

CHAPTER 6

The Culture of Digitality

The age of consumption, being the historical culmination of the whole process of accelerated productivity under the sign of capital, is also the age of radical alienation

Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, p.207.

In our time ... algorithms are becoming decisive, and ... companies like Amazon, Google and Facebook are fast becoming, despite their populist rhetoric, the new apostles of culture

Ted Striphas 'Algorithmic Culture' 2015, p.407.

The double-alienation from analogue technique and the analogue forces a re-appreciation of the bases of culture-formation. What is often loosely termed 'digital culture' is considered here through the framework of digitality in order to derive new perspectives. Through these new perspectives, new estimations of what we 'gain' and 'lose' in the new processes of the formation of culture will serve as a more solid basis of critique of the present condition. This in turn will allow greater understanding and therefore greater possibility for a reassertion of human need over computer-instrumentalised logic, such that the current formations of culture by digitality may be re-shaped in ways more dialectic with our human-technology origins within analogue technique and analogue nature.

I begin by considering two differing but illustrative examples—in Lev Manovich and Bernard Stiegler—of what might be termed the failed 'promise of the digital' in respect of culture, cultural production and politics. I say 'failed', because their concept of the digital is one, like very many others since the 1990s, that is underpinned by analogue-based assumptions. Then I move to a more historically-informed consideration of the 'problem of culture' as a more clearly defined term within the context of capitalism. In particular, I

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look at the major theorisations of culture within capitalism from Adorno and Horkheimer, Guy Debord, Raymond Williams, Zygmunt Bauman and Jean Baudrillard, to show that these too no longer suffice as critique of the production of culture today, because although there was significant analytical purchase in these differing perspectives when they were written, they were conceived in a pre-digital time, and with analogue-dependent theories guiding their logic. I will end by arguing that digitality has brought consumerism—and by extension much of what now constitutes culture—into a radically new realm, one that requires a basic critique of the digital context before we can understand what is happening to what it means to be human and social.

Lev Manovich is a relatively early and influential computer and cultural theorist who provides a useful illustration of how a 'digital culture' is produced in a way that goes beyond the rather more diffused treatment that the literature tends to give to the subject.¹ Nonetheless, his work demonstrates how failure to identify digital as a new category of technology leaves us ill-equipped to register the full significance of digital culture and what this new culture portends in what is the most debilitating sphere of our time: digital consumerism. In his 2001 book *The Language of New Media*, Manovich titled his first chapter with the now quaint-sounding question: 'What is New Media?' A primary objective of not just the chapter, but the book, was to 'understand the effects of computerisation on culture as a whole.' He went on to predict:

just as the printing press in the fourteenth century and photography in the nineteenth century had a revolutionary impact on the development of modern society and culture, today we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of *all of our culture* to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication. This new revolution is arguably more profound than the previous ones, and we are just beginning to sense its initial effects.²

The emphasis on 'all of our culture' is mine. But the author could and should have italicised it himself, just to make sure that the reader did not miss the phrase and its import. Manovich sees 'new media' in precisely such epoch-changing terms. He goes on to analyse some of the now-antiquated but then-prevalent 'new media' technologies, such as DVDs, CD-ROMs and 'computer multimedia', that were spearheading the transformation 'of all of our culture' at that time. 2001, we remind ourselves, is very recent history. It was the year of the Twin Towers and Pentagon attacks by Al Qaeda, another form of revolution whose legacies continue to shape much of the geopolitics of today. However, the cultural legacies of the DVD or CD-ROM are rather more difficult to discern. The CD-ROM simply became obsolete. These mirrored discs fell victim to their limited data and speed capacities. For its part, the commercially-packaged DVD, since 1995 the principal medium for TV series, box sets, etc,

now dwindles in those shrinking domains where streaming and wireless data and ready access to cloud computing have not yet killed it off.

Notwithstanding the relatively brief shelf-life of these supposedly revolutionary technologies, Manovich does seek to account for 'new media' more broadly, including how they shape culture-formation. He calls his theory 'transcoding', an idea whereby computerisation 'transcodes' or recodes previous (analogue) technologies, such as cinema and the printed page, so as to 'interact together in the interfaces of Web sites'.³ Transcoding from analogue to digital is seen by Manovich as functioning in a kind of ongoing *evolution* where technology and human culture develop in mutual interaction. Digital technology, for Manovich, constitutes a new accretive 'layer', a 'computer layer' that will 'affect the cultural layer' in an ongoing interaction at the human-computer interface (HCI)—a term he borrows from mid-twentieth-century computer science.⁴ This interface is a hybrid between a 'computer interface' and a 'cultural interface' that situates the user within 'an immersive environment and a set of controls; between standardisation and originality'.⁵ The idea of HCI as the interface is suggestive in Manovich's work. It draws in spirit, if not directly, from J.C.R. Licklider's influential 1960 essay 'Man-Computer Symbiosis', where Licklider theorised that given computers do well in many things that humans do badly, such as routine and predictable work-tasks, a 'symbiotic partnership' would be a positive and productive collaboration for humankind.⁶ In this partnership Licklider predicted that in the near future:

men will set the goals, formulate the hypotheses, determine the criteria and perform the evaluations. Computing machines will do the routinizable work that must be done to prepare the way for insights and decisions in technical and scientific thinking. Preliminary analyses indicate that the symbiotic partnership will perform intellectual operations much more effectively than man alone can perform them.⁷

Symbiosis will not only lead to a higher technological form but will also constitute a new stage of human progress on the back of the computer. Manovich, writing forty-one years later, and positioned deep within a milieu of post-modernity, hedges more than a little on the question of the future. He does this because his logic concerning human-computer interaction is driven primarily by the technology side of the equation. He speaks mainly of discrete computer, or computer-based, technologies, such as HTML code, Photoshop digital images and so on; and when he speaks of 'culture' he speaks of cultural artefacts (technologies) such as cinema, the printed text, the codex, and the clay tablet.⁸ Culture as a human practice (as opposed to a technological artefact) is therefore a strangely inert component of Manovich's interaction. This is significant. In common with much other writing on culture—a word Raymond Williams termed 'the original difficult word'—Manovich does not define it for

his purposes, notwithstanding the fact that much of his theory depends upon a clear understanding of it.⁹ I shall define it soon, but to close my critique of Manovich's approach, I will show how his downgrading of the culture-human element at the 'cultural interface' limits the theory. His rendering of culture as inert, or at least secondary to technology, means that the predictive value of his theory in particular is also limited. After detailing the logic and interactions of the 'technological layer' and 'cultural layer' in his transcoding theory, Manovich decides, rather feebly, that:

Today the language of cultural interfaces is in its early stage, as was the language of cinema a hundred years ago. We do not know what the final result will be, or even if it will ever completely stabilize. Both the printed word and cinema eventually achieved stable forms which underwent little change for long periods of time, in part because of the material investments in their means of production and distribution. Given that computer language is implemented in software, potentially it could keep changing forever. But there is one thing we can be sure of. We are witnessing the emergence of a new cultural metalanguage, something that will be at least as significant as the printed word and cinema before it.¹⁰

For Manovich the future is open, but unclear. His logic demands this vague lack of direction; yet it need not be so. His logic demands vagueness because developments in digital technology are almost impossible to predict in any context. His logic would be correct if one looked at technology only in isolation. However, a 'transcoding', or technology-cultural interaction, that contains a component of active human *agency*, one based upon human needs, *could* contribute to a future and a culture that may be visible and predictable—at least in outline. For all the nuance of his layering and recoding, what Manovich is suggesting, still, is a straightforward and traditional process of technological evolution, with 'culture' following in its wake, and it is this that renders his theory unable to say much beyond the obviousness of digital's 'significance' vis-à-vis the printed word and cinema. The failure to attribute culture with agency, assigning it inert artefactual (historical) value instead, means that Manovich's theory cannot engage with that most primary element of individual and collective agency—prediction and planning that can allow a future to be envisaged and created to at least a certain degree. Notwithstanding his above average attempt at theorising the effects of digitality, when still in its relative infancy, Manovich takes us no further forward, then or now, towards the new understanding that this influential book claims.

