

The Theory of the Virtual Class

Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein

Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, excerpt from "The Theory of the Virtual Class," from Kroker and Weinstein, *Data Trash: The Theory of Virtual Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 4-26. Copyright © 1994 Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein. Reprinted with permission of St. Martin's Press, LLC.

Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein collaborated to write *Data Trash: The Theory of Virtual Class* (St. Martin's Press, 1994), from which this selection is excerpted. The book presents a critique of technological utopianism and its creation of a digital elite class. Kroker is a professor of Political Science at Concordia University and the editor of the online journal *C-THEORY*. Weinstein is a professor of Political Philosophy at Purdue University and a photography critic.

Wired Shut

Wired intends to profit from the Internet. And so do a lot of others. "People are going to have to realize that the Net is another medium, and it has to be sponsored commercially and it has to play by the rules of the marketplace," says John Battelle, *Wired's* 28-year old managing editor. "You're still going to have sponsorship, advertising, the rules of the game, because it's just necessary to make commerce work." "I think that a lot of what some of the original Net god-utopians were thinking," continued Battelle, "is that there was just going to be this sort of huge anarchist, utopian, bliss medium, where there are no rules and everything is just sort of open. That's a great thought, but it's not going to work. And when the Time Warners get on the Net in a hard fashion it's going to be the people who first create the commerce and the environment, like *Wired*, that will be the market leaders."

Andrew Leonard, "Hot-Wired"
The Bay Guardian

The twentieth-century ends with the growth of cyber-authoritarianism, a stridently pro-technotopia movement, particularly in the mass media, typified by an

The Theory of the Virtual Class

Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein

Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, excerpt from "The Theory of the Virtual Class," from Kroker and Weinstein, *Data Trash: The Theory of Virtual Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 4-26. Copyright © 1994 Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein. Reprinted with permission of St. Martin's Press, LLC.

Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein collaborated to write *Data Trash: The Theory of Virtual Class* (St. Martin's Press, 1994), from which this selection is excerpted. The book presents a critique of technological utopianism and its creation of a digital elite class. Kroker is a professor of Political Science at Concordia University and the editor of the online journal *C-THEORY*. Weinstein is a professor of Political Philosophy at Purdue University and a photography critic.

Wired Shut

Wired intends to profit from the Internet. And so do a lot of others. "People are going to have to realize that the Net is another medium, and it has to be sponsored commercially and it has to play by the rules of the marketplace," says John Battelle, *Wired's* 28-year old managing editor. "You're still going to have sponsorship, advertising, the rules of the game, because it's just necessary to make commerce work." "I think that a lot of what some of the original Net god-utopians were thinking," continued Battelle, "is that there was just going to be this sort of huge anarchist, utopian, bliss medium, where there are no rules and everything is just sort of open. That's a great thought, but it's not going to work. And when the Time Warners get on the Net in a hard fashion it's going to be the people who first create the commerce and the environment, like *Wired*, that will be the market leaders."

Andrew Leonard, "Hot-Wired"
The Bay Guardian

obsession to the point of hysteria with emergent technologies, and with a consistent and very deliberate attempt to shut down, silence, and exclude any perspectives critical of technotopia. Not a wired culture, but a virtual culture that is wired shut: compulsively fixated on digital technology as a source of salvation from the reality of a lonely culture and radical social disconnection from everyday life, and determined to exclude from public debate any perspective that is not a cheerleader for the coming-to-be of the fully realized technological society. The virtual class is populated by would-be astronauts who never got the chance to go to the moon, and they do not easily accept criticism of this new Apollo project for the body telematic.

This is unfortunate since it is less a matter of being pro- or anti-technology, but of developing a critical perspective on the ethics of virtuality. When technology mutates into virtuality, the direction of political debate becomes clarified. If we cannot escape the hard-wiring of (our) bodies into wireless culture, then how can we inscribe primary ethical concerns onto the will to virtuality? How can we turn the virtual horizon in the direction of substantive human values: aesthetic creativity, social solidarity, democratic discourse, and economic justice? To link the relentless drive to cyberspace with ethical concerns is, of course, to give the lie to technological liberalism. To insist, that is, that the coming-to-be of the will to virtuality, and with it the emergence of our doubled fate as either body dumps or hyper-texted bodies, virtualizers or data trash, does not relax the traditional human injunction to give primacy to the ethical ends of the technological purposes we choose (or the will to virtuality that chooses us).

