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# Revisiting the Pharmakon: Why Media Theory Needs Queer Theory

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## Abstract

The concept of the techno-pharmakon, introduced by Plato in *Phaedrus* and later adopted by Jacques Derrida, reached the apex of its philosophical utility in the work of Bernard Stiegler. The simple idea that technology can either be a remedy or a poison, an idea central to Stiegler’s work, is an irresistible binary for media theorists. This essay begins with a critical reflection on that useful binary and on the white male legacy of the pharmakon itself, a legacy that I confess to have perpetuated. If technology can either cure or kill, it does not do so equally; rather, the pharmakon achieves radical variability depending on factors of race, gender, and ability. Put simply, this essay argues that the very same systemic power asymmetries that are responsible for our most pressing social problems are embedded in our technological systems. Moreover, these same power asymmetries haunt media theory itself, leading me to argue that the pharmakon needs to be troubled. I draw carefully on queer theory to recommend a path toward this disturbance of the power systems embedded in both technoculture and in media theory.

## Keywords

Media Theory, Queer Theory, Pharmakon, Power Asymmetry, Critical Design

“For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one.”  
- Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*

In 2010, I seized an opportunity to interview Bernard Stiegler for the journal *Configurations*. We first met in his office at the Institut de Recherche et d’Innovation, located in the Centre Pompidou, where he graciously invited me for a follow-up meeting at his home in the more provincial location of Épineuil-le-Fleuriel. As I remarked in the published interview, it seemed appropriate that Stiegler, a celiac, lived

in a renovated flour mill. This location seemed to suit the disposition of a messianic philosopher of technology who devoutly entangled himself in a system he clearly understood as poisonous. As Stiegler confessed during our meeting, sitting across from me at a low coffee table in the domestic setting of his living room,

I have a pharmacological way of thinking: the more an object evokes in me an excited enthusiasm or zeal—you spoke of zealots—the more I am anxious about the danger of that thing. Because I believe that everything that has produced the most interesting discourses, the most generous, has also generated the most horrible and inhumane results (Stiegler, 2010a: 471).

It would be no exaggeration to say that this meeting, haunted by the specters of Plato, Heidegger, and Derrida, was nothing less for me than a philosophical primal scene, one that I encountered with both “enthusiasm” and “zeal.” But a decade later, I find myself differently oriented, disoriented even, by the rear-view vision of this “interesting” and “most generous” scene of media theory in action. I cannot deny that I am even tempted to follow Avital Ronell by identifying this disorientation as a recognition of *stupidity*.

To orient oneself differently toward the pharmakon could mean resisting the tidy dualism of remedy/poison that characterizes the media-theoretical legacy of this concept. Indeed, the binary notion that technology, in essence, can either cure or kill, lends itself to overly simplistic and possibly shortsighted formulations that ignore the radical variability of technological impacts. The point of this paper then is to smash the binary of the pharmakon. What if we understand pharmacology instead as radically spectral, not just in the sense that it haunts media theory, but that it might embody a spectrum of effects that complicate, twist and turn the straight-up binary of cure or kill. In such a case, we would have to replace the digital trope of 0 or 1 with a less tidy and more dynamic analog point of reference, like the tuning knob on a transistor radio or a stochastic sound wave. By analogy, we might invoke first of all how the tidy diagnoses of heteronormative medicine have been complicated by trans people. How, for example, does a physician prescribe medication for a person who identifies as male, but presents anatomically as a female taking testosterone? As Zaria Gorvett concludes in a revealing report for the BBC,

When you factor in the large data gaps in everything from the average life expectancy of transgender people to the right dosages of medications for their bodies, along with the widespread lack of knowledge among doctors about how to address them – let alone treat them – and the high chance of them being refused treatment outright, it soon becomes clear that transgender medicine is in crisis. Few groups experience such significant barriers to healthcare, and yet their struggles are going largely unnoticed (Gorvett, 2020).

