THE WEIGHT OF NIGHTMARES

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SMALL SCREENS, SOCIAL SPACE AND REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

CAPITALISM: A SYSTEM OF REPRESENTATION

MARX'S CRITIQUE OF political economy concerned itself, first and foremost, with the question of value. In its simplest formulation, the problem revolved around the fact that capitalist production ceased to be intended for real human needs, becoming instead a system of production solely for the purpose of exchange. Everything in this society is produced not for consumption by the direct producers, but to be placed in the market for sale; this includes the labor power of the workers themselves. Under these circumstances, the specific qualities of a human or object (individual elements, specific conditions of production, emotional or psychological attachments, etc) no longer matter. Every material thing and everyone's labor (manual or intellectual) could *and* should be exchanged for each other. The commodification (or valuation for exchange) of an object or a human's labor power, regardless of its specific characteristics, is what Marx terms abstract value (within which, abstract labor is to be regarded as the most extreme and problematic case). A system dominated primarily, if not exclusively, by the market had to create an enormous system of value-equivalence so that there would be uniformity and regularity to the entire process of exchange. That is how the whole of capitalist society came to be reducible to the money economy.

Marx's critique stemmed not from these facts themselves, which he judged to be accurately analyzed and presented by classical political economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo; it stemmed from the fact that classical economists assumed these facts to be natural. In philosophical terms, this translated into a problem of ontology, rather than merely of ideology. That is to say, these social facts *along with* the classical economic concepts that accompanied them took on a life of their own (they turned into a type of being, an *ontos*). Marx's critique, therefore, was based on the fact that all the mechanisms of the capitalist economy and its extended social relations were based on a specific illusion: things appeared to relate to each other as things, when the reality consists of relations among people.

Money, as the universal equivalent-of-all-equivalences, stands at the apex of this gigantic dance of the commodity.

Money itself would have no reality without a specific set of social relations to sustain it. But, since this is the only form in which that set of relations appears to us, the capitalist world appears to our everyday perception in inverted form as a system of autonomous things: as stated above, things relating to each other as things, as opposed to being the result of a process of relations between human beings. The money-form regulates and legitimizes the social process which reduces all the attributes of things and people to some quantifiable and calculable form, producing an illusion of reality where "all that is solid melts into air." Trapped as yet another thing within this system of things, the laboring human being (working for a money-wage –i.e. exchange– as opposed to for his or her own consumption) begins to live in a reality without its own qualities and attributes, where the illusion of exchangeability and monetary calculus "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."

Money, therefore, is a "thing" when it appears to us in our everyday life, but in effect, it is only a representation of a web of relations of production, circulation and consumption organized through institutionalized power and bureaucratic control. However, unlike the shadows in Plato's famous cave, the representations of capitalism take form, they become real (*ontic*). Thus, the reduction of capitalist society to the money economy is a reduction of all substance to form, of all living processes into a frozen thing (reification). Centered around the money-form in this fashion, capitalism consists of a gigantic system of representations.

THE PRODUCTION AND PRACTICE OF SOCIAL SPACE
AS MATERIAL GROUNDING OF CAPITALIST REPRESENTATIONS

The notion of commodity fetishism can itself become reified (or re-fetishized) if it becomes conceived as a "causal factor," rather than as a descriptive concept of a social process. Bad things do not happen in capitalism because of commodity fetishism; rather, commodity fetishism is one of the bad things that happens because of the ongoing processes of capitalism. Capitalist representations are, therefore, not things but processes materially grounded in particular elements of our everyday life.

One of the most crucial elements is space. Social space is a result of particular modes of production (i.e., industrial capitalism had to "take place" in

the industrial city); thus, the analysis of the capitalist mode of production requires an analysis of the space produced in order to implement the processes of capitalist production and consumption. More crucially, capitalism is a system of relations of production that increasingly separates work (by turning it into quantified, abstract labor) from other facets of human life; but, at the same time, capitalism also needs to conquer and control (subsume) all aspects of life. This means that it has to territorially grow. It also means that it has to enter spheres of the everyday world that were once considered outside of the social realm. Capitalism has to always find a way to extend the relations of production forged at the workplace to the rest of the human world. It is in this process where we find the most interesting issue concerning the relation between the everyday experience of capitalism and the production and material practice of space.

