the thought of a thoughtless world (2000)

A CRITIQUE OF COMPUTERS AND THE INTERNET

Originally written (by me) in March 2000, though updated a little since, this text needs revising in the light of our more thorough experience of computer and internet use over the last few years. It was originally part of a critique of developments in the world of education, hence its emphasis on schools and the young.

In the U.S. state of Michigan public funding has been awarded to a "school" that is no more than a computer/internet hook-up among kids being "schooled" at home. This "school" is organised around Christian Fundamentalist ideology.

Here, Ancient & Modern combine to intensify alienation as never before. The attribution of superhuman abilities and values to that great external authority - God - combines with a similar fetishism of the computer as a specific concentrated representative of the commodity economy. In this way, the "school" hopes to instil in isolated vulnerable children respect before the altar of super slick scientific rationalism adorned with the archaic protection racket of sacrificial Christianity. When I first heard of this school I was utterly disgusted, but it's a measure of how the bizarrely sick becomes banal that now I just think, "Oh well!". Perhaps it's also because this school is merely an exaggerated *totalitarian* extension and unification of all the more diffuse

contradictions inherent in *normal* schools. Schools combine the most crass fuddy duddy moralism with the most Brand New technology in order to control and isolate kids, entice them into the tangled web of received ideas and bit by bit make them mutate into wage slaves. And in case anyone thinks the above mentioned school is a peculiarly American aberration, it needs to be pointed out that Birmingham city council, on the 5ᵗʰ of February 2001, drew up plans for pupils to be taught via internet video links as a way of coping with the teacher shortage. And since then, this is being projected as a "temporary" solution all over the country. (though admittedly this is not in the isolation of the home).

In the past, criticising religion was indicative of Evil; it was considered as mad, irredeemably sick, like being opposed to Good'. Today, to criticise the computer in any serious way, is seen as being Olde Worlde, puritanical, religiously anti-technology, like being opposed to Knowledge and Progress. But like Good', knowledge and progress are ideologies obscuring the contradictions. Knowledge? People everywhere know more and more about less and less. Progress? There never has been such progress in separation. Just as the serious critique of religion in the 19ᵗʰ century ("the sigh of the oppressed…the heart of a heartless world…the spirit of a spiritless situation…the opium of the people") led to a more developed critique of commodity fetishism in general, so any critique of the computer ("the video-game of the alienated, the art of an ugly life, the thought of a thoughtless world, the opium of the isolated") can't uselessly stop at some hippy technophobe moralism, like those who never get beyond atheism in their critique of religion. Just as Heaven is meant to embody certain genuine desires and characteristics (such as love between our fellow men and women) that human beings could possibly create if class society and money were destroyed, so computer technology is imbued with human characteristics increasingly repressed, such as (user) "friendliness", or even "sexiness". In this way the dream of a utopian paradise is replaced with the dream that machines can solve our misery - especially our ignorance - for us. The computer becomes a God, superior to our own good sense, our own point of view.

It is no coincidence that the development of the personal computer, in the late 70s and then in the 80s, came at a time when proletarians were coming together and posing a danger to *this* society: the PC makes isolation seem attractive. And after an epoch when mass strikes threatened capital, home working via the internet helps put paid to all that.

In Lautreamont 's "*Les Chants de Maldoror*" Maldoror swims from the shore to tenderly and sincerely embrace a particularly ferocious shark as, with a loving delicate caress, he slits its throat. This perfectly captures the ambivalent attitude appropriate towards computers, as it does towards culture as a whole. Those who regard cultural commodities as "just" a fetish become uselessly purist: computers are also a *real* fetish, they really are magical dream factories, expropriating and colonising real human adventure.Let 's first look at what the benefits of computer technology/the Internet are:

1. It allows you to produce written and illustrated ideas in a communicable form far quicker than a pen or a typewriter.

2. It gives you access to knowledge and ideas far quicker than the biggest library if you've chosen the right discs or logged onto the right website.

3. Er…that's it.

The rest is just pretty pictures and delerious eulogies.

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Looks good - is good

Computers and the Internet of course, appear to be much more than just typewriters, libraries and letter boxes. That's because graphics, typefaces, the whole video-game aesthetics, tend to seduce with pretty colours and constantly changing and moving shapes, endless games with form, getting involved in fantastic stories where you have the feeling that you are choosing what's going on, make your own movie, turn your life into a soap, be the hero/villain in somebody else's program, make your own music, virtual sex…all these endless forms of participation in life on a screen, whilst history passes you by in the empty streets. Arty-fied technology depicts knowledge and ideas in dazzling colours and shapes in a world where life has grown old and senile: and it pretends to rejuvenate this life with dazzle. The greatness of Infotechnology appears at the dusk of life, and at the dusk of any informed intelligence.

