

Microdystopias: Aesthetics and Ideologies in a Broken Moment

Eds. Asbjørn Grønstad and Lene M. Johannessen (Lexington Books 2022).

Foreword

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A confounding antinomy has characterized the ill-fated twenty-first century. On the one hand, a frenzy of “historical” and “unprecedented” moments, as the world is incessantly afflicted by momentous change and cataclysmic and unique events, we are told. “How historical is this?” the news anchor asks the reporter in the field or the expert in the studio, and infallibly, it’s always off the charts. On the other, a debilitating sense of inertia, of being struck by paralysis and unable to imagine alternatives to the present. The more historical moments, it seems, the less times are prone to change, and the weaker the historical agency of our species. These two phenomena coalesce in the violent resurgence of historical imaginaries of a distinctly mythical, messianic, and Manichean zeal. Thus far, the post-millennia era is bookended by the declarations of a Christian crusade to purge the world from terror, and the resurrection of the “spiritual unity”¹ of Russia and the reunification of a “people bound by blood.”² While the former was waged in the name of “the Homeland” and “American soil,” and refracted through the cultural memory of Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima, the latter stakes its claim in the baptism of the Viking prince Valdemar, the conquests of Peter the Great, and the Great Patriotic War. In the interim, we have witnessed the campaigns to reestablish the Caliphate, draped in the archaisms of mounted knights, black banners, iconoclastic rituals, and dark punishments; to “make America great again” (that is to say, to undo the alleged post-racial era); and to “take back control” (the ironic slogan of Brexit).

At least two common denominators can be discerned amidst the global onslaught of ethnic, religious, and national supremacy and *blut und boden* mysticism. First, the projection of a phantasmatic enemy or Other (terror, infidels, immigrants, pedophiles, traitors, deep states, Nazis etc.). Second, a vision of the past as a lost unity that at any cost must be repaired and restored. Ultimately, this political project of redemption and salvation concerns the restoration of an image. The image—which is the idol of history itself, be it Eurasia or “the beautiful, beautiful Alamo”³—is the agent that will undo the fall into time and mend the broken moment in which we live. To W.J.T. Mitchell’s inquiry “what do images want,” we may thus respond: to become reality and to live forever; to immobilize time as a medium of change and to set

“history’s record straight,”⁴ as the 45th POTUS declared at the foot of the floodlit visages carved into the rockface of Mount Rushmore during the Independence Day celebrations in 2020. One is reminded of Gilles Deleuze’s comment on Karl Marx famous adage that history returns “the second time as farce.”⁵ In Deleuze’s elucidation, “repetition is comic when it falls short” and fails to engender “metamorphosis and the production of something new.”⁶ Maybe this is why the tag-on “post” has been exchanged for the prefix “new,” as in neo-fascism, neo-liberalism, and neo-nationalism, the new right, the new cold war, and Novorossiya? In any case, instead of creation and renewal, brute and compulsive repetition without difference.

Let me adduce a few points of entry into this predicament. More precisely, the question is this: how do the two titular notions this book—“microdystopias” and “a broken moment”—pertain to the structural incapacity to imagine the future as other than a repetition of or return to the past? A first entry point can be gleaned from the infamous response to a *New York Times* reporter by a White House official, later identified as Senior advisor Karl Rove, after the invasion of Iraq. The statement, in brief, was that the “reality-based community” of investigative journalism could do no more than study the new realities engineered by the faith-based community running the U.S. empire.⁷ Faith-based and fact-resistant communities, by definition, govern through propaganda, the original meaning of which is “the propagation of faith,” which always means the propagation of images. In the United States, propaganda (i.e., making believe) was rebranded as “public relations” by Sigmund Freud’s nephew Edward Bernays in the 1920s, and implemented through subliminal messaging strategies stimulating the unconscious desires and anxieties, passions and phobias (i.e., mental images) of citizens and consumers.⁸ A century later, these affective modulations are executed by the algorithm-enabled personalized propaganda systems known as “social media.” As Mark Andrejevic comments on this misnomer, it is not we who have amplified our social skills and spheres, but our “smart” devices, which relentlessly communicate with each other and exchange information about their users.⁹ This automated micro-managing of our cognitions, perceptions, and imaginaries is part of a behavioral engineering program that extends from the Taylorist micro-motion studies pioneered by Muybridge, Marey, and the Gilbreths, to the microtargeted ads that predate consumers and swing voters. The basic operational logistics, for which “micro” provides an apt shorthand, remains constant: to break up vital fluxes and flows into discrete entities for the purpose of optimization, valorization, and control. Calibrated on the behavioral data extracted from the micro-activities of keystrokes and mouse clicks, parsed through preference profiling and psychographic messaging algorithms, and monitored at the nano-level of firing neurons and dopamine rushes, what ensues, in Jonathan Crary’s words, is “the

