

Digital Disruptions *An Interview with D.E. Wittkower*

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

D.E. Wittkower is Professor of Philosophy of Technology and Applied Ethics at Old Dominion University. His research involves the intersection of digital and popular culture, politics, economics, ethics, and aesthetics. Wittkower has edited several volumes of Open Court's Popular Culture and Philosophy series, including *Facebook and Philosophy* (2010), *iPod and Philosophy* (2011), *Philip K. Dick and Philosophy* (2011), and *Ender's Game and Philosophy* (2013). He is also the author of *The Philosopher's Book of Questions and Answers* (2013), which introduces readers to philosophical discourse in accessible and personal terms.

You've edited a number of essay collections analyzing the intersection of philosophy and popular culture, including works discussing the iPod, Facebook, and the writings of Philip K. Dick. Are these collections simply meant to bring philosophy to the masses by employing widely accessible artifacts as sites of analysis or is there something genuinely philosophical about these phenomena, be they technological innovations or television shows?

I'll digress a bit to get around to the angle from which I'd like to answer the question.

These books are not always viewed as respectable scholarship within academic philosophy. In part, this is due to a kind of disdain for popular culture—whether based in the “physics envy” that drives philosophy (along with so many other disciplines) into ostentatious scientism or based in the elitist prejudice against the common and everyday, expressed well by Schopenhauer’s injunction of “minding not the times, but the eternities”—but in part it is no doubt due to some of these books simply not being very good. Of course, many journal articles aren’t great either, but when working on the margins, and when prejudices dispose us in a certain direction, it is easy to generalize from a bad first impression.

Sometimes, it may be that a book will suffer because the topic isn’t particularly philosophical. After all, these are books for a general audience, and having a

sufficient fan base to support sales is an important part of how these titles are selected. But that already makes me suspicious of any judgment that a book might be bad due to its unphilosophical topic: my intuition is that, if something is popular, it must be striking a chord with a great number of people, and must therefore be in touch with or at least touching upon a few tensed strings of the soul, to use a Nietzschean image. I'm inclined to say that if it's popular, it must be worthy of philosophical investigation—although there may be some topics that are popular because they allow people to explore things worth exploring and others that merely prey upon or exploit things worth exploring. A clear case: people read Philip K. Dick in part because his stories allow them to work through fascinating issues of fate, time, and human value. An ambiguous case: people don't listen to iPods because they want to work through questions of identity and community, but in the listening, they *are* working through those issues. And a clear case on the other extreme: people watch *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* or truly mindless violent action movies because they want to experience but *not* work through worthwhile issues—ridicule and passive catharsis are ways of not thinking, although the objects of thought that they are not thinking about are not less worthwhile, just more difficult to engage “fans” on. So, while the massive popularity of something seems to me to be clear evidence that it connects to philosophically valuable territory, the mode of public engagement may be variously open or closed to exploration of that territory.

My perspective here also informs how I serve as editor to these volumes. I believe that philosophy has retreated from public life today, for complex and multiple reasons, but that people have not ceased to be interested in and engaged with philosophical issues. Just as today, lamentably, when journalists want a commentator on straightforwardly philosophical topics like meaning and values in contemporary life, they turn to psychologists or religious figures, rather than philosophers, so too, when people want to explore philosophical issues they turn to fiction, film, and scripture rather than to philosophy. Popular culture may not always do it well or even take a helpful approach, but the fact is that today, philosophical work is being carried out by and through popular culture. What I ask of authors in these volumes, and what I strive for in my own writing on popular culture, is to draw out the philosophical work already taking place, and to give “fans” language and theories to better do the work that they were already doing through popular culture. The worst of chapters in these books, in my view, are those that simply use the element of popular culture as an opening to bring in some basically foreign topic from academic philosophy. “Oh, you like [whatever movie]? Well, let me tell you about something *really* interesting!” It's disrespectful and simply false to think that non-philosophers aren't philosophical; the difference has less than we often think to do with content and meaning, and more than we often

think to do with style, tradition, and rigor. Now, that's not nothing, but it's also not everything.