Given the fetishistic nature of the capitalist process, it should be no surprise to anybody that a "culture of representation" is forged as the relations of production already established at the workplace are extended to the entire social world. We are, after all, cultural beings, and no economic or political process can ever take place without culture. At the level of everyday experience, it is impossible to ascertain which part of "paying for my gas with my dollars at the gas station" is economic and which is cultural. The same goes for historical analysis: nowhere are historians capable of offering "testimony from the direct participants" which could delineate a neat division between socioeconomic and cultural changes as they are occurring. We can talk with assurance of a division between economy and culture only when we carry out forms of analysis after the fact; necessary as this analytic process might be, it is imperative to fix that form of understanding as such, and not to substitute it (in reified form) for the actual experience of everyday life. Based on this, we can say that at the level of everyday experience, any form of capitalism trying to extend relations of production into social relations will have, by necessity, to find cultural means to do so. Since space is one of the material grounds for these processes, it becomes crucial to understand the use and nature of the spaces of representation existing in contemporary everyday life.

The quintessential space of representation of late capitalism is the screen. In fact, it can be argued that the emergence of Taylorism – the first form taken by the relations of production of late capitalism starting in the 1890s – is inconceivable without the movie screen. At the same time, the screen is not "natural" to the cinema; in fact, the earliest films – made by WKL Dickson for Edison's company – were shown in kinetoscopes, which were

boxes with a viewfinder. Showing films in public by projecting them onto a screen was the real innovation and triumph of the Lumière Family and it is what allowed the technological spectacle of the cinema to be tied to the production of a society of mass consumption. It is not important here to analyze the initial period of late capitalism or the movie screen; we will instead turn our attention to the small screens of "flexible" or "globalized" capitalism. Suffice it to say that it is at this point where the most important aspect of screen space also emerges: the assemblage of associated spaces. The screen, in fact, is the final space that becomes accessible to the viewer – that viewer has "reached" the screen by going through the streets of the city, through the lobby of a theater, and into the space of the seating auditorium. All these spaces work together to produce a certain conditioning of the perceptive apparatus of the viewer; that is to say, these spaces work together to gradually transport the viewer from the lifeworld of everyday experience to the "magical" realm of a purely symbolic visual spectacle. The screen is the space where the representation of representations takes place, and it is perfectly suited to become an extremely fetishized space within the gigantic system of capitalist representation.

In the contemporary form of late capitalism – "flexible or Just-In-Time (JIT) production," also known as "globalization" – the large screen of the cinema has yielded centrality to the small screens of television and computers. Below are some initial ideas for the analysis of the assemblage of spaces of the small screen and its relation to contemporary society.

TELEVISION: THE CENTRAL SPACE OF REPRESENTATION IN THE TRANSITION TO GLOBALIZATION

Perhaps no reflection on television shows the spatial transformation of everyday life like Redford's *Quiz Show*, based on a screenplay by Paul Attanasio (who also developed the critically acclaimed television drama *Homicide, Life in the Streets*). There is a sequence, near the beginning of this movie, in which Herbie Stempel – a popular but intractably grating and cloying contestant in a television quiz show – successfully advances to the next round; but while he is in the process of doing so, the main advertiser orders him "bumped off." Ignorant of his fate, Stempel has to get into a booth placed inside the sound studio. This is captured by a tv camera equipped with a square screen where we can see Stempel and the booth as an image; this image; in turn, shows up on another square screen – a tv inside the office of the broadcast company's president, who takes the phone

from the advertiser and, then, dutifully calls the director at his own booth located above the pubic seated in the soundstage where the quiz show is being aired. The control booth relays the call to the producers sitting among the live audience, who reply to the sponsor that the common consumers in New York identify with Herbie, who comes from Queens; the promoter exclaims with finality as he slams the receiver: "Queens is not New York!" Having triumphantly finished his round, and full of himself, Herbie takes the chauffeured limousine back to his neighborhood in Queens, but requests to be dropped off a few houses down the block so that he can bask in public adulation as he walks up the street – he passes a whole row of nearly identical houses with people sitting on the stoops or looking out the ground floor window, all cheering or giving him a wisecrack or two. As he reaches his own house and goes up the stoop, a television set is seen in his living room. Inside the apartment is his wife speaking on the telephone to her mother.