Computer graphics give the user the illusion of choice and freedom: an image is chosen for you by the expert programmer and you can juxtapose them in a uniquely' individual way. This gives the sense of participation' so lacking in medieval television. But the illusion of democratic access to expertise means the expert decides what is an acceptable image. The small margin of freedom of playing around with this graphic is no freedom at all: on the contrary, it undermines confidence in producing your own image (one could just as well take a list of stock phrases and sentences and pick n mix them around with the excuse "I can't write", which, sadly, far too many people do, and not just those who get paid to write). Indeed, most of the cheaper programs permit no alteration of the image whatsoever: copyrighted, you can't add on or rub out part of the image. These graphics colonise your personal taste with a standardised monotonous notion of what a "correct" image is. As with everything in a society that represses individuality, the result is the banalisation of virtually indistinguishable and utterly bland computer print-outs. But even if some programmes allow for greater apparent innovation than others, the main point is that the seductive game with graphics colonises the uncritical mind with the corny ideology, so dominant in this society, that says that *what* you say is far less important than *how* it looks or *how* it is said. And even lower in this hierarchy of importance than the content of what you say is what consequence what you say may have on your social relations.

[1] But the fruitless games with form so encouraged by computers are very addictive when you're tired and stressed. The computer also flatters the egos of those who think whatever they might have taken as long as 4 seconds to think about deserves to be beautifully printed and published and shown to the world in no time at all: the instant aesthetics of instant form makes people instantly think they can parade any old instant crap and because it's instantly printed someone will instantly buy it - or, if it's for free, think "Wow! - this is good - well, it certainly *looks* good, anyway." In the brilliant genius logic of this society that which appears is good, and that which is good appears, and that which appears good is even better. Instant truth, instant acceptability - no need to cook, just add pat phrases with a dash of eccentric obscurities.

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Tangled in the Net

The Internet is basically just a glorified world-wide open letter box: full of junk mail, endless variations of vicarious sex, insults as upsetting as bills, and occasional gems of information and ideas. Plus the chance of falling in love with someone whose age, sex and appearance you know less of than you could from an anonymous phone call.

It certainly saves on postage time or having to go down to some obscure bookstore that supplies your interests. And, in those areas of the world where it is relatively cheap, it gives people immediate access to a potentially very large amount of readers', far more so than a pamphlet, for example. But I emphasise *potentially*. Since over 90% of the Internet is commercial, as is 90% of our lives, interest in anything non-economic, let alone anti-economic, is at an all-time low, at least in the U.K., so an anti-economic text like this will normally attract very few people.[13]

There are certainly many aspects of Internet use which are not overtly economic, yet conform to the rules of the modern economy. For instance, much Internet use involves breaking down the separation between private and public. But it does so within the logic of this society, which considers appearance as something positive in itself. So kids from 10 up are putting their diary on websites just to say, "Here I am - I exist!". If you're not public, you're nothing: this is an attitude which, like all ideology, has a partial truth to it. In the positive terms of this society it means only that spectacular recognition makes you "something" (but you still remain just "some*thing*"). Seen from a negative angle it's true: if you're not in some way openly opposed to a world that reduces you to nothing, then you're nothing.

In the past, the separation of public from private involved an ideological/theological façade of serving public "goodness" as a front hiding all the private "badness" of the men of power and property, a separate private individualist existence characterologically and ideologically based on the expropriation for private use of the public social product. For this reason, being open about one's contradictions and making the essential secret contradictions public was at one time considered a revolutionary act. Certainly revealing the secrets of the fraudulent mechanisms of capital's workings, and of some aspects of the lives of its most prominent representatives, might still sometimes have something revolutionary about it, though most of the time it just gets stuck in the corny category of Leftist Horror Shock which neither horrifies nor shocks anybody nowadays, and is just part of concerned journalism. In fact, making daily contradictions public on the Internet hardly ever has anything revolutionary about it most of the time. On the Internet, the main result of being embarrassingly public about ones banal life is, at best, to make it *seem* less banal than it really is. Some of this publicity is like an open confession box - hoping to seduce people merely through your honesty. Apart from the dubious merits of such a form of seduction, trying to meet people by exorcising personal demons through the apparent therapy of the Internet could only work in a different global atmosphere - most times you'll only meet people whose idea of affection is to use or be used. Internet diaries repress all individual reflection, in the socially enforced pressure to *immediately* make a noise, sharing one's trivia with the vast world of strangers just to feel like someone's listening. What is lost is the capacity for a self-critical and critical reflection which is developed over *time* in partly silent distancing ourselves from the racket around us. So the Internet functions as a kind of personal real-life soap opera: an empty daily life becomes meaningful' simply by becoming public. It's a way of sharing your isolated life, supposedly to not be isolated, yet leaving you trapped in, and addicted to, the world of cybercontact - virtual relations. The phrase "All we have in common is the illusion of being together" has never been so pertinent.

