Book Review: The Circle of the Snake: Nostalgia and Utopia in the Age of Big Tech by Grafton Tanner

Jamie Ranger

St. Hugh's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK,
james.ranger@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk, jayranger@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract: Jamie Ranger reviews *The Circle of the Snake* by Grafton Tanner. *The Circle of the Snake* grapples with the political consequences of the cultural turn to nostalgia, specifically the dynamic tension between the radical nostalgia required to contest the incessant homogeneity of cultural reproduction and the neoliberal narrative of a nascent digital utopia endemic to our contemporary systems of mediated communication.

The Circle of the Snake grapples with the political consequences of the cultural turn to nostalgia, specifically the dynamic tension between the radical nostalgia required to contest the incessant homogeneity of cultural reproduction and the neoliberal narrative of a nascent digital utopia endemic to our contemporary systems of mediated communication. Tanner's debut *Babbling Corpse* was a fascinating interrogation of the nostalgic tendencies of late capitalism, specifically the unique intersection of social media, Internet subcultures and the commodification of social imaginaries. In approaching my own research, often clouded by technical language, overburdened with competing methodologies and, more often than I would care to admit, distracted by the playful nihilism of social media, my mind would frequently wander back to passages from *Babbling Corpse.* If Tanner's debut investigated the bottom-up cultural production of vapourwave with the application of a tentative cynicism inspired by the late Mark Fisher, *The Circle of the Snake* is a political interrogation of the material conditions that prompt such cultural production.

The first chapter begins with analysis itself, the fact that the Internet is capable of recording, documenting and storing human behaviour, and that systems designed to analyse our behaviours, and indeed encourage their users to participate in such collective schemes of disciplinary observation, are becoming increasingly normalised. The populist impulse is to marshal these technologies for our own ends, to 'spy back' against our political leaders, and yet so far we have had limited success. If anything, a resurgent far-right nativist populism has exploited the easy circulation of misinformation and encouraged conspiratorial thinking against traditional institutions.

In response to the mounting evidence that Internet and social media addiction may be increasingly dangerous factors in the erosion of our credulous sensibilities, nearly all the Silicon Valley whistle-blowers that decry the incentive models of the attention economy and the social implications of technology's embeddedness in contemporary western life tend to insist upon the possibility of redemption through technology, that these problems caused by tech ought to be left to more ethical technologists to solve,

a collective call "to worship at the altar of sublime technology" (Tanner 2020, 25). Tanner draws from Vincent Mosco's description of the "digital sublime" to describe the ways in which our contemporary form of capitalism, coalescing around investment in digital technology firms, seek to reproduce their own power in what we might describe as a 'pharmacological' manner, turning the power and influence of Silicon Valley into both the poison and the cure.

As with all technological developments in recent years, there is the possibility for self-improvement, for collective achievement, but with ethical questions to be asked:

> Persuasive technologies can be used to coach individuals towards better health outcomes, like quitting smoking or drinking more water. They can motivate people to live more sustainable lives by adopting environmentally-friendly habits. But they also pose numerous ethical quandaries. Who is at the other end of persuasive tech? When does persuasion become manipulation? Is persuasion always in the interest of those being persuaded? (32).

Technology is here framed as cognitive prostheses extending the capabilities of the self, as envisioned in accounts of the posthuman from the 1990s literature. This kind of crude behaviourism, of framing the mind as a biological machine, is the ontology of the "Californian ideology" as originally termed by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1995). Their article infamously described the right-libertarian utopians of the 1970s computer science milieu that sought to transform society through the valorisation of technology and the retrenchment of politics (perfectly aligning with neoliberalism despite their counter-cultural aesthetic). As Tanner contends, "by simplifying the mind with mechanic terms, the technocrats then put forth a basic process of addiction that is as linear as pulling levers and programming people" (38). Providing an example of wearable technologies, Tanner reminds us that "fitness trackers give users a ceaseless stream of information about the human body that offers freedom from the panic of not knowing something" (41). Wearable technologies provide demand for an ideologically imposed sense of self-maximisation, conceiving of oneself as a body that requires as much disciplinary surveillance as any other problem solved by datafication. Unless you've had prior medical reason, you've never needed to consistently check your heart rate, but once the heart rate monitor regularly updates you via Apple Watch, you unconsciously assume that more information is better, and should this regular update be taken from you, there is a conscious sense of loss: am I worse off for being in the dark? Surely I should be optimising the amount of information I can access? Here the ideological injunction to 'know thyself' for the purposes of a neoliberal culture of productive performance aligns with the aesthetic presentation of data by wearable technologies.

