

POSSESSED

How Digital Capitalism Invaded the Human Body

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The age of obsession

Restlessness haunts the human organism. Disquiet has taken hold of our bodies and wrapped its tentacles around our nerve fibres, and if you pause for a moment, you can already feel it diverting your attention away from this paragraph, in the same way that it tugged and yanked at mine while I was writing these very words. Our muscle memory has long since been infiltrated by this impulse, which means that books don't get read, podcasts and films are continually skipped back ten – fifteen – thirty seconds, and that the urge to click ahead to something else completely random arises at the most inconvenient moments. It is a phenomenon that is unique to the twenty-first century. People were obviously restless before the internet too, but with the advent of digital technology in all aspects of our lives, this restlessness has been able to thrive in a way that was difficult to imagine before smartphones became commonplace and always being online became the new normal.

The problem is not that we no longer have time to sit through the opening credits of TV series or concentrate on our work uninterrupted, but that we simply can't bring ourselves to do so. A fidgety sense of disquiet has infected civilisation, making us dependent on constant interruptions in the form of social micro-interactions and brief, compact fragments of

audiovisual diversion. This ‘addiction’ results from the fact that today we are blessed with continuous access to entertainment, distractions and a fragmentation of focus that humans have never been close to experiencing before. One reason why our ancestors were more present in the moment than we are is that they didn’t have a choice – or, rather, they didn’t have *our* range of choices. There weren’t countless parallel contexts banging on the door every moment of their lives. Every aspect of their existence wasn’t perforated by an infrastructure optimised to take up as much time and attention as possible. If they were more focused, more attentive and more unequivocally integrated in the here and now than we are – if *we* were all these things before smartphones fused with our nervous system – then it is largely because their world wasn’t infiltrated by agents of restlessness in the same way as ours is today.

In this context, ‘infected’ and ‘infiltrated’ are meant to be taken very literally. I am no doubt not alone in sometimes feeling that it isn’t actually us who are restless at all, but that an external force is inattentive and unfocused *in* us – *for* us – *on our behalf*. This assumption is supported by the fact that ‘obsessed’ is now one of the most commonly used words to describe our relationship to the media and technology. We are *obsessed* with our new favourite podcast, *obsessed* with the game everyone is talking about, *obsessed* with the smartwatch we have finally got round to buying so that we can conscientiously log all our health-related data. The title of this book in Norwegian is *Besatt*, which corresponds to both ‘obsessed’ – as in ‘obsessed with a novel’ – and ‘possessed’ – as in ‘possessed by a demon’. This means that the body horror perspective is very much present in both the public and private conversations about technology. Even though it is usually the soul that is in jeopardy when a demon takes over a human body, all tales of possession and exorcism are ultimately body horror tales.

In this respect, it is important to stress that the modern use of the word ‘obsessed’ almost always has positive overtones. ‘Obsessed’ is stronger and more forceful than ‘fascinated’, ‘captivated’ or ‘engrossed’ and, like ‘addicted’, it is a word whose original connotations of compulsive behaviour and a lack of self-discipline are nowadays understood to imply an intoxicating excess. Whether we spend all weekend on the sofa absorbed in a TV series, simply can’t stop using a new gadget, or constantly check social media for the latest updates in a story requiring all our attention, ‘obsessed’ describes the welcome feeling of something that grabs hold of us and drags us out of boring and predictable routines. These enthusiastic accounts of not being in control of our own choices and actions go hand in hand with the warnings of recent decades that new technology makes us chronically distracted and unfocused. In other words, we are living in a culture that applauds how technology gets under our skin while simultaneously condemning it.