Mind over Matter

A friend got her kid to learn to write using a computer (actually, more like a typewriter with a screen: a lot less overwhelmingly colonising than the one my kid had in her nursery at the age of 3, where you could produce endless ice-creams, camels and palm trees, etc). It enabled him to form letters which he couldn't do with a pen, because of the difficulty of holding one. But couldn't one equally say that because a child can't draw an ice-cream, a camel or a palm tree, it's o.k. to reproduce them with a computer graphic? Would it really matter if a kid learns to write only when they are physically capable of holding a pen? Why rush? Some purists say that there 's something more direct and individual in pressing a pen down on paper than in typing onto a TV screen, another example of how questions of personal taste become ideologically valorised as something superior. Really it doesn't matter much either way, as long as a kid learns to write with a pen as well: the good side of technology is that it enables people to overcome natural' limitations (as the more privileged disabled well know).[4]

The problem, as the imminent ecological catastrophe shows, is when the struggle with nature from which technology has been developed becomes fetishised as something in itself, rather than a conscious means for a specific end. If the reason for learning to write (or draw) as the development of the means of self-expression gets lost in the ideological morass of progress', which justifies the separation between means and ends, then such technology becomes like a Frankenstein monster turning on its creator.

It is obvious that the aim of the bosses who sell Information Technologies is not to extend individuals beyond the limitations of an alien nature but to make money, a profit, thus turning alienation from nature into social alienation. So how do computers reinforce social alienation? Especially in the young, the most vulnerable and least experienced in this insane world, the computer is used to shape personality. The model for human thought becomes the computer, the malleable, controllable "smart machine". The hardly discernible tendency is to make the mind *want* to be computerised, by introducing computers to kids as young as 3 when they are less aware of how their mind is being shaped and less able to resist effectively. The goal is to control the whole being so that they are available for work all the time and are devoted to productivity. Thinking becomes defined as what computers do or to interact with computers, eliminating the rest of the mind, body and feelings from thought. Intelligence becomes less and less linked to the senses to be replaced by more abstracted modes, tied to symbols on a screen. The ideology says that computers are necessary for enabling schoolkids to engage in higher-order thinking activities such as understanding complex ideas, solving real world problems and analysing critically. But the complex ideas, real world problem-solving and critical analysis are not those of subversive reason, of course, but those of the bureaucrat, scientist, psychologist or ideologist (academic, journalist, etc.) working out better means of social control, better ways of making a profit.
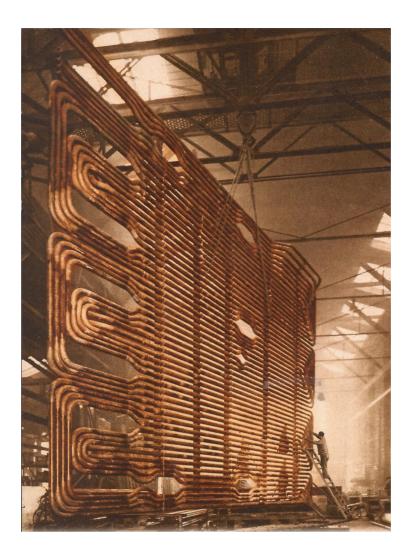
One can get emotional with a computer, as with a car, but one can only apply such emotions to human beings if one treats humans like machines, if one is incapable of recognising them as more than a means to an end.

The computer *represents* lots of physical activities but the only real physical activity is between finger and screen. Even when the keyboard is technically doing something physical (like tilting on a pinball machine) the body learns over time *not* to make any of the physical movements it would normally do on a real machine, because it makes no difference. This is like synthesisers, touch-sensitive ones, which are not really touch-sensitive like a real piano keyboard, but only speed-sensitive, devoid of genuine percussive qualities which are created by the body. This conforms to the general development of technologically-equipped life under capital which increasingly puts the body in the servile service of the mind seen as an extension of the machine. The separation of the body and the emotions and the mind which computers tend to reinforce is symptomatic of the general hierarchical division of labour which compartmentalises life, and which, in previous epochs, expressed itself in, amongst other things, the hierarchy of whites ("the mind") at the top, with blacks and women (the body and emotions) at the bottom.

