

The Will to Technology and the Culture of Nihilism: Heidegger, Nietzsche & Marx

Written by Arthur Kroker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004)

Reviewed by Joseph La Sac

Nietzsche, Marx, and Heidegger—although unlikely as a political or aesthetic combination—are critically appreciated in *The Will to Technology* as three cultural “trauma theorists” in advance of the 21st Century. Arthur Kroker’s book is a transdisciplinary meditation on the genetic, biological, and emerging technologies, with human flesh “disappearing into” technological-being as the Ariadne’s thread winding through and connecting their life’s work. In addition to interpreting each author through other writings by the same author, this exegesis reads Heidegger, Nietzsche and Marx through and alongside writings of all three authors, together, as stand-ins and interpreters of each other, and as “perspectival simulacra” (78) of one another. Kroker repeatedly makes use of a “recombinant” DNA metaphor from the life sciences. In the context of critical digital studies this refers to more than a postmodern pastiche effect. It also refers to the “cutting and splicing”¹ of the material and analog surplus as they disappear and reassemble in virtual and digital forms. The author’s cutting and splicing of the trauma theorists is a recombinant-style reading too, which makes this book a rich and uniquely chimerical consideration of the question of technology.

The first three chapters briefly set the stage for the author’s main thrust of the book by exploring the aesthetic, social and political implications of new digital media. In Chapter 4,

1 Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, *The Political Economy of Virtual Reality: Pan-Capitalism*. Ctheory.net. 15 March 1994.

“Hyper-Heidegger: The Question of the Post-Human” Kroker's treatment of Heidegger starts by relocating the technological ‘world picture’ from the 1954 essay *On the Question Concerning Technology*. In this text Heidegger announced the societal tendency toward enframing—where the dominating impulse of contemporary technology “pirates the human sensorium on behalf of a globally hegemonic apparatus” (47)—and secondly, toward poeisis—where an art of technology, variously expressed in language, poetry, the visual arts, speed writing, new media art, and in Kroker's phrase “an aesthetics of digital dirt” (47), could draw out of the world picture of technology. In this future technology once again has something to “unconceal” in the relationship between technology and art.

Kroker's Heidegger is a “historian of technology” (62) rather than a futurist, but “never a technophobe” (39). For this Heidegger technology is nothing less than the essence of being, which was for him the riddle of technology—that “technology could not be understood technologically.”³ Hence Heidegger's shift to a metaphysical understanding of technology. Here, Kroker turns to the 1969 essay, *The End of Philosophy*⁴ where Heidegger proposed contemporary society is a vast materialization of a fundamental metaphysical force: the “will to will”—that is, the pure will removed from its motivating referents (to power, to life, etc.) The will to will is neither Nietzsche's will to power, nor Marx's will to capital accumulation, but is the “completed will” (Heidegger's phrase) and the “virtual will” (Kroker's phrase). It is no longer the will to anything but now only the will organizing every dimension of life in order to sustain its own existence. The will to will is Kroker's key to understanding the new information economy. It functions in the digital era not only as “virtual capital,” or as an extension of the logic of neoclassical (financial) capital, but as a form of capital that so quickly achieves its “ascendant

3 *Ibid.*

4 Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

historical apogee” because it is “only derivatively about capitalism,” (57) and essentially “about metaphysics.” Yet the will to will is not capital. Kroker places capital in the service of the will to will, as a Nietzschean “mere condition of possibility” (56), a phrase which comes from Heidegger's own reading of *The Will to Power* in his text *Nietzsche*.

This metaphysics, for Heidegger, is simultaneously the “guarantee of stability (truth)” of technological society as well as its “exaggerating drives (art).”⁵ In other words, technology—as the “guarantee of stability (truth)” of the will to will, together with the “exaggerating drives (art)” —is the dynamic instrument by which life is ordered on behalf of completed metaphysics. In the digital age the language of metaphysics can be dropped and pass into oblivion because this is the age of “technology as completed metaphysics”⁶ and metaphysics is “now everywhere” (56) as the new digitally-augmented reality. Metaphysics is “completed,” that is, because the carcass of external historical drives, from capitalist to religionist, “drop away,” leaving only the edifice of a fully-realized technical society that has Heideggerian “aimlessness' as its aim” and “using up” as its method (54). Kroker presents this as no longer the “will to” anything but the will to everything. That is, the will that orders everything to sustain its own existence. One last topic in chapter four worth mentioning here is the treatment of technology as a “danger” and art as its “saving power.” For Heidegger, the special purpose of art was understood as a poetics of listening to or “withdrawing into that which withdraws” (65). Even though the object of withdrawal may remain concealed as ever before, the act of “withdrawing into” is the “lost poesis” (65) of art and the hidden essence of technology. It is the saving power (new media art) lying within the danger (digital culture) and a way of opening up being to the incommensurability of the digital nerve.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

