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Noise vs. Control

A Parable against Modelling the Future

Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter

“People find themselves seemingly unable to create the conditions for a radical bifurcation—not the disruptive ‘radical innovation’ of the kind claimed by those startup entrepreneurs who present themselves as ‘*new barbarians*’, but, on the contrary, a bifurcation taking account of the radicality of this disruption from the perspective of a *new public power*, such that it could *once again create an epoch*.”

Bernard Stiegler

Over many years we’ve been looking at the emergence of “organized networks” as an alternative concept that could counter the social media platform *a priori* of gathering (and then exploiting) “weak links.”¹ Organized networks invent new institutional forms whose dynamics, properties, and practices are internal to the operational logic of communication media and digital technologies. Their emergence is prompted, in part, by a wider social fatigue with and increasing distrust of traditional and modern institutions such as the church, political party, firm, and labour union, which maintain hierarchical modes of organization. While not without hierarchical tendencies (founders, technical architectures, centralized infrastructures, personality cults), organized networks tend to gravitate more strongly toward horizontal modes of communication, practice, and planning. Organized networks emerge in the shadow of platform geopolitics at a time of intense crisis (social, economic, environmental), when dominant institutions fail in their core task: decision-making. As experiments in collective practice conjoined with digital communication technologies,

¹ Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, *Organization after Social Media* (Colchester and New York: Minor Compositions, 2018), <https://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=857>. See also our related essays, “Afterword: Propositions on the Organizational Form,” in Timon Beyes, Lisa Conrad, and Reinhold Martin, *Organize* (Lüneburg and Minneapolis: Meson Press / University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 89–101 and “Dawn of the Organised Networks,” *Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005), <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-029-dawn-of-the-organised-networks/>.

organized networks are testbeds for networked forms of governance that strives to address a world rapidly spiralling into a planetary abyss.

In this essay we'll first survey the state of the arts concerning network theory and then focus on one specific dominant category in cybernetic governance, namely models. We critique the model as a testbed that delimits futurity and then test the status of noise today. For Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist writing in the mid-twentieth century, the cybernetic concept of noise was something he considered as a force generative of patterns.² Similarly, the philosopher Michel Serres thought noise performed the role of a parasite: a kind of interfering guest that conditioned the possibility of new relations and meanings for the host or dominant regime.³ Translating noise to our contemporary control societies gives us a sense of the radical potential of noise as an agent of disruption. As much as the state, corporation, or obnoxious boss insists on submission, there will always be points of technical failure, acts of defiance and refusal, systems that breakdown.

Noise is a potential enemy of dashboard governance. How can we turn to noise as a refuge away from the assault on labour and life by models? If the self-proclaimed perfection of the digital marks a victory over noise (which we doubt is a final one), then how can we design 21st century noise and devise ways to insert it into systems of control? What we propose is an indy R&D of a new cultural technique, similar yet different to masking, hacking, and whistle-blowing. By collectively inventing new cultural techniques of noise able to unsettle the hegemony of platform technologies, we might reorient modes of expression and the practice of politics in ways that are not, in the first and last instance, beholden to the society of quantification. The overall question is an old one: what's to be done? How to escape technologies of measure and effectively undermine them? What concepts do we need to question and which new ones will provide us with possibilities to act in our rage against machine learning and artificial stupidity? But first, let's examine where we are.

Organized Planning

What does the annihilation of choice mean for our ever-evolving proposition, organizing networks? The multitude of distributed networks organizing through a diversity of media has,

² Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

³ Michel Serres, *Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

over the past decade or so, been reduced to social media platforms that dominate the scene of communication. Platforms offer template options whose technics contour our cognitive processes. That is the limit of choice (and a near-fatal one for humanity, as it turns out). Does that mean organization is similarly contained within a menu of undifferentiated options? Do we know what organization will do when choice is predetermined? What does the noise of contingency mean within the limited horizon of platforms? Platforms are not networks. Rather, they accumulate recommended connections. Platforms support collective narcissism and the self-affirmation of group-think. In her journey back into the time of growing up in the mid-twentieth century Scottish working class town of Motherwell, Deborah Orr tells us that the narcissist is one without love: “Narcissism is not self-love. It’s the opposite of that. It’s a nagging horror that you are, deep down, unlovable.”⁴

What if we extend this pathology of self-loathing to the algorithmically selected sociality that mistakes itself for holding some resemblance of a network? Does this help us explain the paradox of platforms and their antithetical relation to organizing as networks? We have already established that the platform template is not equivalent to networks, and suggested that the absence of noise is one of the reasons for this. But let’s probe this further. If platforms resemble an ensemble of narcissists, what is the relation between noise and narcissism? Why can’t noise disturb the power of collective self-loathing? Is this what prevents networked sociality from breaking free of its addiction to platforms?

