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Mind Control Without Controller. A Media-Theoretical Interpretation of Fetish and Capital in Karl Marx's Works

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Abstract: This paper problematises the distinction between the spheres of media-technology and political economy. It reconstructs the value forms in Karl Marx's critique of capitalism (commodity, money, and capital) as medial forms with inherent laws that lead to abstract domination. Their thing-like appearance, and thus their fetish character, arises because the mediation by which they are constituted remains opaque to social agents. It is shown that a similar opacity is the source of the fetishisation of media-technological quasi-objects like "AI". Another parallel with digital systems is present in the movement of capital, where value is transformed into an "automatic subject". Capital processes like a cybernetic system, and this structural homology explains its potent synergy with networked computers: In digital capitalism, the inherent laws of the value forms quite literally program the algorithms. Thus, the reconstruction of Marx as a critic of socio-economic mediation also enables a fundamental critique of digital mediation.

Keywords: Marx, fetishism, Critique of Value, Neue Marx-Lektüre, media theory, philosophy of technology, digitality, digital capitalism, artificial intelligence, social media

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1. Introduction

In media culture studies, Karl Marx does not exactly have the best reputation. While Marxists such as Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht are certainly part of the field's canon, Marx himself and the Critical Theory that builds upon his work have, since the 1980s, been increasingly sidelined with the emergence of poststructuralist media theories (Hesse 2014). Admittedly, poststructuralism cannot entirely be characterised as

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non-Marxist,[1] but the founding discourses – particularly of German-language media research – are dominated by an anti-Marxist impulse (Schröter and Heilmann 2016). What often remained was an image of Marx as a theorist of production who had paid too little attention to communication and media (McLuhan [1964] 2013, ch. 3; Mersch 2013, 30f).

In counterpoint to this are Marxist scholars in international media and communication studies who can demonstrate that Marx regularly engaged with the subject of communication as well as its technologies, and use this as one basis for establishing a specifically Marxist approach (Erdoğan 2012). Whilst Dieter Mersch criticises Marx for underestimating the inherent momentum of (media) technologies and reducing them to neutral instruments in the class struggle, Marxist authors, conversely, warn that the (excessive) emphasis on the media-technology's inherent dynamics obscures their deep embeddedness in social relations and thus threatens to tip media studies into "techno-determinism" (Jhally 1993). Both positions, however, appear to be united by a fundamental assumption: that media and communication, on the one hand, and (political) economy, on the other, are two spheres that are perhaps intertwined but still *essentially* distinct. With the emergence of digital-capitalist universal media, it is high time to question this assumption.

Furthermore, both positions appear to be united in their interpretation of Marx's critique of capitalism as primarily a critique of class domination[2]. Accordingly, the call for papers with the topic of "Mind Control" that originally motivated this paper also linked Critical Theory's analysis of the cultural industry – which builds on Marx's critique of political economy – to the paradigm of class (Boesel and Kennaway 2024). On this basis, one might come to the conclusion that "the masses" are *intentionally* manipulated and hypnotised in the interest of class domination – that they are victims of intentional "mind control". Whilst there is certainly no shortage of disinformation and propaganda in our present day, in the following text, I would like to offer an alternative perspective on Marx's critique.

I want to argue that a media-theoretical perspective should not understand Marx's critique of capitalism solely through the concept of class[3]. Certainly, *Capital* frequently addresses the conflict between labour and capital, such as the length of the working day or the level of wages (Marx 1867/2024, chapters 8 and 18)[4]. However, Marx does not seek to make an empirical assessment of class struggles here, but rather to

[1] Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, for example, referred very explicitly to Marx.

[2] Although, generally, Marxists have since added various other forms of domination, such as racism, imperialism and patriarchy.

[3] In this, I follow the heterogeneous reinterpretation of Marx's work that has been pursued since the 1970s by the authors of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and – not without controversy – radicalised by those of the so-called *Wertkritik* (Elbe 2012; Krisis 1998).