Returning to pharmacologies of media (where, I should note, consequences are far less dire), one might ask: how does white, male heteronormativity constrict and straighten media theory, and how might queer theory turn it otherwise? How might we disturb, to borrow a word from the epigraph of this essay, the straight line from remedy to poison in ways that better represent the dynamic range of asymmetries that characterize contemporary technoculture? I have attempted to address these questions here through a series of turning points, beginning with an about-face in time towards Stiegler's house, to the scene of two white males holding forth on the pharmacology of media.

## Turning Away from the House

In 1986, Alison Bechdel published what has become a well-known comic strip in which one woman asks another if she wants to “see a movie and get popcorn.” Her friend seems reluctant, noting that any film she sees must meet three strict requirements: “One, it has to have at least two women in it...who two, **talk** to each other about, three, something other than a **man**” (Bechdel, 1986: 22). The conversation takes place over a series of panels in which the backdrop features violent imagery of men holding phallic weapons. Not surprisingly, the women cannot find a movie that meets these criteria, so they forego the theatre and head off to make their own popcorn. These panels from the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* inspired what has come to be known as the Bechdel (or Bechdel-Wallace) Test, which now serves as an instrument of critique for evaluating gender representation in film and other forms of fiction. Films that do not pass the Bechdel test reflect a power imbalance that not only characterizes the content of Hollywood cinema but also targets a system of sexual

exploitation that was largely responsible for provoking the #metoo movement. The test is best understood not as a data-driven instrument to measure sexism in film but as a speculative tool that makes power structures visible for the sake of provoking systemic change. If filmgoers apply the test and decide to turn their backs on movies that do not pass it, they could potentially mobilize change in the industry and impact the system that drives it.

Since this essay is turned toward media theory and not toward the medium of Hollywood film, I am prompted to ask: Might it be possible to apply a test like this to a field like critical theory, let alone the philosophy of technology or media theory? Visibilizing the power dynamics in these fields might reveal that a majority white, male academic demographic reaps the rewards of a technocapitalist system that, perhaps ironically, is the very target of its critical enterprise. “*For the Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*,” Audre Lorde tells us (Lorde, 1984: 110). “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable” (Lorde, 1984: 110-111). Lorde’s words resonate far beyond discussions of race and gender in academia, instructing all prospective change-makers to consider the power systems that shape their tools for change. Lorde’s “house” might even speak to the problem of trying – like Stiegler, McLuhan, and so many other theorists of media, myself included—to provoke change from within the system while deploying the language of that system. For media theorists, this means acknowledging the destructive legacies of race, class, and gender that permeate not only technoculture but also the academic cultures that inform media theory itself.

This presents some of us with a hopeless situation: how does a white male media theorist, a pharmacologist in this case, one who considers himself a well-meaning critic of technoculture, get out of the house, so to speak? Making the power context visible, as the Bechdel Test does with gender roles in film, might be a first step in dealing with this sense of helplessness. And to this end, I would like to propose a set of criteria, taking a cue from Bechdel, that might be used to evaluate critical discussions of technology. The criteria I lay down here are meant to be provisional. My goal is neither to generate a database to shame complicit academics or to police those who think and write about technology. Instead, I want to provide a barometer of sorts to make visible

how critical theorizations of technology can be complicit with the very system they have set out to critique. I now present my beta version of what I call the House of Lorde Test (HOLT), fully aware that it will be subject to scrutiny, will likely draw accusations of intellectual or even cultural appropriation, and will no doubt provoke resistance, as it should, coming as it does from a privileged white male. Here we go, in a single sentence:

Any critical discussion of technology should (1) understand the human as a global technical animal and not as a white privileged person, and (2) reference at the very least one non-white-cis-male philosopher or critic, towards the goal of (3) addressing an audience with accessible ideas that are applicable beyond academic circles.

My hope is that resistance to the HOLT, if it comes, will be taken up in the spirit of producing a better model, rather than taking the shape of an ad hominem attack against its disoriented author. It is crucial for critics of technocapitalism to have guidelines that help keep the bigger system in mind, a set of steps to help them get out of the house. If you don't like what I have proposed here, don't hesitate to let me know – then go make something better.