Chapter 5, “A Future That is Nietzsche,” asks what order of moral values must be silently set in place as the fundamental precondition for human flesh to enter a new beginning as cybernetic, post-human beings. Nietzsche's role was to “confirm the reality of the hyper-real” and to announce that “impossibility” is the dominant discourse of the real (77). Nietzsche does this, not as a critic from the outside, but something much more dangerous—as the “interior voice of the times.” The order of values silently set in place are those provided through Christianity, in GM II, and the myth of the sovereign individual, at an intersection where Christianity and digital technology are deeply entwined. Emerging out of the dynamic drive to “make of man a will and nothing but a will” (87) both Christianity and digital technology are based on the hatred of human flesh and a “transcendental urge” (88) to escape the mortality of the body. The sovereign individual connects the two, as the “moral axiomatic” and the “moral eugenics” by which a “will was burned into man” (99). In our enthusiastic digital age the morality of the sovereign individual prepares the human conscience for its assent into the post-human future. Found in *The Genealogy*, the sovereign individual for Nietzsche represents a huge apparatus of psychic repression, and the product of a long history of moral eugenics. In the 21st Century the sovereign individual is still the chained animal, trapped this time in a “consumer machinery of pseudo-choice,” (90) who sometimes violently lashes out in agonistic fits of rage: “road rage, air rage, job rage, sex rage, life rage” (90). Christianity as moral eugenics, Kroker writes, was always a “moral preparation” (87) for the digital age, a carrier of a dominant cultural memetic virus by which the idea of the sovereign self was constructed. Christianity is an embodiment of the ascetic ideal, signaling that human flesh is on the way out, on the decline. However, with the death of God, the mask Christianity has fallen by the wayside and what is revealed or unconcealed, through the mirror of Nietzsche, is a future of pure will and pure technology. That is, the drive to

Heidegger's planetary technicity under the sign of Marxian will to capital accumulation, with the human body and flesh as its harvest.

Nietzsche's ancient story of morality in *The Genealogy* is told again in a new light. This time the “sovereign individual grown weary of itself” meets “technology grown weary of itself” (99) and in this moment the digital nerve feels itself “a stranger in net time” (96). Kroker's doubled-meaning here is that the “triumph of the digital gods” is the real dawning of the age of Christianity—the return of the sacred object signified by the name of God in the form of a will to nothingness. Its Heideggerian “aimlessness” motivates its movement through history as it “sky-drifts across the horizon” of social events (88). If written today, Kroker is convinced *The Genealogy* would be compelled to conclude with a fourth essay on “artificial flesh” and “electric eyes and robotic intelligence” (85) where the instinct for freedom turning against itself in the form of bad conscience has a “second sundering.” The first was when, as narrated in GM I, the human species separates from its animal past. The second lies in a future where the will to technology separates from the human species: the civilized human animal breaking off into the networked-intelligence of digital technology. What Nietzsche called the “internalization of man” as drives are projected inwards from GM II, Kroker argues gives way to the “exteriorization of drives” (94) as the physical human body begins to “live inside” digital reality. Bad conscience, to summarize, “goes electronic” and leads to the “end of *ressentiment*” as the moral energizing force in history (95). With digital technology, “Man has been overcome,” writes Kroker. But more than ever we are “nutcrackers of the (digital) soul” (89) because the digital nerve is forced to go on, to cross over and, with the voice of Heidegger always present, to “harvest the human remainder.” In an eternally-recurring theme of bad conscience development, post-humanity quickly reaches the same point of “monstrous consciousness” (96) as the ancient originators of

bad conscience. The digital nerve then becomes the spearhead of an inward-cutting nihilism.

Against this tale of morality's origins, Kroker presents the digital age as more than technological hubris. He invites the reader to consider this against the ancient equivalence of pain and punishment and the “maggot man.” “Not fear; rather that we no longer have anything left to fear in man; that the maggot man is swarming in the foreground...” (GM I §11) In Nietzsche's gallery of rogues and heroes, the maggot “man” is a tame and “hopelessly mediocre” character, seeing himself (in Nietzschean irony) as the pinnacle of history. In *The Will to Technology* both the “maggot man” and the “blond beasts of prey” (GM II § 17) are tropes which advance the virtual will. The maggot man is a (virtual) will to power, and the “creative leader of virtual capital feeding on dead flesh” (97), as well as the “last harvester” of the human sensorium before it is transitioned from human to cyborg. Kroker describes the maggot man as the recuperative arm of virtual capital—“seeking nourishment,” “finding resistances” and “assimilating, appropriating, overwhelming,” and at last, “conquering” the digitally nomadic proletariat (115). Like a “cyber-dog on speed,” he writes, the maggot man transforms living energy and labor into “electronic cairns of dead culture skin, and crawls inside.” “Not a cultural stone is left unturned” by the maggot man (97). In the spirit of digital capitalism the maggot man is the machinery of dead labor and virtual value.