[4] However, the chapter on "The Classes" has remained a fragment (Marx 1894/1981, chapter 52).

conceptualise capitalism in its “ideal average” (Marx 1894/1981); to grasp its fundamental *laws of motion*, i.e. its internal *logic*. To this end, he successively develops the forms fundamental to the system: commodity, money, and capital. These forms mediate the social division of labour and, in doing so, impose their inherent laws upon society. Simultaneously, they obscure the fact that they belong to a specific historical mode of social mediation and appear as natural things; they become *fetishes*.

As others have done before me (Schröter 2018; Mayer 2016), I would like to suggest that these forms should be understood as medial forms with their own inherent medial logic. Thus, Marx’s critique of political economy can also be read as a “critique of media” avant la lettre, and a radical one at that: ultimately, both workers and capitalists become unequal agents of the autotelic capital accumulation process. This is not about a privileged class that has conspired to control thought and action. Rather, control *emerges* from the inherent logic of the mode of mediation itself. In short: it is *mind control without controller*.

This text therefore challenges the assumption of a separation between the media and political-economic spheres and, against the backdrop of digital capitalism, proposes that both should be considered in terms of their intimate logical connectedness. To this end, it reconstructs key moments of Marx’s capital analysis as a “media theory of capital”. I then relate this reconstruction to phenomena of digital capitalism (only) to illustrate its relevance for understanding our present. To avoid misunderstandings, it should be noted that the validity of the reconstruction of Marx proposed here does not depend on its applicability to current circumstances. Rather, I argue that a media-theoretical dimension has always been inherent in Marx’s conception of capitalism and that the implications of this medial character merely become particularly apparent in digital capitalism. However, the field of digital research as a whole can only benefit from a (critical) engagement with Marx’s critique. Unlike, for instance, in the Marxist media theory of the young Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1970), media are not to be understood as neutral productive forces that “merely” need to be used differently and by different people. Taking the medium’s inherent momentum seriously, technically focused approaches such as Friedrich Kittler’s *reduced* “*materialism*” (Winkler 1999) must be sublated into a dialectical materialism that not only illuminates how media technologies co-constitute society, but also how the capitalist whole inscribes itself into technological systems and literally programmes their algorithms. I would like to outline this towards the end, with reference to Marx’s characterisation of capital as an *automatic subject*.

2. Value Form and Fetish

The first medial form that Marx develops in *Capital* is that of the commodity. It is the “elementary form” of capitalism (Marx 1867/2024, 13). It comprises the factors of exchange value and use value, the latter referring to the commodity’s ability to satisfy human needs, regardless of “whether they come from our belly or our imagination” (Marx 1867/2024, 49). Exchange value, on the other hand, is the quantitative ratio of a commodity to other commodities. According to Marx, this ratio depends on the average amount of labour time expended in production, the abstract human labour time. The labour theory of value is a controversial concept in economic theory, and post-structuralist thinkers have also accused Marx of making an essentialist assumption about an absolute intrinsic value (Gernalzick 2006). This debate is too extensive to cover here, but for the sake of my subsequent argument, it seems important to note that, for Marx, labour value is by no means conceived in essentialist terms and does not belong to the labour products "in themselves". Rather, it is the product of a specific historical-societal formation in which the division of labour is organised through the (money-mediated) exchange of labour products. The determination of value in terms of the socially necessary labour time comes about through an abstraction from the "real nonequality" of the various concrete labour processes (Marx 1867/2024, 50). The abstraction, however, is not a conscious process, but rather an unconscious effect of the equating in exchange:

> "people don't put their labor products into relation with one another as values because they regard these things as mere thingly husks that encase homogeneous human labor. It is the other way around. When people exchange their different kinds of products, they equate them as values, and when they do that, they equate their diverse instances of labor as human labor. They don't know it, but they do it (Marx 1867/2024, 50)"[5].

