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Book Review

Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction: Hyper-Modernism, Hyperreality, and Posthumanism

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Alan N. Shapiro's timely account of artificial intelligence, deep learning, and related technological advances offers a more hopeful vision of our future with machine learning – one which counters the deluge of techno-sceptical narratives to which we've grown accustomed. Originating from Shapiro's PhD thesis and expanding upon his previous publications, the book is best read as a call to arms that lays out Shapiro's insistence that transdisciplinary approaches need to be deployed in addressing relationships between technology and humans. Shapiro foregrounds the field of *Creative Coding* – a hybrid field where art, morality, and computation intersect – as a site of resistance. Creative Coding is, for Shapiro, crucial for the design of our posthumanist future. He sees this as a movement that seeks to undermine the deepening of capitalist inequalities by embedding ethical components into machine learning in order to allow technology to act upon the world in ways that humans, left to our own devices, are unable to do.

Shapiro's project is certainly an ambitious one. As a sociologist – unfortunately a rather pessimistic brood – I found myself at times oscillating wildly between delight and scepticism. The delight stemmed from Shapiro's appreciation that developments in machine learning may provide the embryonic situation in which social change may occur. Up until this point my perspective of our current relationship with technology was that it was the harbinger of *Surveillance Capitalism* (Zuboff, 2019) or *Technofeudalism* (Varoufakis, 2023) – both of which indicated an alarming intensification of unsustainable inequality; the hopefulness of Shapiro was certainly welcome. Conversely, the scepticism I felt stemmed from how easy it is, considering the enormity of the task at hand, to fall back upon the intellectualist safety net of considering Shapiro's utopian outlook as naïve. Despite these wild oscillations I found myself wishing to strongly entertain the idea that all may not be lost, and indeed these latest developments to our technological paradigm may instead be a source of hope – after all, Meta knows we need it!

Shapiro begins by outlining the book's three central themes – Hypermodernism, Hyperreality, and Posthumanism – each corresponding to a section of the text. These themes are underpinned by three guiding hypotheses: first, that Science Fiction should be treated as a distinctive epistemology; second, that Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and hyperreality require critical updating in light of algorithmic culture; and third, that the future of ethical AI lies in Creative Coding – an emerging transdisciplinary praxis where code meets critical theory. At first glance, it was the first of these hypotheses that I felt most resistant to, yet it was also the one that most changed my thinking over the course of the book. Sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin remarked in her 2014 National

Book Award speech that "Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive" – a sentiment that Shapiro's account powerfully affirms.

In Part One, Shapiro explores the theme of Hypermodernism across three chapters. The first, *Mobility and Science Fiction*, draws on a range of sci-fi texts to illustrate how technological developments tend toward the anthropocentric domination of space: the human endeavour is to compress vast expanses through technological means. The second chapter, *Science Fiction Heterotopia*, as the title suggests, uses the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia to develop a working definition of hypermodernity. Shapiro traces how postmodernism has been superseded by the rise of digital media and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. "Knowledge-content is overtaken by the statistical representation of knowledge," he writes. "'Reality' becomes hyperreality of the rule of data" (p. 100). The final chapter, *What is Hyper-modernism?,* I found to be the most enlightening. It refines Shapiro's definition of hypermodernism in contrast to its predecessors: where modernism is viewed via grand narratives and a public self, and postmodernism denies singular narratives in favour of individualism, hypermodernism is characterised by the programmed, narcissistic self. This final chapter draws on major literary figures to exemplify the historical transitions between these epochs and certainly raises questions of machine authorship that will be of interest to readers interested in *cultural production* and *cultural taste*.

Part Two offers a rethinking of Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality and the simulacrum. For Shapiro, simulation now occurs not in images or surface-level representations but within AI systems and code. A new reality, he argues, is being enacted through informatics. "In many ways," Shapiro writes, "the ground must shift from a theory of images to a theory of practice and code" (p. 121). He strays from the more conventional critiques, which frame simulation-as-reality as an undesirable ontology, and instead presents the decentring of the "sovereign human subject" (p. 154) as an opportunity for social emancipation. The section concludes with a meditation on Trump, viewed through a Baudrillardian lens – Trump is seen as irony; a parodic representation of bygone values and as a grotesque emblem of the post-truth condition.

The final section was, for me, the most compelling. Here, Shapiro draws on his expertise in computer science to issue a call to arms for a new *Creative Coding*. This section deals more directly with how radical ideological spaces might be forged by infusing code with human creativity and moral principles. Shapiro makes a good argument here that we are at the end of days regarding computer science as purely an issue of engineering, and ushers in a new pedagogical era where code is taught within social science, humanities and the creative sector.

The reader should be warned that the book is a compilation of previously published works from Shapiro supplemented with some bolted-on endings that I suspect were in order to meet the formal demands of the PhD. This, combined with Shapiro's stylistic tendency to break the text into short, often abrupt subsections, gives parts of the book the feel of an annotated bibliography rather than a fully integrated synthesis. Regardless of this, Shapiro uses his breadth of knowledge that spans across Philosophy, Sociology, Cultural Studies and Computer Science to present some compelling and pressing issues. The book draws upon a great breadth of topics which well reflects the pervasiveness of informatics in all aspects of the social world. I did enjoy Shapiro's addition of numerous readings of sci-fi texts to give weight to his argument, however, despite Shapiro's expansive knowledge of the genre he selected to omit some more contemporary examples I felt could have been of benefit. For instance, in Shapiro's reading of the sci-fi film *Minority Report,* he raises the issue of human will when faced with increasingly predictive technologies. This theme could have been developed further by including Ted Chiang's *Stories of Your Life* where atemporal language systems are considered and their implications for agency and determinism (2015).

Shapiro's book will be of particular interest to those concerned with the future of cultural production and aesthetic judgment. What becomes of the sociology of culture when its foundational premises – especially the anthropocentric assumptions underpinning theories like Bourdieu's class-based habitus or Becker's *Art Worlds* – are challenged by posthumanist developments? Shapiro forces us to reckon with the technological epochs that have increasingly shaped artistic production, especially in fields like music, where claims of human creativity's obsolescence have regularly surfaced with each new innovation, only to be countered by new syntheses of human and machine. Yet the current wave of generative AI may mark a more decisive shift. If the human creator is displaced altogether, how should we theorize the meaning, function, and social basis of cultural forms? Are we – following the lead of others – witnessing the emergence of a digital or machinic habitus? Shapiro is at times unclear: on one hand, he explores new relationships between humans and technology; on the other, he seems to suggest the total displacement of the creative human subject. Nonetheless, I'm grateful to him for drawing our attention to these pressing issues.

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