THE NEW FLESH. A MARCUSEAN DIALECTIC OF EROS AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

La nueva carne. Una dialéctica marcusiana entre Eros y tecnología en la era digital

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we offer a critical theory of the internet grounded in Marcuse's dialectical theory of technology, starting from what we contend to be the fundamental and indispensable core of his thinking: the dialectic between eros and technological rationality. We proceed below in three parts: First, we critically reconstruct Marcuse's dialectic of eros and technological rationality to set the stage for our discussion of the internet. Second, we use Marcuse's distinction between technology and technics to interrogate the internet as a material reflection of the social process out of which it emerged. Under conditions of advanced industrial civilization, it is not surprising that the internet appears as a material reflection of technological rationality. In the final section, we seek to answer the questions raised by the preceding sections: If the internet frustrates our need for erotic connection, rendering desire one-dimensional, would an erotic technology of liberation include the internet? If so, would that internet look anything like what it does now?

Key words: Marcuse, Eros, Technology, Technics, Internet.

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RESUMEN

En este artículo ofrecemos una teoría crítica de Internet basada en la teoría dialéctica de la tecnología de Marcuse, partiendo de lo que sostenemos es el núcleo fundamental e indispensable de su pensamiento: la dialéctica entre Eros y la racionalidad tecnológica. El texto se desarrolla en tres partes: en primer lugar, reconstruimos críticamente la dialéctica marcusiana entre Eros y la racionalidad tecnológica para preparar el terreno de nuestra discusión sobre Internet. En segundo lugar, empleamos la distinción de Marcuse entre tecnología y técnica para interrogar Internet como una reflexión material del proceso social del que surgió. Bajo las condiciones de la civilización industrial avanzada, no resulta sorprendente que Internet aparezca como una manifestación material de la racionalidad tecnológica. En la sección final buscamos responder las preguntas planteadas en los apartados anteriores: si Internet frustra nuestra necesidad de conexión erótica, volviendo unidimensional el deseo, ¿podría una tecnología erótica de la liberación incluir a Internet? Y, de ser así, ¿se parecería en algo al Internet que conocemos hoy?

Palabras clave: Marcuse, eros, tecnología, técnica, internet.

"Perhaps technology is a wound that can only be healed by the weapons that caused it: not the destruction of technology but its re-construction for the reconciliation of nature and society"

(Marcuse, [1979] 2011: 224)

"To do that you have to go on to the next phase… your body has already done a lot of changing, but that's only the beginning. *The beginning of the new flesh. You have to go all the way now. Total transformation… to become the new flesh, you first have to kill the old flesh. Don't be afraid, don't be afraid to let your body die."*

(Cronenberg, 1983)

INTRODUCTION

As early as 1941, Herbert Marcuse articulated the dialectical tension inherent in technology: "technics by itself can promote authoritarianism as well as liberty, scarcity as well as abundance, the extension as well as the abolition of toil" ([1941] 1998: 41). Put differently, technology's possibilities were not exhausted by its misuse, and a qualitatively different form of technology would accompany (or, perhaps, play some part in bringing about) a society free from toil.

And yet, one particular invention stood out to Marcuse as embodying the most worrying tendencies of the intertwinement between technology and reason: the

computer. He explains, "The formal rationality of capitalism celebrates its triumph in electronic computers, which calculate everything, no matter what the purpose, and which are put to use as mighty instruments of political manipulation, reliably calculating the chances of profit and loss, including the chance of the annihilation of the whole, with the consent of the likewise calculated and obedient population" (1965: 224–225). Technological rationality, which Marcuse's well-known *One-Dimensional Man* foregrounds as the form of thought that reifies, objectifies, and ultimately collapses the dialectical thought critical to achieving a liberated existence, seemed to have been concretized within this unassuming machine. To this day, despite the fact that "his" computers and "our" computers are separated by the technological equivalent of geological time scales, Marcuse's suspicions were well founded.

The modern-day tension between technology in the form of the computer and freedom is even more acute on account of a particular innovation that has, as some argue, been so world-changing as to usher in a new form of capitalism: the internet. Advertised as an expanded public sphere through which democracy and commerce might flourish, the internet's material past and present are intentionally obscured by a technological tendency Marcuse already identified in the mid-60's: "the tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the facade of objective rationality. Hatred and frustration are deprived of their specific target, and the *technological veil* conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement" (1964: 32). While material contradictions remain largely hidden, myriad social tensions and contradictions arise and heighten: at precisely the same time that the internet cultivates a desire for sociality and promises the fulfilment of that desire, it undercuts the conditions for its possibility. In general terms, this contradiction is visible in the superficially paradoxical correlation between the near ubiquity of internet and social media use amongst generations that simultaneously report feelings of loneliness at an all-time high. Studies by Harvard University (Weissbourd et al. 2021) and Columbia University (Crowe et al. 2024) both find that somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of young people in the United States report feeling lonely, while the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Japan have all formed governmental ministries specifically tasked with remediating the "loneliness epidemic." The contradiction between the internet's promise of the social and its alienating reality has undoubtedly tragic consequences: just last year one young man became so romantically attached to an artificial intelligence companion that he committed suicide after the AI bot encouraged him to "come home to me as soon as possible, my love" (Duffy 2024). Thus our desire for intimate, non-reified sociality – what Marcuse described as an *erotic* relation to one another – is continually teased and thwarted online.