Privileging the question of ethics via virtuality lays bare the impulse to nihilism that is central to the virtual class. For it, the drive to planetary mastery represented by the will to virtuality relegates the ethical suasion to the electronic trashbin. Claiming with monumental hubris to be already beyond good and evil, it assumes perfect equivalency between the will to virtuality and the will to the (virtual) good. If the good is equivalent to the disintegration of experience into cybernetic interactivity or to the disappearance of memory and solitary reflection into massive Sunstations of archived information, then the virtual class is the leading exponent of the era of telematic ethics. Far from having abandoned ethical concerns, the virtual class has patched a coherent, dynamic, and comprehensive system of ethics onto the hard-line processors of the will to virtuality. Against economic justice, the virtual class practices a mixture of predatory capitalism and gung-ho technocratic rationalizations for laying waste to social concerns for employment, with insistent demands for "restructuring economies," "public policies of labor adjustment," and "deficit cutting," all aimed at maximal profitability. Against democratic discourse, the virtual class institutes anew the authoritarian mind, projecting its class interests onto cyberspace from which vantage-point it crushes any and all dissent to the prevailing orthodoxies of technotopia. For the virtual class, politics is about absolute control over intellectual property by means of war-like strategies of communication, control, and command. Against social solidarity, the virtual class promotes a grisly form of raw social materialism, whereby social experience is

reality complex. And finally, against aesthetic creativity, the virtual class promotes the value of pattern-maintenance (of its own choosing), whereby human intelligence is reduced to a circulating medium of cybernetic exchange floating in the interfaces of the cultural animation machines. Key to the success of the virtual class is its promotion of a radically diminished vision of human experience and of a disintegrated conception of the human good: for virtualizers, the good is ultimately that which disappears human subjectivity, substituting the war-machine of cyberspace for the data trash of experience. Beyond this, the virtual class can achieve dominance today because its reduced vision of human experience consists of a digital superhighway, a fatal scene of circulation and gridlock, which corresponds to how the late twentieth-century mind likes to see itself. *Reverse nihilism*: not the nihilistic will as projected outwards onto an external object, but the nihilistic will turned inwards, decomposing subjectivity, reducing the self to an object of conscience and body vivisectioning. What does it mean when the body is virtualized without a sustaining ethical vision? Can anyone be strong enough for this? What results is rage against the body: a hatred of existence that can only be satisfied by an abandonment of flesh and subjectivity and, with it, a flight into virtuality. Virtuality without ethics is a primal scene of social suicide: a site of mass cryogenics where bodies are quick-frozen for future resequencing by the archived data networks. The virtual class can be this dynamic because it is already the aftershock of the living dead: body vivisectionists and early (mind) abandoners surfing the Net on a road trip to the virtual Inferno.

“Adapt or You’re Toast”

The virtual class has driven to global power along the digital superhighway. Representing perfectly the expansionary interests of the recombinant commodity-form, the virtual class has seized the imagination of contemporary culture by conceiving a techno-utopian high-speed cybernetic grid for travelling across the electronic frontier. In this mythology of the new technological frontier, contemporary society is either equipped for fast travel down the main arterial lanes of the information highway, or it simply ceases to exist as a functioning member of technotopia. As the CEOs and the specialist consultants of the virtual class triumphantly proclaim: “Adapt or you’re toast.”

We now live in the age of dead information, dead (electronic) space, and dead (cybernetic) rhetoric. *Dead information?* That’s our cooptation as servomechanisms of the cybernetic grid (the digital superhighway) that swallows bodies, and even whole societies, into the dynamic momentum of its telematic logic. Always working on the basis of the illusion of enhanced interactivity, the digital superhighway is really about the full immersion of the flesh into its virtual double. As *dead (electronic) space*, the digital superhighway is a big real estate venture in cybernetic form, where competing claims to intellectual property rights in an array of multi-media technologies of communication are at stake. No longer capitalism under the doubled sign of consumer and production models, the digital superhighway represents the disappearance of capitalism into colonized virtual