It is said that we are moving from the endless updating of the same old content and comments on social media platform with its related anxieties and boredom to a new excitement for live streaming. We’re going beyond discourse, performing our little dances, displaying our mini statements, in a desperate attempt to kill time. Move that body, shake it, shake it. Show off your elasticity and self-confidence. But please be quick about it, because my time is more expensive than yours. Welcome to the Snapchat-TikTok logic.

In this context, local solidarity comes across as an act of desperation. A yearning, not to be dismissed, but one has to question how real the desire is to sign on. The compulsion to connect is more an act stemming from the society of obligation. Participation means agreeing

⁴ Deborah Orr, *Motherwell: A Girlhood* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020), 94.

to terms and conditions.⁵ All sorts of industries and organizations instruct their clients and employees to get on board with the platforms if they want to maximize impact, enhance sales, and hold on to their job. Local solidarity huddled away in the inhouse, off-the-rack platform is also a way of blocking in time, an accounting mechanism to demonstrate the day job is getting done. No matter that all your keystrokes, personal details, and data inputs are syphoned off to the backend tech company you were never aware of. Such is the automation of the unconscious that harvests your data. As Brett Neilson writes, “automation unleashes a form of planning that projects anticipated futures based on correlations discovered in dispersed, non-equivalent datasets.”⁶

The radical move: to just drop it all and see where the drift gravitates. What are the new solidarities? What does it mean to co-mingle with the unwashed, the tasteless? Less group self-affirmation, more perversion. But that goes against the parametric rules of the platform. Instead of new cultures of visibility, platform sociality is characterized by the gradual disappearance of the (virtual) public realm as a gathering of different perspectives, knowledges, values, and political convictions. We withdraw into hidden corners, finding solace in Facebook groups, the Twitterati echo chamber, Discord backchannels. From TikTok madness to closed WhatsApp groups, there’s a widespread retreat of organizational capacity to join the unknown and the new, opting instead for conspiratorial environments where many of us feel safe up until contingency lashes out in the form of an unexpected Zoom bombing. Except that’s not contingency. Nowadays trigger warnings precede all encounters with content. Our psychic fragility must not be disturbed. But to assume this horizon of control in digital cultures and platform sociality is to seriously underestimate the political potential of radical contingency and the disruptive force of noise.

The moment of revelation assumes a will to act. That by making whatever infrastructural operation or decision-making process visible then a demos is mobilized as collective knowledge to transform a world into a more politically palatable vision. Wrong. What if nothing happens? No response? This is the new sphere of immanence dictated by indifference. The tsunami of diffidence is orchestrated on a mass scale. The Enlightenment

⁵ See Christopher M. Kelty, *The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

⁶ Brett Neilson, “The Reverse of Engineering,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2020): 77.

strategy of critique in the eighteenth century did not transcend or extend beyond its historical epoch of emergence. European colonialism and white settler invasion did what it did. The legacies of orchestrated and spontaneous acts of violence persist. The science and technology studies (STS)—and Enlightenment—pursuit of making visible the invisible did not work. Across the university today, professors and PhD students rush about doing “critical infrastructure studies” on micro-topics of minimal consequence, assuming that making the world visible is sufficient in and of itself. But then what? What to make of such “knowledge without consequences”? Any act of visualization is, in the first and perhaps last instance, an act of self-referentiality. One demonstrates competency in this or that convention, but it is peak delusion to suppose the thing itself is known and contained.

The neo-Enlightenment strategy of knowledge production extends beyond the academy into journalism, WikiLeaks, and whistle-blowers, all of whom have this romantic commitment to and faith in revelation. This is the neo-theological unconscious in the age of big data. Yet numbers don't need faith. They are guilt-free entities. The operational capabilities of numbers pressed into patterns don't require meaning or value to work. Instead, we attribute these qualities to what are operationally autonomous or at least distinct entities. Perhaps this is their intrigue. The distinction between data and value is increasingly corroded. The digital logic of binary numbers is underscored by a temporal absence. Numbers in themselves don't exist. We see them: through patterns, interfaces, arranged as sets, and so forth. But this is a classic category error: assuming that what we see is the thing itself. What if there is no thing? Or, if it reveals itself, its temporal presence is only fleeting. The revelation is not eternal but occupies a temporality that is irretrievable. The ephemerality refuses recall. This enrages us: we return and there's nothing there, or unreadable, unusable, irrelevant, or we simply already forgot about it. The event happened, it was significant, but the trace of resonance is nowhere to be found, it has vanished.