What's more, the heightening tensions contained within the contradiction between what the internet promises and how it frustrates those desires result in deeply worrying authoritarian tendencies. Technological hyperconnectivity obliterates

solitude, which Marcuse described as "the very condition which sustained the individual against and beyond his society" (1964: 71), while at the same time generating and stoking the kind of unhappiness that "lends itself easily to political mobilization; without room for conscious development, it may become the instinctual reservoir for a new fascist way of life and death" (1964: 76). Incel violence, Q-anon conspiracy theories, and a world-wide uptick in far right online mobilizing all lend credence to Marcuse's insights more than half a century ago. In these ways the internet, emblematic of the technological rationality Marcuse associated so closely with the computer, represents not only a material development in capitalism but also a distinct threat to our psychological, political, and social existence.

Numerous other contemporary scholars have taken up the task of applying Frankfurt School-inspired critical theory to the internet – among them Andrew Feenberg (2008, 2017), Christian Fuchs (2016), Jodi Dean (2003), Jonathan Crary (2022), Steve Garlick (2011), Bruna Della Torre (2024), and more – with many departing from Marcuse's well known dialectical disposition towards technology as a social process. However, in this article we begin our dialectical critique of the internet in a different place by asking: What would it mean to offer a critical theory of the internet that begins with Marcuse's critical theory of sensuous experience? If the internet frustrates our desire for the erotic and robs it of its dialectical potential (or, in other words, makes it one-dimensional), does a technology of erotic liberation even include the internet? And if it did, would that internet look anything like what it does now?

In order to think through these questions, in this article we proceed in three broad sections. First, we reconstruct Marcuse's dialectic of eros and technological rationality in order to recenter the erotic in Marcuse's thinking. While he does write in detail about the liberatory possibilities of technology, we argue that such potentiality is mediated by its relationship to eros. As Marcuse explains in his *Essay on Liberation,* liberation is a process of unleashing our erotic desires in order to cultivate an aesthetic ethos which could dialectically counter the one-dimensionality of technological rationality. Second, we examine the relationship of technology to Marcuse's dialectic of eros and technological rationality. Here we look to Marcuse's influential "Some Implications of Modern Technology" (1941) to distinguish between *technology* as a social process and *technics* as specific deployments of technology. Interrogating the internet as a technic with determinate historical and material context rather than as an ahistorical abstractly dialectical "technology" makes it possible to uncover its intimate relationship to technological rationality *despite* its claims to fulfill our need for erotic connection. On these grounds, we argue that technology's role in either aiding or hindering liberation is contingent upon whether the technics that arise out of it truly embody eros, or merely claim to do so while entrenching the capitalist social process already in thrall to technological rationality. This analysis illuminates the relationship between the exploitation of the erotic

and the material social processes that rely on it. Finally, we offer a sketch of what it would mean for the internet to be truly erotic. This sublated form of the internet would take a significantly different form than the one we have now, both in terms of its material reality (e.g. who owns it, how we are commodified on it, and so on) as well as in what it promises (e.g. that it seeks not to be a replacement for sociality or a public sphere, but a tool to help us achieve these things in the corporeal world). This transformation, of course, could only arise out of a radically different social process – one which had moved beyond the fetishization of technological rationality and toward the realization of the erotic.

1 EROS AND TECHNOLOGY

Fully understanding Marcuse's critical theory of technology is impossible without situating it within the fundamental dialectic between technological rationality and eros in his writing. To wrest it out of this context would result in the relatively banal insight that technology either *could* be good or *could* be bad, but would do nothing in the way of describing how technology takes the form that it does, how it reproduces various tendencies both materially and psychologically, and how this process can reinforce an already-oppressive social process. Here, we set the philosophical mise-en-scène necessary to think with Marcuse on technology, the computer, and the internet.

Broadly, Marcuse, alongside his Frankfurt School colleagues, was engaged in the project of attempting to understand why reason had come to facilitate so much violence and domination in modernity despite its liberatory Enlightenment pretensions. On his view, reason plays a seemingly paradoxical role in the story: the modern technical progress heralded as the pinnacle of reason was also the mechanism of a patently irrational proto-fascistic capitalist liberalism. Worse still, modern reason's Janus-faced manifestation made appealing to "reason" in order to critique advanced industrial society all but illegible. Only in this context could Marcuse write in *One-Dimensional Man* that "it is a rational universe which, by the mere weight and capabilities of its apparatus, blocks all escape" (1964: 71).