reality complex. And finally, against aesthetic creativity, the virtual class promotes the value of pattern-maintenance (of its own choosing), whereby human intelligence is reduced to a circulating medium of cybernetic exchange floating in the interfaces of the cultural animation machines. Key to the success of the virtual class is its promotion of a radically diminished vision of human experience and of a disintegrated conception of the human good: for virtualizers, the good is ultimately that which disappears human subjectivity, substituting the war-machine of cyberspace for the data trash of experience. Beyond this, the virtual class can achieve dominance today because its reduced vision of human experience consists of a digital superhighway, a fatal scene of circulation and gridlock, which corresponds to how the late twentieth-century mind likes to see itself. *Reverse nihilism*: not the nihilistic will as projected outwards onto an external object, but the nihilistic will turned inwards, decomposing subjectivity, reducing the self to an object of conscience and body vivisectioning. What does it mean when the body is virtualized without a sustaining ethical vision? Can anyone be strong enough for this? What results is rage against the body: a hatred of existence that can only be satisfied by an abandonment of flesh and subjectivity and, with it, a flight into virtuality. Virtuality without ethics is a primal scene of social suicide: a site of mass cryogenics where bodies are quick-frozen for future resequencing by the archived data networks. The virtual class can be this dynamic because it is already the aftershock of the living dead: body vivisectionists and early (mind) abandoners surfing the Net on a road trip to the virtual Inferno.

“Adapt or You’re Toast”

The virtual class has driven to global power along the digital superhighway. Representing perfectly the expansionary interests of the recombinant commodity-form, the virtual class has seized the imagination of contemporary culture by conceiving a techno-utopian high-speed cybernetic grid for travelling across the electronic frontier. In this mythology of the new technological frontier, contemporary society is either equipped for fast travel down the main arterial lanes of the information highway, or it simply ceases to exist as a functioning member of technotopia. As the CEOs and the specialist consultants of the virtual class triumphantly proclaim: “Adapt or you’re toast.”

We now live in the age of dead information, dead (electronic) space, and dead (cybernetic) rhetoric. *Dead information?* That’s our cooptation as servomechanisms of the cybernetic grid (the digital superhighway) that swallows bodies, and even whole societies, into the dynamic momentum of its telematic logic. Always working on the basis of the illusion of enhanced interactivity, the digital superhighway is really about the full immersion of the flesh into its virtual double. As *dead (electronic) space*, the digital superhighway is a big real estate venture in cybernetic form, where competing claims to intellectual property rights in an array of multi-media technologies of communication are at stake. No longer

space. And *dead (cybernetic) rhetoric?* That’s the Internet’s subordination to the predatory business interests of a virtual class, which might pay virtual lip service to the growth of electronic communities on a global basis, but which is devoted in actuality to shutting down the anarchy of the Net in favor of virtualized (commercial) exchange. Like a mirror image, the digital superhighway always means its opposite: not an open telematic autoroute for fast circulation across the electronic galaxy, but an immensely seductive harvesting machine for delivering bodies, culture, and labor to virtualization. The information highway is paved with (our) flesh. So consequently, *the theory of the virtual class*: cultural accommodation to technotopia is its goal, political consolidation (around the aims of the virtual class) its method, multi-media nervous systems its relay, and (our) disappearance into pure virtualities its ecstatic destiny.

That there is an inherent political contradiction between the attempt by the virtual class to liquidate the sprawling web of the Internet in favor of the smooth telematic vision of the digital superhighway is apparent. The information highway is the antithesis of the Net, in much the same way as the virtual class must destroy the *public dimension* of the Internet for its own survival. The informational technology of the Internet as a new *force* of virtual production provides the social conditions necessary for instituting fundamentally new *relations* of electronic creation. Spontaneously and certainly against the long-range interests of the virtual class, the Internet has been swamped by demands for meaning. Newly screen-radiated scholars dream up visions of a Virtual University, the population of Amsterdam goes on-line as Digital City, environmentalists become web weavers as they form a global Green cybernetic informational grid, and a new generation of fiction writers develops forms of telematic writing that mirror the crystalline structures and multi-phasal connections of hypertext.

But, of course, for the virtual class, content slows the speed of virtualized exchange, and meaning becomes the antagonistic contradiction of data. Accordingly, demands for meaning must be immediately denied as just another road-kill along the virtual highway. As such, the virtual class exercises its intense obsessive-compulsive drive to subordinate society to the telematic mythology of the digital superhighway. The democratic possibilities of the Internet, with its immanent appeal to new forms of global communication, might have been the seduction-strategy appropriate for the construction of the digital superhighway, but now that the cybernetic grid is firmly in control, the virtual class must move to liquidate the Internet. It is an old scenario, repeated this time in virtual form. Marx understood this first: every technology releases opposing possibilities towards emancipation and domination. Like its early bourgeois predecessors at the birth of capitalism, the virtual class christens the birth of technotopia by suppressing the potentially emancipatory relations of production released by the Internet in favor of the traditionally predatory force of production signified by the digital superhighway. Data is the anti-virus of meaning – telematic information refuses to be slowed down by the drag-weight of content. And the virtual class seeks to exterminate the