## **Turning Stupid**

When I turn back to the scene with Stiegler, I can't help but recall the coffee table, a simple, domestic piece of furniture that served as a medium between us during the interview, holding coffee cups, a voice recorder, and a pile of notes I had prepared in advance. The materiality of the table brings us back to the house of media theory. As John Durham Peters suggests in *The Marvelous Clouds*, media can be understood as “the strategies and tactics of culture and society, as the devices and crafts by which humans and things, animals and data, hold together in time and space” (Peters, 2015: 18). Media, Peters tells us, are not just the voice recorder and inkjet-printed notes on the coffee table, but also the table itself, the coffee cups, the glasses Stiegler and I both wore, and yes, even the clouds above Stiegler's house on that perfect June day. Peters' capacious understanding of media is based on a media theoretical canon that includes “American writers such as Lewis Mumford and James Carey, Canadians such as Harold Innis and McLuhan, Frenchmen such as Leroi-Gourhan and Bruno Latour,

and Germans such as Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Kittler” (Peters, 2015: 18). One might add Bernard Stiegler to this list, but to do so would only inflate the white male elephant in the room. If media can be understood in part as the “strategies and tactics of culture and society,” then it behooves media theorists to recognize the power asymmetries behind those strategies and tactics, asymmetries that shape not only media but media theory itself. If media theorists don’t put this political context on the table, their efforts risk replicating the very same asymmetries.

But sometimes putting the issue on the table is not enough. Take for example an essay entitled “Reading over McLuhan’s shoulder,” a passionate defence of bookish intellectualism in which Peters asks, “Should we honor a dead white guy?” (Peters, 2019: 494). Good question. What ensues is an exposé of McLuhan’s racist, homophobic, and masculinist views,<sup>1</sup> which Peters labels as “off-putting” (Peters, 2019: 494). But he then rescues the Canadian media theorist, laying to rest the off-putting moments in his corpus by proclaiming, “Now more than ever we need to be willing to practice the art of delicate dialectics, of reading people with strong ideas and politics we do not share.” Peters then drives his point home with a veiled threat: “Otherwise, we risk getting really stupid” (Peters, 2019: 496). Who is this “we”? And what is this “stupidity” that Peters so gravely censures?

I would like to think that what Peters is suggesting here is that people should delicately engage all perspectives, even those that challenge their personal identity politics or threaten their privilege. But there could be a more sinister side to this threat, one that suggests that if all the dead white men hailed in Peters’ essay – including a Nazi (Martin Heidegger) and an anti-semitic (Ludwig Klages), as Peters willingly admits — we (?) risk being left with a stupid culture, one bereft of knowledge (Peters, 2019: 495). Personally, I would prefer not to be included in a #weto movement of this stripe. I would be loath, for example, to accuse a Jewish colleague of fostering stupidity if they chose to leave Heidegger off their reading list. Nor would I censure Sarah Ahmed for resisting, in a sort of OULIPO game of gender politics, to cite any white men in her “stupid” book, *Living a Feminist Life*. This makes me wonder if the reader would forgive me for yielding to the temptation of quoting Avital Ronell<sup>2</sup> in this context:

In order to do justice to the American uses and behaviors of stupidity, to the rhetorical sedimentation of the term, one would have to review the

constituent naming of the slave as the nonhuman, the ineducable, in terms of phantasms of calculable intelligence. What has morphed into seemingly less lacerating assertions of stupidity (“shallow,” “airhead,” “bimbo,” “brain-dead,” etc.) belongs to a sinister history, which in part it repeats, of destroying alterity (Ronell, 2003: 39)<sup>3</sup>.

