

# Data Trash

the theory of the virtual class

smelling the virtual  
flowers and counting  
the road-kill  
on the digital  
superhighway



**Arthur Kroker**  
**Michael A. Weinstein**

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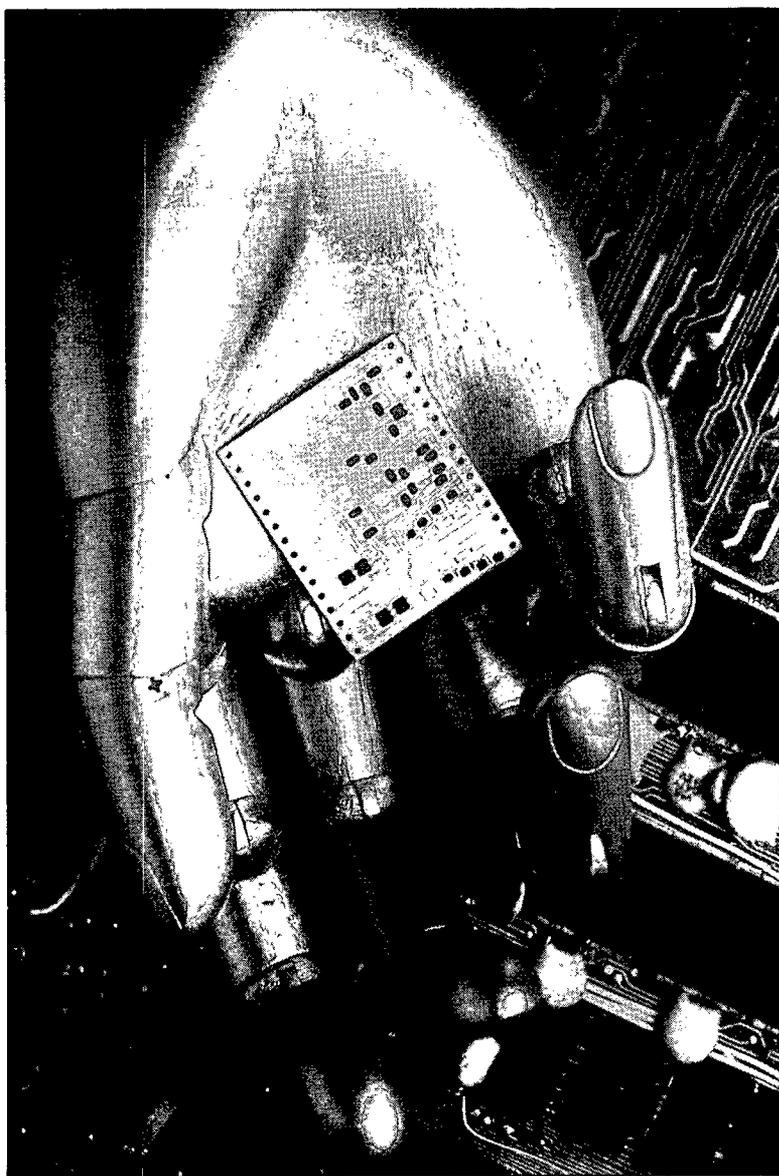
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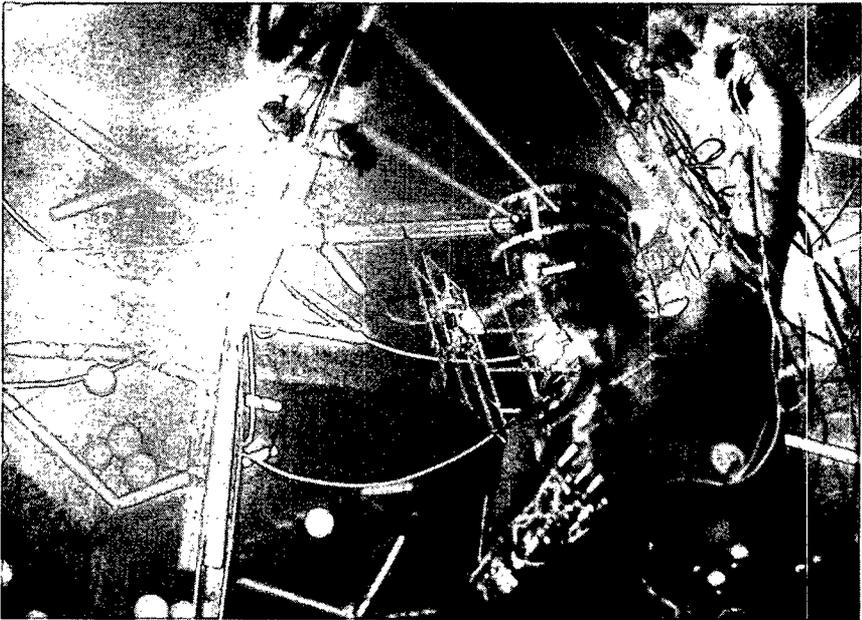
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## PREFACE