Everywhere the desire to play is colonised by an ever-increasing dependence on technical stimuli. With kids desires being hemmed in on all sides by parents, school, cops, paranoia, the market economy as a whole, lack of objects with which to play and, above all, lack of space, video games can seem to make up for such deprivation. The open spaces taken over by juggernauts and concrete jungles are replaced by the images of space in video machines, in which fantasies can be acted out without practical risk, and which tend to further isolate kids in battles against imaginary enemies. In the space of the video game, the labyrinths of truly exciting cities get represented the more the modern city wipes out all the nooks and crannies for adventure.

The toll is already being exacted by this hardly new wave of the economy: increasingly every person, starting with and emphasising young children, who are least equipped to fighting back, is being reduced to the manias of the lifelong computer programmer, whose enthusiasm in discussing the capablilities of the latest "toys" and his "games" with them is in direct proportion to the monotony that characterises his/her manner of speaking and his/her social existence as a whole. A guy I know said of his computer "After 36 years I've found my brain!" The reason those who don't have computers find conversations between Internet and computer freaks so boring is because the brains of these computer obsessives have been programmed and they not only think their brain is theirs', but also that it's interesting despite the fact that their thoughts lack feeling and are so disembodied: all that endless "in" computer jargon showing how brilliant they are and how dumb you are for not understanding this jargon. The computer embodies and affirms the power of positive thinking, to the detriment of every other human quality: subversive analysis, the body, love, friendship, the emotions, *sensual* contact.

When US President Eisenhower was advised in 1958, given the intensity of the Cold War, to set up the Advanced Research Projects Agency (APRA) for the military, in the attempt to keep the US in the forefront of technology, probably no-one predicted the outcome. In an effort to link up the various military projects and research computers it funded, a new communications protocol from computer to computer (Network Control Protocol) was unveiled at LA University in 1969. By 1972, electronic mail was added and soon the protocol was changed to TCP/IP and accepted as standard by the US government by 1978. Commercial ventures wanted access to it as did the universities and a system whereby messages could be packaged and sent independently over the internet as if they were electronic letters passing through an electronic post office was developed. So much for the anarchy of the Internet!

micro-chip, circa 1890

Along with the war machine that helped its development, the computer was probably the defining symbol of the 20th century. However, the *main* impetus for the development of these machines, from the abacus onwards, has nearly always been to ease the task of counting *money*, rather than body bags. One of the first mechanical calculators was designed by the Jansenist Pascal to help his father work out the property taxes he was going to charge his poor peasants. From Babbage 's Analytical Engine of the 1840s to Hollerith 's Tabulating Machine in 1890 there is a fascination with making the task of calculating taxes and profits easier by the employment of number-crunching machines. Hollerith later assisted the tycoon Watson to set up a company which sold and rented thousands of these tabulating machines to small companies for the express purpose of counting money, a company which later became IBM. Eventually, with the development of graphical user interfaces (Apple and Microsoft Windows) the computer moved away from the strict world of numbers and bytes and mathematics to the sharing of information, though this information is itself subject to the quantitative commodity form which gave birth to it and which is at its heart, information which gets treated indifferently, reduced by the logic of equivalence. Information becomes an endless search without purpose other than making money, as abstract as the mathematical mentality that produced the means for its mass distribution.

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Like most technological developments, I.T. vastly speeds up what people are doing anyway. It s ironic that in the 19ᵗʰ century the Royal Mail delivered most letters within 24 hours of their being posted, and often considerably less. Undoubtedly the massive rise in literacy, together with the vast increase in bureaucratic bills and forms and especially in advertising, has had, as a bi-product, the slowing down of the postal service. E-mail, the Internet and faxes obviously make up for lost time. Although ideas have to be timely to be consequential, relevant, and have to reach as many people as possible who could make use of them, such ideas are only as good as what they say and their consequences. How fast they are said and how many people read them, though important, are not the only things that effect their effect. The fetishism of speed is a reflection of capitals' need to turn over a constantly accelerating profit in order to realise itself and to eliminate the opposition. At the same time it would be only half true to say this if one failed to mention the pleasure derived from the speed at which one can express oneself and correct oneself which computers provide. When writing by hand or by typing it's somehow harder to bridge the gap between subjective self-expression and an understanding of how this might make sense or not objectively, to others: computers help to speed up this process, at the same time as allowing one to play around with several thoughts at once in a way that is clearer to oneself than would be if typewritten or handwritten. The problem is when people fetishise this and somehow believe this process is separate from their *own* history, choices and purposes, that this miracle ' is in the computer itself. People who fetishise computers want the *consequence* of what they dowith a computer to only effect their social relations insofar as the computer/internet's role as mediation in these relations becomes intensified. In this way the computer becomes not just one means amongst many towards a conscious aim, a tool as useful as a cordless drill, but an end *in itself.*

