

Kunsthalle Wien/Tabakalera

Diedrich Diederichsen

Oier Etxeberria

(Hg./eds.)

Cybernetics of the Poor

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Mercedes Bunz **Cybernetics as a Way Out of this World**

The dream of pulling the rug of technology out from under the feet of capitalism and replacing the prevailing information-surveillance complex with a cybernetics of the poor is as old as it is important. The idea of technology as a way out of this world, as a tool toward a fairer, more just version of it, comes up again and again in left-leaning theory and practice, from Walter Benjamin's writings on art in the age of its reproducibility (in which the new technology of cinema allows the masses to understand themselves) to Afrofuturism, and, most recently, accelerationism. This text aims to explore one of the trajectories of this idea, spanning the historical and the contemporary, and traversing from politics to art, in order to show how technology and its strong bond with humans has always played a special role in the history of the anti-racist struggle against the hegemony of whiteness in Europe and the United States. That bond and the role it plays in Black struggle will in the following text be read as a cybernetics of the poor. For this, two aspects need to be linked: the role technology can have in artistic practice, and the role technological infrastructure can play as an alternative to political infrastructure. Here, Black struggle has already laid important theoretical and political groundwork one can respectfully learn from today, now that technology has become a political issue affecting everyone all the time, one that defines the world we live in from morning to night,

during work hours as well as during leisure times. Indeed, neoliberal ideology has brought about a leveling of the subject, whereby white subjects, as Shannon Winnubst argues, have also become an essential commodity within capitalism and find themselves no longer immune from experiencing forms of objecthood that have historically been racially inscribed in Black subjects.¹ For these reasons a cybernetics of the poor is needed—a cybernetics that is not about manipulation and control, but one that is invested instead in the bond between humans and machines, and in the powerful potential inherent in such a bond.² To uphold the idea of an alternative, anti-capitalist cybernetics and technology is more important than ever in our times, i.e., at the dark beginning of our twenty-first century.

Another Technology Is Possible

The potential of digital technology for the organization of collectives (things, animals, humans) is not to be underestimated, for it has the same kind of power that was previously located primarily in politics and the political. It is thus all the more interesting that in the prevailing discourse digital technology is rarely considered as a possible solution to sidestep the miserable political situation we find ourselves in. For the proprietors of our digital technical means, familiar quasi monopolies such as Facebook, Amazon, or Google, this is surely very convenient, although it was maybe not intentional. Still, the further we are from accepting the notion that we could operate tech very differently, as *another* technology (which is to say, as a cybernetics of the poor), the more they can make use of a pseudo-natural networking effect to

operate and manipulate as they see fit, while siphoning off the maximum capital from us passive users. For them it is rather convenient that the critical potential of digital technologies is currently masked by a technophobic discourse that has skillfully established a deep distrust in all things digital. In the West, today's squeezed middle classes cultivate a profoundly skeptical attitude toward digital technology in all its forms, from mobile phones to driverless cars, from social media to artificial intelligence. Slightly further to the left, things look much the same due to the fact that digital technology is programmed mainly by large corporations, most of them based in the USA or China. Although critical minds among programmers certainly exist, the broader public remains biased against the potential of digital technologies, whose bad reputation as “uncritical” also puts many radical minds off the idea of acquiring technical skills or dreaming of alternative technical realities to those that exist, let alone actually working on them. The effect is that the technical knowledge that is power does not need to be guarded very much, at least not in most Western societies. Interestingly, this ideological trick of masking technology as uncritical succeeds primarily in white societies and their cultures—cultures that are often built on the idea of an autonomous subject and now find their idea of autonomy challenged by a technology capable of agency and following a logic of its own. Asian cultures as well as anti-racist struggles are less likely to be caught out by a distorted view of technology as a threat, because their cultural constellations address technology as something that works with and for people, rather than against them. The potential for technology to serve as a useful resource, a repository of knowledge regarding power and a weapon of emancipation, has been thematized again and again especially in the history of Black struggle, as the following analysis of examples from political theory and practice will show.