The entire sequence has been a striking representation of new productions of space as extended social practices of everyday life. Everyday life in Eisenhower's America has become a spectacle of little people shoved into boxes which themselves are boxed inside other boxes. The contestant's booth inside the soundstage is a box, which is inside the larger box of the soundstage. The frozen isolation of the individual would be final, if it were not for the fact that the man in the box is captured as an image by the television camera, which is yet another box also inside the larger box of soundstage. That image is sent to a television set, yet another box which can be found in a sumptuous corporate office; but more importantly to programmers and advertisers, it is mostly found in each of identical little boxes of housing (to wit Malvina Reynolds' memorable song) found in urban and suburban neighborhoods. The only spatial anomaly is the street, that interstitial space where the "community" can still gather for an unmediated face-to-face encounter. Otherwise, neighbors and families "get together" by means of distancing technologies that serve to bridge the isolating practices of everyday space: the telephone or the television (both aptly named with the same suffix of Greek origin, *tele* = distance).

At the same time, Redford's film comes close to setting a class based analysis of socio-economic agency, since it clearly distinguishes between the lavish corporate spaces where the movers and shakers make their decisions and call down to their enforcers, while the dwellers of the little boxes in the outer boroughs are the impotent subjects and instruments of their will to profit. In fact, these corporate moguls, who are responsible for what the little people see on tv, spend their time in the office paying very little

attention to the television itself. Only the poor become dependent on tv to gain a "worldview."

Yet, the movie also shows that, eventually, even the social space of the most genteel intellectual aristocracy will be savagely modified by tv. The producers of the quiz show decide to replace Stempel with Charles Van Doren, the handsome child of a famous professor at Columbia University and part of a highly regarded literary family. We first see the Van Dorens at a friend's literary party, where witty repartee of the highest order is bandied about with great aplomb. The young Van Doren, however, is by himself in a side room of the mansion, watching Stempel's quiz show. Unlike his famous father, he shows great interest in the new medium and its possibilities, and decides to apply to be a contestant. Despite his high upbringing, he proves to be as naive as the common folk who make up the great American public he wishes to conquer. Soon he discovers that the producers of the show are not interested in his intellectual prowess. They are rigging the contest by giving him the answers ahead of time. At first he resists, but the popularity he is gaining among the pretty Barnard girls who attend his class, helps him get used to his fate as a mere status symbol that legitimates a show which, in turn, is itself meant to legitimate a product (in this case, a tonic to restore energy to the elderly, which eventually became banned for its dubious claims, turning the quiz show producers and advertisers into contemporary "snake oil salesmen").

Just as the young Van Doren is about to show the world that he is as good as his highly regarded father, in comes a pesky government lawyer to investigate both him and the show. The lawyer's suspicions about the legitimacy of the show prove, in fact, to be correct; eventually he reaches an embittered Stempel, who tells him that he had been ordered to lose to none other than Charles. The lawyer, like Stempel, is a young Jewish man from New York, and can appreciate the pain of someone like him being once again "restricted" out of the American (that is, WASP) mainstream. After amassing enough evidence, the lawyer decides to visit Charles at Columbia University. With a mixture of hubris and debonaire charm, Charles invites the lawyer to spend Sunday at his Connecticut estate, where they will celebrate his father's birthday. During the luncheon, father and son compete by quoting and identifying passages from Shakespeare's plays, while various luminaries of the New York intelligentsia observe the proceedings with casual awe. Eventually, they begin to talk about his son's recent wealth and fame, and Professor Van Doren confesses that he has never seen him compete, because he has never owned a television set nor cared to watch very closely. As the birthday gifts

are finally opened, we get to a huge wrapped package in the middle of the lawn; it turns out to be, of course, a huge television set, a gift from his own wildly successful son. The father casually exclaims that now he must deal with having to find a place in the house to put it.