Research has shown that people find it a lot easier to be aggressive through email than through other methods of communication. Letters usually have the eccentricity of handwriting and involve longer deliberation than emails. The telephone is a constant dialogue, using your own voice. The relative anonymity of emails, plus the speed in responding compared to letters (no need to make that long trudge to the post office), makes the medium qualitatively different from letters and phones, hence the ease of aggression. Another instance of labour-saving devices intensifying our alienation?

Hackers are the new saboteurs - and much of this sabotage is directed not arbitrarily but at the right people - the multinationals, the banks, the political parties and the military. However, many of these people are so into their highly specialised skill that they look down on those proles who don't have their skills. The hacktivist embodies many of the contradictions of the normal activist - an ignorance of social relations - but with the added alienation of remaining in their room whilst performing their specialised anti-establishment activity. The legal hackers believe they are subverting this society merely by bombarding enemy websites with thousands of protest messages (e-mail bombs). No need to even go on a demo to contribute to the anti-globalisation movement. This ensures that the chance of meeting people with different ideas and perspectives, of being influenced by these different people, is reduced to a bare minimum. The possibility of changing, and of being changed by, other people is shrunk to an outside chance. This has always been the problem with the Internet: it ensures that only those who are already interested in a particular topic will log on - those not interested in a critique will ignore the website. The great communication tool ensures an endless network of parallel lines that virtually never meet. So far, hackers have only hit people with viruses that wreck people's programmes, which is fine for our enemies, but how about some friendly hacking'?. Since an attempt to make critical sense of what they dislike (hate hardly comes into it) and to discover what they have in common with other desperate people is utterly alien to them, hackers' viruses never plant the seeds of subversive theory in the minds of those on the receiving end. So far we have yet to hear of critiques being cleverly disguised and sent to people who would not normally consider listening to them.

The Democratisation of Big Brother
An ad placed in lots of newspapers by United Technologies in the US to usher in 1984 said, "Orwell wrote at a time when computers filled large rooms. Only an army of experts could operate them. Only governments could afford them. If information is power then only governments would have the power the computer offered. What Orwell did not foresee was that information could be stored on a chip smaller than a baby's fingernail. Like ordinary beach sand, chips are made principally of silicon - one of the earth's most abundant elements. That the chip has made the computer so widespread removes the fears coming from Orwell's belief that the power of the computer would rest exclusively in the hands of the elite few". That these information castles built on sand dominate the isolated individual in a far more labyrinthine and subtle, and *apparently* individual, a manner than the crude austere Hate Week of Orwell's 1984 doesn't make it any the less totalitarian. What's more, modern totalitarianism *does* share Orwell s horrific conclusion to 1984: after all the torture, more and more people love Big Brother. Or, at least, they look to Big Brother, the State, to protect them. The fact that the social individual has been so beaten - by defeats at work, in schools and colleges, in the street, with friends - is the main reason for the individual's desire to retreat and isolate him/herself behind a computer screen. Though it appears as just an autonomous spontaneous act it's a result of the totalitarianism that has imposed an isolation even scarier than the fake community of Hate Week, which has been replaced with Indifference Decade. Modern totalitarianism has the insidiousness of appearing to be down to individual choice, conveniently hiding the history of brutal class power that has imposed this domesticated "choice". The safe community' of interest groups organised around endless permutations of taste is far safer for modern capital, and for the alienated individual, than the manipulation of demagogic political spectacles such as appear in "1984". Modern totalitarianism seduces the individual's desire to be a part of some specialised set-up but not risk getting too heavily involved - dipping in and out of this or that on the Internet at home is as much community as many people dare get:: safe flirting, safe communication, safe smile, safely separate. A world without risk, except the risk of going mad…