The form of value thus has a *performative moment*, as it is constantly being actualised in capitalist practice (Schröter 2018, 67). This performativity is, however, limited by the fact that, for Marx, the *magnitude* of value is not an arbitrary result of circulation but tied to production. When I talk about a performative moment, I therefore only want to emphasise that, for Marx, value is nothing essential, but both value-form and magnitude of value are constantly *produced* through social action ("they do it"), which implies the possibility of alternative action.

Nowhere is it clearer that Marx's concept of objective value is by no means "value essentialism" than in the famous section on the "Fetish Character of Commodities" in *Capital Volume 1*. Precisely because the *mediating* relationship from which value arises remains unconscious, value appears to be inherent to commodities as things. It is not understood as a feature of a particular type of division of labour (commodity production), but is rather attributed to the objects themselves, so that it is not people but things that appear to enter into an interactive relationship. Just as in the "misty place that is the religious world, where things produced by the human mind seem endowed with lives of their own", the "things produced by human hands" appear as

[5] The last sentence's translation has been changed from the 2024 Princeton University Press edition otherwise used here by me to better capture the original (4th edition) German wording (Marx 1867/1947).

"autonomous figures interacting with one another and human beings" (Marx 1867/2024, 49). Marx calls this "*'fetishism'*; labour products become fetishes the moment they are produced as commodities, and this fetishism is thus inseparable from commodity production" (Marx 1867/2024, 49; emphasis added). Fetishism is, therefore, a logically inevitable product of the capitalist mode of production and could not simply be eliminated through cognitive "enlightenment". Moreover, "to the producers, the social relations of their instances of private labor *appear* [...] *as what they are*:[6] *things mediate* the *relations among people*, while there are *social relations* among *things*" (Marx 1867/2024, 49; emphasis added).

With the seemingly paradoxical formulation of social relations that "*appear as what they are*", Marx attempts to capture the peculiar relationship between necessity and contingency that characterises the capitalist mode of mediation.

Within capitalism, the emergence of the fetish is strictly necessary, and the forms of commodities and money "are *socially valid* for, and *thus objective* with regard to, the relations of production in this historically specific social mode of production" (Marx 1867/2024, 52; emphasis added). Understood as medial forms, commodities and money *mediate* and constitute, firstly, the capitalist division of labour and, secondly, value as the category that organises this division of labour in its specificity.[7]

Yet capitalism is, after all, "merely" a historically determined mode of production and mediation, and in this both capitalism and its mediating forms have their contingent aspect. To put it in political terms: capitalist forms are by no means as necessary or even natural as they appear to be given their fetish character. The mode of social production is *changeable* (and has already changed numerous times throughout history). The fetish makes this (fundamental) changeability disappear behind the appearance of naturalness.

Thus, the fetish is an effect of mediation. In Marx's view, it arises whenever a mediating relationship eludes perception and (almost) disappears. In the case of the commodity, the fact that value is actually a characteristic of a social whole, which mediates its division of labour through the money-mediated exchange of labour products, remains hidden. As a result, it appears as though value were an intrinsic characteristic of these labour products. This connection between the opacity of a mediating relationship and the emergence of the fetish also occurs in Marx's work in relation to the fetish of money and the fetish of capital.[8]

[6] Here I have again deviated from the Princeton translation to be closer to the original wording.

[7] Marx puts it this way: "instances of private labor come to operate as components of a social totality of labor due to the relations that exchange establishes among labor products and, with the products mediating, among their producers" (Marx 1867/2024, 49).

[8] This motif of withdrawal or disappearance is one of several striking parallels to Dieter Mersch's negative media theory (Degen 2026).

The fact that the section on fetishism circles around a relationship of mediality (albeit lacking a modern concept of medium) is also evident in a medial comparison when Marx writes about the value of the commodity:

> "[Value] transforms every labor product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, people try to decipher the meaning of this hieroglyphic, to solve the mystery of their own social product; for a useful object's characteristic of being a value is a social product every bit as much as language is" (Marx 1867/2024, 49-50)".

This passage suggests that, even lacking a modern concept of medium, Marx saw language (which has at the very least a significant medial dimension) as having a close structural affinity with the value relation.