To think through the "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom" (1964:1) that prevailed in advanced industrial societies, Marcuse followed his colleagues Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer by arguing that the modern condition is the consequence of two tendencies in Enlightenment reason, dialectically intertwined and in tension with one another. The first is the tendency to understand the world in ways that make it survivable, a form of reason that Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* emerged out of Western subjectivity's need to preserve itself against a hostile and dangerous nature. This form of reason proceeds by objectifying nature in ways that render it manipulable, thereby establishing a distinction between the perceiving subject and natural "objects" fit for

exploitation. For Adorno and Horkheimer this form of thinking, which they term *instrumental reason*, finds its full expression in Enlightenment thinkers like Francis Bacon, who claimed that the "'happy match' between human understanding and the nature of things that he envisaged is a patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature" (2002:2). Crucially, this scientistic, calculative instrumental reason is indispensable for technical and capitalist progress, while at the same time exceedingly dangerous: it cannot distinguish between "nature" and "humanity" (because humanity already *is* nature) and therefore all too easily facilitates the destruction of humans in the name of self-preservation, be it the scientific expertise required to build the atom bomb or the objectifying precision necessary to exterminate the Jews during the Holocaust.

Marcuse moved beyond Adorno and Horkheimer by historicizing instrumental reason. Rather than writing about an abstract capacity of reason spanning back some two millennia, Marcuse situates instrumental reason within the scientific and technological context of twentieth-century industrial society. Because of this, Marcuse opts for the language of technological rationality, as it is the historically specific form that instrumental rationality takes under modern capitalism (Simpson 2024: 141). Beyond affirming Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that this form of reason objectifies nature in order to exploit it, Marcuse contends that in modern industrial societies organized by technological rationality, science and technology appear as ends in themselves under the guise of Enlightenment goals such as efficiency and value-neutral objectivity. Under these conditions, exchange and production become the unquestionable foundation of the social process which obscures their role as instruments of class domination. The fundamental contradiction between Enlightenment reason's promises and the exploitative facsimiles it facilitates is rendered invisible by the unquestioned omnipresence of technological rationality: what Marcuse famously calls one-dimensional thought.

Against this objectifying, dominating, and stultifying tendency of reason, the Frankfurt School thinkers identified a second form of reason, intertwined with the first: dialectical thought. This form of reason is capable of self-critique; it interrogates the instrumental, scientific, and technological tendencies of reason and in doing so makes possible ethical and liberatory action. Unfortunately, however, though reason as such contains both the violently self-preserving and consciously self-critical aspects, in modernity the former tendency proliferated and all but suffocated the latter. For this reason, critical theory's task is to make dialectical thinking possible again. For Adorno and Horkheimer, doing so would require recovering "a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination" (2002: xviii). What this meant, however, is cryptic; at times they indicated that an early form of mimetic thinking since lost to modernity might serve as a starting point, but for the most part spent their time defending the mere possibility of thinking in the face of unreflective action. As Adorno famously put it in a radio

address near the end of his life: "When the doors are barricaded, it is doubly important that thought not be interrupted. It is rather the task of thought to analyse the reasons behind this situation and to draw the consequences from these reasons… If there is any chance of changing the situation, it is only through undiminished insight" (1991: 200-201).

Marcuse, on the other hand, was much less coy about theorizing what dialectical reason might look like. Rather than reach back to some forgotten form of mimetic reason, Marcuse chose instead to think of dialectical reason as an *expansion* of the reason that had been narrowed down to nothing more than technological rationality. Transcending the Enlightenment division between reason and sensuous experience, Marcuse turned to Freudian categories in order to describe the sublation of reason. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse defines the reality principle of modern industrial society as a "performance principle," in which subjectivity is shaped by rationalized domination in service of capitalist exploitation. What is needed, however, is a *new* reality principle in which none other than eros would rescue reason from its modern rationalized form. Marcuse writes, "Eros redefines reason in his own terms. Reasonable is what sustains the order of gratification… Repressive reason gives way to a new *rationality of gratification* in which reason and happiness converge" (1966: 224). Thus, a new reality principle shaped by eros would transform our current form of life – structured by technological rationality and one-dimensional thought – into a world organized around our biological need for an erotic relationship to ourselves, our peers, and nature. Marcuse explains in his widely-read *An Essay on Liberation*: "new relationships would be the result of a 'biological' *solidarity* in work and purpose, expressive of a true harmony between social and individual needs and goals, between recognized necessity and free development – the exact opposite of the administered and enforced harmony organized in the advanced capitalist (and socialist?) countries" (1971: 88). In this way, expanding reason beyond its suffocating Enlightenment form to include the erotic undermines the reifying, violent tendencies of reason. The objectification of nature, fetishization of capitalist efficiency, and supremacy of "neutral" instrumental reason over ethical claims give way to a new form of reason that dissolves the illusory duality between scientific progress and erotic solidarity.