Information Highway/Media-Net: Virtual Pastoral Power

The "information highway" has become the key route into virtuality. The "information highway" is another term for what we call the "media-net." It's a question of whether we're cruising on a highway or being caught up in a Net, always already available for (further) processing. The "highway" is definitely an answer to "Star Wars": the communications complex takes over from the "military-industrial complex." Unlike "Star Wars," however, the "highway" has already (de-)materialized in the world behind the monitors: cyberspace. For crash theory there is an irony: the highway is a *trompe l'oeil* of possessive individualism covering the individual possessed by the Net, sucked into the imploded, impossible world behind the screen – related to the dubious world of ordinary perception through cyber-space.

Information Highway vs. Media-Net

The prophet-hypesters of the information highway, from President Bill Clinton, U.S.A., to President Bill Gates, Microsoft, proclaim a revolution to a higher level of bourgeois consciousness. The highway is the utopia of the possessive individual: the possessive individual now resides in technotopia.

This is how the higher level of bourgeois consciousness comes to be in grades of perfection. Firstly, we enter an information highway which promises the "individual" access to "information" from the universal archive instantly and about anything. The capacity of the Net to hold information is virtually infinite and, with the inevitable advances in microprocessors, its capacities to gather, combine, and relay information will be equal to any demand for access. Are you curious about anything? The answer is right at your fingertips. More seriously, do you need to know something? A touch of a button will get you what you need and eventually your brain waves alone (telekinesis fantasy) will do it. Here is the world as information completely at the beck and call of the possessive individual (the individual, that is, who is *possessed* by information). Here, everyone is a god who, if they are not omniscient all at once, can at least entertain whatever information that they wish to have at any time they wish to have it. Information is not the kind of thing that has to be shared. If everyone all at once wanted to know who won the Stanley Cup in 1968 they could have the information simultaneously: cyberspace as the site of Unamuno's panarchy, where each one is king.

At the next grade of perfection, the highway not only provides access to that which is already given, but allows the "individual" to "interact" with other "individuals," to create a society in cyberspace. The freedom to access information will be matched by the freedom to access individuals anywhere and at any time, since eventually everyone will be wired. The hybridization of television, telephone, and computer will produce every possible refinement of mediated presence, allowing interactors an unprecedented range of options for finely

Information Highway/Media-Net: Virtual Pastoral Power

The "information highway" has become the key route into virtuality. The "information highway" is another term for what we call the "media-net." It's a question of whether we're cruising on a highway or being caught up in a Net, always already available for (further) processing. The "highway" is definitely an answer to "Star Wars": the communications complex takes over from the "military-industrial complex." Unlike "Star Wars," however, the "highway" has already (de-)materialized in the world behind the monitors: cyberspace. For crash theory there is an irony: the highway is a *trompe l'oeil* of possessive individualism covering the individual possessed by the Net, sucked into the imploded, impossible world behind the screen – related to the dubious world of ordinary perception through cyber-space.

Information Highway vs. Media-Net

The prophet-hypesters of the information highway, from President Bill Clinton, U.S.A., to President Bill Gates, Microsoft, proclaim a revolution to a higher level of bourgeois consciousness. The highway is the utopia of the possessive individual: the possessive individual now resides in technotopia.

This is how the higher level of bourgeois consciousness comes to be in grades of perfection. Firstly, we enter an information highway which promises the "individual" access to "information" from the universal archive instantly and about anything. The capacity of the Net to hold information is virtually infinite and, with the inevitable advances in microprocessors, its capacities to gather, combine, and relay information will be equal to any demand for access. Are you curious about anything? The answer is right at your fingertips. More seriously, do you need to know something? A touch of a button will get you what you need and eventually your brain waves alone (telekinesis fantasy) will do it. Here is the world as information completely at the beck and call of the possessive individual (the individual, that is, who is *possessed* by information). Here, everyone is a god who, if they are not omniscient all at once, can at least entertain whatever information that they wish to have at any time they wish to have it. Information is not the kind of thing that has to be shared. If everyone all at once wanted to know who won the Stanley Cup in 1968 they could have the information simultaneously: cyberspace as the site of Unamuno's panarchy, where each one is king.