We might even trace this history from Nicholas Carr’s Pulitzer Prize nominated book, *The Shallows*, an elaboration of his popular article, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, all the way back to the pharmakon’s philosophical origins in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

“You have found a specific (*pharmakon*),” King Thamus tells his Chief Engineer Theuth, when presented with the gift of writing technology,

not for memory, but for reminiscence (*hypomneseos*), and you give your disciples only the pretence of wisdom; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality (Plato, 2010: 88).

At the very ur-scene of the pharmakon, in an over-cited passage adored by neurotypical media theorists and techno-alarmist self-help writers alike, we find an indictment of stupidity.<sup>4</sup>

The pharmakon itself then, is haunted by a techno-intellectual elitism, calling to mind a less referenced translation of the term in media theory, *pharmakeos*, or scapegoat. One might ask, for example, echoing Nicholas Carr: Who is to blame for the rampant stupidity that poisons digital culture? And McLuhan, among others, might answer: Technology itself is not to blame; “[w]e are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them” (McLuhan, 2003: 23). But technology is anything but neutral. Google, for example, can be gulped down as a mnemonic tonic, but it can also be insidiously toxic – just not in equal measure for every subject. And so, the temporary cognitive discomfort of a white man who relies heavily on a search engine is not as poisonous as the psychic violence that ensues when a black woman googles the word “doctor” and is faced with an endless scroll of white male faces.<sup>5</sup> If a technology like Google can be either remedy or poison, it

certainly does not cure or kill equably. Put simply, the very same systemic power asymmetries that are responsible for our most pressing social problems are embedded in our technological systems.

What, if anything, does this have to do with Stiegler's coffee table? I have established, I hope, thanks to Peters, that a coffee table can be a medium, holding together humans and other things in time and space. But there is no single orientation to a coffee table, or to any other media for that matter. Individual media do not occupy binary positions in space and time like some sort of Cartesian coordinate. Even the coffee table I put my cup on in 2010 has changed radically over the past decade. The horizon of my reach has changed, and I orient myself differently toward the table, thanks in part to Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. "A coffee table at the height of my waist," Ahmed proposes, "would amount to a failed orientation, as I could not extend myself through it, by using it as something on which to place my cup while I am sitting down on the sofa" (Ahmed, 2006: 50). To wit, the coffee table mediating a conversation between two white men discussing technological effects does not fit the way it once seemed to fit. What this means for pharmacologists of media is that close attention to materiality, from the mahogany used to make coffee tables to the tin mined for iPhones in deadly Indonesian mud pits, must take into account the hegemonic power contexts that shape both media and media theory.

## Turning Erect

Attention to materiality, to things that matter, is at the heart of Stiegler's pharmacology. In my notes for the interview, I recorded Stiegler mentioning that he owned a prehistoric stone tool, a *percuteur*, carefully sharpened to strike at objects. For pharmacologists, this stone tool represents the origins of technology and the simultaneous origins of the human, a prosthetically-enhanced animal that "invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool--by becoming exteriorized technologically" (Stiegler, 1998: 141). One can almost imagine a prehistoric ape-man sharpening its tool and its brain at the same time, slowly becoming human through a long series of repetitive strikes, percussions, and accidental repercussions through which the hominid eventually bursts open its own brain, making room for complex language systems to move in. And thus, "The hand frees speech" (Stiegler, 1998: 145),

Stiegler proclaims in *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, in lockstep with André Leroi-Gourhan's *Gesture and Speech*. This paleontological narrative draws a straight line from tool to brain that is summed up crudely in comic representations of a tool-bearing monkey transformed into an upright man, a sequence so simple and pervasive that it fits on a t-shirt. Known as "the march of progress," the oft-lampooned image that almost universally features a male figure, was first illustrated by Rudolph Zallinger for the *Early Man* volume of the *Life Nature Library* (1965) and labelled as "The Road to Homo Sapiens." But this image of human qua erection, a straight-on teleological tale of unimpeded masculine progress, must be put to death.