Bill Gates is the essential contemporary expression of the will to power in Chapter 5. His corporation, Microsoft, is described as a contemporary blond beast of prey—a “conqueror” and “master race” which, “organized for war and with the ability to organize, lays its terrible claws upon the [digital] populace” (98). Gates' autobiography, *Business @ The Speed of Thought*, is a “futurist manifesto” and an “early read-out” of the methods by which key institutions of public life will be compressed into digital format (115). Microsoft has economic, technical and political

ability, and its manifesto predicts a future that it has the digital means to create. With Nietzsche as Microsoft's leading strategic managerial analyst, and Gates as its ascetic priest and maggot man, the task of the blond beast of prey lies in establishing the value-direction of the "softwareing of human flesh" (97). Rewarding the maggot men richly, the digital nerve also "sucks them dry, makes them rich and powerful, and arrogant," but especially, "transcendent." Digital capital "speaks through" these ascetic priests (98). If for Nietzsche this is a transitional period with humanity as a "gamble" and a "going-across," Kroker argues humanity is transitioning to the digital nerve and *The Genealogy of Morals* would not have it any other way.

Nietzsche and Heidegger alongside Marx informs Kroker's understanding of capitalism and the material forces by which it conquers. In Chapter 6, "Streamed Capitalism: Marx on the New Capitalist Axiomatic," Marx is interpreted as a "metaphysician of hyper-capital" (124) and his work *Das Kapital* is a political history and method of capital, and describes one process in the development of the pure will. This is a development by which capitalism, too, disappears into technology. Capitalism for Kroker is incidentally the name we have given the historical movement of the will to technology. Much more than a description of a system of production, *Das Kapital* can be critically appreciated now in an age when the fetishism of the commodity has given way to the fetishism of money and Baudrillardian signs. An age when "value valorizes itself" (118), and when the time it takes for capital to circulate is instantaneous.

Ours is an age in transition from labor as a "factor of production" to the "production of factored labour" (133), because Kroker's Marx writes of a future not of living labor but of dead labor, of human beings reduced to "the inertia of the [Heideggerian] 'standing reserve'" (134). In this world picture of technology, digital capitalism is "networked knowledge" (136) instead of a labor exchange. An important theme here is the "knowledge theory of value," where knowledge

is the exclusive medium of intellectual property and its creation, coding, patenting, and distributing is the motor-force behind the Nietzschean “impressing of forms,” that is, to the digital commodity-form. With the falling rate of (digital) profit and the exploitation of knowledge-value, the author writes that proletarianization of knowledge-work “is only about to begin” (137).

In Kroker's digital capitalism, capital now occupies the same role of labor in the modern era. Just as the worker in relation to the capitalist appropriation of surplus-value creates a 'value alien' to himself, namely “the valorization of the capitalist process of production” (143), so too, capital in relationship to virtuality also creates a value alien to itself. Now that capital is incorporated into the digital process of production, at first as a necessary condition of historical development and now as its spectacular product, capital creates a surplus-value of virtuality. On behalf of which capital is forced to serve as its “historical incubator” (143). The logic of capital was never so much about production for Marx, writes Kroker, as much as it was about circulation, which has an incidental relationship to production. Reading Marx against Heidegger, Nietzsche and the present age, Marx's thought “rubs against digitality” (121). Kroker observes Marx was always writing about the “disappearance of capitalism into technology” (123). Capitalism, “moving at the speed of light” (185), drops its disguises, unconcealing itself as a model of production, and becoming the historical possibility that was always its hidden sign of production, which is, capitalism as a “pure vector of circulation” (118).

An important theme throughout the book is the recurring theory of virtual classes. Articulated first in Kroker's *Data Trash*⁷ the virtual class is described in *The Will to Technology* as both the “subject” and “object” of the Heideggerian will to will (58). Subject, because the

7 Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, *Data Trash: Theory of the Virtual Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

virtual class benefits directly from the unconditional attainment of the will to will, and object, because the virtual class is manufactured as a raw resource necessary for the transition to the will to will. The will to will, then, as a business strategy having become “the very objectivity of its objects.” Always a Nietzschean “going-across” and a “down-going” between the imperatives of technology and capitalism, the virtual class represents the networked-intelligence necessary to realize the will to virtuality and its “potentiality for a fatal undermining” (141).