Bernard Stiegler, eminent philosopher of media, whose theorising on the character of digital has commonalities with this book's arguments on the nature of the analogue-digital ontologies, does move our understanding of digitality forward, somewhat. Stiegler has written widely—and often abstrusely—on the subject, but in his essay 'Teleologies of the Snail', he argues with some clarity

that the digital wave has already enveloped economy and society and that culture-formation, especially political culture, is now subject to a *specifically digital* logic that requires us to ‘radically rethink teleology, and open up the question of new forms of teleologies and teleologies ... made possible and necessary by digital technologies of communication.’¹¹ In contrast to Manovich’s accretion and evolution, the digital, according to Stiegler, has forced a radical technological break. Digitality has already asserted itself and has created a new sensibility through a technological rupture that has caused the ‘process of the grammatisation of flows, [to become] a process of discretization.’¹² This binary of ‘flows’ and ‘discretization’ can be read as another way of describing the analogue–digital breach that I have theorised throughout this book. Drawing deeply from theorist of technics Gilbert Simondon who, like Jacques Ellul, saw technological development as having its own autonomy, Stiegler introduces a term from psychology, ‘dissociation,’ meaning ‘a detachment from reality,’ to describe the digital media-user effect, which:

form[s] dissociated milieus in which I am an addressee without being an addressor, and therefore do not participate in collective individuation, that is, in transindividuation; I am thus short-circuited. Dissociated milieus are industrially disorganised symbolic milieus, that is, milieus that are de-socialised, de-symbolised, de-sublimated, deprived of consistence; they are to this extent organizations which tend to become asocial, that is, without philia, in other words, without these affective ties that are the condition of all political life.¹³

This is alienation from politics by digitality. It is an alienation that stems from the needs of capitalism: its need for control, and its need for efficiency and instrumentalisation. The alienation that is digitality, or ‘discretization’ as Stiegler terms it, was an unanticipated side-effect of capitalism’s technological striving for automation. But in Stiegler’s analysis it has opened up a new space he calls a ‘telecracy,’ a version, it seems, of Postman’s ‘technocracy,’ a space of political and social power that is perpetually shifting and contingent. Unlike Postman’s negative version, Stiegler’s is a space, at least, of political potential, a potential that is undermined for now by the very power that digitality makes possible—automation:

Telecracy is ... that which opens up the possibility of democracy. But it is also that which makes possible democracy’s destruction, since, to the extent that it makes remote control possible, as the power of the distant, it constantly threatens this democracy, of which it is the possibility.¹⁴

Politics needs to fill this space: ‘A new political struggle must take place,’¹⁵ he writes. But based upon Stiegler’s own solution it’s not apparent how this might be possible. And so it is here that Stiegler’s useful insight into the dissociative or

alienating tendency of digitality begins to break down. Writing in 2007, Stiegler seems impressed by the potential of a newish device, the smartphone, whose logic is based upon the very technology he critiques. He is not unusual here. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the social media phase of digitality, Stiegler imagines his personal smartphone, the *Tréo 650*—a kind of keyboard-equipped *BlackBerry* of the period—to be a site of cultural and political potential: an incipient ‘telecracy’ that fits in the pocket. Of his Palm Inc.-manufactured device he writes: ‘Between this *Tréo 650* and myself a circuit is formed.’¹⁶ The completed circuit repairs the ‘short-circuit’ of dissociation and allows Stiegler to be whole again, connecting with himself and with others similarly equipped to form a collective and positive telecracy of networked and transindividuated individuals. In this positive loop, Stiegler envisages the emergence of:

social networks which take shape by sharing in technologies of transindividuation, called cooperative technologies, and which constitute, as the digital *pharmaka* of the technological associated milieu of the Internet – where the addressees are always also senders – absolutely original processes of psychical and collective individuation. Here psychical, symbolic and technical associated milieus have become indissociable.¹⁷

Unlike Manovich, Stiegler accepts the analogue-digital bifurcation, but he does not fully appreciate how far-reaching the ‘dissociation’ has become. Instead he argues that the rupture is one that may be united, through digital technology itself, and that this may be achieved through what can only be inferred to be a knowing subject, acting alone with a smartphone, to form a psychical and technical space, a ‘hypersocial and hyperpsychical space’¹⁸ that connects the individual with others to form the basis for a new political culture. For Stiegler, a repairable breach must mean that digitality cannot signify a new category of technology, nor even a new logic, but a relationship (currently) in flux which can, in some vague and almost transcendent ‘psychical, symbolic and technical’ way, be made symbiotic and collectively political.

Stiegler speculated about the potential political power of his *Tréo 650* in 2007. But change was in the wind as he wrote. For example, on 29th June of that year Steve Jobs launched the first-generation iPhone. Its innovative use of apps on the touch-screen and the later hardwired link to the App Store meant that an immediately enraptured public could immerse itself—as millions of dispersed and dissociated individuals would—into the smartphone-Web 2.0 experience that was occurring at that time. Moreover, a few months previously, and no less consequentially, Facebook had changed its settings to allow its university-only ‘community’ to be joined by ‘anyone with a registered email address.’¹⁹ The wave of social media popularity would grow into a tsunami that sucked up the socio-cultural experience of billions—experience to be cut and diced into quantisable data in order to do the anti-social, anti-democratic and pro-capital things with them that would make Facebook and related platforms the

hegemony they are today.²⁰ Stiegler did not see this coming. Neither did he anticipate the forms and failures of attempted political ‘transindividuation’ such as the Occupy movement of 2011, or the Arab Spring risings of the same year; nor would he foresee the more successful attempts at the ‘short-circuiting’ of the individual by Russian disinformation, or the Chinese Communist Party’s super-surveillance of its people, or the Google ‘filter bubble’, or the NSA PRISM program revealed in 2013 by Edward Snowden, or Cambridge Analytica in 2018, or government troll farms in many liberal and illiberal democracies—and the ready application of cybercops wherever regimes feel the need to keep up with the latest techniques of cyber-surveillance and cyber-oppression. All this and more showed clearly how vulnerable was the ‘short-circuited’ post-modern individual to even deeper individuation and alienation as networks became more ubiquitous. In more general terms, Stiegler’s theory failed to see that mass-individuated smartphone access would quickly revolutionise the web and the economy in many socially-negative ways, and with many casualties—technological as well as social. One minor casualty was the large and cumbersome *Tréo 650* itself, with its obsolete icons and even more antediluvian keyboard. It succumbed almost immediately to the blitzkrieg popularity of the iPhone and was discontinued in 2008. Its maker was purchased by Hewlett Packard in 2010 and wound up a year later.

Stiegler wrote that the post-modern society of ‘dissociation’ was ‘not inevitable’ and that ‘political struggle’ would rescue it for the digitally oppressed. But such a society *was* inevitable. It was inevitable because he and we did not see digital technology in sufficiently thorough terms. It was inevitable because digital technology that is unrestrictedly coded for privatised and instrumentalised ends can only have such consequences if allowed to become hegemonic. And so, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, progressive and collective ‘political struggle’ is almost everywhere facing defeat or is in retreat. There are few real signs of political hope or of grassroots success. We therefore need to understand such political developments not only from the perspective of digital technology, but also in the context of history. Timothy Snyder, in his short book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From The Twentieth Century*, reminds us that many of the main strands of culture from the previous century, especially its politics, are still with us; but we need to learn to identify how they have acquired different surface manifestations in our digitality. For example, a virulent strain of national populism is back. But this is a virtual populism that exists in large part online and is empowered by the ways that the data companies are allowed to deploy their social media algorithms. It follows, then, that the propaganda that sustains the new populism didn’t go away. Propaganda (as political communication) was digitalised to form the basis for a ‘post-truth’ dimension of our post-modernity. The appellation makes it sound like something new, but as Snyder notes, the spreading of disinformation as widely as possible through ‘new media’—in his case radio—was a Nazi first principle of politics in the 1930s. Today, the discretised and quantised flux of digital

information that pulses around the web has been freed from democratic and fourth estate oversight. And so, for Snyder, our ‘post-truth’ era needs to be seen as a warning sign of an incipient digital ‘pre-fascism.’²¹ This is a disaster for politics as well as for the democracy that depends upon its processes. We can see pre-fascist articulations forming today in a rising authoritarianism in the political process—and in business. This development is, to employ Stiegler’s term, very much a ‘dissociative’ digital authoritarianism. It is expressed as a new overlordship by Facebook- and Twitter-utilising elites in governments, in corporations and in right-wing political movements who draw their power from a cadre of the tech-savvy, whose specialist knowledge enables them to manipulate networks in order to manipulate users. Well-positioned elites in politics or business can thus ‘mobilise’ their base—be they politically motivated online followers of an ideology, or consumers of a commercial service—so to control them, either through targeted propaganda or targeted advertising, or a combination of both.