This is the perfect expression for the impact that the televisual practice of space has on the other spaces and rhythms of everyday life. Homes like the Van Doren's soon began to produce their own specialized space: the television den. As the second half of the 20th century began, the modern family household soon altered its activities, rapidly spending more and more of its leisure time in front of the tv set. That allowed for a certain spectacularization of everyday life in ways previously not afforded within the confines of the home, but it came at the cost of surrendering control of even one's affective life. The movie, once again, shows the emotional toll exacted on those whose lifeworld is now stressed by the intensified bursts of "experience" emanating from the tv set. At one point, we see the elder Van Dorens watching as their son competes in the quiz show. The elder Van Doren becomes increasingly agitated and suddenly jumps up, abruptly shutting off the television without waiting to see the outcome. As his wife looks at him in astonishment, he can only exclaim that it is too much, that he cannot stand it. (Needless to say, at that point he is still ignorant of the fact that the quiz show is fake and that the producers have furnished his son with the answers beforehand.)

This change in the cultural habits of modern society became cause of immediate concern. Social researchers fretted about a whole range of issues – possible effects on children's capacity to understand complex concepts due to reduction in attention spans, possible increased tendencies towards violence from daily exposure to television programming, possible skewed electoral politics (evidenced by voter preference for JFK over Nixon, because the former looked better on television), and so on. It is not surprising, within this framework, that most of the social analysis of television and mass media tends to emphasize how these new forms of communication take increasing control of our lives, countered only recently by "audience studies" tending to equally skew analysis in the opposite direction.

Less attention has been paid to the role of television in bringing about a structural transformation of life in its totality, rather than as a mere transformation of the modern "social psychology." Some of these transformations have been condensed by the Postmodernist trope of a "culture of the simulacrum" (noted by Kosinsky in *Being There*, years ahead of Baudrillard).

Much attention has been paid to the "transition" from Modernism to Postmodernism and their corresponding linkages to the transition from Taylorism-Fordism to the system of "flexible" or JIT production. This transition, though, remains a mystery in the analysis of our current condition of postmodernity. Every analyst of modernity seems to run into a gap in explaining the emergence of this "social psychology" that at some sudden turning point in our history falls prey to the "penetration" of film, tv and other visual mass media.

The mystery resides, in our view, in specific and materially-grounded practices of space. Just like the cinema, the production of a televisual screen space leads to a linkage of associated spaces, beginning with the space of the living room; which is how television becomes inserted into the domestic flow of everyday life. The radio, of course, had already taken the same function within the quotidian; but, lacking a screen, it did not have the same capacity as the television to capture the viewers' undivided attention by fixing the consumptive process of mass communication to a single point in space. In effect, the flow of everyday life was generally accompanied – but not modified – by the disembodied voice or sound (music, for example) of the radio. Television restores the embodied and gestural aspects of the communicative process, taking the same social place that the storytellers of the oral culture had. But, in contrast to the *griot* or the itinerant *rhapsodic* poets of Homeric times, television does not create a public sphere in a public place. Instead, it creates an entire new practice of domestic space, in which activities must be interrupted or altogether abandoned because one must stay pinned to a single place, paying attention to the screen. Television has effectively collapsed the public sphere of politics and commerce into the private sphere of the home, turning the recreational aspects of the cycle of social reproduction on its head – entertainment is no longer a discrete activity carried out in a specific and separate representational space (like a theater). Instead it becomes interspersed with commercials and attached as a form of programming flow to the stream of everyday life activities. The point to this flow, as it is well known, is to gather and hold the attention of a stable percentage of the viewing audience in order to lure advertisers to that network. Programming is simple filler between commercial breaks, and mass audiences are the actual commodity that is being "sold" to the advertisers. It is through these particular practices of everyday life, grounded in material transformations of the social world (such as productions of space) that the commodification of all aspects of everyday life is completed; and it is this complete commodification of the audience

which accounts for the allegedly superior "ability of the image to penetrate the human mind."