The last seventy pages are dedicated to an exposition of technology and art. In Chapter 7, “The Image Matrix” Kroker traces the death of the analog and the triumph of the digital to the physical internment of photography archives, such as the Bettmann Archive which is owned by Bill Gates. In 1995 it was brought to an underground “necropolis” (161) to be refrigerated and stored away. The author is motivated to describe this transition in lucid, literary detail. One of Kroker's more familiar tropes is found in Chapter 8, “The Digital Eye,” where the digital eyeball as a bored, wandering sensory organ, jumps from image to image with a restlessness and “high-pitched consumptive appetite,” “demanding novelty,” and is never satisfied (167). This is no longer a story of body invasion, as in Kroker's 1987 book *Body Invaders: Panic Sex in America*, and no longer the culture of the “disembodied eye,” but a culture where the image is both the goal and the precondition of culture. As goal, contemporary culture is driven forward by images as its most pervasive form of nihilism. As precondition, our possessive bodies are in turn possessed with such finality by the pervasive and “enigmatic dreams” of the image.

In 2002 Chicago-based artist Eduardo Kac engineered a “transgenic” bunny named Alba⁹—a rabbit with green glowing fur from a jellyfish gene—setting into motion the new transgenic art scene. The author's attitude toward this movement, which takes as its premise that

9 Christopher Dickey, “I Love My Glow Bunny,” *Wired Magazine*, April, 2001: Issue 9.04.

genetic creations are art projects worthy of praise, is doubled. In recent years Arthur and Marilouise Kroker have teamed up with new media artists such as Steve Gibson, sparking their own dialogue on the disappearance of human flesh into digital technology. The transgenic artists similarly seek to stimulate dialogue about possible benefits and drawbacks of mutation, resequencing, cloning, and regenerative medicine through art, sound, multimedia and writing. With transgenic art, however, the controlling codes of genetic determinism “finally flee the skin of the body,” exhibiting their “hyper-aesthetic possibilities” for genetic mutation (188). Transgenic artists in the author's eyes are not pioneers of an “unknown future of technicity,” but are rather “aesthetic registers” of genetic destining. New media art, on the other hand, possesses the ability to perceive ancient repressed memories. Its aim, similar to mass media, is toward enhanced perception of digital culture and the creation of totally immersive experiences. The point, writes Kroker, is not to “mimic” digital mass media but to “break its spell” (205). In the imagination of new media art, the transgenic body is not only represented as it is through transgenic art, but “performed,” “reverse-engineered,” and critiqued (207).

Much has been said about Kroker's scientific and literary “border crossing” metaphors.¹⁰ In *The Will to Technology* Kroker invokes Nietzsche's synaesthetic epistemology when referring to the “eye that hears,” (Z) “the data tongue,” (182) “code taste,” (182) “mirror tongue,” (182) “soul catchers,” (180) “tattoo sound,” (190) and “firewire eyes” (186). These metaphors are described by Best and Kellner as “extreme,” “stretched and forced.”¹¹ This perspective, however, overlooks the redeeming qualities of these metaphors and undermines the author's ability to provoke original thinking and generate transdisciplinary dialogue. Above all, this style holds “impossibility” as the dominant discourse of the real, and shocks its readers into critical

10 Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997).

11 *Ibid.*

awareness of the digital world.

The big question remains whether it is possible to really effect such a synthesis as Kroker strives for in chapters four, five and six, on Heidegger, Nietzsche and Marx respectively. Readers specialized in the scholarship of one philosopher might view Kroker's three-fold project as softening their edges. If Kroker errs in overlooking irreconcilabilities, he adds value to the discussion of their comportment toward technology. To label these irreconcilabilities as such would undermine the intelligent perspective of the author, for whom irreconcilability, incommensurability, and paradox are sources of inspiration. To prove worthy a many-sided engagement between emergent technologies and critical theory is itself the recombinant task of *The Will to Technology*. Kroker's strategy for unconcealing the broader implications of the will to technology is to “theorize at the edge of incommensurability” (14).

Throughout this book the author provides an ongoing account of street youth, anti-globalization counter-summits, “rap metaphysics,” (72) and the “anti-virtual class” (149) which challenges the rise to, and the fetishism of, virtuality. They ask what the “human meaning” of globalism is. Explaining the counter-tendencies of the will to technology as expressed in “an emergent *human* class” (152) is the aim of both Arthur and Marilouise Kroker in their roles as public intellectuals. Above all their writings and collaborations with new media artists aim to voice critical concerns about the human body and its ascent into technology. *The Will to Technology* and its website (www.willtechnology.com) are positive dedications to their valuable public efforts to keep apace with technology and culture.

About the Reviewer:

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