# DATA TRASH

Virtual Reality is the dream of pure telematic experience. Beginning in the cybernetic shadowland of head-mounted scanners, wired gloves, and data suits, virtual reality has quickly become the electronic horizon of the twenty-first century. A cold world where bodies get prepped for downloading into data, where seeing means artificial optics, where hearing is listening to the high-speed world of sampler culture, where travelling becomes a nomadic journey across the MUD (*Multiple User Dungeons*), and where communication disappears into the high-speed fibre “backbone” of the Internet. In virtual reality, flesh vaporizes into virtuality as (twentieth-) century bodies are repackaged with (twenty-first-) century cybernetic nervous systems for speeding across the electronic frontier.

The gigantic nova of technotopia pulses with such brilliant energy because western society is in the terminal phase of a slow, but nonetheless fatal, fade-out. A prolonged evacuation of the energies of the social where the biological organism flips into the electronic body, and where the cult of the “wired” is the ruling rhetoric of all the technological fetishists.

The wired body is perfect. Travelling like an electronic nomad through the circulatory flows of the mediascape, it possesses only the virtual biological form of a multi-layered scanner image. Abandoning the heavy referential history of a central nervous system, the wired body actually *grows* a telematic nervous system that is freely distributed across the electronic mirror of the Internet. A product of neural tapping and image-processing, the wired body is the (technoid) life-form that finally cracks its way out of the dead shell of human culture.

Technotopia is about disappearances: the vanishing of the body (into a relational data base), the nervous system into "distributive processing," and the skin into wetware. As technology comes alive as a distinctive species, we finally encounter the end of (human) history and the beginning of virtual history. A waiting time of *growing bodies* for endless circulation through all the synapses and gateways of the data networks. A euphoric space where subjectivity drains away into televisual memories, and desire is recombined into a vertiginous matrix of doubled possibilities. Virtual reality skin-grafts the logic of the ambivalent sign onto the "standing reserve" of the social. Here the delirium of the recline of western civilization is experienced as both the ecstasy of crash culture and the catastrophe of *our* burn-out in digital culture.

### Cyber-Flesh Scanning the Media-Net

Taking virtual reality as the (ir)real world of the electronic frontier, *Data Trash* operates like a deep space galactic explorer. Approaching the media-net with long-distance (theory) scans, it sweeps the virtual world with a rapid series of media probes, mapping the political economy of virtual reality and recombinant culture. It then arcs away with some final sampler images of crash history. Here, technology means the will to virtuality, and virtuality is about the recline of western civilization, an historical non-time marked by recurrent bouts of spasmodic violence and random crashes of all the big referents, which are all horizoned by the ascendant politics of liberal- and retro-fascism. Unlike the 1890s with its romantic invocation of catastrophe scenarios, the 1990s emerge as an era of general cultural recline: a time of cynical romanticism and cold love, where the body disappears into a virtual imaging-system, and where even catastrophes are reversed by the media-net into specular publicity for a crash that will never happen. On the one hand, the weakened body becomes a prosthetic to the media-net; and on the other the body electronic is data trash struggling to come alive again in recombinant form: to quick-learn how to survive the spasms and crashes of (digital) life on the virtual road. Reclining (into virtuality) *and* data trash (with a will?) This is the fate of the body electronic in the interminable countdown to the Year 2000.

Focussing on contemporary American politics but developing a more general historical thesis, *Data Trash* traces the will to virtuality as it becomes the primal impulse of pan-capitalism (virtual political economy), the mediascape (virtual culture), and post-history (virtual history). Using the literary device of media event-scenes, the theoretical analysis of *Data Trash* is mutated and accelerated by ongoing transformations in the cultural politics of the media-net. And why not? *Data Trash* is itself a wavering event-scene: a violent interzone between the will to virtuality and battered (human) flesh.

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Theory of the Virtual Class

### Wired Shut

*Wired* intends to profit from the Internet. And so do a lot of others. "People are going to have to realize that the Net is another medium, and it has to be sponsored commercially and it has to play by the rules of the marketplace," says John Battelle, *Wired's* 28-year old managing editor. "You're still going to have sponsorship, advertising, the rules of the game, because it's just necessary to make commerce work." "I think that a lot of what some of the original Net god-utopians were thinking," continued Battelle, "is that there was just going to be this sort of huge anarchist, utopian, bliss medium, where there are no rules and everything is just sort of open. That's a great thought, but it's not going to work. And when the Time Warners get on the Net in a hard fashion it's going to be the people who first create the commerce and the environment, like *Wired*, that will be the market leaders."