There is very little point for us to trace the historical development of television or to do an analysis of specific programs. This analysis would inevitably have to be contextual rather than textual, for no matter how viscerally hard hitting, introspectively pithy, or mordantly funny these shows are, tv programs do not offer any differences in terms of visual form or content from the cinema. The only textual transformation comes from the increased possibilities offered by the tv medium to serialize stories (a practice that the cinema had confined to "short-subjects" in the matinee shows of the movie palace era). Serialization has largely privileged the melodrama (usually the soap opera, although "adult dramas" like *E.R.* have successfully grafted this subgenre to prime time), the crime story, and the situation comedy. The repetitive nature of the serialized narrative enables television to correspond to the routinized stability of the viewer's everyday experience in ways seldom, if ever, available to film – in fact, watching television does become part of the personal routine of everyday life. This process of serialized routinization allows for a paradoxical intensification of televisual realism and verisimilitude, despite the fact that the sharpness and definition of the tv image is noticeably inferior to photography and film (i.e., the tv image is not "like how the eye sees," a problem which may disappear with the High Definition standard). When this process is inserted as a spatial practice into the flows of domestic life, it produces a powerful effect of subjectivation in which the viewer relates to the virtual universe of television as if it were real.

Given this new "technique of the observer," television then counts on diminished attention spans and blurred lines between fiction, reality, and entertainment. It is here that the socially structuring impact of television is the strongest. Over the past two decades (as the Era of JIT and Globalization takes its worldwide hold), we have seen a transformation of mainstream television in which news and "reality" shows take up greater parts of the schedule once reserved for narrative (drama and comedy) and variety programming (like *The Ed Sullivan Show*). To be sure, off-the-air broadcasters still program plenty of drama and comedy, but television too becomes part of the "flexible economy," and much of its entertainment programming has migrated to cable where it can be targeted to specific consumer niches (a key element of the JIT system): there are channels exclusively dedicated to "women's entertainment," others show only classic Hollywood films, or nothing but golf or auto racing; and, of course, a growing

number of sports are now shown primarily (hockey, basketball) or almost exclusively (boxing) through cable or satellite services.

Even so, the greatest impact that cable has had is in the all-news area, where the lines of demarcation between reality and televisual representation, and between awareness of real events and the construction of this very awareness (if not of the events themselves), becomes highly blurred.The development of globalization can be charted alongside the development of the Cable News Network (CNN). The turning point for CNN was, without doubt, the Gulf War in 1991. In a paradoxical way, that first moment of global prominence for this network came as a form of "radio" rather than tv, since the network did not have at the time the equipment to send picture from Iraq. CNN's first broadcasts consisted of a still photograph of their reporter, Peter Arnet, reporting from his hotel window while Bagdad was under heavy artillery and aerial bombardment. As soon as pictures started to come in, the Gulf War turned from riveting journalism to riveting technological spectacle with carefully intended "ideological effects:" the re-legitimation of the American Armed Forces (which had been badly damaged by the Vietnam War) and the collective valorization of a new technological apparatus of warfare – tiny cameras attached to computer-guided bombs, infrared "night vision" of aerial bombardment, etc.

From that moment on, CNN has been one of the key manifestations of a new and still emerging global divide: a formation of new social status, grouped around informational rather than purely monetary forms of wealth accumulation; with structuring markers provided by new forms of mass media, rather than by material wealth or social geography (for example, the "right" neighborhood, the "developed" nation). One no longer obtains high social status exclusively according to "what side of the tracks" one was born or according to the level of conspicuous consumption afforded by having gobs of money. The new global upper classes are still identified by those markers, but they are grouped more pointedly around specific media and information outlets (including, of course, computers). That is to say, there is more in common between CNN viewers and Wall Street Journal readers in New York City and, say, Brussels, than between those same New Yorkers and their co-territorial neighbors in, say, the "working middle class" neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Staten Island where viewing and reading habits run to local programming (e.g., the New York Post or *Judge Judy*).

If social power and status is now conferred, in addition to money, by "immaterial wealth" (information), then, we need to understand the small screen as part of the spatial practice of intellectual and cultural capital of the new global order.