3. A Media Example: The "AI" Fetish[9]

The analytical potential of the concept of the fetish for our digital-capitalist present transcends the subject area of political economy in the narrower sense. But precisely because of that, it reveals the logical connection between Marx's critique and the media sphere. Increasingly opaque digital systems foster the emergence of false, reified notions, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding so-called "artificial intelligence". This discourse has gained considerable momentum in recent years due to the success of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and other generative systems. Novel "AI" technologies based on *big data* and *neural networks* are attributed a high degree of power and autonomy.

As early as 2014, the US computer scientist and author Jaron Lanier criticised the fact that, in the public imagination, these models are being hyped up into "mystical, magical personas" that are supposedly on the verge of developing a consciousness of their own (Brockman and Lanier 2014). However, training these neural networks requires a vast pool of training data, most of which must be created or processed by humans. For translation software, for example, the work of millions of human translators is "scraped" without them knowing about it or being paid for it. "In order to create this illusion of a freestanding, autonomous, artificially intelligent creature, we have to ignore the contributions from all the people whose data we're grabbing in order to make it work" (Brockman and Lanier 2014).

The connection between the appearance of autonomous creatureliness and the human labour behind it becomes obvious when Amazon calls its platform for so-called crowdsourcing (the outsourcing of digital tasks to third parties via the internet) "*Mechanical Turk*": the seemingly mechanical chess-playing robot caused a sensation across Europe in the 18th century, yet was in fact controlled by a person hidden inside it. The digital version is not dissimilar: even though crowdsourcing encompasses other

[9] The following ideas have since been further refined in the forthcoming chapter "AI as a Fetish: From the Value Form to the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects" (Degen n.d.).

aspects of digital micro-tasks, one important purpose of the Amazon platform is to employ legions of underpaid clickworkers (many of them from economically disadvantaged regions of the world) to generate training data for “artificial intelligences” (Grohmann and Araújo 2021). This shows that these “intelligences” are stochastic models based on countless human micro-decisions. Machine learning requires millions of human ‘teachers’ as well as their work and lifetime, a fact that is obscured by the Fetish of the ingenious “AI”. In a sense, this obscuring is actually a form of *necessary false consciousness* (Lukács 1923/1971), given that the “black box” structure of these systems is geared towards making their training input forgotten. The motif familiar from commodity fetishism emerges here: the *opacity of mediation* – in this case between input and output – makes the fetish of “AI” as an independent proto-consciousness appear.

4. Money and Capital as Media

When I say that in *Capital* Marx outlines a kind of mind control without a controller, the fetish merely illustrates one part of this control structure. Taken on its own, the fetish is ”merely“ false consciousness. However, the concept of ”mind control“ is commonly understood to mean that by controlling the mind, behaviour can also be controlled. Indeed, the fetish also has consequences for behaviour – it compels those living under capitalism to behave as if commodities had value ”in themselves“. The political consequences of the false appearance of naturalness, recently distilled into the rhetoric of “no alternative”, are striking – yet the portrayal of the “media theorist” Marx would be incomplete without his concept of capital.

To this end, we must first examine money, which we have so far neglected. In accordance with his dialectical method of presentation, Marx develops the concept of money by pushing the commodity form to its logical limits and thus demonstrating that, for commodities to constitute their value at all, they require a *universal equivalent*: money. Commodities can only be equated with one another as values – and thus as products of *abstract human* labour – because money provides a third entity that serves as the *immediate expression* of value (Heinrich 2001). In the collection of texts later published as the *Grundrisse*, Marx therefore writes: “Money is the physical medium into which exchange values are dipped, and in which they obtain the form corresponding to their general character” (Marx 1939/1993, 167)[10].