Implied in the proliferation of new media technology is the erosion of corporate control of the digital landscape. One of the ways corporations combat the collapse of the user/producer binary is through what you've termed "systematic colonization," whereby information companies price innovation beyond use by independent producers. Can you explain the process by which systematic colonization takes place and why you believe that it leads to a renewed feudalism?

I'm adapting the notion of "systematic colonization" that Marx discussed in *Capital, Vol. I*,¹ wherein the interests of the mother country are enforced by establishing a set price for unowned land in the colonies (where "unowned" is, of course, predicated on out-of-hand dismissal of any native rights). In this circumstance of abundance, the labourer is reunited with the means of production and artificial scarcity must be introduced if profits are still to be extracted. In the digital space, wherein we are all colonists, the interests of established economic powers are enforced by a similar prevention of free employment of the means of production abundant and non-competitively available to us. Through the abuse of patent portfolios, corporations are able to limit innovation by threat of lawsuits. Even a spurious claim of patent infringement is economically devastating to the entrepreneur who is not an established economic power, ensuring that market control of digital spaces is limited to those corporations able to afford a patent dispute, or, more often, possessing a patent portfolio deep enough to mount a counter-claim strong enough to force a détente or licensing exchange. This introduces a sort of re-emergent feudalism, in which we live and work in digital environments that we control and employ, but do not own. Just as the serf belonged to the land he worked, so too today we work on and with digital wares that we possess, but do not own.

Now, this is from my 2008 article, "Revolutionary Industry and Digital Colonialism."² Today, an additional form of digital colonialism is in place, most visible in discussions of SNS privacy and of "big data." Our movements and activities in digital spaces produce data that is collected, mined, and monetized. User activities, although they are not always experienced as labour, are subject to exploitation insofar as they generate surplus value extracted by owners. The revenue generated from our browsing histories and Facebook postings are not

1 Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, Marx-Engels Collected Works, v. 35., New York: International Publishers (1996), 755–59.

2 D.E. Wittkower, "Revolutionary Industry and Digital Colonialism," *Fast Capitalism* 4.1 (2008): n.p. http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/4_1/wittkower.html.

shared with us, but are instead fed back into systems further integrating us into consumption and crypto-alienated production: consumption insofar as our explicitly or implicitly expressed desires (for example, explicitly through Facebook likes or implicitly through cookie tracking of browsing activity) allows retailers to stalk and surround us through targeted advertising, and crypto-alienated production through ever more “frictionless” and entertaining modes of sharing data. This is “crypto-alienated” production in that it is motivated by and serves interests that are genuinely social and not themselves alienated—I do not, for example, talk politics with my friends because it helps Facebook figure out how to sell information that Old Navy will use to target their advertising—and yet it produces surplus value that I have no rights to and no control over the use of.

Here we see another form of re-emergent feudalism. We prosumers produce value through our activity—now obscured as “playbour” rather than as clear labour—which becomes salable through massive aggregation into “big data.” The control, autonomy, and unalienated personal motivations of our online activities constitute our surface experience of the system, but as a mode of production, we are serfs: our production serves the interests of and generates profits for the landed corporate aristocracy, which unilaterally accumulates value from and exercises control over our digital lives. As Metafilter user *blue_beetle* (Andrew Lewis) put it on Aug. 26, 2010, “If you are not paying for it, you're not the customer; you're the product being sold.”³

Switching topics, one of the unintended consequences of digitization has been an increased emphasis on intellectual property rights and how such rights might be violated. In the past, you've argued that digital capitalism undermines modes of production based on capital accumulation, in part, by bridging the gulf between laborers and productive means. To what extent has digitization exposed the fictional side of capital accumulation and in what ways might this make possible a rethinking of intellectual property, ownership, and the alienating effects of privatization?

