

The Need of a Critical Theory of Digitalization (Remark on the Point of Technologization in the Manifesto)

Alexandra Colligs

Krisis 2023, 43 (1): 117-119.

Abstract

The prior issue of *Krisis* (42:1) published *Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto*, with the aim to instigate a debate of the issues raised in this manifesto – the necessary re-thinking of the role (and the concept) of nature in critical theory in relation to questions of ecology, health, and inequality. Since *Krisis* considers itself a place for philosophical debates that take contemporary struggles as starting point, it issued an open call and solicited responses to the manifesto. This is one of the sixteen selected responses, which augment, specify, or question the assumptions and arguments of the manifesto.

Keywords

Critical naturalism, Digitalization

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.43.1.40935>

Licence

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\). © 2023 The author\(s\).](#)

The Need of a Critical Theory of Digitalization (Remark on the Point of Technologization in the Manifesto)

Alexandra Colligs

Even if it seems correct that the hope for liberation cannot be placed in the acceleration of technological development, an answer is still needed to the question of how the utopian prospect of a *third* nature as a relation of care can be related to the current technological apparatuses and the power relations that pervade them. How, then, can the intertwining of nature, culture, and technology be critically described and re-perspectivized? To pursue this question, Critical Naturalism must incorporate the reflections of a Critical Theory of digitalization, which critically points out how Big Tech has reduced the promise of technological liberation to consumerism, and pushes a posthumanism in which the human mind is reduced to behaviourist predictions of behaviour.

That the relentlessly driven technological development which launches the super-rich into space and yet abolishes neither hunger, nor disease, nor misery, does not strive for the best for all, is by now probably obvious. However, this does not dispense us from a close analysis of how our development into cyborgs (Haraway 1991), i.e. the intertwining of our way of being with technological apparatuses, mediates our relationship to inner and outer nature. And how this change is accompanied by the construction of an immense surveillance apparatus, which on the one hand ensures the (bio-)political controllability of the population, and on the other hand drives the production of ever new needs by evaluating the “behavioral surplus” (Zuboff 2018), the endless multiplication of which serves the purpose of new markets. Following the reflections of the older Critical Theory, it is important to understand how the totality of the technological mediation of our self-relations, as well as our social relations through the encompassing digitalization, reshapes and changes these relations. And how, in turn, they produce our inner nature, our needs, and, relatedly, our relationship to outer nature in a way that structures these modes of relating in terms of domination and commodity form. In order to pursue the questions further, it is necessary to take a closer look at the ways in which the digitalization of the world intervenes in processes of subjectivation. It has to be considered here in particular how our existence as avatars, i.e. as formalized, standardized, and disembodied forms of representation of our selves in virtual space, relates to non-virtual reality. It seems

that our avatar existence not only represents us but has begun to form our real existence in a way that transforms us into *real* avatars, i.e., leads to our embodiment of our abstract and virtual existence (Stederoth 2022). The identity of such a subject thus decisively constituted in the virtual world loses individuality to the extent that experiences not mediated by technological standardization become more and more impossible. This concerns not only the experienceability of our needs, which are reshaped by permanent technological and market mediation and aligned according to the logic of profit and growth, but also our relationship to external nature, which is increasingly immaterialized and devalued as a mere background for instagram pictures or as a supplier of raw materials for technological progress; and whose laws are not to be respected but best broken (hence the excitement for nuclear fusion experiments that promise to generate more energy than is expended). The virtual transformation of our mode of existence not only contributes to the fact that we can more strongly disregard our entanglement with and dependence on external nature, but also entangles us more deeply in the promises of a green capitalism which pretends to avert the climate catastrophe by individual consumerism and by the means of digital tools that pick out emission-saving flights, offer environmentally friendly produced clothing, or encourage us to buy electronic cars. The herein complicit forms of subjectivity have to be addressed and criticized in order to create other forms of collective self-preservation that relate differently to inner and outer nature.

Some questions which have to be addressed in this process would be: is there still a remainder of nature that is able to escape the almost inescapable digital constraints of standardization? At what point could resistance against our continual constitution as deficient beings be located, which revolts against the self-optimization impositions of morning routines, fitbits, and cosmetic surgery which all reduce the body to nature that has to be controlled? How do we rescue the mind against its assimilation to procedural schematization and algorithmization and the reduction to affirming that what already is? And: if there is no longer a “backstage”, i.e. no place where the subject still knows itself unobserved and safe from others, what does that mean for the possibility of political agency and radical change?

References

- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Stederoth, Dirk. 2022. *Reale Avatare. Zur Versponnenheit in Netzkultur*. Berlin: J.B. Metzler.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2018. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Biography

Alexandra Colligs is a postdoc at the University of Kassel in the department of Practical Philosophy. She studied philosophy, german language and literature, and psychoanalysis at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, where she also received her doctorate with a thesis on the relationship between liberation and identity in Judith Butler and Theodor W. Adorno. Her doctoral thesis *Identität und Befreiung* was published 2021 (Campus-Verlag). Last year, she co-edited a volume on *Critical Theory and Feminism* with Karin Stögner (Suhrkamp, 2022). She is currently working on her postdoctoral thesis on a materialist perspective on the theory of mind.