Even though this use of the term does not refer to a modern concept of medium, it is possible to reconstruct an intrinsic medial logic of money in *Capital*. For Marx, and contrary to what neoclassical economics presupposes, money is *not neutral* (not just) because money constitutes the “equivalence machine” of the market to begin with. Furthermore, he shows a dynamic that can be understood as being a general tendency of media, one towards the most frictionless processing, which is expressed in the

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[10] This also makes it clear that, in a fully developed commodity economy, there can be no unmediated barter.

evolution from coinage to paper money (Marx 1867/2024, 98-103) and ultimately to "electronic cash" in the broadest sense, as one might add today. However, Marx also identifies a logic specific to money. It is based on properties that are inherent in the very concept of money. Because money presents people with absolute exchange value – and thus (potentially) boundless power of access – in a reified form, "people become greedy for gold" (Marx 1867/2024, 104)[11]. The peculiarity of money lies in the fact that an "external thing that can become anyone's private property" embodies social power, which thereby becomes "a private person's private power" (Marx 1867/2024, 105). Thus, when in the "bourgeois epoch", in which money is the dominant medium, "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" (Marx and Engels 1848/2002, 223), this can also be interpreted as an effect of money as a medium. It tends to dismantle those relations of domination based on personal dependencies and, in their place, establishes new ones founded on the dispositive power of money. Marx illustrates this monetary mind control in *Capital* with a quotation from Shakespeare:

> "[Gold] Will lug your priests and servants from your sides,
> Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads;
> This yellow slave
> Will knit and break religions; bless the accurs'd;
> Make the hoar leprosy ador'd; place thieves,
> And give them title, knee and approbation,
> With senators of the bench" (Marx1867/2024, 105)[12].

This "money-grubbing" is underpinned by a specific logic inherent to money. It is fuelled by a contradiction or limitation inherent in money itself:

> "Qualitatively, or with regard to its form, money has no limits – it can represent material wealth universally because it can be transformed into any commodity. But at the same time, every real sum of money is of a finite quantity and therefore limited in how much it can achieve as a means of purchasing. This contradiction between money's quantitative limitations and its qualitative limitlessness keeps driving the person who amasses money back to the Sisyphean task of accumulation. His fate is the same as that of the world conqueror, whose every new conquest of land ends at a new border" (Marx 1867/2024, 106).

[11] The power of access is not limited solely to commodities in the narrow sense of products of labour: "Since looking at money doesn't tell one what has been transformed into money, anything, whether or not it is a commodity, can be turned into money" (Marx 1867/2024, 105)

[12] Quote from William Shakespeare: Timon of Athens.

This inherent logic of money, defined by an ongoing contradiction, is the essential prerequisite for the boundless logic of capital. The "person who amasses money" or "hoarder of treasure"[13] – Marx's character mask for monetary logic – lives frugally and "forgo[es] acting on carnal desires for the sake of [his] gold fetish" (Marx 1867/2024, 107). In contrast, the capitalist pursues a far more fruitful path to value accumulation: production. The capitalist uses money to buy commodities – the key commodity being labour power – to sell commodities with surplus value at the end of the production process. This surplus value is possible because the capitalist pays the workers only enough for their subsistence, whilst appropriating the entire value of the commodities produced during working hours. "But when a buyer purchases a commodity in order to sell it, he begins and completes the circuit with the same thing—money or exchange-value – which makes the movement of this circuit endless" (Marx 1867/2024, 126). At the outset of Marx's schematic dialectical presentation, money mediates the circulation of commodities ("selling in order to buy"), which "is restarted and repeated for an ultimate purpose that lies outside the circulation sphere, and this act finds its measure and its meaning in that purpose: consumption". However, in the movement of capital it becomes an "end in itself": "buying in order to sell" (Marx 1867/2024, 126). It is the internal logic inherent in money that ensures that every provisional endpoint of the movement of capital becomes the starting point for a new one. Marx notes: just as "the drive to amass money is by nature boundless" (Marx 1867/2024, 106), "the movement of capital […] has no limit" (Marx 1867/2024, 126).