Considering how much we talk about being obsessed, we are surprisingly uninterested in what it is we are obsessed with. In recent years, for example, there has been a growing tendency to blame *the algorithms* for all the negative effects of modern digital technology. An algorithm is basically a formula or procedure that describes how a given task is performed, which in practice embraces everything from recipes and magic rituals to mathematical

formulas and advanced cybernetics. In everyday speech, however, the word refers to computer programs that use more and less sophisticated forms of machine learning to manipulate us into performing certain actions. This is a practice that has taken off since the foundations of the modern internet were laid at some point during the first decade of this century. After ten years of persistent – if not always so pertinent – criticism of this manipulation, ‘the algorithms’ has become a collective term for the tech industry’s strategies for influencing us in ways we are unaware of or don’t fully comprehend. Thus ‘the algorithms’ can now mean anything from clandestine surveillance and the automatised exploitation of human mechanisms of addiction to traditional upselling tricks – regardless of whether machine learning or algorithms are actually involved.

The focus on algorithms is understandable, considering that they represent the most concrete manifestations of technology’s instrumentalization of humans. At the same time, this notion of algorithms as being the root of all evil is based on the view that it is possible to remove everything that is negative, unpleasant or problematic about the technology that defines our era without fundamentally changing its essence. This is clearly a convenient position, because if all that is wrong with technology is the algorithms, the tech industry only needs to make small adjustments in how it operates to earn our full trust and support. In this respect, it is important to be aware of the fact that the tech industry’s most cynical tricks and most destructive practices derive directly from the ideological foundations on which it is based, and that this ideology pervades the overwhelming majority of the products and services we are offered today.

We only need to feel that sudden, unstoppable urge to pick up our smartphone and be distracted from whatever we are doing to know that the algorithms constitute an essential element of what in the last twenty years has taken root in our culture and our bodies. The withdrawal symptoms we experience after short bursts of dopamine-inducing content, the phantom tingles of excitement from imaginary vibrating phones, the knee-jerk reactions of suddenly diverting our attention in a different direction, all this is due to the algorithms’ Pavlovian conditioning of the human organism. Algorithms may be seen as the vanguard of the tech industry’s colonisation of the human nervous system, but in the grand body horror tale of how technology infects and transforms us physically, they are still only part of the bigger picture. Just as important is the way technology shapes our view of the world, humanity and technology itself, in completely different ways than the people who created and developed it originally envisaged.

New technology, new reality

In David Cronenberg’s classic body horror movie *Videodrome* (1983), the main character Max Renn (James Woods) discovers a mysterious TV programme that completely alters his understanding of reality – and gradually also reality itself. Max is the boss of a small TV station based in Toronto that specialises in soft porn and other edgy content that the bigger channels

wouldn't touch with a bargepole, and it is in this context that he comes across the show 'Videodrome'. The programme has no plot in the conventional sense of the word, and consists in its entirety of what seems to be bona fide torture and murder on camera. Max immediately spots a business opportunity, but it soon turns out that the bestial content is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, the TV show contains a broadcast signal that gives viewers a new and unique kind of brain tumour, and this tumour causes bizarre hallucinations that transform the world into an increasingly surrealistic nightmare landscape.

Videodrome was a flop when it was released in cinemas in 1983, but over the years it has achieved cult status thanks to its unforgettable depictions of the symbiotic relationship between humans and media technology. The plot revolves around Max's journey into an underworld full of mysterious beauties, enigmatic cults and fascist groups that conspire with tech companies to cleanse society of moral deviants. As the drama reaches its climax, both Max and the audience lose their grip on what is real and what are hallucinations. Because of this ambiguity, *Videodrome* is an unusually effective embodiment of the feeling that technology affects us in ways we are incapable of understanding or controlling. The film is best remembered for its eerie atmosphere, its striking images of the fusion between biology and technology – as well as the cryptic mantra 'Long live the new flesh!'. But what makes *Videodrome* still seem relevant more than four decades after its premiere is that all these elements are rooted in central questions related to humans and media technology, which have only become more pertinent since the 1980s.