The fact that these technologies are being used by greater numbers of people, at least in the richer' countries, that they are cheap enough to be considered 'democratic', whereas in the past they were the property of the privileged elite, is hailed as of value *in itself*. But, as with the car, this extension of bourgeois freedom' to everybody will have miserable effects as yet unforeseen (cancer, obesity, back problems, repetitive strain injury, headaches, plus severe eye problems for those mainly in the Third World who spend their days endlessly checking silicon chips through microscopes, etc.). Sure, computers won't cause holes in the ozone layer, kill and maim hundreds of thousands of people a year, give kids lead poisoning and asthma or stop them playing in the streets, but, uncriticised, they *will* intensify people's acceptance of these miseries and worse. Already there are studies of the inhibiting unsociable effect of computers on children and adolescents, who increasingly find themselves incapable of relating to other people [5] . Which is just what the commodity economy ordered: who needs to meet people, recognise something in common with them, invent activities with them, fall in love and all that messy stuff when buying and selling and relating to the world merely through abstractions is so much more orderly and smoother?

And all this Brave New Democracy of InfoTech, as with the whole notion and function of democracy in this hierarchical society, is more democratic for some than for others. 30 years ago the highly skilled computer programmer was a fairly rare commodity for which capitalists paid a high salary. Nowadays there are computer programmers who are highly paid. But more and more, working on computers is subject to as much wage differentials as all other sectors. At the bottom there are the vast majority of I.T. workers bored to death working on their word processors, producing spreadsheets and databases for a low wage, at the top Bill Gates indifferent to the prospect of the extra millions - a pittance - he'll make selling his software to Britain's schools.

A friend, unemployed on and off, with a £2000 debt hanging over him, who lives in a small

council flat in a tower block with several cancer-inducing mobile phone masts on top of it said, of his computer, "It puts me on the same level as those rich people in Hampstead; I can access all these wonderful worlds, just like them". This ideology of democratic equality is just what the rich in Hampstead want the poor to think. "All these forms of virtual reality are almost as good as the real thing", he added. Virtual sex for the celibates, virtual friends for the lonely, virtual money for the broke, virtual food for the starving, virtual power for the impotent. Yes - if one ignores the essential, all these forms of virtual reality are almost as good as the real thing. Capital hopes it can fool all of the people most of the time that the difference between reality and fiction is unimportant (it should be said that maybe this friend was just saying these things in reaction to my over-critical stance on computers, which was partly a reaction to his over-eulogising stance).

Democracy, born in Greece, but only for the adult male Citizens', not for the vast majority - the slaves, the women, the kids, has now been extended to almost everybody over 18 (but not, of course, equally, as it was for the Greek ruling class). This is because a significant number of wage slaves and future wage slaves have internalised the values and ideas of their masters, tamed of their nameless wildness, domesticated. Many, of course, are waking up to the banal fact that "choosing", for one second by means of a cross every 4 or 5 years, between 2 gangs of rich thugs is no choice at all. But if the "political" side of democracy seems like a con, other aspects don't. For example, there are few people who see that, as with politicians, the choices available to you on a computer are like those in an election - decided by the programmers who have a vested interest ₆ in hiding the profitable reasons behind the false "either/or" choices that make you forget the choice to struggle for your *own* de-colonised choices. The fact that the choices in an election are effectively reduced to 2 or 3, whereas with a computer, the choices seem infinite, doesn't alter the fact that the vast majority of choices made with a computer or the Internet are choices for the authority of *this* world, the world of business, of passivity in the face of externally-defined History, of isolation. What appears to be endlessly accessible at the change of a disc, at the touch of a button - the vast and increasing array of knowledge and ideas of humanity - is essentially only those aspects of knowledge that are profitable to the company that employs the programmers. The logic of business allows no information or ideas that could threaten the world of business, though sometimes such information might be given which threatens a rival business (and one may guess at how reliable such one-sided facts are). In this world any use of computers outside the logic of business or the State is the one use that is actively discouraged (some people, logging onto certain radical websites find a written message appearing on their screen, courtesy of the less subtle State police, "Your interest has been noted"; sometimes access is blocked). If such subversive reasons are mentioned they are dismissed as ideological'; in this way the *most ideological* pro-economic choices imposed by the rulers and owners on computer programming can pretend to be beyond ideology. The simple fact that these uses are normal' apparently makes them non-ideological. Any anti-ideological use of computers and the Internet must begin by de-mystifying them. They are not really more useful for human beings than pens, encyclopaedias and telephones: their complex metaphysical subtleties, in the end, are the same as the fetishism of commodities generally. Their use, unfetishised, comes down *purely* to how you use them *against* the world of commodities, the world of things and their price, how you use them to affirm your power against a world that denies you any power. Just as the fetishisation of guns can lead to the death of fellow wage-slaves in the war of each against all, or even to suicide, and only rarely are turned on the organisers of our misery, so the computer, as an extension of thought, *could* be turned against dominant ideology but rarely is.