When considering the question of *mind control*, (at least) two aspects should be highlighted here:

First, capital produces its own fetish. This fetish creates the impression that capital (whether in the form of money or real capital) inherently possesses the capacity to increase in value. For Marx, however, surplus value ultimately always rests on human labour. The capital fetish is most paradigmatically found in interest-bearing capital, i.e. in loans, bonds, shares, etc. From the perspective of the money market, the capital movement M–C–M' is reduced to M–M'. The "mediation" via the production process "has disappeared", and money appears to multiply of its own accord, to possess an intrinsic capacity for value growth (Marx 1894/1981, 464). The capital fetish arises because "the mediating process is omitted", (Marx 1894/1981, 517), just like with the commodity fetish. This opacity of mediation ensures that people are confronted with their social division of labour as an external thing, an alien power or "force of circumstance" (Altvater 1999).

Second, the question of the capitalist's agency must be examined. Whilst workers are primarily motivated by the sheer necessity of earning a living and their agency is exploited as a source of value, the capitalist's situation is more complex. "His person, or rather, his pocket, is money's starting point as well as the point it returns to. The change that gives this form of circulation its objective content – value is valorized – is

[13] "Schatzbildner" in the original German (Marx 1867/1947, 147)

his subjective goal" (Marx 1867/2024, 127). The characterisation of the capitalist defined in this way is radical in that it reduces subjective motivation to its function within the movement of capital. However, this by no means implies that a person who is (also) a capitalist can be reduced entirely to this function. Rather, "he functions as a capitalist, or as personified capital endowed with consciousness and a will, only insofar as the sole motivation driving his operations is to appropriate more and more abstract wealth" (Marx 1867/2024, 127).

Empirical entrepreneurs may well be subjectively convinced of the (social) usefulness of their product: if they wish to sell their product on the market, they must compete with other entrepreneurs. "Free competition makes the immanent laws of capitalist production operate for individual capitalists as external laws that they are forced to obey" (Marx 1867/2024, 240). In media-theoretical terms, this means that entrepreneurs, by relating to one another through forms of value, have no choice but to enter into a competitive relationship and to act out the internal logic of capital – ceaseless accumulation – meaning they have to become capitalists. The critique is therefore directed not at the person of the capitalist, but at a mode of social mediation that reduces individuals to mere instruments of an abstract end in itself. If the fetish already evokes associations with *voodoo*, then one might argue that the capitalist here becomes a *zombie* of the capital movement[14] – a clear counter-image to Joseph Schumpeter's "dynamic entrepreneur" (1911/1993) or to the hyper-virile self-presentation of the finance and tech "bros" on so-called "social" media.

If the capitalist's autonomy is "destroyed" in this way, the question arises as to who or what is the subject of the movement of capital, or rather where agency is to be located in this process. It is said that "money makes the world go round", yet for Marx it is not the medium in and of itself that drives this movement. Rather, it is the *value* mediated by it that, through the constant transformation of commodities into money and back again, becomes an "automatic subject" (Marx 1867/2024, 128). This does not, however, reveal a "non-human actant" that could be placed indiscriminately alongside human actors. Rather, value is a characteristic of a specific mode of mediation of the social division of labour and is thus ultimately a product of human agency. However, this remains opaque to the human actors. The structure of the mediating process itself brings about this form of behaviour-guiding "mind control" without a personal controller. For this reason, Marx can be described as a "media critic" *avant la lettre*.

5. The Automatic Subject as a Cybernetic System

The concept of the automatic subject could play a key role in a theory of digital capitalism based on Marx, extending beyond the fundamental definition of digital capitalism as "the dimension of capitalist society where processes of the accumulation of capital,

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[14] The terms "voodoo" and "zombie" are used here in a pop-cultural sense and their usage certainly does not claim to do justice to the corresponding West African and Caribbean belief systems.

decision-power and reputation are mediated by and organised with the help of digital technologies" (Fuchs 2022, 28). Representatives of the German Critique of Value *(Wertkritik)*-approach had already referred to the automatic subject as a "social machine" and a "cybernetic system" (Krisis 1998). For, as Johan Frederik Hartle and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser emphasise, the capitalist market always possessed a similar structure to digital or cybernetic technologies, even before their explicit advent: "In capital, value operates through the absorption of values in an autonomous dynamic, whereby quantifiable units relate to one another and regulate one another of their own accord" (Hartle and Schweppenhäuser 2025, 252, translated by the author). By means of the writing systems of the 18th and 19th centuries – and thus long before Turing's universal machine – capitalism subjects the globe to a comprehensive quantification, in which all possible and impossible things, and even human beings, are identified with a number and thus become, in a certain sense, "calculable". From this perspective, mind control without controller could also be understood as steering without steersman (in Greek: *kybernetes*) (Mayer 2016)[15].