1 Shannon Winnubst, “The Many Lives of Fungibility: Anti-blackness in Neoliberal Times,” *Journal of Gender Studies* vol. 29, no. 1 (2020): 102–112, DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2019.1692193.

2 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985), in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181; Francisco Varela and Paul Bourguine, eds., *Toward a Practice of Autonomous Systems: The First European Conference on Artificial Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

Technology as a way out of this world: this was something demanded early on by Huey P. Newton, a Marxist and founding member of the Black Panther Party, who fought against the oppression of African Americans and promoted a self-confident Black internationalism. His essay “The Technology Question” from 1972 centers around the idea of cybernetics as a way toward another world; it was clear to him that “the crucial issue of our time is the control of technology.”³ For Newton, removing the hegemonic control of technology from the United States was key. The precisely formulated first sentences of his text clearly frame this goal in political terms: “Knowing how to struggle is the essence of winning. Recognizing ills is fundamental; recognizing how to overcome ills is mandatory.” In order to break the intolerable situation of the ongoing technological hegemony of the United States, Newton argued, we must learn from its strategy. He describes how the funding of technological research at elite universities was part of the US “knowing how to struggle” since it allowed the country to create an “information explosion”—quite literally a *Vorsprung durch Technik*—that proved highly effective. We are still living with its consequences some fifty years later: it was Stanford University and Silicon Valley that ensured the decades-long hegemony over the internet by the Californian Ideology.⁴ For Newton, this “information explosion” was to be repeated on his own side, the side of the Black struggle. Newton saw the potential for a Black cybernetics in technology, and today that potential is being thought anew by Ramon Amaro in his idea of the “black technical object,” as discussed below. For both, technology is anything but neutral: “Technological advancements,” Newton writes, “have been gained through expropriation from the people, including slavery proper but also chattel

slavery followed by wage slavery”⁵—but this trajectory of anguish does not determine what technology is. For Newton, technology’s past does not lead directly to its future: “Every serious thinker knows that scientific and technological developments do not grow in a straight line. They develop exponentially by leaps and bounds.”⁶

In “The Technology Question,” the appropriation of technology lays the groundwork for the advancement of Black self-governance. The theory of a special bond between Black diasporic existence and technology has been addressed repeatedly in the past decades, not least in Greg Tate’s essays,⁷ Kodwo Eshun’s recently reissued book *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*,⁸ and Diedrich Diederichsen’s anthology *Loving the Alien*.⁹ The largely positive associations of technology described in these books—and in Afrofuturism more generally—suggest that the concept of cybernetics as a way toward another world is much more highly developed in Black diasporic thinking than elsewhere. This is also an act of appropriation: translating into technology what is hailed as “culture” in the white discourse takes a field from which Black people were supposed to be excluded and makes it a source of hope as much a structure of support. This can be found in music, for instance—from Sun Ra to Parliament’s “Mothership Connection” to Underground Resistance to A Guy Called Gerald’s “Black Secret Technology.” It is also evident in painting, as in Faith Ringgold’s *Jazz Stories: Mama Can Sing, Papa Can Blow #1: Somebody Stole My Broken Heart* (2004), which portrays a performance by three instrumentalists and a singer. The

3 Huey P. Newton, “The Technology Question” (1972), in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, ed. David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories, 2002), 256.

4 Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, “The Californian Ideology,” *Science as Culture* 6, no. 1 (1996): 44–72.

5 Newton, “The Technology Question,” 256.

6 Ibid.

7 Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

8 Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998) (London: Verso, 2020).