To get to the roots of digital culture we need to go deeper than Manovich or Stiegler. Neither discusses culture very much in their critique of the digital. They focus instead upon technology and politics, respectively. Culture, they imply, is an expression of technological and political change, as opposed to being the *source* of such change. If Manovich and Stiegler (and others like them) were sufficiently thorough-going in their analysis—that is to say, to see *digital itself* as the central element—then their consideration of their chosen themes of technology and politics would have been more radical, more penetrative and more persuasive, instead of being partial and limited. Technology and politics fall within the overarching human domain of culture. And *everything* is framed by it and by the discourses that sustain it. And so, in that sense, to think about the *culture of digitality* is not only to think about certain manifestations, but to think about what it is that makes such manifestations virtual and real at the same time.

Marxism and Consumer Culture: from Ground Zero to the Ghetto

Since the beginnings of capitalist modernity, the commodification process has colonised increasingly more of those realms of human activity expressed as ‘culture’. And as this colonisation has continued, the culture-capitalism conjunction has been identified as an important challenge in the critique of modern life. This is the case not only in the Marxist tradition, revealing a more pervasive concern with the sociology of modernity as it pertains to culture.²² For example, in the early twentieth century, as ‘mass culture’ became an established reality, Georg Simmel, in his work *Individuality and Social Forms*, identified what he saw as a ‘problem’ with culture-formation, one which he chose to analyse in terms of *authenticity*. He writes:

History ... concerns itself with changes in the forms of culture... But we can also see a deeper process at work. Life ... can manifest itself only in particular forms; yet owing to its essential restlessness, life constantly struggles against its own products which have become fixed and do not move along with it. This constant change in the content of culture, even of whole cultural styles, is the sign of the infinite fruitfulness of life. At the same time, it marks the deep contradiction between life's eternal flux and the objective validity and authenticity of the forms through which it proceeds.²³

Simmel is asking: culture rises up from the 'fruitfulness' of everyday life, but to what extent does an objective reality, the 'external forms,' impinge upon it to stall or hinder its evolution? And what happens to 'authenticity'? Though no Marxist, Simmel's 'external forms' may be seen as akin to objective capitalist society, with its forms impressing the commodity upon the individual and wider society as an increasingly naturalised force that would in time—in the time of modernity—become a dominant factor in the *production* of culture in the sphere of human experience. Ours is a culture in which people are increasingly defined by commodities. We tend to accept them, often unreflectively, as bearing the marks of who we see ourselves to be in our individuated social contexts—in the varied and graded expansion of what Pierre Bourdieu would later call the 'cultural goods' that are also the symbols of 'distinction' that he wrote so penetratingly about in his 1984 book of that title.²⁴

I will analyse here the particular mechanism of the objective 'external forms' that impress upon subjective lives the 'cultural goods' that become part of life in terms of their symbolic meaning. I will pursue this, in the first instance, through a core, but now somewhat discontinued, Marxist idea of 'base and superstructure.' This is an idea that stems from Marx himself, and which is encapsulated in another of his much-quoted lines: 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.'²⁵ This translates as: the socio-technical foundations of any society have a substantial effect upon the consciousness of its population. After discussing this process, and showing why it still matters as a model of analysis, and what it tells us about capitalism as a technology-driven social relation, I will show how the 'base and superstructure' model—in Marx and in interpretations of him—has been transformed by digitality, and how this in turn has transformed the nature of consumerism and politics in ways that principally reflect the needs and the logic of digitality.

We have already touched upon the thought of Raymond Williams in regard to both technology (television) and politics. His writings on culture, however, have been much more influential, and so it is to Williams I will turn for a more concrete definition of the term. In 1989 Verso published *Resources of Hope*, a collection of Williams's essays on political and cultural theory. An article he wrote in 1958 titled 'Culture is Ordinary' appears in it. This is a foundational

text on how not only to understand and define culture, but also to see culture's lived experience as a way of understanding ourselves and our historical, social and economic context. The clue to Williams's idea is in the title. It is a point he reiterates throughout the text, observing that: 'Culture is ordinary, that is where we must start'; 'Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact'; and 'Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind'.²⁶ So, what does it mean to argue that 'culture', with its persistent connotations of both 'high' and 'low', is in fact *ordinary*? Williams writes what is partly a semi-autobiographical analysis that uses the context of his Welsh working class origins and his later life as a Cambridge academic to frame his hypothesis on culture. For example, Williams is a Marxist, but of a 1950s 'neo' sort, that rejects any 'prescriptive' interpretation of Marx's base and superstructure theory and dismisses the idea that the productive base of society 'is in some way a cultural directive'.²⁷ His direct experience of working-class culture taught him otherwise. However, knowledge, communication, travel, and learning play their parts, too, and they do so sometimes in important ways. Williams continues, and with clear reference to how Cambridge culture is imbricated with that of his Welsh village:

A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction.²⁸

In one sense, what Williams in his 1976 book *Keywords* called that 'original difficult word' is actually rather simple—and rather ordinary. Culture is about meaning. As pattern-seeking creatures, humans are all about attributing meaning to things. Broadened out from individual meaning-making, 'the making of a society is the finding of common meanings and direction', as Williams puts it in a beautifully minimal formulation.²⁹ Moreover, there is a strong sense that he views experience and meaning in culture-forming as experiences and meanings that can be creative and authentic expressions of individual self-realisation. Whereas Simmel saw a difficult contradiction between 'life's eternal flux' and the sources of 'validity and authenticity', Williams sees no such problem, but expresses, rather, a positive and somewhat romantic view of culture. And it is one—as the title of the book in which the essay appears proclaims—that constitutes a 'resource' for understanding this thing called culture. His is a view, in other words, that democratises culture, makes culture 'ordinary' and places it

in the minds and hands of everyone as a natural resource that all can be a part of and share.

Williams had more to say, and in less autobiographical terms, about how 'ordinary culture' is affected by objective forces, such as technology and economy. He did this in a 1973 essay in the *New Left Review* titled 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'. In the same manner as in his 1958 essay, Williams takes care to dissociate himself from what he terms the 'unacceptable' and 'commonly held' Marxist view expressed as a 'determining base and a determined superstructure'—the idea of an almost mechanical process whereby capitalism's productive forces unsparingly define or govern the superstructure of society and its forms of culture.³⁰ Marx himself, Williams notes, did not subscribe to such a process, but instead emphasised the 'conditioning' effect of the 'base', its producing of a context or general environment that acclimatises the 'superstructure' towards predispositions. Williams thus gives the 'commonly held' 'determination' effect of base to superstructure a rather different evaluation, writing that: 'we have to revalue "determination" towards the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicted, prefigured and controlled content'.³¹ Moreover, and this will become important later in the context of digitality, Williams makes a characteristically Williams neo-Marxist statement that acknowledges the complexity of it all:

crucially, we have to revalue 'the base' away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men (*sic*) in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process.³²

In other words, there can be no room for rigidity when theorising the relationships between economic and technological forces and how they interact with individuals in society and in the shaping of their cultural meanings. The interaction is always in motion and the essence of the process is revealed in the concrete activities of people in everyday life and in the patterns and institutions that form and dissolve to shape and reshape meaning in cultural life.

And so for Williams there is more than just endless flux and interpenetration between base and superstructure. In his 1973 essay, which coincided with an Anglophone 'discovery' of Antonio Gramsci,³³ Williams ingeniously introduces Gramsci's concept of hegemony, with which to give the base-superstructure process greater analytic power. The power of hegemony, as Williams understands it from Gramsci, is that it is an almost subterraneanly powerful form of ideology that is 'deeply saturating of the consciousness of a society'.³⁴ So deep that it 'even constitutes the limit of common sense for most people under its sway [and] corresponds to the reality of social experience very much more clearly than any notions derived from the formula of base and superstructure'.³⁵ The power of hegemony, as compared to the relatively shallow and transient

power of ideology, is that not only does it lie deep within society, and its ideas appear often as common sense, but that hegemonic ideas can also appear as *neutral* or *positive*, when they may not necessarily be so. An example of such deep hegemony is the concept of capitalism itself, which until recently, and in the US at least, was widely equated with democracy, and functioned also as a basic expression of human freedom.³⁶ More pertinent for our purposes is the supposed 'neutral' functioning of technology, and of computers in particular. As we saw, the Cold War discourse around computing paved the way for digital technology that would be seen as a wonder-technology, a 'magical' technology based upon the 'neutral' concepts of logic and mathematics that would reproduce a multitude of 'efficient' and 'smart' applications throughout the economy and society. However, even if functioning at a deep cultural level, hegemony is able to succeed only through the maintenance of a power discourse that consists of, as Terry Eagleton observes, a wide variety of 'practical strategies by which a dominant power elicits consent to its rule from those it subjugates'.³⁷ In other words, as a deep-lying hegemonic idea, consent can function as a default attitude until, for whatever reason, 'power nakedly reveals its hand' to become 'an object of political contestation'.³⁸