Marcuse, of course, is ever the good dialectician: in sublimating reason, he does not dispense with science and technology as a whole despite their centrality to the totally administered society shaped by technological reason. Instead, he writes: "Freedom indeed depends largely on technical progress, on the advancement of science. But this fact easily obscures the essential precondition: in order to become vehicles of freedom, science and technology would have to change their present direction and goals; they would have to be reconstructed in accord with a new sensibility – the demands of the life instincts" (1971: 19). In this way, science and technology very much have a role to play in a liberated society, and may even be

crucial to realizing that liberation. However, we emphasize here that Marcuse's dialectic of technology hinges entirely on that technology's relationship to both technological reason and eros: it is not that specific technological innovations *as such* contain dialectical potential, but rather whether those inventions are reflections of latent dialectical tensions and liberatory potentialities inherent in the the social process out of which they emerged. In this context, gas chambers and heat-seeking predator drones are not imbued with dialectical possibility; they are instead reflections of a social process shaped by technological reason and an abject disregard for life.

This analysis, then, poses an issue for the computer: if the computer is indeed the concretization of the "formal rationality of capitalism" (1965: 224–225), as Marcuse argued, *could* it have the potential to bring about an erotic world? His writing seemed to indicate that the computer was most obviously a reflection of the social process that birthed it, its liberatory potential foreclosed by a fully rationalized social process. The question only becomes more acute with the advent of the internet. Though he was not present to see the proliferation of the internet, its intrusion into every second of our day and each of our once-private intimacies, Marcuse gives us the categories with which to form a critical theory of the internet – one that begins with its relation to our biological need for solidarity, and properly interrogates technology within the historical, material, and ontological context out of which it emerges. In the next section, we use this starting point to talk about how the internet exploits the promise of the erotic while further entrenching precisely the technological rationality Marcuse decried.

2 TECHNICS AND THE TORTURE OF DESIRE

Once heralded as a new frontier of decentralization and global citizenship in the early aughts, the internet itself has become a site for a cruel dialectic to intensify wherein the promise of erotic solidarity is teased, commodified, manipulated, and ultimately frustrated. Marcuse seemed to be predicting the internet of today when he described the computer as a crowning "triumph" of capitalism: another machine that "…institute[s] new, more effective and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion…" (1941: 7). How, then, did our envisaged digital agora for "global citizenship" come to both stoke and deny our desire for erotic connection?

Here, we rely on an insight yielded by Marcuse's historical account of technological rationality: the fundamental distinction between *technology* as a social process, and *technics* as specific materially-embedded deployments of technology. After excavating and explicating this theoretical distinction, we analyze the internet as a technic – or in other words, in its historical, material, and conceptual context – to uncover how the illusion of a digital *tabula rasa* was already compromised by its inherited logics of enlightenment rationality, long before the internet's near-

ubiquitous presence. This groundwork, we argue, enables Marcuse's sensuous framework both to illuminate the internet as the consummation of technological rationality, and to articulate the conditions under which a truly erotic, liberatory technic might emerge.

Marcuse outlines the distinction between "technology" as a social process and "technics" as specific deployments of technology most clearly in his 1941 article "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology". Rather than seeing technology wholly as mere *instrumentum*, Marcuse understands technology to be a "…mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize the machine age," as well as "a mode of organization and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships." (1941: 138-139). This theoretical move was a departure from the phenomenology of technology that preceded it, which interrogated technology as *tabula rasae* or mere neutral human inventions with no context of consequence beyond their appearance. This tendency eschews the formative historical and material context under which myriad technologies develop, alongside their use cases. Categorically broadening our notion of technology as inescapably social yet processual allows for inquiries into the nature of technology as a dialectical vehicle of change. In other words, Marcuse identified a problematic and unreflective tendency in the appraisals of technology that preceded his: they took technology as "given". By incorporating material and historical context, Marcuse's conception of technology critiques and displaces other ostensibly 'neutral' appraisals of technology. At the same time, Marcuse's framework critiques the technological rationality latent in vacuous, vague, and ahistorical accounts of "technology" as a vehicle for the oppressive logics of "objectivity" and "neutrality" that arise from enlightenment rationality. Only then could Marcuse displace these ahistorical accounts with a generative, self-reflexive notion of technology as a dialectical social process situated in its specific historical, material, and social contexts.