9 Diedrich Diederichsen, ed., *Loving the Alien: Science Fiction, Diaspora, Multikultur* (Berlin: ID-Verlag, 1998).

luminous blue lines of the technology that is music float through the red space, suffusing it. The blue technical lines also frame the faces and seem to have taken over the senses of the musicians, lending them an otherworldly air. In film, the metaphor of alien technology is taken up in *The Last Angel of History*, directed by John Akomfrah in 1995 with the UK's Black Audio Film Collective, which follows the journey of a so-called Data Thief traveling across time and space searching for archeological fragments of technology in search of the code that holds the key to the future. Amaro sums up the central positioning of technology in Black culture in general as follows: "The technical has [...] functioned as the black body's precise mode of collective departure."¹⁰

For Newton, leaving behind the prevailing injustice through a collective departure, a departure that would be based on technology, was a real political possibility that unfortunately became a missed opportunity. Interestingly, the Black Panther Party shares not only its name and its birth year of 1966 with the Marvel hero Black Panther, recently transposed from comic to screen, but also the fiction of a technically advanced nation in East Africa, which in the case of Marvel's Black Panther is his homeland, Wakanda.¹¹ The failure to create such a nation in Africa was a serious loss for Newton: He believed Africa and the Third World would have been able to embrace self-governance if the USSR had shared its technical know-how. Newton, himself a Marxist-Leninist, had harsh words for the Soviet Union's omission: "They damaged the ability of the Third World to resist. They could have given the Third World every technique available to them long ago."¹² Yet the Soviet superpower, which was, as

Newton saw it, for some years technically more advanced than the United States, kept the power of that knowledge for itself.

Black Secret Technology

The crucial point for political self-determination was technology; for Newton, territory as the ground that anchors political power was no longer decisive. The expulsion of the United States from Vietnamese soil would not make it a liberated country. In order to be truly free and assert its autonomy, a country needed access to technology. Newton thus presents technology as a field that codetermines the political. Interestingly, such a devaluation or re-evaluation of the political is something that tends to crop up repeatedly in anti-racist struggles, as reflected in Newton's dismissal of the US presidency as "relatively unimportant."¹³ This resonates with the work of theorist Sylvia Wynter, who has clearly demonstrated that political institutions and forms of governance, including our current democracies, not only have histories of racism but are also conceptually closely interwoven with or even grounded upon racist exclusion: in order to be "free," the Athenians needed the counterpoint of the slaves embodying a lack of freedom. "Their 'sacrifice'/exclusion allowed the free-born Greek citizen to realize him/herself as *free*,"¹⁴ Wynter writes, with reference to Bernard Williams's study *Shame and Necessity*.¹⁵ The fact that the ideal of the white, enlightened, free male is at the very core of democratic self-determination is a reason for many postcolonial thinkers to view political institutions, and politics per se, with skepticism. Fred Moten sums up his fundamental mistrust of the political by making an uncomfortable point: "we might have

10 Ramon Amaro, "Afrofuturism," in Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, *Posthuman Glossary* (London: Routledge, 2018), 17.

11 The Marvel character Black Panther aka T'Challa was created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and first appeared in *Fantastic Four* 1, no. 52 (July 1966). The Black Panther Party was founded in October 1966, though the logo had already been used by the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, led by political activist Kwame Ture, aka Stokely Carmichael.

12 Newton, "The Technology Question," 260.

13 Newton, "The Technology Question," 263.

14 Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition" in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 208n30.

15 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

to open ourselves to the possibility that political power is not at all what we need.”¹⁶ Because: “What if the political is simply the structuring of societies in dominance?”¹⁷

While racism always involves exclusion from political and social power, a response to it invariably has to aim for more than just dominance for its own side: the oppressed minority cannot simply want to become the new majority. In the world of art, curator and artist Charles Gaines explored and analyzed this situation in the group exhibition “The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism” at the galleries of the University of California in 1993–94.¹⁸ His text in the accompanying catalogue meticulously describes the conceptual figure of the minority with a precision that offers a lateral escape route out of the dialectical framework of minority/majority binaries. Many years later, this opening engendered a postcolonial cybernetics whose theoretical underpinnings are still in the process of being fleshed out. In 1993 this seemed to be the most productive exit strategy available, because the prevailing political system provided no room for a Black minority to make a break on terms decided for themselves. For Gaines, taking up the idea of marginalization and criticizing it is a “sword with two edges,” precisely because appealing to one’s own marginalization is, at the same time, a confirmation of it: “as we use it to attack racism, we wound our villain with each downstroke, but each time we raise the sword for another blow, we wound ourselves.”¹⁹ Whereas the majority has an identity that can change, the minority dependent on that same majority remains in a (non-self-determined) process of becoming. Ultimately, it is always the majority that decides who or what belongs to the minority. “Change,” Gaines writes, “is possible only from

