games. The playing field for these tends to encompass the planet.

The Girl: A kind of interface through which the world is perceived as a domestic sphere subject to the authority of beauty. The Girl is a kind of living money that validates the commodity as the repository of what desire desires.

Hacker: A kind of interface that perceives its relation to others as a qualitative rivalry, based on the creation of incommensurable values. Hackers create the new, and in that sense they are a key interface to modernity. They arise in their fully realized form, however, with the expansion of intellectual property laws to cover the whole of creation. While associated with computers, hacking can pertain to any field.

Hacker class: Classes are created by relations of private property, which cleave those who have it from those who don't. The evolution of the property form into "intellectual" property creates new class relations, cleaving the hacker class from the vectoral class.

Hypocritical theory: When it loses its vocation as critical thought in and against the commodity form, critical theory becomes hypocritical theory. It no longer works on the non-identity between what it says and what it does.

Interface: This is the portal between the human and the inhuman. It can make the inhuman world legible to the human (thus calling into being an experience of the human as human). Interfaces can either enable the agency of the human in the inhuman, or vice versa.

Low theory: As opposed to High Theory, low theory does not necessarily play the game of quantifiable recognition within the academy. It experiments instead with the creation of new relations between practices and modes of communication. It may pass through the worlds of scholarship, journalism, politics, aesthetics, and literature, but it is not bound by the rules of any of these. It makes up its own.

Military-entertainment complex: A way of describing a kind of power in which the vector is used to secure both resources and desires. It relies on the same (vectoral) technologies to exert power across space and time through the management of information about that space.

Postcolonial: A spatial figure or trope that poses the question of the relation of the metropolitan powers to their peripheries. First registered as a rejection or reversal of the privileging of the metropole, it also opens up toward a more general questioning of the apparent spatial discreteness of metropole and periphery.

Postmodern: A temporal figure or trope that poses the question of the historical trajectory of the modern. First registered as skepticism about the modern, it also opens up the possibility of rethinking its temporal sequences and periods.

Overdeveloped world: Rather than developed and underdeveloped, here the concept of (economic, social) development is turned against itself, and the so-called developed world displaced as the standard. It is a way of reading the postcolonial critique back into narratives of historical stages. It sparks the thought that perhaps the West missed a certain historical juncture where a qualitative break into another way of life may have been possible.

Telesthesia: Perception at a distance, as in the telescope, telegraph, telephone, television, or telecommunications in general. Its key quality is to bring what is distant near, and make what is distant a site of action. It is a property of a class of vectors that have the quality of making information move faster than people or things, thus opening up the terrain of third nature as a terrain of command and control, and eventually of a game space.

Third nature: The collective struggle to wrest freedom from necessity produces a second nature, in which everyday life can take place in a world more concordant with its needs. But the process of producing second nature produces yet more necessities. Third nature is the attempt to overcome the limits of second nature by enclosing it within a layer not of built forms but of media and communications. Nature itself is only ever perceived as a residue, as that from which second and third nature extract themselves.

Transopticon: If the Panopticon imbues its subjects with a sense of being perceived by a central authority or Big Brother, the transopticon distributes that perception throughout space. It is the sense also that perceptions from different points of view can be composited regardless of their heterogeneous quality.

Vector: One definition of a vector is a line of fixed length but no fixed position. By extension, vector can be thought of as any material form a relation can take which has certain definable

qualities but which has no fixed position. For example, roads or telegraph lines have certain properties irrespective of their location. A telegraph line transmits only information, while vehicles traveling on roads can move people, commodities, weapons, or information. The vector is also indifferent to the qualities or meaning of what it transmits.

Vectoral class: A class that secures its power as intellectual property and as control of the information vector. It may be conceived either as a fraction of the ruling class or, more provocatively, as a new ruling class entirely. It has two fractions: one uses the vector to dominate the movement of commodities; the other the movement of resources. Or, in short, both fractions use third nature to control second nature and nature, respectively, through the games of commodity-space and strategy-space.

Vulture industry: The culture industries mass-produced culture as a commodity, thus imbuing culture itself with the very form of the commodity. But at least the culture industry went to the trouble of making something to be consumed. The vulture industries retreat from making culture to controlling the vector of its distribution and extracting a rent from its use. The rise of the vulture industries is in part a tactical acknowledgment that culture has been partly resocialized by digital sharing. But it is in part also a new attack on the common cultural realm.

Weird global media event: Something of significance that appears to happen in a particular place, but which actually takes place along the vectors which connect that place to a world. The world called into being by the event is not global in the sense of universal, but rather it invokes *a* world. Its weirdness stems from some unexpected novelty in where and how it happens.

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- 4 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, London: Verso, 1988, p. 33.
- 5 “Help Children in Africa,” *Mail Online*, July 10, 2010; at: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk>>; “Supermodel Vows to Stay Naked . . .,” September 8, 2009; at: <<http://www.aidwatchers.com>>.
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- 13 Pierre Klossowski, *Le monnaie vivante*, Paris: Rivages, 1997.
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- 6 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011.

- 7 Raoul Vaneigem, "Basica Banalities," in Ken Knabb (ed.), *The Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2005. Graeber acknowledges the influence of Vaneigem, glancingly, and only in a footnote. He quite rightly avoids being entangled in the pro-situ world as much as he resists the Marxological one.
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- 17 See René Riesel, "Preliminaries on Councils and Councilist Organization," in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, pp. 348–62. The workers' council tradition pre-dates the Situationists, of course. See Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2002.
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