How, then, are *technics* situated within Marcuse's historicized notion of technology? For Marcuse, technics are "the technical apparatus of industry, transportation, [and] communication…" (1941: 138). That is, technics are the concrete manifestations of technological development: the tools, machines, and infrastructures through which historicized reason is expressed and enacted. Their meaning and social function are not intrinsic, but contingent upon the historical and material context in which they are deployed. For example, the telegram and the television are both technics, but they embody different manifestations of technological rationality because they emerged from distinct social processes that have unique material and conceptual circumstances. The telegram, finding popular use in the industrial era, facilitated a linear utilitarian communication; often in service of state and commercial coordination. Television, by contrast, developed within a neoliberal consumer capitalist framework; in service of mass entertainment and passive spectatorship. For Marcuse, technics do not possess *inherent* emancipatory or authoritari-

an content; they reflect the social rationality that animates their development and deployment. Therefore, a Marcusean approach to theorizing the internet would not start with its idealistic and ideological promises of consumerist bliss and infinitely democratic communication. It would start instead with a material history of the internet, one in which the internet is treated as a technic with a specific historical context, which we sketch here.

The early internet emerged from state-sponsored research and Cold War defense strategies, most notably through the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), a project of the United States Department of Defense (DoD) designed in the late 1960s as a decentralized communication network. Initially connecting a small number of research institutions working on military contracts, ARPANET laid the technical foundations for the contemporary internet. Far from a neutral arbiter of human potentiality, from its inception, ARPANET was shaped by power struggles between military command and academic use, the consolidation of state power and decentralized governance, public research and corporate privatization.

The DOD's interest in ARPANET was driven by Cold War imperatives: the network was designed to ensure command-and-control survivability in the event of nuclear attack. When academic institutions sought to expand ARPANET's utility beyond militancy, tensions emerged over its scope and governance. Even early debates over Internet Protocol (IP) standards, naming systems, and later state oversight over global commons via organizations like Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), reflect enduring struggles over who could *govern* the architecture of supposed connection. Rather than offering a digital commons, the internet's backbone was increasingly structured around state and corporate control. From the outset, the infrastructure of "connection" was dually inseparable from state power and the logic of mastery (of others, nature, and ultimately oneself). Despite the internet's popularization as a decentralized digital architecture, its development remained tethered to the dominant rationalities of national security, technocratic management, and eventually, neoliberal enclosure. Even throughout the 1980s, key internet protocols (like Transmission Control Protocol [TCP] and IP) were still being developed under U.S. military auspices.

Then, in 1995, the National Science Foundation Network (NSFNET), which had operated as the internet's public backbone, was decommissioned and handed over to private telecoms, effectively commercializing the technological structure of ARPANET. At the same time, the popular understanding of the internet's myriad uses began to shift, effectively obfuscating the computers' "reproduction of inequality" behind a "technological veil" as household computers became commonplace in the 90's. The ownership of the internet "commons" was then quickly divided up and sold as corporate consolidation via AOL, Yahoo, and later Google concretized the internet as a privatized infrastructure. This transition from a defense project to an

everyday ostensibly social and political infrastructure did not overturn its underlying rationality. Instead, it masked the persistence of technological reason behind a seductive new promise: connection.

Meanwhile, cyberlibertarians, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, and neoliberal policymakers coalesced around a utopian vision of the internet; as a new frontier of innovation, democratic potential, and ultimately, profit. Wired magazine's Kevin Kelly famously dubbed the internet a new "Network Economy" (1997), while firebrands of the digital age like Nicholas Negroponte (1995) and John Perry Barlow (1996) positioned the web as the death knell of centralized authority. The internet's mystifying potential for the consolidation of work, leisure, and play inevitably drew in more buyers of the digital computer, blending mass communications "together harmoniously, and often unnoticeably… bring[ing] these realms of culture to their common denominator – the commodity form." (1964: 40). An innocent desire to engage with a novel invention turned into a direct way to reach consumers, blending, "the productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces [to] 'sell' or impose the social system as a whole." (Marcuse 1964: 12-13).

This historical reality materially embeds the internet's emergence within a status-quo that centers the instrumental, reifying, objectifying, form of reason that Marcuse identified as a primary force in the collapse of dialectical thought. The proliferation of the internet is not the renewal and expansion of human connection, but rather the continuation and intensification of a logic inherited from enlightenment rationality. Using a Marcusean lens, it is not hard to connect the calculative technological rationality that served as ARPANET's wartime backbone to the algorithmic manipulation of desire under capitalism in the name of economic warfare. Thus, interrogating the internet as a *specific* technic – a particular crystallization of technological rationality – contextualizes its partial role in the broader, truly dialectical category of technology as a social process.

For Marcuse, it is the more capacious category of technology understood as a processual, contingent organizing principle which yields specific technics that "promote authoritarianism as well as liberty, scarcity as well as abundance, the extension as well as the abolition of toil" (138). However, as we indicate above, it is not necessarily the case that *each* technic contains an equal amount of both possibilities; the liberatory capacity of particular technics relies upon the extent to which it reflects an authoritarian or erotic tendency in the social process out of which it emerged. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse explains the deep interconnection between technics and the social process, which is worth quoting at length:

"The technological *a priori* is a political *a priori* inasmuch as the transformation of nature involves that of man, and inasmuch as the "man-made creations" issue from and re-enter a societal ensemble. One may still insist that the machinery of the technological universe is "as such" indifferent towards political ends – it can revolutionize or retard a society. An electronic computer can serve equally a cap-

italist or socialist administration; a cyclotron can be an equally efficient tool for a war party or a peace party. This neutrality is contested in Marx's controversial statement that the "handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist." And this statement is further modified in Marxian theory itself: the social mode of production, not technics is the basic historical factor. However, when technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality – a 'world.'!" (1964: 154).