Similar scenarios can be found in the wild-west crypto sphere of Bitcoin hype and blockchain makeovers, where there are a few winners who can extract value on the spot. But they have fled the scene. This is the speciality of data processing. Value reappears elsewhere, and manifests across social and economic settings. The metamorphosis of value may be momentarily captured but then migrates, impossible to retain. This phenomenon prompts widespread social anxiety, fear, fury, xenophobia, paranoia, jealousy, contempt, and, more generally, a spatial form of cognitive disorientation on a mass scale. Can we see this as a new

form of governmentality, a technique of managing populations of stagnation savaged by prolonged economic austerity? But let us not confuse the target: we are not speaking about the state here, or at least any static concept of the modern state with its regulatory regimes. But rather this emergent form of population management may be symptomatic of an emergent state form. Regardless, we don't yet have to name it so much as identify its operation, to understand its mechanism and techniques of control and modulation of affect and desire. In so doing, we move into a position to produce concepts coextensive with technical forms of power.

Let's now talk more about the cultural dimension, since this is the territory in which control so often touches down and performs. Culture is the testbed of control. This takes us into the unconscious since culture is the scene in which the imaginary rehearses its drama of society. Once consolidated, the new normal possesses an extraordinary power or force.

The Revenge of Aesthetics

What remains when politics puts up its foreclosure sign? Party politics long ago descended into a squabble that resembles a TV game show without resolve to address actually existing problems. Inner-exile into the aesthetic realm might help assuage our despair with the general condition of pervasive nihilism and planetary destruction accelerated by the historical project of capitalism.⁷ Indeed, the aesthetic so frequently does not present itself as the final option in the face of imminent catastrophe because it occupies the secrets of the unconscious.

Aesthetics is the idiom of expression even if it's not named as such. When the ship is sinking, the aesthetic is the performative trope of futility. A fatalistic resignation attends the retreat into the gestural economy and its abundance of social media influencers, consultancy cabals, and brand managers. Regardless of one's disciplinary persuasion or claim to expertise, the aesthetic binds the predicament of culture as a form of mass social expression.

We need to distinguish between aesthetics and substantive intervention with material effects. The instrumental reason put under duress is incapable of articulating its performative mode. This is why we associate such a condition with the unconscious. When all else has failed, why do we consider aesthetics as the last gesture? Aesthetics, in other words, is aligned with

⁷ See Jason M. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

and conditioned by profound crisis. This feature returns us to the 1920s when artistic expression blossomed across a Europe and a wider world about to lurch into prolonged hardship, misery, and horror wrought by economic collapse and global war. What do we regain when we refine and, nowadays in the midst of data regimes and machine worlds, recalibrate our perception? Aesthetics subsists as a latent condition, launching itself again in the face of social collapse when there's nothing left to lose.

Conventionally, aesthetics holds minimal legitimacy outside the cultural industries and art markets. The closest experience many may have with aesthetics arrives on their front door when they unpack their flatpack. The past decades have taught us to distinguish between dynamics of finance markets and art markets, which had already become fully financialized. The aesthetic as a potential to respond was no longer about the succession of styles. We are not talking about the invention of the next style. Aesthetics has by now migrated to the performative possibility that endures in the time of life. The human is now fulfilling this function in an increasingly machine governed world. Performance does not occupy any central stage, but rather is entirely side-lined to view the spectacle from the back row.

The human is at best a soulless vessel that generates momentary value within an entirely promiscuous and pervasive economy of data. The human body and brain are host to the extraction of value from fully financialized instruments of communication. Each and every movement, gesture, thought, and desire is already mapped, anticipated, and predicted. As far as the territory of control is concerned, nothing is unknown. Can something understood as freedom exist in a degree zero world? What are its minimal conditions? Nothing unknown will remain. Yet contingency persists.

