

Luddism Begins at Home

Random Meditations on Overcoming the Media Trance

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Tragedy of the Sixties: If you turn on and tune in—such heavily technophilic metaphors!—you can't really hope to drop out of the technocracy. Too bad turn off, tune out, and secede isn't nearly so snappy a slogan.

Car ads make great play with our unconscious realization that we need cars to get away to some place where there are no cars. To escape. The "freedom" of the American automobilist is a freedom from community, from place, from the human. It accomplishes all this, as Virilio might say, by its speed, which alienates (or "liberates") the human from organic connection to space. The car causes pollution, death and disease; it demands paved highways and parking lots. It transforms nature into a tourist destination. It "makes" constant omnipresent noise, global warming and aesthetic blight—to name a few "side effects." But the car produces social breakdown. This is what people buy their SUV's for. There is the hidden hook in all car ads.

TV causes stupidity, obesity, anomie, boredom, cultural despair, suicidal depression and so on. But TV produces social breakdown as its true content, its "message" (as McLuhan said). Alienation is its true value. The personal computer as glorified TV causes the same range of side effects as other electronic media (with a few new ones like carpal tunnel syndrome) but it actually produces far more. Marrying CommTech to media produced a malign synergy as both offspring and goal in one box: total absorption of attention, of attentiveness, in machinic representation. This is a high point for technocracy: its triumph over hearts and minds as well as bodies.

As for the newest new tech, genetic engineering, it may cause Frankenfoods, hideous mutations, new diseases, and so on. But these "inadvertencies" or failures seem far less threatening than the fated successes of the technology, which will produce the privatization and capitalization of nature, the reduction of life itself (including sexuality) to money. In the future, you'll pay not only for your water and air but even for your body.

Living without modern conveniences can be much more pleasurable and much easier than most readers (even radical readers) might imagine. Capital has most of us spooked into believing on deep pre-rational levels that without Civilization we'd all be dead (or worse) within days. We must be helpless, otherwise we wouldn't buy their false security. We must be taught to associate the organic with death, otherwise we might be tempted to refuse the representation of the machinic as life.

Luddism proposes not martyrdom, but pleasure. Appropriate tech must be by definition sensuous and sensual. Science liberated from Capital would serve Fourier's ideal of Luxe, of pleasure undreamed by the dull customers of mere Civilization.

We need a systematic way to wake up from the trance-state induced by the very Mesopotamian notion that only the slaves of the powerful are safe from the dangers of nature and the anxieties of a too-perfect freedom.

Some friends of mine watch hours of TV daily on the premise that one needs to know what THEY are cooking up. But in truth, one or two little adverts, seen accidentally every year or so, suffice to unfold the entire plan with perfect clarity.

A letter to the Editor in my local paper quite seriously proposed the idea that "children are 'learning machines'." In computer jargon, I believe a learning machine is a kind of dull "artificial intelligence," not up to Sci-Fi standards:

no desire, no humor, no imagination, and, in fact, no intelligence. Nevertheless, we know the universe is like a computer, the universe IS a computer. The brain is a computer, and some day, computers will be brains. Since people are computers they can be treated as learning machines: turned on, tuned in, plugged in, jacked in, downloaded, and virtualized. The rogue educator John Gatto once said that if anyone ever called his children “human resources” he’d go after that person with a baseball bat. But...“learning machines?”

Of course, technology shapes unconsciousness as much as (un)consciousness shapes technology. “It’s a question of who’s to be master,” as Humpty Dumpty put it. I believe it was Arthur C. Clarke who said that any technology one cannot understand appears to the unconscious as magic.

We adopt a supinely passive position toward our tech, our Second Nature: the very water in our fishbowl, the tech-world that envelopes and cocoons us. We feel—and rightly—that we have no influence over this world. “Primitive” people worshipped the world they couldn’t understand (storms, animals, fertility, etc.), and we technohumans worship the world we cannot understand, bowing to idols of scale and efficiency, speed and molecularity, cost and price “mechanisms,” techno-war and genetic imperialism.

The next big command metaphor will be derived from genetic theory and engineering. DNA is a life machine, the mechanism of life itself. It can be repaired and improved. It can be commodified and sold. In fact, the Human Genome Project, which presented itself as pure humanitarian research, was driven from the start by visions of trillions. Eugenics failed because its science was faulty, its tech ineffective. Genetic engineering is based on “good” hard science, and GenTech will work.

Its successes are more to be feared than its failures. Its goal is to create a “race” of eugenic wealthians, gentes of the Imperium who can afford tall blond high-I.Q. learning machines devoid of all taint. Tech will move on from the power to shape and control mere consciousness to metamorphic control over the whole body and the essence of life itself: from the image of life to life as pure image. No wonder Debord committed suicide—even though suicide is just another machine.

Monsanto has decided that “natural” is a market niche, an upscale consumer market, small but lucrative—not a “revolution” to be feared, but merely a “lifestyle option” to be monopolized. The new flexible outsourced downsized corporate matrix can easily supply all sorts of niches. We’ve passed beyond the era of One Size Fits All, or Any Color So Long As It’s Black. Out of 600 or 6000 channels, at least, one can be safely devoted to Greens. After all, Greens spend money too, maybe even lots of money.

If Property Is Theft, Technology Is Murder

The automobile, for example, is not accidentally murderous but inherently murderous. It kills not just by “accidents” but by its very existence, first as a source of pollution, but even more fundamentally as source of social atomization and the loss of nature. Speed itself, as Virilio says, constitutes a pollution of both space and time. Replacing gasoline with electricity or methane or tapwater will have no effect on these “invisible” forms of murder.

After all, one needs one’s car. One can always plaster its bumper with Green slogans. “I’d Rather Be Fishing”...but somehow I’m not. Some day my Prince Kropotkin will come. But till then I need my cellphone.

Thus, bit by bit all culture becomes a form of mourning.

Since Luddism can’t really be practiced alone, the whole question of praxis becomes vexed beyond measure. Overcoming Media Trance may be seen as a kind of spiritual practice, open to the individual—but to discover and live with a technology that is not “hurtful to the commonalty” there must first exist a commons. Machine-smashing can begin at home, but society can only be changed in a Luddite way by machine-smashing on a social scale. Otherwise...nothing.

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