I first taught Computer Ethics in 2001 and have taught that course and others touching on the topic of intellectual property rights (IPR) periodically from then to the present. The student views on IPR that I've heard have changed dramatically over these dozen years. In those earliest years of the aughts, the starting point for students was the basic Lockean labour-desert legitimacy of IPR, with the

3 It is interesting to note that Andrew Lewis, whose comment was an act of socially-motivated prosumption benefitting Metafilter, has since personally commodified his own crypto-alienated conversational act by selling clothes featuring the now-slogan on a CafePress store (<http://www.cafepress.com/youretheproduct>), which is now profiting (albeit with profit-sharing) from his playbour.

motivating image of the hardworking struggling-artist-musician. Many of these students had been Napster users, who freely admitted to using LimeWire and BearShare to illegally download music, even though they had a pretty firm belief that what they were doing was wrong. That's no longer the default position, among my students at least, and there is now a noticeable contingent who have exactly the opposite position—who believe firmly that IPR, in its current form at least, is a form of extortion, and who do not freely admit to illegally downloading music, but instead use legal streaming services and legally purchase downloads.

The way I read this is that the RIAA/MPAA/BSA⁴ approach helped to win the battle, but clearly helped to lose the war. The extreme fines imposed and the unreasonable term length of the Copyright Term Extension Act, combined with judgmental ads based on clearly questionable analogies (that you're prevented from skipping on some DVDs, surely a way to make your audience hostile) and the terroristic singling-out of individual downloaders (and/or their relatives in whose names the internet access is provided)—those students who are aware of some or all of this are keenly aware that IPR is an instrument of control; Realpolitik whose image of the “starving artist” appears now only as a broken mask, split at the seams, and more an indictment of the cynicism of the copyright industries than a moral cover for them. To be sure, the threat of massive and disproportional penalties has been effective in disincentivizing filesharing, but I'm not sure that would have been decisive, even for those students who say they never download, were those disincentives not accompanied by new options for listening, like Spotify, and the rationalization of pricing structures driven by competition from new online mp3 sellers, like iTunes—and those less abusive economic arrangements may have been sufficient on their own to win this battle, to whatever extent it has been won.

The ideological fallout, though, has been significant. When we move, in my philosophy of technology course, from discussion of IPR in the established copyright industries to more forward-looking questions about 3D printers, RapRep systems, and DIY chemical synthesis, students seem to immediately and instinctively ask questions and air concerns using social welfare and user rights as a starting point, rather than asking questions having any basis in property rights. Confronted with the possibility of home synthesis of medicine, they do not worry about whether pharmaceutical firms will remain profitable—they wonder how much the public can achieve as self-organizing communities of concern with full access to the means of production, and how much energy will be (mis?)directed at formulating new means of recreational psychopharmacology. Confronted with the possibility of printing your own assault rifles, and how to look out for the public good in this not-unlikely

4 Recording Industry of America, Motion Picture Association of America, and Business Software Alliance, respectively.

future, not a word is wasted on the idea of code-based, DRM, or CSS-style solutions. The starting assumption, at least in this limited sample of young folks with whom I get to talk about this stuff in depth, is that the cat is out of the bag, and the bag, for its part, has more than holes enough to let the sunshine through.

What I'm still not seeing is a sense of class consciousness among we digital proletarians. Both in my classroom and in what I'm seeing in the online public discourse, there is umbrage at all sorts of separate forms of digital colonization and exploitation—resale of personal data, privacy violations, clickwrapping, end-user license agreements, abusive pricing, and so forth—but little sense of the way that these separate elements form a system of class struggle. I'm not at all sure that the sense that informational space is an occupied territory will emerge until the means of production are advanced enough that the public is technically, but not legally, capable of affordably producing physical goods. In the meantime, I still hold to what I argued at the start of "Revolutionary Industry and Digital Colonialism": it is the digital means of production that have taken on the role of the revolutionary class. I hope, though, that we gain class consciousness before it brings about the revolution, so that new systems of production can be put in place in accordance with human values, rather than determined merely by the scripts, valences, and accidental politics of technologies as they happen to be developed; so that new systems can be guided by social and user contexts, rather than simply design context.

If you don't mind me being cute for a second, you contend that the decentralization of communication toward the individual should be taken seriously by scholars, regardless of the seriousness of a communication's content. This need becomes particularly apparent when one considers "cute" memes, such as pervasive pictures of cats posted on the website I Can Haz Cheeseburger. If it's true that theoreticians must seek value in communications that exist, rather than those privileged by their own philosophical considerations, what value do cute memes have for understanding both the objects of new media and the cultures in which these memes circulate?