There's a futility to design hoping to establish some interval that resurrects the human as an agent somehow disentangled from its primary constituent part: the machine. A hopeless gesture that fails from the start. Reflection by Design. Neural network text generators register this all too proficiently, but only up to a point at which absurdism kicks in:

Conventionally, aesthetics holds minimal legitimacy outside the cultural industries and art markets. But when the design of a table is utilized as a mass symbolic act in mainstream media in the interest of social awareness, it becomes accepted because its appeal is not morally or aesthetically neutral. As a result, a table can become a mass

symbol of marginalization for people who are marginal or disenfranchised. I have a live in boyfriend, and he cannot get enough of this program and his dog. He was featured in the public records. I suppose his social class affects his⁸

Or, as one our favourite designer's instructs: Save the Humans.⁹

Against Modelling

Models are forms of containment, they presume the three P's rule: prediction, pre-emption, prevention. As the ultimate expression of "theopolitical media of communication" preoccupied with control, models operate in a closed, self-referential world of uninterrupted flows.¹⁰ No matter how open and dynamic the design of models, parameters are always and necessarily limiting, if not restraining our lives. Modulating our desires and calibrating our cognitive processes in ways coextensive with the operational logics of the machine, the collective struggle for autonomy and freedom is increasingly disorientated.¹¹ The "protective shield" (Freud) of our psychic apparatus was invaded long ago.¹² Today, our cognitive processes are under assault as the brain is rendered indistinct from cybernetic machines. In our common pursuit of liberation from the structural violence of the cybernetic regimes, it is time to question the hidden tyranny of models and side with the subversive power of noise. Inputs/outputs, but never contingency: that's the revolt of the disaffected.

In contrast to the abstract method of modelling we propose to undermine the cybernetic machine, awaiting alternatives to take over. Which noise exactly are we talking about? Not the "Wiener/Weaver" noise, nor the electronic noise genre of the 1980s. What is digital noise today, social media noise, surveillance noise, Uber noise? Is the urban tactics of masking the

⁸ After entering the first sentence, this passage was generated by <https://talktotransformer.com/>, which has since been taken offline due to running costs incurred by the developer: "Sad news ... I can no longer afford to run Talk to Transformer without revenue. A better version is available in my recently launched (paid) product, called InferKit."

⁹ Mieke Gerritzen and Koert van Mensvoort, *Save the Humans: How to Survive* (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers and Next Nature Network, 2015).

¹⁰ On theopolitical media, see John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹¹ See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) and N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹² Catherine Malabou, *Morphing Intelligence: From IQ Measurement to Artificial Brains*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 8–9.

only possible way we can protect ourselves and trick the system? Counter-cultural techniques have long been forgotten and are no longer part of popular culture. Popular in the seventies and resurfacing again in the anti-globalization movements of the late nineties, practices of media jamming and the like all too willingly fed Big Brother with the wrong information with the aim to “pollute” the databases.

These days, users have to be explicitly reminded that they fill in their profiles with the wrong information, use wrong names, and switch off location. But in fact the databases can’t be messed with since the engineers have pre-set the parametric architecture. Moreover, such strategies of disinformation and reversal no longer hold since the platform logic is immune to meaning and content. Data only refers to a larger family of data and the operative logic of the machine. All that’s required is a maintenance of the input/output function as the primary means to accumulate data that translates as capital. Politics is all about the decision. Hackers steal information by making copies and then perhaps deleting information, but rarely do these deviant acts add noise to the system. As Peter Krapp points out, “Denial-of-service attacks exploiting the processing rhythms of certain system resources are nothing more or less than digital demonstrations.”¹³ The operational strength of the machine, in other words, is reinforced by the techno-political act of interaction. So what’s digital noise then? The simple gesture of refusal can be a start. Our willingness to comply has been automatic, part of our subdued subconscious state of mind that longs for a friction-free life.

We’re now living in the age of fake accounts that produce fake news in order to manipulate online public opinion. One might reasonably wonder if public opinion is also fake, and indeed this was Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion nearly fifty years ago when he compelling and provocatively argued that public opinion does not exist.¹⁴ Rather, for Bourdieu, a self-referential system prevails with surveys, focus groups, opinion polls, questionnaires and so forth, all of which say more about the apparatus of knowledge than they do about their referent—the people, consumer, citizen, etc. Needless to say, Bourdieu’s critique did little to assuage the advertising industry of the magical power of numbers. And what did it matter

¹³ Peter Krapp, *Noise Channels: Glitch and Error in Digital Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 52. See also the work of the Dutch glitch artist Rosa Menkman: <https://beyonddresolution.info/>.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “Public Opinion Does Not Exist” (1973), trans. Mary C. Axtmann, in Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, eds., *Communication and Class Struggle, Vol. 1: Capitalism, Imperialism* (New York: International General, 1979), 124–30.

anyway, folks just carried on all too happy to consume. This in itself was sufficient as a validation of technologies of measure. In the sparkling world of commodity culture, the consumer is sovereign.