Tanner argues that "so many today are nostalgic for adolescence and childhood – perhaps not the childhood they lived through but one free from the tyranny of digital tech" (43) – the disorientation of the subject in digital capitalism has been well-documented in social theory, and perhaps we find a decelerating escapism in media that simplifies the world. Gen Z Instagrammers use filters that make their digital photographs look like Polaroids; millennials for a time used filters that turned their digital videos a coffee-stained sepia tone; these are all aesthetic reproductions of the mediated cultural past, but is this merely a form of transtemporal resonance, or are there lingering concerns with political implications?

Tanner argues the latter, that

> the more complex and technologised our control society becomes, the larger the nostalgia industry will grow. As social problems are solved by increased

monitoring and corporations uphold competition as the means to achieve personal fulfilment, the nostalgia industry will continue to churn out representations of pre-9/11 pop culture, making a killing in the process. Trapped in their schools, quantified and controlled, young people are no match for the neoliberal logic of Big Tech (43).

Let us attempt to push back: are we not in danger of forgetting the way that capitalism has always exploited nostalgia for the easy marketing of cultural products? There were two Godzilla movies in the 1950s, eight Godzilla movie appearances in the 1960s, five Godzilla movies in the 1970s, two in the 1980s, six in the 1990s, five in the 2000s, and four in the 2010s, and I've only counted the Japanese versions, never mind the torrent of English-language adaptations! We've had more iterations of Batman than I've had hot dinners, and even the famous Batman television show from 1966, often considered the original comic book adaptation, was a conscious pastiche of the black and white 1943 serial that had recently emerged as an ironic sensation across American college campuses. Almost all the Disney princess movies now being lazily reproduced in live action are cash-grab reboots of animations that were themselves reproductions of European fairy tales. Of course, none of this is a surprise to Tanner, a veritable cultural explorer of all things reboot and rehash, but the claim in response may be that if this process is becoming more accelerated, hysterical and brazen in the social media age, would this not provide an opportunity for critical interventions that were hitherto occluded? If nostalgia is being so cynically utilised in late capitalism, then perhaps our technologies provide a means of communicating the exposure of corporate cynicism to one another, to build a resistant counter-culture?

Nostalgia is a form of historical misremembering that undermines the opportunity that an understanding of the past gives us, the possibility to learn from previous mistakes:

> it misremembers the past as a wonderland where possibilities were endless and stability wasn't in short supply. This starry-eyed view of the past, comprised of our personal histories and larger historical narratives, is toothless and safe. It is a reactionary wish because it refuses to recognise the past for what it was: a time with its own cadre of problems from which we can still learn (46).

Collective memory will always oversimplify and mythologise certain historical narratives, themselves subject to ideological influence and obfuscation, but nostalgia is an emotive yearning, inherently evaluative and quite often irrational. Nostalgia is a means by which individuals may resonate with the world, but it is also a lazy way to do so, the easiest way to cut through the complexity and multiplicity and get hit with something that you immediate recognise and ascribe meaning to: for Tanner, we must "understand nostalgia not only as an individual or even communal emotion that often promotes prosocial behaviour but also as a rhetorical tool that can be utilised towards dangerous ends" (54). An example that sprang to mind whilst reading: Pokémon Go may have amused thousands of millennials over a summer, but there are underlying political and social questions that the technology of augmented reality forces us to consider: to what extent should corporations and their commercial products be capable of disrupting traffic, of coordinating and coalescing individuals in arbitrary mass assembly, of shuffling bodies looking at screens with the ping of a digital geotag? Furthermore, would anyone have cared if they weren't looking for Pokémon, the biggest childhood craze of the late 90s, repackaged as urban orienteering?