But why make a big thing about computers? But then why make a big thing about anything? This is just what this society wants us to say. Of course, like television, computers are just' a symptom of this society - but, like TV, they reinforce it. Unlike pen and paper, they should not be taken for granted. Their history is completely different. That almost everyone gets driven furiously crazy by their computer fucking up is just one symptom of this difference. The unprecedented proliferation of computers coincides with an unprecedented isolation of the

masses of individuals from each other.

Video/Computer games

There was a piece of graffiti put up in Sheffield during the Gulf War which said "Hi-tec war kills and maims but the media shows us video games". Video games often involve military combat which anaesthetise you to the horrors of real military combat. At the same time, various anti-violence moralists criticise video games for encouraging aggressive behaviour, but spectacular violence co-opts real rage into passive forms, so they should be grateful. Sure, maybe such games numb people a bit to any notion that shooting and killing are real situations and have real effects [7], but undoubtedly the ideological justifications for capitalist wars are far more numbing - as, indeed are the *totality* of social relations (it's the feeling of fatal inevitability that numbs people most of all to capitalist wars). With video games it 's more people 's underlying good reasons for expressing genuine anti-hierarchical rage that gets numbed. The rage against alienation becomes pacified into a risk-free fight with fake aliens on a screen: a false exit from isolation which leaves you just as, if not more, isolated as before. From the outside, playing such games seems pathetic, a waste. Sure they are - they distract people from social relations. But this is just moralism, if it ignores what games represent **subjectively**. In fact the adrenaline-flowing pleasure, the switch between anxious tension at the prospect of getting killed ', and those moments of success ' when you can relax a little if you want, that people experience when playing these games derives from the player's determination to beat the programmed machine. They are ways of co-opting the excitement and anxiety people always feel when they revolt against this world. That 's one of the reasons that kids playing truant are often found in Amusement Arcades. The games are sometimes a superficial and simplistic representation of people's complex repressed and anxious rage against the machine of society. They are like drugs - dreadfully addictive and obsessional, blocking out daily life to the degree that you can even neglect some of the basic tasks of the day (just like the proscribed drugs). This can last up until the moment you win, when you find yourself alone and indifferent, wondering what it was that gave you the buzz from that particular game, and yearning for a greater hit.

Above all, these games, and computers and the Internet altogether, present people with an image of space - a window onto endless corridors, large rooms, weird streets and lush vistas - to console the dispossessed for the increasingly claustrophobic lack of freedom which they are increasingly forced to endure.

There are now revolutionary ' computer games, with radical ' choices, none of which involve chucking your computer out the window [8] or looting your local supermarket. But even if they did wouldn't that just be a way of taming people into not really doing these things? The habit of seeking *virtual* adventures usually prevails over any desire to practically realise some of the options presented: the isolation of video games makes being teased with the image of collective rebellion unlikely to lead to the awkward and complex tasks involved in *real* struggle.

Video games give the players the idea of constantly making choices and the sense of freedom of choice, when as with computer graphics, the choices are defined for you. If the desire to beat the machine is the co-optation of the desire to destroy the commodity machine that distracts and destroys us then we must reverse perspective on this not just theoretically but practically. **In 1981, in the April riots in Brixton, an amusement arcade in Stockwell Road was trashed and the Space Invaders machines were put out across the road as a mini-barricade against the real Space Invaders - the State in the form of the cops. This is what is meant by "reversal of perspective": the masses of individuals putting machines in the service of humanity, not humanity in the service of machines**.March 2000.

\1 In the end, it's not a question of creating a uniquely personal aesthetic, but of the repression of direct uncommodified creativity which make mere aesthetics such an easy, but conservative, choice.

\2 A friend of mine fell in love with someone on the Internet who then fell ill with cancer. He was very upset even though he'd never met her. He wanted to see her but she put him off, until she eventually died. He was heart-broken. A year later, surfing the net, he found her miraculously recovered. The story of her illness and death had been invented by a woman who, having been hurt and humiliated by various men, wanted to pass on the pain to any man who would fall for her fake identity. As the recent "I love you" virus shows, the desire to be loved and to love in a world where people have never been so isolated cannot be realised through Internet technology, which is mostly a false exit from isolation, ending in sad humiliation. Fetishising it, you have to give up on your own initiatives. People say the Internet is how you use it - well let's see some proof that it's not 99.99% crap.