Noise in the Pandemic

We see that more clearly than ever during this pandemic period, when dried up pay cheques unsurprisingly coincide with a collapse in consumer confidence and mass closures of businesses. Does this collective act of withdrawal from consumer society suggest also a turning point in the hegemony of numbers and technologies of calculation? Is this the ultimate gesture of refusal: desire that simply cannot manifest as an act of consumption? What might this mean for rechannelling desire in other directions and other ends? Indeed, what might it mean politically if desire can't be channelled, if it has no outlet or form of expression? Imminent pandemonium? Perhaps. Or the simulation of revolt? The nature of fake is that it wants to be as perfect as its rival. Mimicry of the antagonist is an entry-level requirement. Ergo, fake hates noise, it longs for perfection as a simulacrum. We're supposed to live in the age of the pure digital, with total connectivity of seamless, interoperable systems. But what if we spark a renaissance and surprise the world with fresh, 21st century noise? Can we design the Next Noise?

The status of the test in the form of models can always be tested by noise. Noise is considered the original counterpart of the signal, its shadow, and is featured extensively in all early theories of communication and cybernetics—except for today. In this all-digital age it seemed, for a brief moment, as if noise had been conquered, negated, crushed. This remains the mythos of the Chinese surveillance state and its export of control. But then, inevitably, the suppressed reappears on the scene. Noise returned as the unexpected revenge of externalities. The constitutive outside that forces change as the illegitimate agent. Filters break down, a virus enters the system, the inner psychic armour can no longer filter and manage all the information. Big data start to become meaningless with so many incomplete entries. Decisions designed around omissions register the impossible face of the incalculable. Flows still flow but the totalizing premise of data extraction is one without a purpose when confronted by the incomplete life that hovers besides the perfection of the model.

In the world-wide scenario of doom that defines the global rash of coronavirus, the directives issued by government unfold by the day. Instal that tracking app! Don't leave home! Take a

pay cut! Prepare to suffer! Isolate! Lose that job! Pre-pandemic life was a parallel universe that once existed, and now it fades by the day. That universe feels also like a crime of finance capitalism triggered by climate change, which economic historian Adam Tooze considers an enabling condition for the mess we are in now.¹⁵ In the midst of COVID-19, the 2020 pandemic wreaking planetary havoc without a horizon, platform capitalism has asserted its market hegemony insofar as tech stocks are booming and platform businesses jostle in the battle of delivery services and remote working during lockdown and quarantine. But are we also starting to see fissures emerging in these technologies of control? Doesn't it follow that once the economy as we know it is shattered then there's nowhere left for platform capitalism? How do we collectively start designing the blueprints, now, for a social, economic and ecological life in the ruins of the future?

Adorno was a multi-variant figure on the question of method and models. To ensure a relative degree of viability and financial sustainability for their Institute for Social Research, part of the deal for Adorno and Horkheimer with Lazarsfeld was to take on board his more quantitative social science methods. This was no more apparent than in the monumental study of the authoritarian personality.¹⁶ There, they enlist a range of methods: questionnaires, interviews, group studies. And then, to discern the constitution of a "disposition that expressed or was influenced by fascist ideas," they adopted more intriguing techniques we no longer hear about: opinion-attitude scales (in contrast to opinion polls), clinical-genetic interviews, thematic apperception tests. Their major concern was with "patterns of dynamically related factors." We are not readers of literature in psychology, so can only imagine these methods are no longer in circulation. Nonetheless, there's an interesting resonance here with data analytics.