COMPUTERS AND VIRTUAL SPACE:
THE QUINTESSENTIAL FETISH OF GLOBALIZATION

If a series of associated spaces was still maintained with television, the computer simply has collapsed all space and function into a single practice. The computer is simultaneously a business machine, a communication interface, a vehicle for banking and shopping, a tool for research and information gathering, and a toy. Its simultaneity also extends its socially restructuring reach to spaces that previously were not colonized by the screen – it sits on the office desk or it even fits in the palm of our hand, it presents itself as a bank teller, it allows for the waiter to relay food orders to the kitchen at many restaurants, it even connects drivers of luxury automobiles to satellite guiding systems. In terms of a collapse of function, the same computer operations and skills that we apply to job tasks like word processing, are used for recreational pursuits. This allows for work to be completed at home "after hours," while many hours are logged at the work computer shopping online for the holidays or attempting to finally win the four-suit level of Spider Solitaire. The computer heightens collapse between the public and the private spheres begun with television, further blurring (if not wholly erasing) the structural separation between the social cycle of production and the cycle of social reproduction.

Under this new configuration, a series of hybrid spaces and actions begin to emerge: the home office, the automated teller or the voice mail, the chat room, and, of course, the ethereal cyberspace of the World Wide Web. The rhetorical strategies of postmodernity – pastiche and schizophrenic speech, the hybrid and the simulacrum – continue to, nevertheless, be grounded on specific material practices of space in the contemporary world. It is increasingly imperative to understand the production of space of the computer screen, along with the practices of its assemblage space; because, in fact, it is with the JIT system where the distance between screen and capitalist production vanishes. The JIT system is possible precisely because the new class of industrial managers can look at "flagged information" on a computer screen and direct precise flows of instructions to subsidiaries all over the globe, which is where the actual products are manufactured. No computer screen, no JIT, pure and simple.

The total collapse of social cycles, and of space and function revolving around the computer screen, has finally allowed virtual space to become "real" – that is to say, to become the conduit for processes of human interaction, rather

than to be a result of mental reflection (the bourgeois novel) or "haptic" illusion through optics (film and tv). As computer networks become ever more widespread and progressively user friendly (unlike the initial UNIX incarnation, developed by the U.S. Department of the Navy), a utopian fervor begins to emerge among grassroots groups of users as well as among certain critics and intellectuals who conceive of the internet in terms similar to how the European "pilgrims" saw America as The New World. Nevertheless, it is becoming clear that the world wide web is not going to become a new Arcadia, populated by spontaneous and self-regulating communities of cyberdwellers. Instead, it has been captured by the same society of the spectacle that gave us the simulacrum of the suburb with its sprawling shopping malls and privatized television dens. "Dot com" traffic now overwhelms the internet (chief among them, websites dedicated to pornography), relegating "dot org" and "dot edu" to the marginal activities of researchers and activists. The virtual space of the internet has inevitably become "the place" for the new public sphere of late capitalism.

Having lost its initial promise of either social emancipation or untold riches, the internet is now settling into its role as part of the global order of mass media cartelization – for example, AOL, an internet company, famously merged with Time Warner, of print and movie origins, to make up the largest media empire in the world. As it does so, the old questions of imperial hegemony arise: the global domination of the English language, the nearly exclusive stranglehold on technological and scientific research and development by a handful of companies in Japan and the U.S., and the recent anti-trust legislation against Microsoft and the battles over "open source" programming, and so on. This also brings about a whole variety of new problems in international law relating to patent and ownership rights, the rights of localities to control or even censor internet content, the pursuit and punishment of internet crime, and the liability of service providers for the actions of its users (recently exemplified by the music industry's legal maneuvers against Napster, KaZaa, and other fileshare services).

On the other hand, these recent battles over filesharing of recorded music serve to illustrate what some analysts see as the rhizomatic quality of the internet. As commerce turns increasingly into e-commerce, as power turns increasingly into biopower, and as everyday activities become increasingly structured through computer use, the "lesser folk" find themselves gradually using and negotiating the same infrastructure that the hegemonic forces rely upon. This means that the network cannot be entirely shut down in order to stop an attempt at counterhegemonic use, a fact that

could potentially allow for a social insurgence to overcome globalization. Yet, since globalization is predicated so much upon the virtual space of its cybernetic network, its forms of power can only be conceived as abstracted imperial forms, distantly – if not absently – hovering over the heads of common citizens in the form of a "place with no place."