Therefore, there seems to be a structural homology between the social machine and the digital machine. Building on this observation, the relationship between the two must be examined. At the very least, the interest in questions of (valuable) information (and thus also in the concept of information that is fundamental to digital technology) has its decisive roots in the capitalist economy (Schröter 2018, 71). Beyond that, however, there is a suspicion that the economic purpose "governs the means, that is, the digital media" (Hartle and Schweppenhäuser 2025, 257, translated by the author). Christian Fuchs (2023, 180) thus describes the networked computer as a convergence technology capable of penetrating all spheres of society and facilitating the dissolution or blurring of the boundaries between traditionally separate phenomena such as production and consumption, the public and the private sphere, work and leisure, work and play, subject and object, etc. This characterisation is reminiscent of McLuhan's "electronic age", in which money, writing and the clock converge into an organic unity, thereby bringing about the total involvement of individuals in their work (McLuhan 1964/2013). Information technologies transform the whole world into a networked workplace, whereby the immediate site of production (the factory) tends to lose its "privileged" status as a site of exploitation and resistance (Dyer-Witheford 1999). In short: digital media enable the relentless capitalist drive towards quantification and exploitation to expand into new spheres, and open up unimagined possibilities for capital's tendency towards totalisation. The prerequisite for this potent "synergy" is the structural-logical homology of the two cybernetic machines, capital and the networked computer.

[15] It is no coincidence that this turn of phrase is reminiscent of the logic of the protocol, which not only organises the internet but, according to Alexander Galloway, is becoming the dominant technique of governance in Control Societies (Galloway 2004, 241-246).

The historic starting signal for this new era was fired in 1971, a year in which Richard Nixon not only announced the abandonment of the gold standard, but Intel also commercially launched the first mass-produced microprocessor. Whether this was merely a fateful coincidence certainly warrants further investigation from the perspectives of both media and monetary theory. What is certain is that, starting in the 1970s, information processing began to emerge as the dominant source of value creation, closely intertwining financial and digital economies. It is here that Marx's concept of "fictitious capital" assumes particular significance. The reality-agnostic logic of speculation not only becomes the dominant mode on the financial markets (leading to an ever-greater decoupling of the financial and real economies), but also becomes embedded in the constitution of the public sphere via networked communication media, particularly so-called social media (Vogl 2021).

This gives rise to significant *epistemological* problems: "The ultimate objective of Internet companies such as Facebook […] is to provide the infrastructure through which humans encounter the world" (Davies 2018, 186). On social media, much like in the valuation of investments on the financial markets, relevance and (the appearance of) truth are not established through cultural techniques of reasoning, but are generated in an algorithmic, conformist and self-referential manner (Vogl 2021): That which generates a lot of engagement does so because it triggers strong emotions. Such information is prioritised and displayed in users' feeds. Once again, we are dealing with a cybernetic system in which a complex feedback "process decodes, analyses, structures, balances and thus, in a certain sense, *steers* behaviours" (Nosthoff and Maschewski 2023, 379, translated by the author, emphasis added). Through this focus on affect, social media platforms provide the ideal conditions for populist communication. Here, too, one can speak of "mind control without a controller", as it is not human publishers who intentionally "manipulate" the feeds – although of course users are constantly attempting to harness the algorithms for their own political and economic purposes.