At the next grade of perfection, the highway not only provides access to that which is already given, but allows the "individual" to "interact" with other "individuals," to create a society in cyberspace. The freedom to access information will be matched by the freedom to access individuals anywhere and at any time, since eventually everyone will be wired. The hybridization of television,

adjusting the distance of their relations. Through the use of profiles, data banks, and bulletin boards people will be able to connect with exactly those who will give them the most satisfaction, with whom they share interests, opinions, projects, and sexual preferences, and for whom they have need. Just as "individuals" will be able to access the realm of "information" (anything from their financial and insurance records to any movie ever made), they will also be able to access the domain of "human" communicators to find the ones who are best suited to them. As Bill Gates of Microsoft puts it: "The opportunity for people to reach out and share is amazing."¹

The information highway as technotopia is the place where "individuals" command information for whatever purposes they entertain and find others with whom to combine to pursue those purposes. As Gates puts it, it is "empowering stuff." Technotopia is the seduction by which the flesh is drawn into the Net. What seduces is the fantasy of "empowerment," the center of the contemporary possessive individualist complex. By having whatever information one wants instantly and without effort, and by being linked to appropriate associates one saves an immense amount of time and energy, and is more likely to make better decisions for oneself. Who can complain about having more information, especially if it can be accessed easily and appropriately by a system of selectors that gives you what you ask for and nothing else, or even better, that knows you so well that it gives you what you really want (need?) (is good for you?), but did not even realize that you wanted?

The information highway means the death of the (human) agent and the triumph of the expert program, the wisdom that the greatest specialist would give you. Expert programs to diagnose you. Medical tests performed at home while you are hooked up to a computer that are interpreted by an expert program. In order to serve you, the "highway" will demand information from you. The selector systems will have to get to know you, scan you, monitor you, give you periodic tests. The expert program will be the new center for pastoral power. This is, of course, still enacted under capitalism. You will have to pay for information with money and there will be plenty of restrictions on its accessibility. Leave that as a contradiction of the virtual class between the capitalist organization of the highway and its technotopian vision: a contradiction within possessive individualism. More importantly, you will pay for information with information; indeed, you will be information.

The highway becomes the Net. What appears as "empowerment" is a *trompe l'oeil*, a seduction, an entrapment in a Baudrillardian loop in which the Net elicits information from the "user" and gives it back in what the selectors say is an appropriate form for that user. The great agent of possibility becomes the master tool of normalization now a micro-normalization with high specificity. . . perhaps uniqueness! Each "individual" has a unique disciplinary solution to hold them fast to the Net, where they are dumped for image processing and image reception. The information highway is the way by which bodies are drawn into cyberspace through the seduction of empowerment.

world is cyberspace. The dream of being the god of cyberspace – public ideology as the fantasy of pre-pubescent males: a regression from sex to an autistic power drive.

[...]

The Virtual Class and Capitalism

The computer industry is in an intensive phase of “creative destruction,” the term coined by Schumpeter and used by the neo-Darwinian macho apologists for capitalism to refer to the economic killing fields produced by rapid technological change. The Net is being brought into actuality through the offices of ruthless capitalist competition, in which vast empires fall and rise within a single decade (Big Blue/Microsoft). Under the disciplinary liberal night watchman’s protection of “private” property-rights, capitalist freebooters destroy one another as they race to be the ones who actualize the Net, just like the railroads of the nineteenth-century racing across the continent. This means that the virtual class retains a strict capitalist determination and that its representative social type must be a capitalist, someone who is installing the highway to win a financial competition, if nothing else. If one is not so minded in today’s computer industry they will be eaten alive. You will only be able to get personal kicks and pursue your (ressentiment-laden) idealistic views of computer democracy in this industry if you sell. So you hype your ideas and your ideals become hype – that is the twisted psychology of the virtual class: not hyped ideology, but something of, by, and for the Net: ideological hype.

There are pure capitalists in the cyber industry and there are capitalists who are also visionary computer specialists. The latter, in a spirit of vicious naivete, generate the ideological hype, a messianic element, that the former take up cynically. It’s the old story of the good cop and the bad cop. How come the good cop tolerates the bad cop? So much for the computer democracy of cyber possessive-individualists. The economic base of the virtual class is the entire communications industry – everywhere it reaches. As a whole, this industry processes ideological hype for capitalist ends. It is most significantly constituted by cynicism, not viciously naive vision. Yet, though a small group in numerical proportion to the whole virtual class, the visionaries are essential to cyber-capitalism because they provide the ideological mediation to seduce the flesh into the Net. In this sense the cynical capitalists and the well-provided techies are merely drones, clearing the way for the Pied Piper’s parade.

