

New Labor

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The advertising character of culture shines in its gaudy light (§ 26)

We last humans no longer even rub elbows for warmth. We do not touch, except by means of our screens and our newsfeeds. A cornucopia of blue light, the phone screen is at best illusory warmth, one whose actual coldness cuts us to our core. “If you’re not paying for it, you’re the product.” Pundits repeat the line endlessly, as if repetition alone confirms its truth. Of course, as with all lies, there is a modicum of truth here: we are the product of social media, but only in the sense that we are produced by it, produced by the algorithms hidden beneath the light of the screen. We are its workers, laboring at all hours, in post office and grocery lines, in classrooms and cafes, in parks and playgrounds, in bathrooms and bedrooms; we labor tirelessly, tiredly, tiresomely. Jobs are in fact now just a “side hustle.” Every click, every share, every like creates more content, streamed back to us, like Saratmak. A urophagia of profit, every click a current, each more current than the last, a shower of gold for Mr. Zuckerberg. Like all fool’s gold, however, its scientific use can only be incendiary. Not satisfied with the spark of a wheel-lock, this pyrite now lights fire to everything in its path. The same feeble light inches its way from the iPhone screen to the fluorescent lights of the Senate, each animated by the same meme, now fashioned onto insurrection t-shirts shining back to us via news screen. Ernst Cassirer once noted that there is no field into which the problem of space does not in some way enter. This is no less true of cyberspace. Where physics corrects us and invites us to speak of space-time rather than mere space, speak here of profit-space, rather than cyberspace, which now stretches far beyond the confines of the digital realm, lodged increasingly within every inch of time-space, like a global virus. “Augmented reality” betrays more truth than we’d like to admit: our labor accounts for every augmentation, our clicks and likes and views and our smart devices and glasses and TVs forming hubs on Elon Musk’s race to outer space. “Never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the ‘end of ideologies’ and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth” (Derrida 2006, 106). These lines remain true still, except that for the masses even potentially to countenance them, they must now be fused into a meme, sent into cyberspace only in order to be sent back—long the fate of all things in the autonomy of modernity—all things doubled, now for profit.

References

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Biography

Martin Shuster is associate professor of philosophy and holds the professorship of Judaic studies and justice at Goucher College, where he also directs the Center for Geographies of Justice. In addition to many articles and essays, he is the author of *Autonomy after Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), *New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), and *How to Measure a World? A Philosophy of Judaism* (Indiana University Press, 2021).