I don't think it should be controversial that, to understand something, you should study what it is—not least of all the parts that are not predicted by our models or precedents (and are not mere anomalies). Memetic play, cuteness, and cat pictures certainly fall into that category. (Although certainly, for each, we can find a history, but not of the scale and prominence that would have made current behavior expected, even in retrospect.)

I admit that I take a certain perverse pleasure in seeking out, theorizing, and defending things dismissed as trivial, unimportant, and silly, but there are good reasons to do so in addition to my own temperament. A fundamental insight of

standpoint epistemology is that those marginalized in society have a privileged perspective created by their exclusion. The contours of a thing emerge from background into perception at the edges. The places I like to look are not the margins of digital culture, but the margins of our theoretical engagement with digital culture—I am, after all, a philosopher rather than a sociologist. So my intuition is that by attempting to recuperate devalued elements of digital culture I should be able to identify revealing moments within larger systems in the same way and for the same reasons that, for example, a feminist perspective is able to highlight elements of male-dominated culture that may otherwise escape notice. Behaviors marginalized by theorists open different and, perhaps, unique possibilities for theoretical insight and critique.

The prevalence of the aesthetic category of the cute in digital culture may be a response to the coldness and distance of online interaction.⁵ The cute abuts the helpless and the manipulative. A sad dog with its leg in a cast can be cute. An unhappy cat getting a bath can be cute. The word itself used to be a negative term for a coy neediness, becoming positive and “endearing” only during the 20th century. Cuteness calls upon us; it is a modality of the experience of being needed. This is one possible factor in the ascent of the cute in digital culture; it is safe to assume that there are multiple factors in play. Perhaps the interest in the cute is not as easily commodified as other emotional drives—drives of dominance or sexual desire, for example—and so emerges to an unexpected extent once the means of mass communication become generally available through new media. Perhaps the democratization of communications allowed for the emergence of emotional content previously undervalued by a male dominated business environment that relegated the interest in cuteness to specific demographics, and which failed to recognize that enjoyment of the cute was not coextensive with “girliness.” Surely there are many who share cute animal pictures who are not among the Sanrio clientele, and the bronx community shows that the masculinist exclusivity of men from girlish cuteness may be fading.

Part of the cute and lolcat phenomena, though, has to do with the process of play itself rather than the particular content. We can see this clearly in Amazon review hijacking, most famously in the Three Wolf Moon Tee.⁶ At the time of writing, the product has 2,286 customer reviews, largely attesting to the virility imparted by the product. In the top-voted review, with 30,622 people saying they found it “helpful,” B. Govern wrote:

5 D.E. Wittkower, "On the Origins of The Cute as a Dominant Aesthetic Category in Digital Culture," in *Putting Knowledge to Work and Letting Information Play*, eds. Timothy Luke and Jeremy Hunsinger, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers (Springer), 167-175: <http://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-94-6091-728-8/page/1>.

6 See: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Mountain-Three-Short-Sleeve/dp/B002HJ377A>.

This item has wolves on it which makes it intrinsically sweet and worth 5 stars by itself, but once I tried it on, that's when the magic happened. After checking to ensure that the shirt would properly cover my girth, I walked from my trailer to Wal-mart with the shirt on and was immediately approached by women. The women knew from the wolves on my shirt that I, like a wolf, am a mysterious loner who knows how to 'howl at the moon' from time to time (if you catch my drift!). The women that approached me wanted to know if I would be their boyfriend and/or give them money for something they called mehth. I told them no, because they didn't have enough teeth, and frankly a man with a wolf-shirt shouldn't settle for the first thing that comes to him.

The process is a kind of directionless and emergent crowdsourced participatory comedy, which is perhaps just a complicated way of saying that this review thread represents thousands of people virtually hanging out and screwing around. This is an interruption of nonsense and play in a virtual space of commerce through a repurposing of a forum intended to allow prosumers to generate market value for Amazon through crowdsourced quality control—but the user intension is not specifically disruption or culture-jamming, but simple social play. It is a pure and beautiful thing.