A frontier mentality rules the drive into cyberspace. It is one of the supreme ironies that a primitive form of capitalism, a retro-capitalism, is actualizing virtuality. The visionary cyber-capitalist is a hybrid monster of social Darwinism and techno-populist individualism. It is just such an imminently reversible figure that can provide the switching mechanism back and forth between cyberspace and the collapsing space of (crashed) perception.

The most complete representative of the virtual class is the visionary capitalist who is constituted by all of its contradictions and who, therefore, secretes its

world is cyberspace. The dream of being the god of cyberspace – public ideology as the fantasy of pre-pubescent males: a regression from sex to an autistic power drive.

[...]

The Virtual Class and Capitalism

The computer industry is in an intensive phase of “creative destruction,” the term coined by Schumpeter and used by the neo-Darwinian macho apologists for capitalism to refer to the economic killing fields produced by rapid technological change. The Net is being brought into actuality through the offices of ruthless capitalist competition, in which vast empires fall and rise within a single decade (Big Blue/Microsoft). Under the disciplinary liberal night watchman’s protection of “private” property-rights, capitalist freebooters destroy one another as they race to be the ones who actualize the Net, just like the railroads of the nineteenth-century racing across the continent. This means that the virtual class retains a strict capitalist determination and that its representative social type must be a capitalist, someone who is installing the highway to win a financial competition, if nothing else. If one is not so minded in today’s computer industry they will be eaten alive. You will only be able to get personal kicks and pursue your (ressentiment-laden) idealistic views of computer democracy in this industry if you sell. So you hype your ideas and your ideals become hype – that is the twisted psychology of the virtual class: not hyped ideology, but something of, by, and for the Net: ideological hype.

There are pure capitalists in the cyber industry and there are capitalists who are also visionary computer specialists. The latter, in a spirit of vicious naivete, generate the ideological hype, a messianic element, that the former take up cynically. It’s the old story of the good cop and the bad cop. How come the good cop tolerates the bad cop? So much for the computer democracy of cyber possessive-individualists. The economic base of the virtual class is the entire communications industry – everywhere it reaches. As a whole, this industry processes ideological hype for capitalist ends. It is most significantly constituted by cynicism, not viciously naive vision. Yet, though a small group in numerical proportion to the whole virtual class, the visionaries are essential to cyber-capitalism because they provide the ideological mediation to seduce the flesh into the Net. In this sense the cynical capitalists and the well-provided techies are merely drones, clearing the way for the Pied Piper’s parade.

A frontier mentality rules the drive into cyberspace. It is one of the supreme ironies that a primitive form of capitalism, a retro-capitalism, is actualizing virtuality. The visionary cyber-capitalist is a hybrid monster of social Darwinism and techno-populist individualism. It is just such an imminently reversible figure that can provide the switching mechanism back and forth between cyberspace and the collapsing space of (crashed) perception.

ideological hype. The rest of the class tends to split the contradictions: the visionless-cynical-business capitalists and the perhaps visionary, perhaps skill-oriented, perhaps indifferent techno-intelligentsia of cognitive scientists, engineers, computer scientists, video-game developers, and all the other communication specialists, ranged in hierarchies, but all dependent for their economic support on the drive to virtualization. Whatever contradictions there are within the virtual class – that is, the contradictions stemming from the confrontation of bourgeois and proletarian – the class as a whole supports the drive into cyber-space through the wired world. This is the way it works in post late-capitalism, where the communication complex is repeating the pattern of class collaborationism that marked the old military-industrial complex. The drive into the Net is one of those great capitalist techno-projects that depends upon a concert of interests to sustain it, as it sucks social energy into itself. The phenomenon of a collaborationist complex harboring a retro-Darwinian competition is something new, but is stabilized, in the final analysis, by a broad consensus among the capitalist components of the virtual class that the liberal-fascist state structure is deserving of support. Indeed, in the U.S.A. in the 1990s the state is the greatest producer of the ideological hype of the “information highway.” The virtual class has its administration in the White House. The concerted drive into cyberspace proceeds, all in the name of economic development and a utopian imaginary of possessive individualists.