Andrew Leonard, "Hot-Wired"  
*The Bay Guardian*

The twentieth-century ends with the growth of cyber-authoritarianism, a stridently pro-technotopia movement, particularly in the mass media, typified by an obsession to the point of hysteria with emergent technologies, and with a consistent and very deliberate attempt to shut down, silence, and exclude any perspectives critical of technotopia. Not a wired culture, but a virtual culture that is wired shut: compulsively fixated on digital technology as a source of salvation from the reality of a lonely culture and radical social disconnection from everyday life, and determined to exclude from public debate any perspective that is not a cheerleader for the coming-to-be of the fully realized technological

society. The virtual class is populated by would-be astronauts who never got the chance to go to the moon, and they do not easily accept criticism of this new Apollo project for the body telematic.

This is unfortunate since it is less a matter of being pro- or anti-technology, but of developing a critical perspective on the ethics of virtuality. When technology mutates into virtuality, the direction of political debate becomes clarified. If we cannot escape the hard-wiring of (our) bodies into wireless culture, then how can we inscribe primary ethical concerns onto the will to virtuality? How can we turn the virtual horizon in the direction of substantive human values: aesthetic creativity, social solidarity; democratic discourse, and economic justice? To link the relentless drive to cyberspace with ethical concerns is, of course, to give the lie to technological liberalism. To insist, that is, that the coming-to-be of the will to virtuality, and with it the emergence of our doubled fate as either body dumps or hyper-texted bodies, virtualizers or data trash, does not relax the traditional human injunction to give primacy to the ethical ends of the technological purposes we choose (or the will to virtuality that chooses us).

Privileging the question of ethics via virtuality lays bare the impulse to nihilism that is central to the virtual class. For it, the drive to planetary mastery represented by the will to virtuality relegates the ethical suasion to the electronic trashbin. Claiming with monumental hubris to be already beyond good and evil, it assumes perfect equivalency between the will to virtuality and the will to the (virtual) good. If the good is equivalent to the disintegration of experience into cybernetic interactivity or to the disappearance of memory and solitary reflection into massive Sunstations of archived information, then the virtual class is the leading exponent of the era of telematic ethics. Far from having abandoned ethical concerns, the virtual class has patched a coherent, dynamic, and comprehensive system of ethics onto the hard-line processors of the will to virtuality. Against economic justice, the virtual class practices a mixture of predatory capitalism and gung-ho technocratic rationalizations for laying waste to social concerns for employment, with insistent demands for "restructuring economies," "public policies of labor adjustment," and "deficit cutting," all aimed at maximal profitability. Against democratic discourse, the virtual class institutes anew the authoritarian mind, projecting its class interests onto cyberspace from which vantage-point it crushes any and all dissent to the prevailing orthodoxies of

technotopia. For the virtual class, politics is about absolute control over intellectual property by means of war-like strategies of communication, control, and command. Against social solidarity, the virtual class promotes a grisly form of raw social materialism, whereby social experience is reduced to its prosthetic after-effects: the body becomes a passive archive to be processed, entertained, and stockpiled by the seduction-apertures of the virtual reality complex. And finally, against aesthetic creativity, the virtual class promotes the value of pattern-maintenance (of its own choosing), whereby human intelligence is reduced to a circulating medium of cybernetic exchange floating in the interfaces of the cultural animation machines. Key to the success of the virtual class is its promotion of a radically diminished vision of human experience and of a disintegrated conception of the human good: for virtualizers, the good is ultimately that which disappears human subjectivity, substituting the war-machine of cyberspace for the data trash of experience. Beyond this, the virtual class can achieve dominance today because its reduced vision of human experience consists of a digital superhighway, a fatal scene of circulation and gridlock, which corresponds to how the late twentieth-century mind likes to see itself. *Reverse nihilism*: not the nihilistic will as projected outwards onto an external object, but the nihilistic will turned inwards, decomposing subjectivity, reducing the self to an object of conscience- and body vivisectioning. What does it mean when the body is virtualized without a sustaining ethical vision? Can anyone be strong enough for this? What results is rage against the body: a hatred of existence that can only be satisfied by an abandonment of flesh and subjectivity and, with it, a flight into virtuality. Virtuality without ethics is a primal scene of social suicide: a site of mass cryogenics where bodies are quick-frozen for future resequencing by the archived data networks. The virtual class can be this dynamic because it is already the after-shock of the living dead: body vivisectionists and early (mind) abandoners surfing the Net on a road trip to the virtual Inferno.

### “Adapt or You’re Toast”

The virtual class has driven to global power along the digital superhighway. Representing perfectly the expansionary interests of the recombinant commodity-form, the virtual class has seized the imagina-