\3 Less and less people want to find adventure outside the constraints of economics. And of those few who *want* even fewer *do.* People might not mind being reminded of what they've been forced to repress if their non-economic (and anti-economic) wants could fairly quickly be realised: but in the counter-revolutionary epoch of today, who dares be interested in some fantasy revolutionary theory/practice' when all it churns up are like memories of sex after a long period of celibacy…...The repressed returns and gut anxious frustrations bubble up as those moments when we could have gone further but just hit the brick wall of our own lack of confidence, niggle at us from deep down.. In the end, going for a long walk or a swim in the local baths is the easiest non-economic want to realise, better than listening to or reading the ramblings inside your head or on the web (or here).. Anything to make you feel alive now without getting your pants off. Anything to distract from that desperate questioning pacing up and down the back of your mind. And when this repressed returns without any foreseeable practical use, when it returns purely as theory, then it has to be quickly defended against for fear of the discomforting anxiety of searching for some apparently hopeless practical exit.

\4 For some, it also overcomes social limitations. A friend of a friend , who has conflicts with the local council over housing problems, used to get treated with contempt by the bureaucrats when she wrote letters by hand, complete with the normal lot of spelling mistakes. When she got a computer, with her letters all neatly printed, and the words having gone through the spell check, they began to treat her with respect. This is indicative of the ridiculous sneering attitude of middle class bureaucrats, who are impressed by superficial appearances, and above all, correct spelling. In a country where the phonetic irregularity of spelling is renowned, this counts for something. Regardless of the comprehensibility of something, bad spelling is treated with all the snotty derision that the elitist education system can produce. One suspects that the lack of consistency between pronunciation and spelling isn't just to do with the different historical influences on English writing, nor just that pronunciation has changed at a far quicker rate than spelling, but is also one of those typical quintessential English archaisms, like the weird shapes of rugby balls or bowling green bowls: unconsciously designed as a sign of one's grammar or public school status. When I was at school, as many marks were awarded for the spelling as for the composition of an essay. If nothing else, the invention of the spell check, despite its in-built limitations, looks like weakening this particular archaism, The spellcheck is an example of the computers tendency towards creating a kind of democratic equalising effect, though always in submission to the reign of appearances.

\5 "The more that people use the Internet the more they tend to feel depressed and lonely, according to a two-year study on the social and psychological effects of surfing in cyberspace…they reported a decline in interaction with family and a reduction in their circle of friends that directly corresponded to the amount of time they spent online."- *The*

Guardian, 31/8/98. Fortunately, a recent statistic said that after a year of being on the Internet, a fairly large proportion of those who were signed up to it stopped doing so. Despite a world that says you're missing out if you're not online, some people still have the capacity to recognise their own interests.

\6 This is not to imply some conspiracy on the part of programmers: absolute identification with their lucrative career makes them spontaneously' produce programmes that are profitable. They see themselves as non-ideological in producing programmes on the basis of whatever sells.

\7 Of course it's hard to estimate this, but one wonders if nice' video games, such as Harry Potter, are any less numbing than the sickeningly vicious ones, like those with realistic graphics involving blowing people's heads off, torturing prisoners or killing prostitutes. The essential misery of these obsessional games is not especially their immediate content, however nauseating, but the illusion of participation they promote when at the end of the hit' you feel so utterly alone, unlike in activities involving real participation. Harry Potter computer games represent to the isolated consumer a vast labyrinthine space which technically the leisure industry could create - a Hogwarts version of Disneyland. But it would be an enormous investment, initially only available for rich kids and would simply be a a highly security-controlled lucrative banal environment devoid of all independently playful initiative , less a representation than a video game, but as ultimately boring , a safe way of co-opting the experience of kids in the past, exploring empty houses and bomb sites. The revolutionary possibility of realising directly in the world around us the myriad fantasies expressed in some computer games, novels, art, movies, theme parks etc. has to be repressed so that people have to buy the fundamentally unsatisfying commodified representation of these dreams. The world already possesses dreams the subversive consciousness of which it must develop in order to develop them in reality …(impressive or what?).

\8: A recent example of destroying computers occurred in Paris in mid-April 2005, when an annexe of the Ministry Of Education was temporarily occupied by rebellious school students as part of their struggle against a new law. 2 computers were chucked out of the window, whilst most of the others were wrecked or damaged in some ways, an action far more educational than the virtual education that school students are increasingly subjected to as part of the economy's project of education on the cheap (educating people to become ignorant, that is). See our text on \the movement of secondary school students in spring 2005