the standpoint of the majority: the majority changes but it is not in the process of change; the minority, on the other hand, is always in the process of change. This is true not just of race but of various majority/minority distinctions.”²⁰ This multifarious and constantly changing identity of the minority will always seem lacking in comparison to the autonomous white subject—at least until the dialectic of white/black and subject/object is sidestepped in favor of a different constellation based more on Black cybernetics in connection with art, artifice, and technology. This combination as a way out has a history in the anti-racist liberation struggle. Nowhere is this more evident than in Afrofuturism, which could be described with Moten as an aesthetic insurgency.²¹

Mothership Connection

Afrofuturism is often read as a kind of “countermemory.” Eshun writes: “To establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble counter-memories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity.”²² In this regard, Afrofuturism is sign and symptom of a unique and special relationship with technology that is crucial to the self-perception and self-positioning of Black existence: “Black existence and science fiction are one and the same,” because the close bond between humans and technology that is so typical of science fiction is, for Eshun, also an expression of self-alienation.²³

Cinema, right at the center of mainstream culture, addresses this close cultural link between Black individual existence and technology, but flips and distorts it into a

16 Fred Moten, *Black and Blur: Consent Not to Be a Single Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 257.

17 Ibid., 256.

18 Charles Gaines, *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, exh. cat. (Irvine, CA: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993), 12–21.

19 Ibid., 17.

20 Ibid., 16.

21 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 257.

22 Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 288.

23 Ibid., 298.

negative and racist version of itself, sold as the human failing of a minority. Martin Kevorkian shows this in his study of film *Color Monitors: The Black Face of Technology in America*, in which he highlights and discusses the racist stereotype of the “black computer expert.”²⁴ This figure crops up repeatedly—in movies such as *Die Hard*, *Terminator 2*, *Independence Day*, and *Mission Impossible*—as a servile link between the white man (hero) and the machine (computer). In white mainstream cinema, having a particular affinity with the machine is the domain of second-class citizens; it is something for people who themselves resemble machines.

The special bond between Black existence and technology, however, can also be interpreted very differently. For instance, it can be deployed as a weapon against the mainstream figure of the universal subject in order to forge an escape route. What if, as Gaines writes, “race itself is taken to be a discrete attribute that may modify the universal subject”?²⁵ The theoretical and practical approach—to step away from the configuration of the universal subject and leave it behind—has indeed been mobilized in recent times using the specific conceptualization of the Black non-subject’s bond with technology. Amaro, in particular, has elaborated on this, not least in an essay (cowritten with Murad Khan) that works through various ways of moving away from the universal white subject “towards Black individuation.”²⁶ To this end, he adopts the philosophical vocabulary of Gilbert Simondon, particularly his idea that the individual is the result of an ever-renewing process of “individuation.” For Simondon, the individual subject also always already has traits of an object, as it is not self-made. Amaro picks up on this concept and takes it further in this essay, as well as in

other writings.²⁷ In doing so, he is inspired by the work of artist Jack Whitten, who started out as an Abstract Expressionist and is known for outsourcing parts of the production process of his paintings and sculptures to be executed mechanically.²⁸ For this, Whitten worked with a rake-like instrument, for example, which he called a Developer: “After several experiments, I built what I called the Developer, an analogy to photography, which was meant to rebuke the notion of touch.”²⁹ In this way, a technical element (the Developer) is explicitly introduced into and embedded within the creative process. In place of a self-determined artistic subject expressing itself one can find here, as in many of Whitten’s works, a collaboration with technology and/or material.