I've sought out other kinds of disparaged online behavior to attempt to validate as well. In a recent article,⁷ I criticize the ongoing philosophical debate about friendship online in order to make sense of and assign proper value to the practice of sharing photographs of one's lunch. It seems reasonable to say that, if your theory of friendship cannot make sense of a widespread social practice, the problem is more likely that your theory is wrong than that people are wrong to think that there's subjective purpose and meaning in the actions they choose to engage in. I argue that an Aristotelian prejudice has led us to ignore views of friendship as a process of shared experience; that we focus too much on friendship as a path to knowledge and virtue, and fail to notice the quotidian texture of friendship in wasting time together, sharing meals, drinking, and shooting the shit. As long as you think that a picture of a sandwich is meant as a communication or that it's aimed toward something, you're pretty well driven to the conclusion that people today are narcissistic or stupid. But the photograph of the sandwich isn't a communication, it's part of an opt-in asynchronous shared virtual experience—it is an invitation to lunch. For similar reasons, I've also argued that one of the major and unappreciated reasons for Facebook's massive success is the way it provides affordances for

7 D.E. Wittkower, "'Friend' is a Verb," *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Computers* 12.1 (2012), 22–26: http://www.apaonline.org/APAOnline/Publications/Newsletters/Past_Newsletters/Vol11/Vol_11.aspx.

valuable social forms of boredom.⁸ Being bored along with others allows us to explore questions of meaning and value in a kind of existential free-play of individual purpose, and we should recognize the value of our own boredom in the same way and for the same reason that we recognize the value of the wasted hours of our childhood, wandering through woods and streams or playing with sticks and throwing rocks.

There's a political dimension to this as well. If we reconceptualize time spent on Facebook as at least sometimes constitutive of a life lived together with others (asynchronously and at a distance), then not only does that allow us to think differently about online friendship, it also allows us to think differently about the city and its political meaning. Arendt argues that living in proximity with others provides the conditions that allow power to emerge. If we can adapt this to our lives online, as I argue we can, then we can make better sense of how some Occupy Wall Street occupations have been successful in maintaining a sufficient sense of community and agency on Facebook, after being evicted from physically occupied spaces, to allow them to continue to organize and take direct actions offline.⁹ So, that's my attempt to rehabilitate "clicktivism"; another widespread but disrespected online activity that has been too quickly dismissed.

My next planned project in this purposefully unlikely trajectory has to do with bacon. It was a "weird news" piece about bacon-flavored shaving cream that made me realize that the online mania for all things bacon—bacon band-aids, bacon plush toys, bacon cologne, bacon scented candles, bacon toothpaste, bacon memes, Epic Meal Time, etc.—called for theorization. It'll be a little while before I can make time to work on this, but my basic intuition is that this represents a kind of comforting and regressive retreat to a set of comfort-food experiences in emotional accord with an ideal and ideology of authenticity—familiarity of taste, the earthy flavors of wood and salt, the physical torpor produced by too much and too heavy food—which is, however, being adopted in a post-auratic, ironic, and hyperreal fashion, in accord with the social media environment of consciously performed "authenticity" of self. There are also elements of fan culture, but transformed to fit into the more universal context of our Facebooked sociality—talking about bacon can provide the cultural cachet of the insider reference, while excluding almost nobody. So I'm looking forward to finding time to write that up.

8 D.E. Wittkower, "Boredom on Facebook," in *The Unlike Us Reader*, eds. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures (2013): <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/portal/publication/unlike-us-reader-social-media-monopolies-and-their-alternatives>.

9 D.E. Wittkower, "The Vital Non-Action of Occupation, Offline and Online," *International Review of Information Ethics* 18 (December, 2012): <http://www.i-r-i-e.net/index.htm>.

I've also been wanting to write about the twinned post-feminist presumptive fantasies embodied by Etsy and Pinterest for a while. The explosion of new hybrids of ideology and (re)appropriation, set loose in the shifting ecosystem of life under late capitalism, provides niches in which so many new ways of cyborg living can thrive. We're in the midst of our own digital-human Cambrian explosion, and fascinating things are happening everywhere.