parcellization and fragmentation of shared zones of experience into fabricated microworlds of affects and symbols.”¹⁰ As Eli Pariser observes with regard to the monadization, siloization, and tribalization induced by these self-perpetuating feedback loops: “Left to their own devices, personalization filters serve up a kind of invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas.”¹¹ Congruent with the Latin *propagare*, meaning to breed, spread, and increase, is also Mitchell’s intuition that images behave like virus-like agents, as self-replicating life forms or parasitical microorganisms that invade host-cells for their reproduction, going viral in neural tissues and digital networks alike.¹² It is not only images that have been broken up into bits and bytes and repackaged into streams of 1s and 0s, however, but also time itself. As often has been noted, the homogenizing effect of the once predictable rhythm of news media outlets has been shattered by auto-curated and custom-made newsfeeds. Eroding into clickbaits, soundbites, and memes, the public sphere is curbed into isolating echo chambers, and the horizon of a common future into solipsistic filter bubbles.

My second, and maybe equally foreseeable, entry point into our broken moment is Francis Fukuyama’s thesis on “the end of history,” which was merely a lengthy iteration on Margaret Thatcher’s rallying cry “there are no alternatives,” later rephrased in Angela Merkel’s neologism “alternativlos.”¹³ To recap: history’s endgame was the dissolution of the Communist bloc, the end of ideologies as the driving forces of history, and the irreversible triumph of market economy and hence of liberal democracy. Obviously, this has not been the case. As suggested above, moreover, ideologies, grand narratives, and great man theories did not go away. Instead, they were rerouted, no longer blazing the trail toward a future but regressing into the past, or they transmuted into grand conspiracy theories (usually both). From another perspective, they became reformatted and embedded in a different infrastructure, hardwired into a new substrate and executed at the micro-level speed of computational processing. This development is also the premise for two more recently proclaimed endings. The first one was announced by Chris Anderson, the chief editor of *Wired* magazine, as “The End of Theory” in 2008. With the exponential growth of data and computing power, human behavior can be tracked, measured, and predicted with absolute certainty, independent of interpretation, explanation, or understanding. “No semantic or causal analysis is required,” Anderson gleefully avers, nor is there any need to waste time contemplating ideas, norms, and values when “[c]orrelation is enough” and “numbers speak for themselves.”¹⁴ Ten years later, in a more somber analysis of the ontological consequences of statistical forecasting, James Bridle augurs “the end of the future,” which should be understood in an absolutely literal sense. Since

predictive algorithms can only base their probabilistic projections on the data they have been fed, which by necessity derive from the past, the future that they predict will, by design, be “like the past,” while everything that “has not been seen before or which does not map onto established patterns, that which is uncertain or ambiguous, is excluded from the field of possible futures.”¹⁵ No place, then, for the uncaptured or undecidable, the unmeasurable or innumerable, previously known as the future. This new technoepistemic paradigm, which succeeds the Enlightenment paradigm that knowledge will make us free, is also the basis for a new faith-based community blindly committed to technological solutionism and automated decision making, whether in the form of high-frequency trading algorithms or preemptive signature strikes.