Tanner invokes "the nostalgia of Instagram – this presentist 'instant nostalgia' designed to sell products and ideas" as "regressive and ahistorical", since "those who yearn desperately to escape the present see different utopias in the past" (64). We may say that it is as if Gen Z perceive the digital age as an age of curating historical moments, rather than an age where history, and therefore nostalgic recollection, can occur in earnest. We may also say by way of critical response that regressive and ahistorical mythologies of the past have been par for the course since time immemorial. Rousseau and Arendt waxed lyrical about Greek assemblies in their political thought; every age has had its thinkers that decry the state of the decadent present, with those more con-servatively-minded wistfully recollecting the might of a dead empire. The difference here is the aggressive totalisation of the phenomenon by the culture industry. Tanner refuses to afford us the easy denunciation of nostalgia as inherently reactionary:

> sites of memory can be crucial for coping with the passage of time as they allow communities to reimagine or recapture what has been lost. But they also run the risk of objectifying the past as a kind of theme park we can visit, a place where history really is and where we can refuel on true meaning during current crises of authenticity. They are also sites of oblivion subject to selective memory, where remembering dovetails with social forgetting (73).

We may define a site of memory as a signifier, object or physical space that communi-cates a certain interpretation or idea of the past in a social setting (Nora 1996). As has been noted elsewhere in the literature, there is both a "restorative nostalgia" that wishes for a return to the imagined past and a "reflective nostalgia" that is more criti-cally aware (Boym 2001). Tanner's central thesis, therefore, could be framed as sug-gesting that our contemporary socio-economic structures, in tandem with the technical configuration of digital communication, have rendered the former more potent than the latter. How is contemporary nostalgia different from the historical nostalgia otherwise apparent in the texts of modernity? Tanner provides us with an answer:

> the twenty-first century is as much a recombinant culture as a recursive one. In a recombinant culture, media objects come together to create a kind of pastiche. For example, pop songs that sample other tunes are fixtures in a recombinant culture. So are crossovers, sequels, and spin-offs. But once advertisers and media corporations started employing more finely tuned recommender systems, creative content began cycling over with astonishing speed, thus leading to a culture of recursion (2020, 79).

For Tanner, nostalgia is ultimately "an emotion of control" (88). The nostalgic subjec-tivity is one that compels the individual to reclaim what they believe they have lost, in some cases, referring to a world that existed before they were even born. Yet this controlling impulse, to make the world turn back, to return to a place of comfort that may no longer exist (and may have only ever existed in the realm of fantasy) is the desire that social media exploits. For as Tanner persuasively argues, social media is itself a technology of nostalgia, defined to encourage users to smear their identity over all the platform, spreading themselves thin for the whims of datafication and prospec-tive advertisers, but to do so through the lens of capturing the past. Media is always the technical retention of memories, through images, video and text, and thus our in-corporation of media into our digital identities – the things we choose to share, the things we choose to show or say – are always in service of our "immaculate surrogate", a "manicured history" (88).