One approach to resisting this narrative of human species-fulfillment might be to turn away from the narrative of technological progress to focus instead on the act of repetition itself, the repeated percussions of a universal subject exteriorizing itself with a stone implement. "The work of repetition," Sara Ahmed concludes in *Queer Phenomenology*, "is not neutral work; it orients the body in some ways rather than others" (Ahmed, 2006: 17). In terms of the history of technics, one could say that repetitive technical tasks, which are central to Stiegler's conception of technogenesis, are not neutral. Rather, they cannot be disconnected from gender, class, race, and other contexts. This becomes obvious when one considers, for example, the repetitive actions of a blacksmith, a launderer, an assembly line worker, or a telephone operator. For Ahmed, "the normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time, which produces what we can call the bodily horizon, a space for action, which puts some objects and not others in reach" (Ahmed, 2006: 66). This focus on repetition rather than on progress, or even reproduction, might offer one answer to Stiegler's call for a new *libidinal economy*, one that resists "the way technology changes the *télos*, that is, the rule of ends which shape the social organization of collective desire as a system of care and remedies" (Stiegler, 2009a: 33).

Turning back to Stiegler's notion of technological exteriorization (via Leroi-Gourhan), one could say that it is not only the prosthetic reach of the human that matters, but the physical conditions that make reaching possible and the nature of the matter available within that reach. This question broadens the biopolitical context of human technics, calling to mind that the "normative dimension," in Ahmed's words, "can be redescribed in terms of the straight body, a body that appears 'in line'" (Ahmed, 2006:

66). Turning the tables, as Ahmed puts it, on the normative dimension, calls for a movement away from the vertical, a twist or turn away from the erect stance of the so-called universal subject. This might even be a diagonal movement. Michel Foucault, in response to a reproach from critics that he does not provide an overall theory, presents this very image of diagonality:

I am attempting, to the contrary, apart from any totalization -- which would be at once abstract and limiting -- practices and knowledge to open up problems that are as concrete and general as possible, problems that approach politics from behind and cut across societies on the diagonal, problems that are at once constituents of our history and constituted by that history: for example, the problem of the relation between sanity and insanity; the question of illness, of crime, or of sexuality (Foucault, 1984: 375-376).

Picking up on this, Ahmed suggests that “[q]ueer orientations might be those that don’t line up, which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow other objects to come into view” (Ahmed, 2006: 107). For example, this slantwise orientation allows Ahmed to carefully foreground the gendered nature of phenomenology by considering the wife and children hidden in the background of a famous philosophical object: Husserl’s writing table. What I have tried to show here is that such a slantwise approach might also offer a destabilizing reorientation toward media theory and not just toward tables. Let’s turn then, from *Homo Erectus* to what I call *Homo Inclinus*.

## Turning the Tables

The experience of a failed orientation is almost as common in media theory as it is in queer theory. Stiegler himself suggested that for technical animals, “disorientation is *originary*, that humanity’s history is that of technics as a process of exteriorization in which technical evolution is dominated by tendencies that societies must perpetually navigate” (Stiegler, 2009b: 1-2). What is not figured into this schema, however, is the power asymmetries built into that system. Those who control the extent and pace of technical change hold an inordinate amount of power over those who can only be seen as losers or failures in the evolutionary game of exteriorization. For example, in their

co-authored book *Failure*, Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander identify a widespread “regime of failure” that produces scapegoats, the *pharmakos* of technological progress (Appadurai and Alexander, 2019: 2) This regime “produces and naturalizes failure and creates the pervasive sense that all successes are the result of technology and its virtues, and that all failure is the fault of the citizen, the investor, the user, the consumer” (Appadurai and Alexander, 2019: 2). Rooted in the mantra of *move fast and break things*, the regime of failure capitalizes on planned obsolescence to generate an accelerating stream of black-boxed services and products that break down and are replaced before consumers have a chance to fully orient themselves to the flow. In such a system, we are destined to fail. But might it be possible to fail better?