The Hyper-Texted Body or Nietzsche Gets a Modem

But why be nostalgic? The old body type was always OK, but the wired body with its micro-flesh, multi-media channeled ports, cybernetic fingers, and bubbling neuro-brain finely interfaced to the “standard operating-system” of the Internet is infinitely better. Not really the wired body of sci-fi with its mutant designer look, or body flesh with its ghostly reminders of nineteenth-century philosophy, but the hyper-texted body as both: a wired nervous system embedded in living (dedicated) flesh.

The hyper-texted body with its dedicated flesh? That is our telematic future, and it’s not necessarily so bleak. Technology has always been our sheltering environment: not second-order nature, but primal nature for the twenty-first-century body. In the end, the virtual class is very old-fashioned. It clings to an antiquated historical form – capitalism – and, on its behalf, wants to shut down the creative possibilities of the Internet. Dedicated flesh rebels against the virtual class. It does not want to be interfaced to the Net through modems and external software black boxes, but *actually wants to be an Internet*. The virtual class wants to appropriate emergent technologies for purposes of authoritarian political control over cyberspace. It wants to drag technotopia back to the age of the primitive politics of predatory capitalism. But dedicated (geek) flesh wants something very different. Unlike the (typically European) rejection of technotopia in favor of a newly emergent nostalgia movement under the sign of “Back to Vinyl” in digital

over-identification with the feared and desired object, the hyper-texted body insists that ours is already the era of post-capitalism, and even post-technology. Taking the will to virtuality seriously, it demands its telematic rights to be a functioning interfaced body: to be a multi-media thinker, to patch BUS ports on its cyber-flesh as it navigates the gravity well of the Internet, to create aesthetic visions equal to the pure virtualities found everywhere on the now superceded digital superhighway, and to become data to such a point of violent implosion that the body finally breaks free of the confining myth of "wired culture" and goes wireless.

The wireless body? That is the floating body, drifting around in the debris of technotopia: encrypted flesh in a sea of data. The perfect evolutionary successor to twentieth-century flesh, the wireless body fuses the speed of virtualized exchange into its cellular structure. DNA-coated data is inserted directly through spinal taps into dedicated flesh for better navigation through the treacherous shoals of the electronic galaxy. Not a body without memory or feelings, but the opposite. The wireless body is the battleground of the major political and ethical conflicts of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century experience.

Perhaps the wireless body will be just a blank data dump, a floating petri dish where all the brilliant residues of technotopia are mixed together in newly recombinant forms. In this case, the wireless body would be an indefinitely reprogrammable chip: micro-soft flesh where the "standard operating-system" of the new electronic age comes off the top of the TV set, flips inside the body organic, and is soft-wired to a waiting vat of remaindered flesh.

But the wireless body could be, and already is, something very different. Not the body as an organic grid for passively sampling all the drifting bytes of recombinant culture, but the wireless body as a highly-charged theoretical and political site: a moving field of aesthetic contestation for remapping the galactic empire of technotopia. Data flesh can speak so confidently of the possibility of multi-media democracy, of sex without secretions, and of integrated (cyber-) relationships because it has already burst through to the other side of technotopia: to that point of brilliant dissolution where the Net comes alive, and begins to speak the language of wireless bodies in a wireless world.

There are already many wireless bodies on the Internet: Many data travelers on the virtual road have managed under the weight of the predatory capitalism of the virtual class and the even weightier humanist prejudices against geek flesh, to make of the Internet a charmed site for fusing the particle waves of all the passing data into a new body type: hyper-texted bodies circulating as "web weavers" in electronic space.

Refusing to be remaindered as flesh dumped by the virtual class, the hyper-texted body bends virtuality to its own purposes. Here, the will to virtuality ceases to be one-dimensional, becoming a doubled process, grisly yet creative, spatial yet memoried, in full violent play as the hyper-texted body. Always schizoid yet fully integrated, the hyper-texted body swallows its modem, cuts its wired connections to the information highway, and becomes its own system-operating software, combining and remutating the surrounding data storm into new virtualities. And why not? Human flesh no longer exists, except as an incept of the wireless

over-identification with the feared and desired object, the hyper-texted body insists that ours is already the era of post-capitalism, and even post-technology. Taking the will to virtuality seriously, it demands its telematic rights to be a functioning interfaced body: to be a multi-media thinker, to patch BUS ports on its cyber-flesh as it navigates the gravity well of the Internet, to create aesthetic visions equal to the pure virtualities found everywhere on the now superceded digital superhighway, and to become data to such a point of violent implosion that the body finally breaks free of the confining myth of "wired culture" and goes wireless.