One must indeed agree with Anna-Verena Nosthoff and Felix Maschewski (2023, 371) when they identify the ability to autonomously rearrange the parameters of algorithms and thus the rules and processes of public opinion-forming in accordance with economic motivations as the "nucleus" of the platform-economic transformation of the public sphere and its leading companies. However, these economic motivations arise under capitalist conditions. Despite their political-economic scope for sovereign action, the platforms' logic of engagement ultimately follows the capitalist pressure to generate profit: platform companies are financed by advertising revenue, so they have a strong interest in keeping users engaged for as long as possible. Long and regular usage times promise more ad impressions and, consequently, higher revenues. Like the appropriation of surplus value, this constitutes a specific time regime subject to the imperative of accumulation[16]. The action-structuring laws of motion of capital, which I have characterised in this article with the slogan *Mind Control without Controller*, thus literally programme the code that constitutes our digital public spheres.

6. Coda

Gilles Deleuze (1995) spoke of a new type of "Control Societies" in relation to the techniques of governance employed by digital neoliberalism. Facing multiple crises – tendencies towards social regression and the threat of ecological collapse being just two particularly pressing examples – and against the backdrop of the image of *steering without a steersman*, contemporary capitalism seems characterised by a frantic, self-destructive type of control, an adverse feedback loop. Internally, the cybernetic loops of the digital-capitalist machine are caught in a self-reinforcing cycle which, on a financial level, manifests as a tendency towards exponential growth in the money supply with unclear referentiality (Mayer 2020), and on an epistemological level, as a "post-factual era" fuelled by the resentful momentum of social media, whilst externally, capitalist production is gradually burning through our material foundations of life – mocking every fantasy of a dematerialised digital. Attempts to feed the natural "externalities" and (CO_2-) limits into the process of the digital-social machine by means of pricing seem so far to hold just as little promise of success (Chami et al. 2023) as the "project" of leaving socio-ecological transformation to the "free market" (Christophers 2024).

The point of the abstract perspective that is merely outlined here is not, however, to reduce the entire world of phenomena to the workings of a single principle. Rather, the very fact that such a totalising account could appear plausible at all is the very scandal denounced by the critique of socialisation through value (Ruschig 2017). What is also necessarily left by the wayside at this level of abstraction are the countervailing tendencies, the resistance of the workers and the "autonomy of nature" (Schaupp 2024), which stand in opposition to the movement expressed here as the *automatic subject*, and which it must overcome by force. One could therefore write the same story as a history of struggle against the movement of capital, in which many a technological innovation turns out to be a "weapon" in the struggle between capital and labour (and nature) (see: Marx 1867/2024, 401; Dyer-Witheford 1999, 65).

We have here, therefore, not a "pure" medial logic that would process smoothly through world history. Rather, by emphasising the self-perpetuating dynamics of capitalism, the aim is to demonstrate why Marx's critique of political economy should be of interest to media theory, particularly in the age of digital capitalism. Not only does Marx develop the inherent logic of "his" mediating forms in a way that can be understood as

[16] Despite the time-technological parallel, I do not wish to advocate a digital labour theory of value such as the one put forward by Fuchs (2012), which defines users' screen time as (infinitely) exploited labour time and thereby explains the high profits of digital corporations. In this regard, the proposal put forward by Oliver Nachtwey and Simon Schaupp (2022) (possibly supplemented by a time-technological component) seems more convincing to me.

prototypical for media theory and critique, but there is also much to suggest that the programs and the development of the digital “universal media” cannot be understood without reference to the capitalist whole and its laws. The task of media theory is, therefore, to carry out foundational work in this area and to further elaborate monetary valorisation as quantification and visualisation (Krämer 2005), that is, as profound medialisation (Schröter 2018). A possible starting point is the fundamental observation that no monetary system exists without co-evolutionary bookkeeping (and thus writing and numbers)[17]. Future research should explore the relationship of mutual conditioning between the capitalist machine and its analogue and digital writing systems in greater depth.

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[17] Probably the oldest written sources available to us – Sumerian clay tablets – are also the earliest evidence of economic administration. These provide early evidence of a proto-monetary system (Graeber 2011).

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