Interestingly, a similar form of working with material, derived from the same quest for another (Black) existence, can also be found in a different form of art, namely that of writing. A case in point is the hybrid of literary and historical writing in Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (2019), which is intricately woven around existing research and documentation. In the interests of brevity, a recommendation to read the book will have to suffice here. The focus in the context of this argument is on the experiment of recording an “other” existence—which Hartman researches in writing via archival documents and mostly third-person narratives; and which Amaro detects in Whitten’s work and takes one step further. In place of the Black subject, still invariably defined by the white original, Amaro introduces a new subjectivity—that of

24 Martin Kevorkian, *Color Monitors: The Black Face of Technology in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

25 Gaines, *Theater of Refusal*, 15.

26 Ramon Amaro and Murad Khan, “Towards Black Individuation and a Calculus of Variations,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 109 (May 2020), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/109/330246/towards-black-individuation-and-a-calculus-of-variations/>.

27 Ibid.

28 Ramon Amaro, “Artificial Intelligence: warped, colorful forms and their unclear geometries,” in *Schemas of Uncertainty: Soothsayers and Soft AI*, ed. Danae Io and Callum Copley (Amsterdam: Sandberg Instituut, 2019), 69–90.

29 “Jack Whitten talks about process and his touring retrospective,” *Artforum* (online), October 15, 2015, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/jack-whitten-talks-about-process-and-his-touring-retrospective-55689>.

“the black object.” This theoretical turn is a radical one. It profoundly abandons the self-determined subject position. In its stead we find the “motherhood connection” of the black object, establishing a close link, through individuation, with the technical object. This connection allows both to change constantly as they “inform each iteration of themselves in a self-governing system of feedback.”³⁰ And with this, Amaro shifts the concept of subjectivity from self-determination toward self-regulation or precisely this “self-governing system of feedback.” In doing so, Amaro creates an active cybernetics of the Black object, shaped by a culture of constant becoming, in which it is also taking part: an object that replaces the self-defining, self-representing subject. What Amaro calls the “black object” or the “black technical object” functions fundamentally differently—as a link between the human and the machine. The powerful potential unleashed by this connection is not defined by a seamless connection between people and machines, but by reciprocal adjustment and modulation. Not only are there built-in feedback loops and error alerts, but also continuing incompatibilities, all of which form part of this alternative cybernetics: “In other words, allowability for the unusable, uncommon, and thus incomputable individual potentializes the social space toward new ways of relating.”³¹ And these “new ways of relating” bring us to the conclusion, with one more thing to be said.

Out of This World

Learning from Black culture, Black experience, Black existence as a non-Black person means never to forget the immense violence that not only obstructs discursive potentialities, but also affects individual lives directly and physically, putting them literally in danger. White objects still operate

on a different playing field, and in other feedback loops, allowing them a wider scope in which they can move with more freedom and less anxiety. Greg Tate summed it up in the title of the anthology of essays he edited in 2003: *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*.³² At one and the same time, taking a theory seriously entails working with it, referencing it, thinking through it—and so to some extent appropriating it. This dilemma brings with it the question of how such appropriation can be done with sensitivity and respect, without erasing its specificity and situatedness—a dilemma that must be faced as it also should not be ignored, however difficult it is to get right. It remains the case that it is in Black theory and Black cultural practices that one finds an interpretation of technology that could offer all of us a way out of demanding from technology simply that it should function smoothly and serve the subject. From Ramon Amaro to Huey P. Newton, but also in Sylvia Wynter’s work, we can find powerful arguments for the profoundly political dimension of technology as infrastructure—including as an infrastructure of subjectivities. On these grounds, too, the goal is to build out this dimension into an anti-capitalist cybernetics of the poor, there is all the more reason to respectfully take up the work already done in the field of Black theory and culture in a way that acknowledges its significance. This is still more important today, when we are surrounded by a technical infrastructure that shapes both the collective and the subjective. Digital technology intervenes in everyone by constructing individuals who are always at the same time also data subjects. In our digital twenty-first century world, we can find in this Black history with its alternative cybernetics—cybernetics as a way out of this world—the blueprint for a different future with technology.

30 Ramon Amaro, “As if,” *Becoming Digital/e-flux Architecture*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/becoming-digital/248073/as-if/>.

31 Ibid.

32 Greg Tate, *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Broadway, 2003).