A discourse that carries a hegemonic idea, or set of ideas, is a form of communication. This much is clear. But if we think about the *particular mode* of communication in the base-superstructure context, this enables consideration of how and to what effect communication has been transformed through digitality. Régis Debray provides a useful framework for this consideration when he writes that it is 'Impossible to grasp the nature of conscious collective life in any epoch without an understanding of the material forms and processes through which its ideas were transmitted—the communication networks that enable thought to have social existence'.³⁹ For Debray, the material forms and processes are the source for understanding the nature of the communication itself. Much like McLuhan's 'medium is the message', Debray claims that it is the medium itself that constitutes the most important aspect of communication—shaping the content and giving 'social existence' to it. The material aspect of communication is something Christian Fuchs takes up in connection with a base-superstructure interpretation of Raymond Williams to consider how these function in relation to digital communication—and to the production of culture. Fuchs's theory thus constitutes a rare treatment of the concept in the transition to digitality. Fuchs begins: 'wherever there is culture, there is communication. When we communicate, we constitute culture'.⁴⁰ In the context of digital society, however, it is often claimed that digital's immateriality constitutes a central aspect of the transformed nature of communication, and as Fuchs phrases it, digitality 'tends to advance the ideology of the immaterial'.⁴¹ To counter this tendency, and building directly upon Williams and his materialist conception of communication in the base-superstructure process, Fuchs argues for what he terms a 'communicative materialism' that would act as a corrective to the ideology of digital immateriality.⁴² Today, the ideology of immateriality has become

hegemonic. It has rendered the materialist conception of history, as well as the materialist underpinning of the base-superstructure, as secondary—both as a way to understand capitalism, and to understand its social expressions such as class, class consciousness, and culture-formation. The ideology of digitality, especially in its communicative forms, Fuchs points out, has obscured the deeply materialist character of its basic functioning. We must look at ‘the conditions of production of the internet and digital media’ to assess its reality, he argues, and if we do, we will see relations and forces of production that are not too different from those of the pre-digital era. For example, the internet is not a clean and weightless assemblage of immaterial efficiency. It is an immense drain on electricity and could consume 20 per cent of all the world’s power by 2025.⁴³ Digital hardware contributes vast amounts of material waste in the form of steel, plastics, glass, and heavy metals like cadmium, antimony, lead and mercury. Moreover, an international division of labour—humans involved in the production, distribution and discarding of digital products—thrives today in ways that would have been recognisable in 1950 or 1970. Fuchs makes the compelling case that this underlying material reality of the communicative basis of our globalised society must be recognised and promoted as the basis for a humanly-based form of resistance to the new depredations of digital capital. He sums up Williams’s materialist communication with an approving restatement of its irreducibly human core:

Whereas communication is a human social process and a practice, communications are systems, institutions and forms. There is a dialectic of communication and communications: Humans communicate by means of communications whereas communications are created and re-created by human co-production and communication.⁴⁴

According to Fuchs, it is only through a revelatory ‘communicative materialism’ that digital immateriality—as a pernicious ideology—may be properly understood and resisted by means of a grounded understanding of the continued importance of the materiality of production and of culture, as much today as it was in the 1950s or 1970s.

It will be clear from what I have written previously that whilst any Enlightenment-based and Marxist-based future and present-day resistance to capitalism can be built only upon a material-communicative basis, it is necessary to prioritise. Digitality is the first problem. Digital technology, acting as another category of technology, the first technology that we have to compare and contrast with the analogue, must be seen for what it is. It must be seen for what it compels us to realise—that we ourselves are analogue in our essence, in our evolution, and in the institutions, cultures, societies and economies that have been expressions of these. It must be seen also that, as currently constructed and applied through market-based and capitalist-driven processes, digital technology is antithetical to the analogue-based legacies that are the basis of historical

materialism and much of our present-day historical conditioning in terms of how we imagine the world to be. For example, liberal democracy and social democracy were conceived and spread using the ‘material forms and processes’ of communication from the eighteenth and early twentieth century, respectively, yet we assume they can function in the same way through digital means.

All this leads to the conclusion that, on the concept of base-superstructure and hegemony in the context of culture-formation, Williams was prescient in his identification of the materiality of communication. But Fuchs underestimates the power of digitality, both as an ideology—which it is—and as an antithetical techno-logic that deeply reaches into every register of society. Moreover, the analogue-digital dualism, and the eclipsing of the former by the latter as the hegemonic techno-logic, force us to acknowledge that the base-superstructure analyses, from Marx through Williams to Fuchs, must be seen for what they are—analogue constructions from an analogue era. Base and superstructure, as articulated by Williams and Fuchs, albeit with nuance and suppleness, need to be put to one side as a way to understand capitalism, until the nature of digitality is understood and prioritised as a central question of our time.

The Withering Roots of Analogue Culture Within Digital Capitalism

Interpenetration between base and superstructure suggests a certain separation of the spheres. Williams saw these spheres as functioning in a ‘totality’, but that this concept only made sense in the context of hegemony, the crucial ideological and communicative force that could provide the tipping-point for the success or otherwise of an ideological component within capitalism.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, separation of the spheres, involving the effects of time and space, meant that during the long analogue era of capitalism there were elements of culture-formation in the superstructure where the productive forces of the base could colonise it completely, or lightly, or not at all. This was something that Williams and his close contemporaries, E.P. Thomson and Eric Hobsbawm, understood well. Thompson, for example, was a Marxist labour historian of the early New Left who chronicled the working-class cultures of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in industrialising Britain. In *Customs in Common*, Thompson makes the useful point that ‘custom’ was a term that ‘carried many of the meanings we now assign to “culture”’ and that ‘many of the classic struggles at the entry to the industrial revolution turned as much on customs as upon wages or conditions of work.’⁴⁶ In other words, at the early phase of industrialisation, the sphere of the base was seen as another, alien, sphere that could represent an existential threat to pre-industrial culture. Thompson provides an example of what may be seen as a ‘common’ protective response in many parts of Britain to the incursion by capitalism into culture through what he terms ‘rough music’. This was a public display of popular sentiment in towns and villages by

means of a 'raucous, ear-shattering noise' made by people parading through the streets, banging pots and pans to create a 'music' that could be mocking, or lewd, or obscene, or a form of 'ritual hostility' to some local issue or person that was offensive to community norms.⁴⁷ Thomson writes that this custom was a part of a Europe-wide practice that went back at least to medieval times, but was then expressing customs and meanings and memories against the incursions of capitalism in the early phase of industrialisation. Historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote of a later period of working-class culture, where capitalism and industry were more centrally a part of individual and community lives. As part of the rise and spear of industry, 'authentic' forms of culture that still existed were, to employ Marx's term, becoming 'conditioned' by capitalism. This was a transition phase expressing what Hobsbawm called a 'semi-industrial pattern of culture'.⁴⁸ We can still recognise forms of this today in their specificities, but we can recognise also that they are dwindling or becoming quaint or archaic in the age of digitality. Hobsbawm describes a transition phase from semi- to fully-industrialised culture in the 1840s:

In the pre-industrial towns, communities of craftsmen and domestic workers evolved a literate, intense culture in which Protestant sectarianism combined or competed with Jacobin radicalism as a stimulus to self-education, Bunyan and John Calvin with Tom Paine and Robert Owen. Libraries, chapels and institutes, gardens and cages in which the artisan 'fancier' bred his artificially exaggerated flowers, pigeons and dogs, filled these self-reliant and militant communities of skilled men...⁴⁹

By the end of the century, however, there existed a 'wholly industrial life' in which the 'cultural needs' of the workers and the poor were formed.⁵⁰ By then the spheres had merged into their 'totality', or 'complex whole' as Williams put it, but with still the distinct and recognisable 'class character of a particular society'—which for Williams was those of South Wales and Cambridge that shaped his own cultural life with their 'ordinary' meanings.⁵¹

Such culture-forming was based upon analogue capitalism. Its techno-logic provided the forms of time and space that were based upon the concept of 'recognition', where the effects of the productive base showed a discernible link between cause and effect, and where the individual and community were 'conditioned' to adapt or resist or evolve with its logic. This generated in humans what Glenn Adamson terms a 'material intelligence', where 'scale and distance' were produced analogically and set at *human* scale and distance.⁵² This was the case at least until the dawn of the electronic age of the 1960s when McLuhan told us that the new age of electronically augmented 'extensions of man' posed new ontological questions concerning the human-technology relationship.