I use the term “black box” in part to gesture toward an intersectional approach to systemic technological failure that I am not able to develop fully in this paper but that must not be ignored completely. Consider, for example, Ruha Benjamin’s conception of the *anti-black box*,<sup>6</sup> which “links the race-neutral technologies that encode inequity to the race-neutral laws and policies that serve as powerful tools for White supremacy” (Benjamin, 2019: 35). I should add that the underlying intersectional ethos of this paper can be summed up aptly in words of guidance from Ijeoma Oluo: “Act and talk and learn and fuck up and learn some more and act again and do better” (Oluo, 2019: 230). Oluo’s words provide an important counterpart to Samuel Beckett’s overused and abused lines from *Worstword Ho*: “Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all” (Beckett, 1983: 8). This absurdist charge, which embodies some of Beckett’s last thoughts about both the failure of language and unfettered progress, has of course been adopted by Silicon Valley as an inspirational quote that encapsulates a privileged, neoliberal telos guided by a death drive that produces the newest and latest disposable technological thing. I have attempted to undo this appropriation of Beckett by focusing specifically on the line “throw up for good.” A turn of the stomach, an abjection, a messy vulnerability of the human body, belie the straight-up mechanical and antiseptic ethos of technocapitalism.

In this spirit, I created the rough-hewn three-legged table described in *Making Media Theory* as an object-to-think-with prone to being unsettled through surprise inclinations. I borrow this image in part from Adriana Cavarero’s book *Inclinations: In*

*Critique of Rectitude*, where she opposes the moral rectitude of normative power systems with a philosophy of “inclining the subject toward the other, . . . giving it a different posture” (Cavarero, 2016: 11). The inclined subject might turn away from the concept of technogenesis in order “to think relation itself as originary and constitutive” (Cavarero, 2016: 13). For this to happen, we must rethink the human species not as the fulfilment of technical articulations, but as a species capable of leaning in toward the other, a species of “creatures who are materially vulnerable and, often in greatly unbalanced circumstances, consigned to one another” (Cavarero, 2016: 13). In this context, what matters is the action of reaching out toward otherness, and not the action of grasping the object and mastering it through repetition.

The themes of failure and vulnerability are of course common topics in the field of queer theory. Consider, for example, Jack Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*, where he suggests that

To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures (Halberstam, 2011: 187).

Halberstam deploys this call to action in his own work through an embrace of what he calls “low theory,” which allows him to discuss phenomenology through Disney’s *Finding Nemo*, for example. Alternatively, as my three-legged table suggests, this call to action might also serve as a design prompt for media theorists inclined toward the creation of critical artifacts, which can sometimes be just as silly and goofy.

This hands-on approach to media theory, informed by a recognition of human vulnerability, is exemplified in *Obfuscation: A User’s Guide*, by Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum. This book seems to be a direct response to Stiegler’s call in *Taking Care* for digital “first-aid kits” that treat cognitive damage inflicted by the “merchants of the time of brain-time divested of consciousness” (Stiegler, 2010b: 85). Brunton and Nissenbaum target the systems of power that allow big tech to capitalize on the vulnerability of its user base by deploying increasingly invasive methods of information

capture. As the authors put it, “precisely what information they capture, where they send it, how it then is used, and the logic of its impact on us we simply do not know” (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2015: 79). Describing this situation as “epistemic asymmetry in its most extreme form,” the authors call for resistance by suggesting various counter-methods “for disappearance, for time-wasting and analysis-frustrating, for prankish disobedience, for collective protest, for acts of individual regress both great and small” (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2015: 1). The uncanny alignment of these methods with queer tactics of resistance is obvious, and this alignment makes sense, given that both are targeting asymmetries held in place by the same hegemonic regime of heteronormative, male power. It is here perhaps, in radical acts of critical design or in the disturbances of tactical media, as Rita Raley has put it (Raley, 2009: 6), that queer theory and media theory can be spliced together most productively, in an effort to call out and turn the tables on technocapitalist power systems.