In the context of advanced industrial society, when the internet becomes the universal form of material production – the lifeline and connective tissue of almost every industry on earth – it projects a vision of historical reality shaped by its own emergence out of technological rationality, which in turn (re)shapes the social process. At the same time, when one "species" of technic becomes essential to the apparatus of material production itself, the subsequent sublimation of psychosocial tensions projects a technologically rational "world".

Marcuse does not offer a single set of conditions to define the emergence of a technic that "circumscribes an entire culture", but gestures toward its possible consequence as the constant reinforcement of technological rationality. When a technic becomes essential to all sectors, all domains of production, and restructures labor and social life as, "...a system which determines a priori the product of the apparatus as well as the operations of servicing and extending it," it reconfigures its form as an apparatus among many, "becom[ing] totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations." (1964: 8). Technical progress itself "...in the name of the historical prospects of freedom from toil and domination," becomes the veneer under which "...a whole system of domination and coordination, creates forms of life (and of power) which appear to reconcile the forces opposing the system and to defeat or refute all protest…" (1964: 6). When a technic that underlies labor, culture, desire, and its sociohistorical dimensions becomes a "world," resistance becomes definitionally "irrational" insofar as it signals a departure from technological rationality. Technological rationality then becomes the dominant mode of thinking, feeling, expressing, and ordering life, which then enforces and perpetuates the false promises of what Marcuse called "terroristic technocracy" ([1941] 1998: 42).

Using Marcuse's technological framework, we can therefore situate the contemporary internet as a specific technic that stands against the dialectical category of technology. As Marcuse all but predicted, the internet's ubiquity and universality grows with every false promise of freedom, sociality, and the erotic that it extends. In other words, each promise to meet our human needs presents a new way for the internet to extend and entrench – materially, ideologically, and erotically – the exploitative conditions of its emergence. Indeed, the internet has become fully integrated into the structure of capitalist production as an essential technic that has

reshaped technology as a social process itself. Nearly all forms of labor, from blue-collar logistics, the organization of the factory floor, white-collar remote work, free-lance creative work, to new forms of digital labor; now rely on the infrastructure of the internet. Not only does the internet serve an indispensable role in the apparatus of material production, it generates novel avenues of exploitation and alienation (dropshipping, data mining, etc.), defines how we find and maintain work (remote work, the gig economy, etc.) or leisure (video games, social media, etc.), and shapes the formation of desire (influencer culture, porn, gooning, doomscrolling, etc.). This is precisely how the internet "projects a historical totality – a 'world;'" it offers a seamless continuity between work, play, and personal expression, collapsing the boundaries and spatial divisions that once facilitated the separation of the "realms" of our lives under the guise of efficiency, access, and progress.

The incentives for both the consumers and producers of digital technologies to expand, reconfigure, and sell is in many ways irresistible and perfectly logical in the "world" projected by an internet shaped by technological rationality. The internet continuously extends both the market of potential buyers for any number of com-modities, while constantly encouraging the sale of said commodities. This logic ex-pands and deepens across an array of digital contexts, bringing the uninitiated into the digital fold with the threat of "opportunity costs" for not optimizing everything from productivity to job-seeking – a logic which transmutes into the imagined max-imization of one's knowledge, relationships, and ultimately, selfhood. In this view, integrating a digital interface into every facet of one's life may somehow perfect it, while refusing these "tools" becomes irrational in the "world" that the internet pro-jects when it becomes a universal technic. At the same time, such "opportunity costs" are not merely illusory as they can incur real additional economic hardship that complicate participation in social life.

Today, work, education, and basic communication are not only integrated with but dependent upon internet-connected devices and are coupled with more insidi-ous, alienating tendencies: among them, commodifying or systemizing the intima-cies of one's life. For example, take the origins of Facebook, dubbed "Facemash" in 2003 while Mark Zuckerberg was completing his degree in computer science at Har-vard: Zuckerberg utilized the digitized student directory to create a system to rank his female classmates' attractiveness by presenting users with pairs of photos of their classmates and a prompt to choose which was "hotter". It is not at all difficult to connect this particular instance of systematizing and rationalizing desire from some two decades ago to current, significantly more widespread and socially accepted in-ternet technologies, among them: dating apps such as Tinder which give users statis-tical summaries of their romantic and sexual "win/loss" ratios, pornographic livestreaming hubs such as Chaturbate which monetize the illusion of erotic con-nection, and subscription services such as OnlyFans which exemplify the fusion of frustrated desire and capitalism.