Finally, an observation made by Michel Foucault in his penultimate lecture on *The Birth of Biopolitics* from 1979. It concerns Adam Smith’s thesis that self-interested, risk-taking, and competitive subjects pursuing personal gain in a deregulated marketplace unintentionally—and only unintentionally—contribute to the collective good.¹⁶ “For there to be certainty of collective benefit,” Foucault infers, “it is absolutely necessary that each actor be blind with regard to this totality.”¹⁷ The doctrine of the Invisible Hand in which our global economy is grounded does not only prohibit sovereign oversight and intervention, then; it also stipulates that in order for “the atomistic behavior of *homo œconomicus*”¹⁸ to fulfil its manifest destiny within a free enterprise system, imaginative acts that challenge this order with alternatives must be prohibited as well. The totality of the social body must thus for all intents and purposes remain invisible and unthinkable, and the possibility for collective actions toward a common good unimaginable. One may speculate, then, on whether this self-imposed ban and blindness is in fact integrally aligned to my opening gambit: that our current moment is one of repetition without difference, which co-constituent symptoms are a discursive inflation of historical moments, an inability of history to renew itself, and an upsurge of ethnonationalist idols. Without the aid of number crunching algorithms, we can nonetheless make the following prediction with some certitude: the proliferation of microdystopias that have become synonymous with our quotidian realities will inevitably continue in a situation which constitutive feature, as Asbjørn Grønstad puts it in his chapter, is “the obstruction of the powers of the imagination.” While offering piercing diagnoses of a miscellany of microdystopic configurations, each essay in this collection also seeks to surmount this obstruction that separates our imaginaries from a shared lifeworld.

NOTES

¹ Vladimir Putin “On the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine.” Published July 21, 2021 on the Russian President’s official website: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (last accessed June 22, 2022).

² Vladimir Putin “Address by the President of the Russian Federation” February 21, 2022: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (last accessed June 22, 2022).

³ President Donald J. Trump’s State of the Union address on February 4, 2020. Full transcript available at: www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/us/politics/state-of-union-transcript.html (last accessed June 23, 2022). “Project Alamo,” we may further note, was the name of Trump’s digital election campaign.

⁴ Transcription of President Donald J. Trump’s Fourth of July speech. Full transcript available at: <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-transcript-at-mount-rushmore-4th-of-july-event> (last accessed June 23, 2022).

⁵ “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” Karl Marx *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* [1852] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels *Selected Works in Two Volumes: Volume 1* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House 1962) 247.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* [1968] trans Paul Patton (London and New York: Bloomsbury 2014) 119.

⁷ Ron Suskind “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush” *The New York Times Magazine* October 17, 2004: <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html> (last accessed June 24, 2022).

⁸ See Adam Curtis’ four-part documentary series *The Century of the Self* (BBC 2002) and Cory Wimberly’s *How Propaganda Became Public Relations: Foucault and the Corporate Government of the Public* (London: Routledge 2021).

⁹ Mark Andrejevic *Automated Media* (New York and London: Routledge 2020) 29.

¹⁰ Jonathan Crary *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso 2013) 53.

¹¹ Eli Pariser *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Books 2011) 13.

¹² W.J.T. Mitchell *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2011).

¹³ Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press 1992).

¹⁴ Chris Anderson “The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete” *Wired* June 23, 2008: <https://www.wired.com/2008/06/pb-theory/> (last accessed June 24, 2022).

¹⁵ James Bridle *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London and New York: Verso 2018) 44. See also: Meredith Broussard *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press 2019); Kate Crawford *Atlas of AI* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2021); and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the Politics of Recognition* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press 2021).

¹⁶ Adam Smith *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell 1776).

¹⁷ Michel Foucault *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978–1979* trans G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008) 279.

¹⁸ Ibid. 282