I will provide two examples of this makerly and materialist splice to illustrate the point. The first is Jason Lajoie’s *Queer Controller*, as discussed in his essay “Applied Media Theory, Critical Making, and Queering Video Game Controllers.” Lajoie’s hacked-together, handheld game controller is a tangled assemblage of buttons and wires, designed for maximum configurability. The controller is a good demonstration of the uninhibited design approach I have referred to as “crapentry” (O’Gorman, 2020), an antidisiplinary tactic that resists the will to mastery. In Lajoie’s words, the *Queer Controller* “disrupts normative conceptions of able-bodied and masculine forms of power in controller design, including the ways controllers limit and afford subject-positions with video games as gendered and able-bodied players” (Lajoie, 2021). This project, which is not in the least bit practical – but effective as a queer media theory object-to-think-with—is ultimately a performance of resistance to the systems of masculine, heteronormative control that characterize both the tech industry and the broader cultural nexus that fosters it.

The second project I would like to consider is DB Bauer’s *Playing with Dolls*, a multimedia assemblage of three projects that enact a “queer remix” of plastic army men figurines through the use of virtual reality, 3D printing, and miniature dollhouse props. Bauer refers to her design method as *computational queerness*, “mixing social and material codes of gender, sexuality, race, and other issues related to embodiment,

identity, and the lived experience” (Bauer, 2021). Like Lajoie’s project, Bauer’s queer “army men” bring together queer theory and media theory through the hands-on methods of critical design, demonstrating yet another approach to “subversive repetition” (Butler, 1999: 146). The design work of Lajoie and Bauer, in other words, show us how “parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were (Butler, 1999: 146).

These critical objects, useless from a strict engineering perspective, complicate yet another infamous binary laid out by King Theuth in Plato’s *Timaeus*: “O most ingenious Theuth, he who has the gift of invention is not always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions and the uses of them” (Plato, 2010: 87). I would like to reclaim and reject this passage from *Timaeus*, keeping in mind Legacy Russell’s suggestion that “When we reject the binary, we claim uselessness as a strategic tool” (Russell, 2020: 69). First of all, Theuth’s words serve as a generative prompt for considering the power dynamics that lead to a judgment of uselessness, which Russell resists creatively in *Glitch Feminisms* and Ahmed takes up at length in *What’s the Use?* Moreover, and not unrelatedly, this passage begets the following question: Can those who invent a technology not also judge its potential harm and profit? I ask this question not only as a call for critical media theorists to invent new useless technologies, but also as a reminder that epistemic asymmetry creates a situation that absolves tech developers from forecasting the broad consequences of their inventions.

What these projects also have in common, crucially, is an aspect of play. Bauer’s plastic figurines vividly demonstrate how “the openness of variations and options elementary to playfulness and play can help in thinking through the engrossing appeal of sex, the plasticity of desires, appetites, and orientations, as well as their congealment in categories of sexual identity” (Paasonen, 2018: 2).<sup>7</sup> Quoting Bonnie Ruberg, Lajoie describes his own “longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play” (Ruberg, 2019: 1). I would also add that both Bauer and Lajoie have a knack for infusing play with a trait of disorientation, or what play theorist Roger Caillois identified as *ilinx* (Caillois, 2001). This seems suitable for a design approach that is critical of the normalizing tendencies of capitalist technics. The playfulness of this design work also exhibits a palpable

degree of hope, the belief that queer material engagements that combine theoretical reflection and hands-on creation, can serve as acts of world-building that actively unbuild the normative and formative sway of power systems. Technically impractical as these projects are, they do not provide answers; instead, they speculate and ask questions. Nor do these projects reflect the straight teleology of hope for a wholesome and fulfilling future, as the image of children at play might conjure (*pace* Lee Edelman), but rather, a “notion of futurity,” turning to José Esteban Muñoz, “that functions as a historical, materialist critique” (Muñoz, 2009: 26). Inspired by the admittedly utopian critical design ethos of “problem finding” rather than “problem solving” (Malpass, 2017: 4), the work of Lajoie and Bauer embodies a queerness that is “not quite here” (Muñoz, 2009: 21).