In this respect, it seems to me, that it is imperative to turn back to our initial consideration of the screen as a production of space. If the screen of the cinema and the television produced a more or less unified field of vision, the computer screen is in fact the quintessential locus of postmodern fragmentation. Almost all software packages have discrete areas (menu bars, scroll bars, data fields, etc) that can be the focus of attention or can be completely disregarded when most tasks are performed. Additionally, there are subregions of those areas which represent "buttons" that can be "pressed" in order to call of a "function." All words encased in quotation marks appear real to us, but that is because we have become habituated to live with these metaphors (as we are habituated by commodity fetishism). What we are really pressing is the handheld mouse which relays an electric signal to a microprocessor. The function is nothing more than a binary permutation which allows us to have not only the visual display simulating a button, but also the visual display simulating these binary permutations as a "function with a result." Much of the celebration of computers in journalism and pop analysis revolves around this type of "interactivity" between user and machine, which takes on the form of epochal pronouncements when tied to cybernetic networks.

But this interactivity would be no more remarkable than the interactivity between driver and automobile, if it were not for the fact that the computer screen becomes a perfect expression of its time. The computer screen demands flexible consumption, as exemplified by the segmentation of the screen into discrete areas which are dislocated; that is to say, areas which are interdependent but have discrete moments of use, and their order of use is prioritized according the type of tasks that come up, rather than by a socially sanctioned and culturally imposed way of "reading" the screen (i.e., the computer does not require the consumption of the entire screen space as a unity, the way film and tv require). The fragmentation of postmodern culture is given by the fragmentation of experience through material practices of space, such as the material practices of the flexible screen space of the computer. It is this practice of space that allows us to develop the necessary habits to live in the flexible economy of the JIT and its non-unitary (or "small narrative") culture of postmodernism.

Computer games demonstrate better than anything else the habituating force of the computer screen. These games typically have a set of obstacles or problems to be solved, so that a player can then gain access to a new animated space (or "board") in order for the game to continue. While the game is being played, there is usually a bar or segment of the screen where numerical amounts increase as the player successfully completes different tasks in a given board or sequence of the game. As these amounts of points increase, the player obtains "objects" which can be used right then or at later phases of the game to solve more complicated tasks; which allows the player to progress deeper into the "levels" of the game. But, not a single player of a computer game can fully account (and in some cases, cannot account at all) for the connection between the specific tasks that they are executing and the numbers that are always accumulated. Players know that there is a connection, but they cannot tell which points came from what actions. Additionally, and more importantly, these points are accumulated in a space of the screen which is deliberately designed to be at the margins of the visual field. The point is for the player to know that a process of quantification is taking place, but with a sense that this process of quantification is occurring beyond his or her control.

Until recently, this was exactly like the everyday experience of common pedestrians in New York City, who could walk under the rolling numbers of the "Debt Clock" located on 6th Avenue and 43rd Street. This was a digital clock that registered the increase in the government's public debt as it was being accumulated by the second – the numbers did not show time, they actually showed the amount of dollars owed (in billions), with the right hand digits moving at such speed that they were only a blur of light. Pedestrians could see the public debt going up by several thousand dollars in the space of time that it took them to walk the length of a block.

Not a single one of these pedestrians, myself included, could ever discern the specific relation between what they were doing in their own lives and the numbers dizzyingly growing as they walked by. They knew that there was some relation, but it was and continues to be impossible to connect our everyday reality in the common streets of a common city to those numbers. This is the same as in the screen of the computer games, where there is an equal disparity between performed task and the accumulation of fictitious value. And, this is also the same kind of disconnected distance that we have between our tangible everyday experience and the millions of "IMF and World Bank dollars" floated in stabilization and adjustment transactions and regulated "above our heads."

The practice and the representation of space of the computer screen is precisely what allows for us to continue blithely carrying on with our lives under new forms of commodity fetishism produced by "flexible capitalism" – i.e., the transformation of fictitious finance capital into real value as an organizing principle for the new ways of everyday life emerging under globalization. As such, it continues to weigh like a nightmare on the mind of the living.

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