Intellectually and philosophically, as far as understanding media technology is concerned, we have never really gotten beyond the aphoristic skein that McLuhan drew over media's ontological consequences. And so we were

unprepared for the time when McLuhan's 'electronic' age became the digital age. We largely assumed that they were the same, an evolved and more sophisticated form of communication, when they were not. McLuhan's electronic 'global village' was analogue technology at its furthestmost point of recognition for media technology users. And this was what made it (and McLuhan) so fascinating. For example, although 1960s television appeared almost as a form of magic in a box in front of our eyes, we could still *recognise* the process in terms of its technological cause and effect. Satellite transmission of 'real-time' global events such as the 1968 Olympics, or the live unfolding of the hostage crisis at the Munich Olympics four years later, stretched the imagination in terms of the technical feat involved. The SYNCOM satellite that televised these was analogue, but this was the time of analogue-digital crossover in satellite communications.⁵³ Such global spectacles could generate new cultural meanings so that we could begin to feel ourselves as being a part of the global village, even though:

to someone in London or Sydney, Mexico and Munich could still feel very distant when represented by grainy pictures and feeble analogue signals. However, although the message of the media was still analogue, it was a media technology in decline, and it was *this* message—the message of one category of technology being replaced by another—that we collectively failed to register.

For those billions caught within the logic of digitality today, the experience of space shrinks, and the experience of time accelerates. One effect is that our ancient faculty for analogue and human-scale recognition does not function so well. Nowhere feels distant any longer, and we don't really understand or reflect upon this, especially when the media seems to be for 'free' through Facebook or Zoom or WhatsApp.

Digital culture is produced through different technological means than was analogue culture. The base and superstructure of Williams and Fuchs tell us how culture formed in the analogue industrial world, but their analogue-based analysis cannot tell us much about culture formation in the digital context. Within the techno-logic of digitality there are no spheres of base and superstructure that imbricate and mix and overlap to constitute a (modern) totality, one that is subject to a recognisable power-discourse of hegemony. Production and consumption (base and superstructure) function within a single sphere—a digital sphere, a digital loop that has excluded and alienated the individual, and society, from the material and analogue 'circle of action' that according to Arnold Gehlen constituted our actual essence and our actual deep point of authenticity—indeed, our only point of authenticity. Culture is still formed by meanings, but such meanings are formed through a non-recognition of the cause and effect of digital communication. This in turn means that we do not fully understand or recognise the basis of our culture-formation. We

have entrusted it to the new ‘magic’ of networked computation, a growing ecology of digital applications and devices that shrinks space and accelerates time so as to make communication ‘efficient’ for us for ostensible reasons of convenience. At the same time, however, these media obliterate the analogue underpinnings of at least 500 years of print culture—a different medium with a very different message.⁵⁴

Digital culture is extra-‘ordinary’ culture but not in a way that Williams would see as positive, where the ‘nature of a culture’ is ‘always both traditional and creative’. As we will see, digital culture is subject to a logic that itself does not—cannot—recognise or promote either tradition or creativity. This is ‘ordinary’ to use Williams’ term, in that it contains ‘meanings and directions’⁵⁵ that emerge from the ‘specific activities of men (*sic*) in real social and economic relationships.’⁵⁶ However, these new meanings and directions emerge from our technological relationship with a new category of technology. Consumer culture forms a vast domain of cultural practice within the logic of digitality. But it is so pervasive and so transformed from its analogue origins in the late nineteenth century that the term ‘consumer’ is now a misnomer. I will end this part with some considerations on how we might think about this term in the context of digitality. But firstly we need think about consumer culture historically and critically before reflecting upon its dénouement—to then reflect upon what has replaced it.

Consumer Culture’s Academic Ghetto

‘Consumer culture’ has functioned as a critical concept at least since the 1940s and the publication of ‘The Culture Industry’ by Adorno and Horkheimer.⁵⁷ Their essay in many ways is the ‘ground zero’ of critical theory and political economy in questions of culture within capitalism. With the most advanced and developed mass culture of the US as the object of their analysis, the Frankfurt School authors describe an almost science-fictionally dystopic vista of mass ‘obedience to the rhythm of [an] iron system’ of fiendish deception and total control by a relentless commodification that impresses its uniform stamp upon everything—material and consciousness, ‘body and soul’.⁵⁸ It is a system from which there is no escape, and no retreat into a pre-capitalist idyll untouched by accumulation’s insatiate appetite. There is no solace to be found within ‘high’ culture, either, as this too is now a ‘species of commodity’ promoted more openly and brazenly than ever before.⁵⁹ For many, Adorno and Horkheimer’s grapeshot blast was ideologically and psychologically too much to bear in terms of what it implied for prospects for working-class liberation, especially in a post-war climate of working-class optimism, and with social democracy broadly ascendant. It suggested that consumerism had almost a death-grip upon the consciousness, not just of workers, but everybody, and that this was something Marx and Marxism(s) had paid not nearly enough

attention to. Marxists, especially, found such a theory of ‘superstructural reality’ difficult to accept, and so on the left the culture industry thesis became either a reality suppressed, or a theory channelled safely into the universities for cloistered and ever-on-going re-interpretation. Regarding the latter fate, as Fredric Jameson put it:

Not only is this repression of the cultural moment determined by the university structure and by the ideologies of the various disciplines—thus, political science and sociology at best consign cultural issues to that ghettoizing rubric and marginalized ‘field of specialization’ called the ‘sociology of culture’—it is also and in a more general way the unwitting perpetuation of the most fundamental ideological stance of American business...⁶⁰

Within the university is where the idea has remained—and so attenuated as a way to understand the actual power of accumulation and the commodity when applied to culture. This in retrospect was a fatal intellectual turn. It was a problem compounded by the fact of the post-war ‘golden age’ of the 1950s and 1960s, when the working-classes of the Western democracies embraced consumerism and its culture with alacrity. Workers chasing after jobs and overtime to buy cars and homes and cinema tickets will rarely be militant and will never be revolutionary. Thought leaders within and around the universities were already re-interpreting the connection between capitalism and culture. Vance Packard, for instance, an English graduate and then journalist, published a huge best-seller in 1957 titled *The Waste Makers*. He sought to criticise and negativise the term ‘consumer’ and the kind of society it produced. However, Packard didn’t critique capitalism or capitalist consumption—such ideas had been consigned to the universities—but instead targeted ‘the mass-marketers and status-promoters [who] have moved into culture in a large way’ with their use of new psychological insights with which to manipulate the hapless consumer who buys impulsively the commodity with built-in obsolescence after being lured to it by a price-cut through ‘aggressive advertising and selling.’⁶¹ In popular books, Packard and others exposed a problem with the negative logic of consumption within competitive capitalism, but they tended to look at societal effects (such as over-consumption) as opposed to deeper causes—philosophical, economic or technological.

Others in the 1960s’ new left felt energised to make some kind of critique of the commodified ‘superstructural reality’ that permeated everyday life and did see capitalism and its commodification logic as the problem. However, they mostly refused to subscribe to the radical dystopia conjured up by the Frankfurt School, and maintained that revolutionary ways to resist must be found. One of these was Guy Debord. In the 1960s it was Debord who led the semi-popular, semi-intellectual charge against consumer capitalism. He took it for granted that industrial commodities now controlled and shaped culture.

In the new media age of the mass-consumed image, Debord saw 'the image [as] the last stage of commodity reification' and therefore the site of the final battle against capitalism's commodifying assault upon the possibilities inherent in human culture-making.⁶² For Debord and the Situationist movement, what he termed *détournement*, or the use of artistic cunning, of cleverness, of knowingness, in order to subvert the commercial image, text, practices and ways of seeing, was how resistance to 'commodity reification' must begin. Debord promoted *détournement* as a kind of 'anti-art' to use against a high and low modern culture which he saw as 'dead' in terms of its capacity to represent or express or practise culture that was in any way free or authentic.⁶³ We see *détournement's* historical legacy today in the art of Banksy.⁶⁴ However, Debord and his movement were never able to transcend consumer culture through *détournement*. Indeed, as they themselves had identified—and this was something that Adorno and Horkheimer would have seen as anyway inevitable—the *recuperation* of their strategies of resistance once 'the shock had lost its punch' was the ineluctable fate of *détournement*.⁶⁵ Alongside the fate of the works of Banksy today, the 1960s poster image of Che Guevara stands as a good example of the recuperation process: an image of the Argentinian revolutionary by Alberto Korda that was stylised and commodified and consumed by millions after Guevara's death in 1967.⁶⁶ The image circulates widely still, but as a sign emptied of any trace of the Latin American struggles against imperialism and capitalism in the 1950s and 1960s.