It is tempting to position this admittedly utopian conception of hope in the context of Stiegler’s theorization of hope as *elpis*, the double-edged gift inside Pandora’s box. *Elpis* is at once a gift of foresight and also a terrifyingly stupid recognition of mortality. As Stiegler puts it, “this knowledge of the end, which is also a nonknowing, forms the primordial situation out of which each person conducts himself or herself. *Elpis* could be seen as (the relation) to the indeterminate, that is (the anticipation of) the future, and as such, ‘the essential phenomenon of time’” (Stiegler, 1998: 198). Here again we are faced with a binary problem. First of all, let us not forget that Pandora, an originary female like Eve, serves as a punishment for the creation of man. Moreover, *elpis*, as typically conceived, is either a coveted bestowal, a Promethean flame that distinguishes human from non-human animals, or it is a curse, a bilious gift of death that shackles humans to the finite clock of flesh. But why must this recognition of finitude serve as a curse? In the projects discussed here, which are raw engagements with the materiality of both human bodies and technical things, fleshly finitude becomes entangled in messy critical objects, belying the blind hopes perpetuated by the straight line of technological progress.

### **Coda: Turning Wild**

In the final minutes of my visit with Stiegler at his provincial home, I asked if he had anything to say about the field of Animal Studies, which in 2010 had reached a sort of apex in North American humanities discourse. The French philosopher had very little

patience for this notion of a posthumanist philosophy dedicated to animals, and I would even suggest that he had not heard of it (or wished he hadn't). But this question did provoke him to engage in a discussion of wildness. "[I]n ritual societies," Stiegler told me, "—in shamanistic society, for example—they do not transform nature, they remove things from nature. They negotiate with animals, which are often totems—that is to say that they place themselves almost on an equal level with animals. And that is an entirely different rapport with nature" (Stiegler, 2010a: 475). This was ultimately an examination, in Stiegler's terms, of one who "takes care of the wild" (Stiegler, 2010a: 476), such as a hunter or agriculturalist. I know in my head that the discussion, had it not been cut short because of the setting sun and a train schedule, would have led to industrial farming, genetic modification, and the climate crisis. But in my heart, I can imagine the conversation straying elsewhere, towards "other forms of wildness, lostness, and misshapen hope" (Halberstam, 2020: 23) that might bring together media theory and queer theory. I can even fashion this errant desire into a speculative title for the book that Stiegler was not able to complete: *Taking Care of the Wild*.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The intrepid reader can search for evidence of this claim in McLuhan’s *Playboy* interview.
- <sup>2</sup> As most readers are aware, Ronell was accused of sexually harassing a graduate student at New York University, and was suspended from her position during the 2018-2019 academic year. While I will admit that deliberately citing Ronell in a discussion of power asymmetries may be judged as “cute,” I believe that it lays bare the complexity of cancel culture in academia. My hope is that this citation will provide readers with an opportunity to reflect on this topic, which I cannot develop responsibly in this discussion focused on technoculture.
- <sup>3</sup> It seems appropriate, given the focus on tables in this discussion, that the cover of Ronell’s book features two elderly white men, seated behind a table and staring confusedly at very large books. The image, from a scene in Beckett’s *Ohio Impromptu*, is examined by Rudolph Mràzek in his 2003 review of Ronell’s *Stupidity* for *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.
- <sup>4</sup> Stupidity also haunts the Greek origins of technicity, as Stiegler documents in the title of his first volume of *Technics and Time*, which points to a lapse in foresight known as the *Fault of Epimetheus*.
- <sup>5</sup> See Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: NYU Press, 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Benjamin bases her work in part on Frank Pasquale’s book, *The Black Box Society*, which examines how laws that protect corporate secrecy uphold a power asymmetry that allows the creators of digital products and services to compromise their users’ privacy.
- <sup>7</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for *Media Theory* who carefully read this manuscript and proposed this important link to the work of Paasonen.

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