The wireless body? That is the floating body, drifting around in the debris of technotopia: encrypted flesh in a sea of data. The perfect evolutionary successor to twentieth-century flesh, the wireless body fuses the speed of virtualized exchange into its cellular structure. DNA-coated data is inserted directly through spinal taps into dedicated flesh for better navigation through the treacherous shoals of the electronic galaxy. Not a body without memory or feelings, but the opposite. The wireless body is the battleground of the major political and ethical conflicts of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century experience.

Perhaps the wireless body will be just a blank data dump, a floating petri dish where all the brilliant residues of technotopia are mixed together in newly recombinant forms. In this case, the wireless body would be an indefinitely reprogrammable chip: micro-soft flesh where the "standard operating-system" of the new electronic age comes off the top of the TV set, flips inside the body organic, and is soft-wired to a waiting vat of remaindered flesh.

But the wireless body could be, and already is, something very different. Not the body as an organic grid for passively sampling all the drifting bytes of recombinant culture, but the wireless body as a highly-charged theoretical and political site: a moving field of aesthetic contestation for remapping the galactic empire of technotopia. Data flesh can speak so confidently of the possibility of multi-media democracy, of sex without secretions, and of integrated (cyber-) relationships because it has already burst through to the other side of technotopia: to that point of brilliant dissolution where the Net comes alive, and begins to speak the language of wireless bodies in a wireless world.

There are already many wireless bodies on the Internet: Many data travelers on the virtual road have managed under the weight of the predatory capitalism of the virtual class and the even weightier humanist prejudices against geek flesh, to make of the Internet a charmed site for fusing the particle waves of all the passing data into a new body type: hyper-texted bodies circulating as "web weavers" in electronic space.

Refusing to be remaindered as flesh dumped by the virtual class, the hyper-texted body bends virtuality to its own purposes. Here, the will to virtuality ceases to be one-dimensional, becoming a doubled process, grisly yet creative, spatial yet memoried, in full violent play as the hyper-texted body. Always schizoid yet fully integrated, the hyper-texted body swallows its modem, cuts its wired connections to the information highway, and becomes its own system-operating software,

world. Refuse, then, nostalgia for the surpassed past of remaindered flesh, and hyper-text your way to the (World Wide) Webbed body: the body that actually dances on its own data organs, sees with multi-media graphical interface screens, makes new best tele-friends on the MOO, writes electronic poetry on the disappearing edges of video, sound, and text integrators, and insists on going beyond the tedious world of binary divisions to the new cyber-mathematics of FITS. The hyper-texted body, then, is the precursor of a new world of multi-media politics, fractalized economics, incept personalities, and (cybernetically) interfaced relationships. After all, why should the virtual class monopolize digital reality? It only wants to suppress the creative possibilities of virtualization, privileging instead the tendencies of technotopia towards new and more vicious forms of cyber-authoritarianism. The virtual class only wants to subordinate digital reality to the will of capitalism. The hyper-texted body responds to the challenge of virtualization by making itself a monstrous double: pure virtuality/pure flesh. Consequently, our telematic future: the wireless body on the Net as a sequenced chip microprogrammed by the virtual class for purposes of (its) maximal profitability, or the wireless body as the leading-edge of critical subjectivity in the twenty-first century. If the virtual class is the post-historical successor to the early bourgeoisie of primitive capitalism, then the hyper-texted body is the Internet equivalent of the Paris Commune: anarchistic, utopian, and in full revolt against the suppression of the general (tele-)human possibilities of the Net in favor of the specific (monetary) interests of the virtual class. Always already the past to the future of the hyper-texted body, the virtual class is the particular interest that must be overcome by the hyper-texted body of data trash if the Net is to be gatewayed by soft ethics.

Soft ethics? Nietzsche's got a modem, and he is already rewriting the last pages of *The Will to Power* as *The Will to Virtuality*. As the patron saint of the hyper-texted body, Nietzsche is data trash to the smooth, unbroken surface of the virtual class.

Note

- 1 John Seabrook, "E-mail from Bill," *The New Yorker*, LXIX, 45 (January 10, 1994), p. 54.