Nostalgia, if it ever really went away, returned with impetus as the public "yearned for the relative stability of disciplinary societies" (95), a world without uncertainty and complexity, a world where you can open your phone and see your friends, pictures of a party you remember attending, a video of your friend doing the Ice Bucket Challenge, a funny reference to a television show from your childhood, a video of your favourite singer when they smashed that live performance of their hit song; all comforting moments, in an infinite series on the platform, bitesize sources of easy recognition, all for as long as you want and as long as you need. Perhaps a source of entertainment, definitely a source of one's attention, a recursive culture is more than a culture of ironic self-reference: it's a culture addicted to reproducing the same cultural objects again and again, a ludicrous promenade of models wearing the same clothes in different colour palates for its own sake. Tanner's brilliant metaphor makes the link to the dangers of nostalgia in a recursive culture:

> If a control society is a serpent, then a nostalgic one is an ouroboros. A symbol of recursion, the ouroboros is a metaphorical reminder that histories repeat and old ideas rarely ever die. To prevent the 'new' from taking shape in a nostalgic society, the 'old' probes the walls of history for weak points and bursts through. New ideas appear to take shape, but very often they are built upon old prejudices that refuse to die. Whether by the corporate impulse to limit competition, the legal efforts to freeze the fair usage of content, or the desperate desire to lock out those ideas that don't conform, cultures under control can get trapped within the circle of the snake. We have transitioned into this new kind of control society, a variation on the theme of the serpent (96).

A society that intends to live in a collective fantasy in which personal emotional resonance with corporate intellectual property is lamely repackaged to suit immediately decipherable consumer needs, resembling a drip-tray culture of 'content output' rather than creative care, is a society of adult children. Its accompanying tech economy that desires the algorithmic and data-analytical capabilities "to satisfy social needs, deliver constant information, and ease the strain of daily life" (99), whilst *prima facie* admirable, only contributes to the problem of nostalgia, which is itself a problem of neoliberal capitalism. We ought to aspire to be more than hogs at the trough for a platform-media oligarchy.

Tanner's cynicism resembles the critique of Silicon Valley that Evgeny Morozov called "solutionism", the ideology that Silicon Valley tech companies believe they can apply their resources and expertise to any and all social problems (Morozov 2013). In this case, it is the existential problem of our freedom, of our hurtling through the world without assurances, in which technology is framed as the "hopeless manifestation of the digital sublime, a way to give up the last vestiges of agency" (Tanner 2020, 111). He concludes by railing against the neoliberal ideology that permeates contemporary western social life and is inextricably imbricated by our technologies; wearable, digital, surveillant, or all of the above. In a puzzling social contradiction, the claim is that our only hope for the future is that our technologies will make it easier for us to enjoy reliving the past. In order to disentangle ourselves from the ouroboros of recursive culture, we require an "urgent and necessary reckoning with Big Tech" (128).

The Circle of the Snake is a welcome addition to the oversaturated market of politics of technology texts for the general reader; it is neither a techno-utopian morality tale, nor a series of doomer provocations without a politics of emancipation. Its critique is of a world that has already arrived; its politics are grounded in the material architecture of an increasingly digitised cultural struggle in which cynical corporate cultural

production trades on the shallow resonance of immediate recognition and populist infantilisation. Perhaps the poetic and polemic language masks the plausibility of certain connective tissue in parts, but only in terms of their intensity. The relationships between neoliberal capitalism, digital technologies, a recursive culture industry and a political ecology pathologically wedded to mythological representations of its past are powerfully argued, and resonate strongly, especially read in the early stages of the Biden presidency.

References

Barbrook, Richard and Andy Cameron. 1995. The Californian Ideology. *Mute Magazine*, September 1. Accessed July 9, 2021. https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/californian-ideology

Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The future of nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Morozov, Evgeny. 2013. *To save everything, click here: the folly of technological solutionism*. London: Allen Lane.

Nora, Pierre. 1996. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past – Vol 1: Conflicts and Divisions*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Tanner, Grafton. 2020. *The Circle of the Snake*. Winchester: Zero Books.

About the Author

Jamie Ranger
Jamie Ranger is a doctoral candidate at St. Hugh's College, University of Oxford in the Department of Politics & IR. He writes on the politics of speed, technics, media, space and radical democratic theory. He tweets from @jamieandhisego.