Concerned with the same issues as Debord, Adorno and Horkheimer, though with different conclusions, was Herbert Marcuse, possibly the last great voice of the 1960s who could appreciate the extent of the terrible damage that consumerism had inflicted upon prospects for human freedom. But he, too, was ultimately pessimistic. Art—and 'higher art' especially—was the only hope for possible salvation, according to Marcuse. The language of art, he wrote, 'creates another universe of thought against and within the existing one'.⁶⁷ But he also saw that our cultural universe within commodifying capitalism was an irreparably fragmented one, where feelings, impressions and experiences are unable to connect. The irony is that art can create a fragment or zone of culture wherein it becomes possible to recognise the empty and degraded reality of the wider superstructure. However, to know this is also to know that we, individually and collectively, are unable to do anything about it—except to refuse (as much as is possible) to be a part of the machine that capitalism creates. But even Marcuse could not sustain his optimism. As he put it at the end of *One-Dimensional Man*, the 1960s book that would make him famous for a time in the latter years of that decade: 'totalitarian tendencies of the one-dimensional society' are of a force and power where 'nothing indicates that it will be a good end'.⁶⁸

A new decade saw a new philosophical attitude towards the conjunctions of capitalism and culture. It is perhaps no coincidence that the cultural studies discipline that Raymond Williams helped to create began to burgeon in

these intellectually more conservative decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Cultural studies by then had become an established ‘field of specialisation,’ to use Jameson’s term. And a post-1968 generation of scholars, many with an experimental neo-Marxist perspective on things, looked for hope, or alternatives, or some kind of authenticity in the processes of culture formation. However, many of those who would make names for themselves in the academy looked for these not in a direct critique of the commodity logic as an expression of capitalism and its technologies, as did Adorno, Horkheimer, Debord and Marcuse, but instead in an *embrace* of the commodity logic in the search to find freedom within it.

Stuart Hall must be mentioned here because he was one of the most influential cultural theorists up until his death in 2018. From the 1970s on Hall combined a post-colonial theorising with a newly-popular Gramscian framework to identify the power structures at work in cultural production. He sought to de-construct these and lay open their capitalist and imperialist logics. Hall and his numerous followers set the Anglophone culture studies departments abuzz in these Thatcher and Reagan years. Cheap money fuelling consumer debt saw commodity culture explode across a globalising capitalist sphere and provided a vast cornucopian spectacle for theorists to work with. New generations of academics in the field of cultural studies (and in social theory, politics and sociology) were employed to decode TV shows and films, as well as shopping malls, youth fashion and music, sport, advertising, video, comics, and much else. Resistance and counter-hegemonic strategies and sub-cultural symbolic dress-codes became the currency of analysis in these decades.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, and to draw from Jameson once more, this perspective was born in the universities, and was never anything other than ghettoised theory and knowledge that circulated largely in the heads of academics and students and in the specialist books and journals that published it. But Hall was revolutionary enough to agree with Raymond Williams that politics must still play a role in cultural theory and practice. Accordingly, he saw the field of culture as a part of the ‘long revolution’ (Williams’s term) that aims for ‘popular control’ over culture and its forms.⁷⁰ For Hall this involved spreading the word beyond the ghetto. The magazine *Marxism Today* in which Hall chose to publish ‘The Culture Gap’ in 1984 was a publication that could be picked up in any fairly large newsagent or railway station in Britain at that time, and so was a potential vehicle for popularising a critical awareness of consumerism. As a monthly it sold up to 15,000 copies, a circulation far above any academic book or journal. However, *Marxism Today*’s politics were rather different from other socialist-left journals such as the *New Left Review* or the *Monthly Review*. Its editor Martin Jacques was quoted in the *New York Times* in 1988 as saying, apropos the magazine’s political positioning, that ‘The left must be committed to economic modernisation and international competitiveness.’⁷¹ There is no little irony here that Hall, a devotee of Gramsci, would publish in a journal whose editor displayed telling Gramscian signs of being under the spell of the hegemony of 1980s neoliberal

ideology. This was a world of fragmentation that Marcuse had identified more than twenty years before, but vastly more so. And as we can see, the ideas and alternatives that Marcuse saw as impossible to connect in a 1960s world of 'total reification' were, in Hall and his acolytes, critiques of resistance from *within these fragments*. They were degraded ideas from an even more degraded era in terms of the depth and scale of an insatiable consumer culture. And so, *Marxism Today's* ideas, and by extension the ideas of Hall too, had a negligible constituency in terms of workers looking for counter-hegemonic strategies in their consumer-culture lives. The magazine's circulation inevitably dwindled as neoliberal globalisation became increasingly ascendant. It ceased publication in 1988, a time when in the popular imagination 'Marxism' meant Erich Honecker, or Nicolae and Elena Ceauşescu, leaders who would soon feel the tide of history turning against them, and where Martin Jacques's eccentric views about 'international competitiveness' in the realm of Marxist ideas mattered little to a world thinking about other things.

Zygmunt Bauman was a significant writer who held a consistent line on culture throughout these times—criticising the ghettoed theorisations of consumption and culture and of the 'freedoms' and 'choice' that consumer society purportedly brought. Viewed by Ali Rattansi as the 'Adorno of our times'⁷² Bauman wrote that capitalism provided freedom and choice, but only within the parameters of market-approved commodities—and this was to render the consumer essentially 'unfree' or trapped within the boundaries of the capitalist market itself. To have active agency in the marketplace, Bauman writes, is to have hardly any kind of agency at all, and certainly not political agency:

All possible dissent is ... depoliticized beforehand; it is dissolved into yet more personal anxieties and concerns and thus deflected from the centres of societal power to private suppliers of consumer goods. The gap between the desired and the achieved states of happiness results in the increased fascination with the allurements of the markets and the appropriation of commodities.⁷³

Bauman speaks here of the power of the commodity and its capacity to generate the social practice that—as an unintended consequence—establishes an apolitical culture, or a culture that is 'political' only insofar as it is expressed as a cultural politics of style or taste or distinction. Such culture is not a culture of social change. It is, rather—in the context of digitality—a new and distinct form of post-modern culture that is narrow in scope, inflexible regarding what is acceptable, and regressive in respect of its capacity to grow into something *actually* new.

Bauman's view that consumer culture is 'depoliticized' is in fact only a surface articulation of a deeper and more serious problem. Jameson moves closer to identifying it when he writes of the ghettoisation of an idea by a dominant ideology. The study of culture was kept safely within the universities, he saw,

there to be endlessly interpreted and to form an intellectual backdrop wherein commodity culture is a given, a normative world *within which* meaning is made. Judith Butler made a similar point about Marxism being relegated to the universities to become 'cultural studies', or Marxist theory and practice being mainly about the study of culture.⁷⁴ But Jameson saw the ghettoisation of the particular idea of mass culture under capitalism as being the effect of reification. Mass consumer culture holds out the promise of a Utopia of material plenty and ontological fulfilment, but delivers only illusions—and does so cynically, especially in its advertising. Mass culture and commercial culture, however reified and reifying they may be, still, according to Jameson, have as their 'underlying impulse'... 'our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought to be lived.'⁷⁵ And within this space of our deepest fantasy there exists hope for a reawakening of the 'ineradicable drive towards collectivity' that may serve as the 'indispensable precondition for any meaningful Marxist intervention in contemporary culture.'⁷⁶

Where Jameson sees a glimmer of light, Adorno and Horkheimer perceive only stupefying darkness. In between these two main poles of thought, poles that are anyway not too far apart, there was (and still is) a much wider analytical space; a ghettoed space to be sure, but one from where Marxist and left-oriented critiques of culture and the consumer society are still developed today. From within the ghetto's 'field of specialization' they generate what is perhaps the bulk of the mainstream understanding of the culture-commodity relationship, and so for that reason must be included in our narrative. During the 1980s and 1990s, decades of energetic neoliberal globalisation, prominent theorists such as Judith Williamson and Paul du Gay would half-critique and half-celebrate consumer society, and so were able to avoid the dreaded 'pessimist' shadow that hangs over the Frankfurt School. Williamson, for example, in her *Consuming Passions* from 1986 argues that advertisers channel our emotions and turn them into passions in a perspective not far removed from Adorno and Horkheimer's 'mass deception' thesis. At the same time, however, she uses Marx to suggest that consumer culture is a trap from which there is no escape, so we might as well enjoy it, and use it to shape our identities. She begins her book with a scene-setting side-swipe at Marx who, as she puts it, 'talks of the commodity as "congealed labour", the frozen form of a past activity; [whereas] to the consumer it is also a congealed longing.'⁷⁷ For Williamson, this longing or passion can be uncongealed and set free through the 'power of purchase'. To buy can be a form of 'active power' and this power and passion that are the expression of latent consumerism are 'what breathes new life into objects.'⁷⁸ To buy something is therefore not just to 'own' it, but also to 'be' it, such that it can express who you are or who you wish to be.