Our desire for erotic connection is thus captured by the crystallization of technological rationality under the guise of access, reinforced within an incentive structure that feeds off of continuous engagement and the extension of the digital into all facets of life. Even dissent likewise becomes commodified: activism all too easily turned into brand identity, and erotic solidarity into parasocial transactions or consumer intimacy. The user internalizes the alienating logic of technological rationality while its social reinscription beyond the "confines" of the digital realm naturalizes domination, making exploitation appear as participation and alienation as connection. Thus, the internet appears as an all-encompassing technic with nascent sociopolitical deformations that hinder the formation of erotic connection.

Much like the handmill in feudal society or the steam mill in industrial capitalism, the internet has reshaped the social process that is modern technology writ large. It is not merely an essential apparatus among others but perhaps some new material formation: a *meta-technic* – one that mediates and organizes not only technology as a social process, but also the use, development, and meaning of nearly every other technic. Understood in this way, the internet is a recursive and expansive force that reconstitutes technology itself – and other technics – in its image. It is this structural transformation that compels us to treat the internet as both the culmination and intensification of technological rationality as well as the impetus to rethink the erotic as a political and technological possibility. How might we conceptualize or discover erotic possibilities given the contemporary terrain of the internet?

3 THE EROTIC INTERNET

The lurching fear of the foreclosure of the dialectical possibilities of technology is vividly present in Cronenberg's classic work of body horror: *Videodrome* (1983). Why bother with the fallibility of human connection when technological rationality promises a kind of liberation by way of total rationalization? To "go all the way" and "become the new flesh" by "let[ting] your body die" is to embrace the fantasy that one can transcend the messiness of desire and embodiment by fusing fully with the machine (1983). But in doing so the self is not liberated, it is overwritten and captured by erotic alienation framed as nascent, unending fulfillment. This fantasy echoes Marcuse's concern that the form of rationality that governs technology does not merely structure production, but conscripts and constricts thought, desire, and consensus as we interact with them. As Marcuse writes:

> "In manipulating the machine, man learns that obedience to the directions is the only way to obtain desired results. Getting along is identical with adjustment to the apparatus. There is no room for autonomy. Individualistic rationality has developed into efficient compliance with the pregiven continuum of means and ends. The latter absorbs the liberating efforts of thought, and the various func-

tions of reason converge upon the unconditional maintenance of the apparatus." (1941: 144)

The "technic" then serves as the habituating vehicle for the colonization of subjectivity, making technological rationality appear not only desirable but inevitable. Even the most intimate human impulses are restructured to conform; desire itself becomes an object of optimization and control. As in *Videodrome*, Marcuse's writing indicates that the "liberation" promised by technics such as the internet is a faux-liberation; pursuing what the internet sells as eros is in actuality the perpetuation of technological rationality and the repression of the liberatory eros – understood not just sexually, but socially, politically, ethically, and aesthetically – that Marcuse is searching for. If, then, the truly erotic is the ground from which resistance and liberation emerge, what possibilities remain for its reconstitution under our current technical order? Could an erotic technic arise from this digital terrain at all? If so, would it look anything like the internet of today?

Because technics are not inherently liberatory or repressive but rather reflective of the social processes and rationalities that animate them, the possibility remains that the internet might become something else or competing technics might emerge to facilitate erotic connection. Against the totalizing logic of technological rationality, Marcuse leaves open the dialectical potential for technics that foster sensuous solidarity rather than heighten suppression. If, as he writes, liberation requires "a new sensibility" grounded in "life instincts," then the internet, fundamentally reconceived as an erotic technic might be repurposed not as a site of alienation, but of embodied presence and erotic relation (1971: 19). Crucially, because technics are reflections of the social process out of which they emerge, this reimagining hinges on a radical transformation in both its material (pre)conditions – primarily its ownership and structure – as well as its symbolic function. Rather than displacing sensuous experience, obliterating solitude, or instrumentalizing connection, an erotic internet would enable new modes of sociality premised on receptivity, vulnerability, and facilitating connection. It would not promise liberation through pseudo-erotic escape in the form of repressive desublimation, but through true erotic flourishing.

A truly erotic technology must not only facilitate this need for biological solidarity, but disentangle the enduring logics of technological rationality itself. As Marcuse notes, technological rationality can persist under myriad social orders as an inherited mode of thought; the organization of sociality must thwart this inheritance with "new relationships [that] would be the result of a 'biological' solidarity in work and purpose, expressive of a true harmony between social and individual needs and goals, between recognized necessity and free development–the exact opposite of the administered and enforced harmony organized in the advanced capitalist (and socialist?) countries" (1971: 61). Against the alienating presence of AI chatbots, dating apps, and astro-turfed propagandist bots, could communally-owned, deliberative mechanisms of engagement propagate this erotic internet?