The signal that causes tumours to grow in the brains of people who watch the show 'Videodrome' was created by Brian O'Blivion, an eccentric media professor who long after his death continues to appear on TV thanks to an enormous video library of monologues he recorded before he died. According to O'Blivion, the world experienced by those who have developed the tumour represents a higher level of reality, which he calls 'the new flesh'. It is 'the new flesh' that makes Max's hand fuse with a revolver, and which transforms video cassettes and TV screens into biological creatures of flesh and blood – or at least makes it look that way. The nature of this new flesh is never defined, yet it is clear that once someone has been infected by the 'Videodrome' signal, the world is no longer controlled by the laws of physics, but by the dreamy logic of the electronic media.

At first glance, *Videodrome's* depictions of technology seem to have little in common with the film's contemporary origins in 1980's Canada, or even with our own era, but if we look beyond the most grotesque and excessive metaphors, we find an underlying analysis that is worth closer inspection. Cronenberg was born and raised in Toronto, and he based the character of O'Blivion on one of the city's leading academics: the media theorist Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan was a lecturer at the University of Toronto while Cronenberg was a student there, and even though Cronenberg never attended McLuhan's lectures, he used his theories as a starting point for *Videodrome*.

McLuhan (1911–1980) was one of North America's most prominent public intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, and even appears as himself in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977). He is best known nowadays as the man behind 'the medium is the message', the most commonly quoted media slogan in history, and *Videodrome*'s main premise may be seen as a burlesque literalisation of this frequently misunderstood axiom. The reason Max is so affected by the programme 'Videodrome' is not due to all the murders and assaults he witnesses, but the secret signal to which he is exposed. Because, as O'Blivion's daughter and heir Bianca later explains, the signal can be incorporated into any show on TV. The thing that transforms Max and his world beyond recognition is a feature of the TV signal itself, not the specific content of the 'Videodrome' show. In other words, the important point here is not what he watches on TV, but the fact that he watches TV at all.

Transformation is a key concept for McLuhan, who devoted his life to describing, mapping and predicting the unintended consequences of technology on humans and society. Although algorithms affect us in underhand and devious ways, they mainly do what are they meant to do, which usually involves getting us to act in a manner that benefits the players who have developed them. It isn't always plain to see how the actions we are trained to perform serve those who get us to perform them, but there is always an analysis and a plan behind it all. This means that if we know what the algorithms have been designed to achieve, we can take precautions and at least protect ourselves to a certain extent from their influence. The phrase 'If you aren't paying for a digital product, then you are the product' is an example of such knowledge.

What McLuhan was concerned with, however, was a qualitatively different type of technological influence: the complex ripple effects of new technology that take place over generations and centuries, and which no one can realistically predict or control.

The legacy from Phoenicia

One of the central ideas in McLuhan's writings is that technology must be understood as physical and mental extensions of the human organism. These extensions exert a complex influence on us that we are rarely aware of and are, by definition, beyond the individual's control. McLuhan wasn't the first one to formulate this idea, but he developed it and made it the basis of his life's work, which more than forty years after his death provides one of the best road maps we have for understanding the complex interaction between humans and technology. While he didn't actually use the word 'cyborg', he made an assertion early on that today is widespread: although the media technology we use on a daily basis is not yet physically integrated into our bodies, in practice it constitutes a direct extension of our nervous system and muscle memory.

McLuhan's analyses of the influence of technology are quite different from the current critique focusing on algorithms. Even though he is usually described as a media theorist, he

started out as a literary scholar, called himself a metaphysician and spoke with the unwavering self-confidence of a prophet. He liked to express himself in brief statements that he called 'probes'. These probes were designed as tools for exploring ideas, rather than being principles in the traditional sense of the word, and were formulated as a cross between slogans, stand-up observations and Zen Buddhist koans. The previously mentioned example 'the medium is the message' is the most famous of these, but McLuhan rattled them off at length to anyone who was willing to listen. Some of them found their way into everyday speech and popular culture ('The human family now exists under conditions of a global village'), others appeared in McLuhan's books and lectures ('Nature is an item contained in a man-made system of satellites and information'), while many were rejected and forgotten when they failed to excite himself or his audience. That a considerable number of these probes were based on unsound factual foundations, however, did not apparently bother him – at least not as long as they conveyed some kind of deeper truth about the subject.