Later on in the book she continues with a narrative on the work of the pioneer postmodern photographer Cindy Sherman to illustrate the power of choice that she (Williamson) wields as she faces a wardrobe full of things to wear:

When I rummage through my wardrobe in the morning I am not merely faced with a choice of what to wear. I am faced with a choice of images: the difference between a smart suit and a pair of overalls, a leather skirt and a cotton skirt, is not one of fabric and style, but one of identity. You know perfectly well that you will be seen differently for the whole day, depending upon what you put on; you will appear as a particular kind of woman with one particular identity which excludes others. The black leather skirt rather rules out girlish innocence, oily overalls tend to exclude sophistication, ditto smart suit and radical feminism. Often I have wished I could put them all on together, or appear simultaneously in every possible outfit, just to say 'how dare you think any one of these is me. But also, see, I can be all of them.'⁷⁹

Paul du Gay was a rising cultural studies thinker in the mid-1990s who edited a book with Stuart Hall titled *Doing Cultural Studies*. Its second edition was blurb-ed by the *LSE Review of Books* as 'Arguably the most famous book in its field ...'⁸⁰ He agreed with Williamson's approach to the analysis of consumer culture. He believed that there was an active agency in consumer culture, and that the commodity provided the material means for positive 'self-constitution'.⁸¹ However, Williamson's own words in the above quote show clearly the restrictions the commodity logic imposes. To begin with, the process of 'self-constitution' is one of surface image, and not of any deep-reaching ontological transformation. The surface image can and does change at a whim. And what du Gay celebrates in Williamson as *bricolage*,⁸² is in Williamson's own telling, especially when extolling the photography of Sherman, more like confusion, frustration or what Harvey calls 'schizoid'.⁸³ Consumption and culture in the sense that Williamson conveys are of an early and accommodating postmodern form. Shopping, she reasons, 'makes you feel normal'. Williamson goes on to rebuke Marxism for no longer having any answers, and follows up with: 'the point about consumerism is that people are getting something out of it'⁸⁴ even if it consists of illusions. And in the prescribed postmodern style of the time, Williamson refuses to engage in a direct critique of capitalism, only of its manifestations. And so consumption no longer means the end-point of production, where 'value' has been realised and profit made and then partly invested in further production of commodities for sale, etc. Consumerism is not even a recognisable element of the base and superstructure process, because production as consumption's 'mirror' or 'conditioning' has disappeared from the analysis. The market—as bringer of choice—is implicitly, in Williamson's scant reference to the term, akin to Milton Friedman's understanding of it: as the precondition for individual freedom.⁸⁵ With the eliding of the role of capitalism and the logic of commodity production as the bases for the analysis of the consumer society, the consumer society necessarily becomes the cultural expression of a world with no relations of production and no historicity. Culture is all bricolage, choice and mouldable identity. A

chief ‘victory’ for many such theorists is that culture has been freed from the standardisation of Fordism and thus consumer society enables the individual to freely ‘self-constitute’ in whatever way they please, albeit within a ‘depoliticised’ and marketised culture. With the disappearance of historical materialism from the cultural studies analytical frame—vanished along with the function of technology in the process—what also disappears in Williamson and du Gay is the possibility of an actually alternative way of thinking and of being.

In the final sentences of ‘The Culture Industry’ Adorno and Horkheimer deliver the last hammer-blow of the negative dialectic upon cultural production and consumption. In what reads as a stark and unsparing coda to a bleak and relentless critique, they describe what they see as the victims’ own terrible knowledge of the logic that is at the heart of the ‘mass deception’ that capitalism perpetrates by means of commodification:

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.⁸⁶

Adorno and Horkheimer touch upon a deep-seated feeling of lack, specific to each of us, that recognises the truth of the deception. But it is a truth repressed and sublimated, because another truth is that we know (or feel) there is nothing we can do about it. So ‘thoroughly reified’ are we that repression or sublimation is replaced by a contingent and evanescent desire or craving that is generated and given material or immaterial form by advertising, and which occupies our consciousness as the subject and object of what stands for personal fulfilment in life within capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay does not belong in the cultural studies canon. But it is there—to be dismissed as extreme, pessimistic, deterministic, or undermining of a form of Marxism that is unable to accept what their essay shows: that through mass advertising and commercialism, the nature of the commodity (and therefore capitalism) has changed—and has changed in a way that obviates, or makes impossible, the traditional ‘revolutionary’ road towards a socialist or communist society.

To close this part I will briefly consider the last major twentieth-century philosopher of the commodity and culture conjunction, Jean Baudrillard. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, he is recognised in the cultural studies canon, but does not belong either to it or to its ghetto. He acknowledges the catastrophe that consumerism has wrought upon culture and politics, but refuses to sublimate the knowledge, and so belongs with the Frankfurt School philosophers and also with Fredric Jameson somewhere outside the semi-celebratory

mainstream. His work is also an important crossover into digitality, a point I will develop soon.

In his early works, and following McLuhan and Debord, Baudrillard acknowledges the profound power of the electronic image. His innovation on this theme was to conceive of the shift from the power of production within capitalism as reality's materialist base in society, to the power of production of simulation or simulacra.⁸⁷ The image, or the sign, has become the primary exchange value. As Doug Kellner explains, for Baudrillard, 'commodities are not merely to be characterised by use-value and exchange value ... but sign-value—the expression and mark of style, prestige, luxury, power, and so on—becomes an increasingly important part of the commodity and consumption.'⁸⁸ Three major effects upon the production and nature of culture flow from this idea. First is that the electronic image vastly increases the power and reach of the commodity-sign. It can colonise time and space and the consciousness of the individual (as consumer) far more readily than the material object. Second, the commodity-sign as simulation or simulacrum is an illusion and therefore constitutes a new level of disconnect from the material and objectively real. And third, for Baudrillard, the growing importance of sign-value undermines the analytical value of both political economy and the base and superstructure theories that are based on historical-material assumptions of how capitalism functions. In other words, sign-capitalism has replaced nineteenth-century commodity-capitalism, and therefore immeasurably enhances the alienative power of capitalism. In *The Consumer Society*, first written in French in 1970, Baudrillard claims that:

We may ... suggest that the age of consumption, being the historical culmination of the whole process of accelerated productivity under the sign of capital, is also the age of radical alienation. Commodity logic has become generalised and today governs not only labour processes and material products, but the whole of culture, sexuality, and human relations, including even fantasies and individual drives. Everything is taken over by that logic, not only in the sense that all functions and needs are objectivised and manipulated in terms of profit, but in the deeper sense in which everything is spectacularized or, in other words, evoked, provoked and orchestrated into signs, consumables and models.⁸⁹

In their related but differing ways, the searching and penetrative critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer, Jameson and Baudrillard on the conjunctions between capital, consumption and culture teach us much about the process. Only Jameson is hopeful, however, about the chances for 'any meaningful Marxist intervention in contemporary culture.'⁹⁰ The Frankfurt scholars radically modified their Marxism and Baudrillard eventually abandoned his. What unites them, however, is the lingering spectre of alienation—the human effect of technology that has always been capitalism's ace of spades. It is an effect that

Raymond Williams took insufficient cognisance of in his almost bucolic painting of the constitution of culture, where culture, as 'ordinary', could somehow be made common and democratic through almost the innate integrity that he believed exists inside 'ordinary' people 'to know what is best and to do what is good'⁹¹—and to take humanity to a better place. These views on consumer culture, Williams's included, are not the only writings on the conjuncture, of course. But they are in my view the most original and perceptive. However, they also leave us at an impasse. Their work is pre-digital and apart from Baudrillard none of it provides solid analytical ground any longer, because the ground has shifted so radically from analogue to digital. To find a way through we need some constancy. And alienation is the constancy in the relationship with capital from analogue to digital. In Marx, and underpinning the theories just discussed, alienation is estrangement from the products of one's labour. However, digitality and its logic of automation have alienated humans not only from commodities for exchange, but also from the analogue technology that made humans who and what they are. It alienates us from a natural environment and a physical world that disappears as we enter the virtual.