The legacy of Adorno and Horkheimer persists across generations, such was the impact and insight of their contribution to a critique of technological society. We are reminded, again, of their significance in reading Bernard Stiegler's *The Age of Disruption*. Stiegler writes of a

¹⁵ Eric Levitz, "A Historian of Economic Crisis on the World After COVID-19," *Intelligencer*, 7 August 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/08/adam-tooze-how-will-the-covid-19-pandemic-change-world-history.html>

¹⁶ T.W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019 [1950]).

pervasive bleakness to be sure, defining the concept of “algorithmic governmentality” in the following terms:

What is new is the systematic exploitation and physical reticulation of interindividual and transindividual relations—serving what is referred to today as the “data economy,” itself based on data-intensive computing, or “big data,” which has been presented as the “end of theory.” This amounts to the full realization of barbarism in Adorno and Horkheimer’s sense, but they could surely never have imagined how far this would extend onto the noetic plane.

Automatic and reticulated society thereby becomes the global cause of a colossal social disintegration. The automatic power of reticulated disintegration extends across the face of the earth¹⁷

What if Stiegler had given failure a chance? Noise is pure contingency, unleashed to disturb the signal. As the grip of computational capitalism tightens its hold of the social through the extractive logics of data economies, are we approaching a multi-scalar situation that sees the eradication of contingency? In other words, does the computational universe self-generate in cybernetic ways to the extent the constitutive outside of noise and contingency are no longer requisite forces of system renewal? Developments in AI suggest as much. So would high-frequency trading most of the time, at least until it crashes. But to go down this path is to reckon the grip of computational or platform capitalism is as total as it assumes. It’s to sell short the revenge of the parasite. This does not mean we enter some post-pandemic world in which power recedes from the world.

We are with Foucault on this point. Power never ceases to manifest in social relations and generate worlds. The collective challenge is to decide how to channel power into forms not so brutally exploitative and destructive. We are not naïve idealists here. But we do recognize a weakening of prevailing forms of power, noticeably the emergence of the USA and UK as failed states. Certainly a geopolitical vacuum is rapidly being filled by China. This was already the case over the past five to ten years. But do we really buy into their phantasm of

¹⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in the Age of Computational Capitalism*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 7.

destiny to be the world's new hegemon? Our focus on the question of power resides in an analysis of technical systems that govern the world, and a critique of their capacity to govern in a society turned to noise.

Despite moments of hope and organized intervention, the “collective desire to rebalance centralised power” through decentralized networks has pretty much seemed like a lost cause since the 2001 tech-wreck and global conflicts stemming from 9/11 and the escalation of surveillance society.¹⁸ New business models were required, and our lost souls provided the perfect surface for digital extractionism. Flutters of insurrection blossomed in moments of political and economic crisis across the planet: from the Movement of the Squares (from Tahrir to Taksim), Occupy, Umbrella movement (Hong Kong), Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) up to the global movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter. A reorganization of agency arises from the abyss of network chatter. Among the first casualties are the predatory persona of the social media influencer. No one gives a damn about the upkeep and maintenance of narcissism when you're still wearing that same hoodie and those crusty sweat pants, months into home quarantine and enforced isolation. Celebrity culture has passed its tipping point and a general consensus has emerged. The power to lift us out of banal routine no longer works when the shopping mall is a contamination site and our credit cards are maxed out. A Houellebecqian couldn't-give-a-shit society is now on full display.¹⁹ Welcome to the new anti-aesthetic.

What does platform capitalism extract from this descent into mass nihilism? Earlier we noted that governance through algorithms and data systems cares little about content. There's no political potency to be found there. Data generation and hoarding is sufficient in and of itself to meet the objective of training machine learning systems. But platforms are hitched to the accumulation and reproduction of capital. How, finally, do we identify the strategic choices we have to make if we study media theory, platform capitalism, and infrastructural operations? A combinatorial theory that builds concepts from technics makes possible less trafficked analytical routes into the relation between subjectivity, the unconscious, and the violence of capital. The relation between machine cognition and the politics of decision is

¹⁸ Cade Diehm, “This is Fine: Optimism & Emergency in the P2P Network,” *The New Design Congress*, 16 July 2020, <https://newdesigncongress.org/en/pub/this-is-fine/>

¹⁹ See Bernard Stiegler's remarks on the “entrepreneurial literature of Michel Houellebecq,” in *The Age of Disruption*, 246.

haunted by contingency and noise. This is a relation that is a non-relation inasmuch as the parametric borders of computational systems by default exclude that which is beyond measure. The cultivation of noise can manifest in quite simple acts. Goal orientation is central to the design of modelling and correlation of non-identical data sets. Noise, in this sense, can be understood as action without ends. Society beyond platforms emerges from the social abandonment of goals.