To get the full benefit of McLuhan's work, we are obliged to accept this oracle-like rhetoric as an essential part of his method as both a thinker and communicator. The same applies to his butterfly effect approach to history, whereby apparently minor technological inventions can have tremendous consequences for societies and civilisations. For example, in his book *War and Peace in the Global Village* he argues that the invention of the stirrup transformed the structure of European society in the Middle Ages. McLuhan thought in terms of the big picture; he viewed technologies and cultures from a macro perspective and operated with a time horizon of many thousand years. His broad generalisations were the rule rather than the exception, and as most of his theories exist in a grey area between media studies, philosophy and history, it is difficult to verify them.

On the other hand, he had a unique understanding of the interplay between people and technology, as well as the ability to put this into a larger context. One important reason why McLuhan's work appears relevant in relation to technology developed long after his death is that his thinking was in the same format and on the same scale as Silicon Valley's – not least when it comes to technology's potential to transform humanity and society. Something else he had in common with today's technologists, who are busy creating artificial intelligence and providing human consciousness with eternal life in servers, is that he wasn't afraid to venture into what traditional media studies considers to be the domain of metaphysics and science fiction.

However, McLuhan started out with antiquity. Like the other academics who belonged to the so-called Toronto School of communication theory (Harold Innis, Eric A Havelock, Northrop Frye et al.), McLuhan built on the premise that the introduction of phonetic script in Phoenicia and Ancient Greece involved a radical reorientation of human consciousness. Phonetic scripts – alphabets – differ from other types of writing systems (such as Chinese signs and Egyptian hieroglyphics) in the sense that each sign represents a sound rather than a syllable, word or concept. According to McLuhan – who never shied from taking a scientific

hypothesis in a speculative direction – the use of the phonetic alphabet led to the sense of sight becoming superior over time to the senses of hearing, taste, smell and touch. And because the human eye typically perceives the world in a linear and fragmented way – we focus on one thing after the other, rather than taking in everything at once as we do with our ears – this made the Ancient Greeks particularly well-suited to cognitive exercises like abstraction, analysis, classification, standardisation, specialisation and individualisation. This stood in clear contrast to the practices of so-called primitive societies, who experienced the world as one big seamless web of elements and events; and according to McLuhan, it was the break with this worldview that created the western world such as we know it today.

In other words, and not unlike the mysterious TV programme in *Videodrome*, the phonetic alphabet contained a metaphorical signal that infected the people who used it and transformed reality around them in ways they neither understood nor were able to control. However, what Cronenberg portrays in *Videodrome* is a reversal of this process, which McLuhan claimed was an inevitable consequence of the introduction of what he called ‘electric’ media (which we nowadays call ‘electronic’). According to him, radio, film, television and other modern media were already well on the way to leading humanity back to a sensory reality where the senses were more equal, and where the perception of sensory impressions could best be understood in aural terms, such as resonances, harmonies and cacophonies. The reason for this change was a large-scale shift away from the written word, a process that McLuhan claimed would replace our rationalistic perception of reality with a worldview reminiscent of those we find in primitive or traditional societies.

With its digital ghosts, dreamlike incidents and mystifying connections between humans and technology, the new reality that unfolds around Max in *Videodrome* is a magical world in which everything is alive and there is no real distinction between an internal and external landscape. In a world like this, rational, analytical intelligence has clear limitations as a navigational tool, and Max’s immediate reaction to this change is a feeling that the world has become completely unhinged. In the 1960s – decades before the internet and smartphones started undermining the human ability to concentrate – McLuhan argued that our entire western civilisation was rushing headlong into precisely such a crisis, as an inevitable consequence of the psychological reorientation process the new media had triggered.