In the final part I will describe in outline the cultural condition of this double-alienation through digitality. In doing so, I don't presume to offer any solutions to this condition, still less to have furnished any of the most vital questions. It is, rather, to *state where we are* in relation to this unique technology. It is to position my overall theory as nothing more than a point of insight (from a place of alienation) into a technology we currently do not recognise because the orientation toward automation at the centre of digital logic purposively prevents us from engaging with it in a way that we can understand and which has proportionality and equivalence to our human-scaled capacities.

Notes

¹ Examples of a capacious approach to the subject of 'digital culture' we find in Mark Deuze (2006) 'Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture', in: *The Information Society* 22(2), 63–75; Rob Wilkie (2011) *The Digital Condition: Class and Culture in the Information Network*. New York: Fordham University Press; and John Gorham-Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2008) *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. New York: Basic Books.

² Lev Manovich (2001) *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, p.43.

³ Ibid., p.64.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. pp.64 & 96.

⁶ J. C. R. Licklider (1960) 'Man-computer symbiosis', *IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics* 1 (March), 4–11.

- ⁷ Ibid., p.4
- ⁸ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, pp.83–84.
- ⁹ Raymond Williams (1976) *Keywords*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.xxvi
- ¹⁰ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, pp.97–98.
- ¹¹ Bernard Stiegler (2009) ‘Teleologies of the Snail: The Errant Self Wired to a WiMax Network’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 26(2–3) (March/May), 33–45, p.35.
- ¹² Ibid., p.40.
- ¹³ Ibid., p.38.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p.36.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p.41.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.42.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Sarah Phillips (2007) ‘A Brief History of Facebook’ *The Guardian Online*, 25 July. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2007/jul/25/media.newmedia>
- ²⁰ See Jaron Lanier (2018) *Ten Arguments for Deleting your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. London: The Bodley Head.
- ²¹ Timothy Snyder (2017) *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from The Twentieth Century*. London: The Bodley Head, p.71.
- ²² See, for example, David Frisby’s (1985) ‘Georg Simmel: First Sociologist of Modernity’, *Theory, Culture and Society* 2(3), 49–67.
- ²³ Georg Simmel (1971) *Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.376.
- ²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p.2 and *passim*.
- ²⁵ Karl Marx (1994) ‘A Preface to the Critique of Political Economy’, *Selected Writings*. Lawrence H. Simon (ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, p.211.
- ²⁶ Raymond Williams (1989/1958) ‘Culture is Ordinary’ in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, Robin Gable (ed.). London: Verso, pp. 92, 93 & 92.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p.96.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p.93.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Raymond Williams (1973) ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, *New Left Review* 82, November–December, p.3.
- ³¹ Ibid., p.6.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Perry Anderson (1976) ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’, *New Left Review* 1/100 October–December, 5–77.
- ³⁴ Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, p.6.

- ³⁵ Ibid., p.8
- ³⁶ The 2008 financial crisis has dented this particular common-sense idea. A 2016 Harvard University survey found that a majority of millennials were sceptical of capitalism. However, the *Washington Post* article which printed the results also said that 'A subsequent survey that included people of all ages found that somewhat older Americans also are sceptical of capitalism. Only among respondents at least 50 years old was the majority in support of capitalism.' See Max Ehrenfreud (2016) 'A majority of millennials now reject capitalism, poll shows', *Washington Post*, April 26th. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/04/26/a-majority-of-millennials-now-reject-capitalism-poll-shows/?utm_term=.21c730432742
- ³⁷ Terry Eagleton (1991) *Ideology: An Introduction*. London: Verso, p.116.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Régis Debray (2007) 'Socialism: A Life-Cycle', *New Left Review* 46 (July–August), 5–17, p.5.
- ⁴⁰ Christian Fuchs (2017) 'Raymond Williams' communicative materialism', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20(6), 744–762.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p.754.
- ⁴² Ibid., p.750.
- ⁴³ Climate Home News (2017) "'Tsunami of data" could consume one fifth of global electricity by 2025' *The Guardian Online*, 11th December: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/dec/11/tsunami-of-data-could-consume-fifth-global-electricity-by-2025>
- ⁴⁴ Fuchs, 'Raymond Williams', p.745.
- ⁴⁵ Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', pp.7–8.
- ⁴⁶ E. P. Thompson (1993) *Customs in Common*. London: Penguin Books, pp.4–5.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p.469.
- ⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm (1992) *The Age of Revolution*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p.273.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p.275.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', p.7.
- ⁵² Glenn Adamson (2018) 'Material Intelligence', *Aeon* <https://aeon.co/essays/do-you-know-your-stuff-the-ethics-of-the-material-world>
- ⁵³ Ian Glover and Peter Grant (2000) *Digital Communications*. London: Prentice Hall, p.2.
- ⁵⁴ Walter Ong (1983) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge.
- ⁵⁵ Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', p.93.
- ⁵⁶ Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', p.6.
- ⁵⁷ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1986) 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. John Cumming (trans.). London: Verso.

- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p.120 and 133.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., p.158.
- ⁶⁰ Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture' *Op. Cit.*, p. 139.
- ⁶¹ Vance Packard (1968) *The Waste Makers*. Philadelphia: David McKay Publications, pp.109 & 33.
- ⁶² Jean-François Lyotard (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.xvi.
- ⁶³ Guy Debord (1988) *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. London: Verso, p.16.
- ⁶⁴ See Banksy (2005) *Wall and Piece*. London: Century.
- ⁶⁵ Cited in Claire Gilman (1997) 'Asger Jorn's Avant-Garde Archives,' *October* (79) (Winter), 32–48, p.41.
- ⁶⁶ Adam Weishaupt (2011) *The Revolt of the Spectacular Society*. Hyperreality Books.
- ⁶⁷ Herbert Marcuse (1991) *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, p.238.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., pp.256–257. Interestingly, some recent revision of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* argues that his focus on art, as the quintessentially subjective intellectual practice, was in fact a form of bourgeois individualism and was, as Oliver Nachtwey argues, 'an important source of neoliberal collusion.' See his (2018) *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*, Loren Balhorn and David Fernbach (trans.). London: Verso., p.70.
- ⁶⁹ A good example is Simon During (ed.) (1993) *The Cultural Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993. This has essays from the cultural studies heavyweights, such as Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige—but also, rather ironically, Adorno and Horkheimer's 'The Culture Industry'. I know from experience as a 1990s PhD student in cultural studies that this collection was one that no student could be without—and would not cite liberally.
- ⁷⁰ Stuart Hall (1984) 'The Culture Gap,' *Marxism Today*, January, 18–22, p.21
- ⁷¹ Steve Lohr (1988) 'A Magazine Reflects a Shift in the British Left,' *New York Times*, April 25 p.22.
- ⁷² Ali Rattansi (2014) 'Zygmunt Bauman: an Adorno for 'liquid modern' times?,' *The Sociological Review* 62(4), November.
- ⁷³ Zygmunt Bauman (1991) *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity, p.262.
- ⁷⁴ Judith Butler (1998) 'Merely Cultural,' *New Left Review*, 1/227, January–February, 33–44, p.33.
- ⁷⁵ Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,' p.147.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p.148.
- ⁷⁷ Judith Williamson *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture*. London: Marion Boyars.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., p.12.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., p.91.
- ⁸⁰ Paul du Gay et al. (1997) *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage.

- ⁸¹ Paul du Gay (1996) *Consumption and Identity at Work*. New York: Sage, p.87. du Gay would later decamp to the Copenhagen Business School.
- ⁸² Ibid., p.87.
- ⁸³ 'schizoid' is how David Harvey (through Terry Eagleton) terms Sherman's work in (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.7.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., pp.230–231.
- ⁸⁵ Milton Friedman (1962) *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ⁸⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry', p.167.
- ⁸⁷ Jean Baudrillard (1981) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press.
- ⁸⁸ Doug Kellner (2015) 'Jean Baudrillard', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/ baudrillard/>.
- ⁸⁹ Jean Baudrillard (2017) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, p.206.
- ⁹⁰ Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', p. 148.
- ⁹¹ Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', p.95.