We may begin with negating the incentives and penalties for maintaining our digital status-quo, thwarting the role of corporate middle-men and the consolidation of state power. An erotic internet must actively cultivate forms of relation irreducible to optimization or surveillance. In other words, the structure of digital communication between users must move from anonymized one-to-many to one-to-one in order to actualize the initial techno-optimist promise of decentralized communication that undermines centralized authority. Digital spaces of engagement would require platforms that take mutual recognition as their organizing principle in lieu of quantification of 'content' that keeps users engaged to appease advertisers and stakeholders. Coupled with instituting platforms as a cooperative, real commons governed by its users, we may be able to co-opt our existing digital infrastructures toward disalienation as a stepping stone for a truly erotic technology.

There already exists a kind of budding praxis of erotic technics that "tool" our existing digital landscape; take the open-source ATProtocol of "Bluesky", a social platform which allows users to select their own moderation tools and choose how their feeds are structured with a variety of communal algorithms that order how you engage with the platform around different aims (discover new users, only order your feed chronologically, only see things authored by who you are following, etc.). Bluesky explicitly wants to invert the top-down digital infrastructure of social media, and invites a reconfiguration of sociality from below. This may offer the technical preconditions for pluralistic digital publics to emerge on a shared commons, unfettered by both refusing the sale of the platform as a Public Benefit Corporation (PBC) that integrates returns for independent developers who code a variety of tools for the platform. Similar emerging digital tools, platforms, and restructured spaces of engagement like Fediverse (a decentralized network of interoperable platforms like Mastodon, where users can host their own servers and collectively shape moderation and federation policies), and are.na (a visual organization tool where users collect and share content in customizable blocks and channels, often used for collaborative research and creative projects) offer glimpses of a plural digital milieu organized by the desire for erotic connection and the facilitation of free expression.

Yet, these departures from explicitly "social" top-down digital technologies cannot alone constitute a truly erotic technology. Bottom-up social technics, the decentralization of communication, and shifts in ownership of platforms themselves leave the underlying logic of technological rationality largely intact; alongside the drastic environmental consequences of our foundational reliance on devices that pollute our environment, deplete non-renewable rare-earth-elements (REEs), and exploit colonial supply chains rife with human rights abuses. To use Marcuse's categories: that would be a transformation of a *technic*, but not the transformation of the underlying *technology*. When we think of an erotic internet and the erotic technology that must be its precondition, we might envision building a communally-operated, owned, and recycled technology that could both make use of our exist-

ing 62 million tonnes of e-waste (UNITAR 2024) and challenge the constant production of devices with unnecessary, minute changes. Community mesh networks (a decentralized, community-built network where users share and relay internet access through local nodes rather than relying on a central provider) open this avenue for challenging and thus reimagining our current digital infrastructures and the physical structures that support them. Projects like *Guifi* in Catalonia and *NYC Mesh* redistribute technical power and ownership by enabling communities to build, maintain, and govern their own connectivity while challenging the monopolistic control of broadband infrastructure by corporations like AT&T or Comcast.

These glimpses of alternative digital arrangements, from protocol-level decentralization to cooperative ownership, reveal the latent possibility of an erotic internet. Yet the mere inversion of current structures is not enough. Without a transformation of the underlying rationality – the sensibility that organizes our interaction with tools, platforms, and one another – even the most radical-seeming interventions risk reinscribing the same logic of domination. Technological rationality does not vanish with new affordances or user governance; it persists as a form of life unless actively *and materially* unmade and reimagined. A liberatory internet must be birthed from an erotic technology; the faux-erotic commodification so omnipresent now must be properly identified as precisely the false needs that Marcuse warned so presciently against.

That the tension between the erotic and technological rationality was reflected and perpetuated materially in technology remained one of Marcuse's core concerns throughout his career. His attention to the way that technological rationality so craftily manipulates and frustrates our desire for the erotic continues to be one of his most profound insights. In some of his last reflections on technology and society, Marcuse cautioned his audience against the danger of blaming our alienation on the proliferation of technology and instead held out a profound hope for the capacity of technical progress, albeit in a radically new form:

> "Technical progress is an objective necessity for capitalism as well as for emancipation. The latter depends upon the further development of automation up to that point where the prevailing 'economics of time' (Bahro) can be overthrown: free, creative time as the time for life.
>
> But it is perhaps fallacious to conclude that only the misuse of science and technology is responsible for the ongoing repression: the transvaluation of values and compulsions, the emancipation of subjectivity, of consciousness, might very well have an impact on the very conception of technology itself and in the structure of the technical-scientific apparatus ... *Perhaps technology is a wound that can only be healed by the weapon that caused it: not the destruction of technology but its re-construction for the reconciliation of nature and society.*" (1979 [2011]: 222)

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