Data Centre Séance: telepathic surveillance capitalism, psychic debt and colonialism

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The montage image in Figure 19.1 is a series of digital video stills of a collaborative art investigation of a data centre in Lower Manhattan, New York in 2017. The image is organized in a filmic sequence as event documentation. The austere data centre, built in the Brutalist style, is known as ‘33 Thomas Street’, the ‘AT&T Building’, the ‘Long Lines Building’. More recently, it was identified by Edward Snowden and then in Ryan Gallagher and Henrik Moltke’s article published online in The Intercept as the National Security Agency’s (NSA) centre in New York code named ‘TITANPOINTE’ (Gallagher and Moltke 2016). The twelve still video images all together represent key moments of the event. The video was filmed by Emanuel ‘Manny’ Migrano, who was sourced by my main New York proxy collaborators Vandana Jain and Mike Estabrook, both of the collaborative art and activist group Art Codex. My art practice has a long engagement with materials and performances of telecommunications and I wished to work with the invisible and immaterial presence of data centres in New York.

Through our work with the Occupy movement Jain, Estabrook and I were aware of the Occupy artist Mark Read and activists working with a New York data centre, and this work was a reference for our art collaboration years later. Jain and Estabrook and others are dressed to endure a mid-January snow blizzard without any outside public shelter provided by the data centre. The snow adds to the cold, alienating atmosphere and resembles the retro-futurist aura of Bladerunner in which radioactive ‘kipple’ rain provides a
repetitive presence to the ambient possibility of future crimes generated by the science fiction telepathy of Phillip K. Dick’s *Minority Report* (Dick 2002). Other participants included are a psychic called Neptune Sweet aka Electric Djinn aka OmniJenn aka Jennifer Berklich; a hacker called Ryan Holsopple; the Australian art critic for *ARTnews*, Peter Hill; as well as Glen Einbinder and others associated with Art Codex and ABC No Rio art and activism groups.

In this chapter I ask: how do data centres facilitate surveillance capitalism, psychic debt and colonialism in unseen ways? Why does 33 Thomas Street look haunted in this image? Why does 33 Thomas Street have no windows and only vents for the release of heat and a low humming generated by powerful computers, cables and switchboards? A number of chapters in this volume, including
those by Medien (Chapter 7), Dickson et al. (Chapter 8), Rossipal (Chapter 9) and Stork (Chapter 17) investigate the relationship between predatory lending and new forms of indebtedness entangled with postcolonial border regimes and racial inequalities in social participation. This chapter asks, how can psychogeographic art and politics enable us to imagine ‘psychic debt’, or the mental trauma that accompanies unpayable debts? How does what Guy Debord called ‘The Society of the Spectacle’ (2005; written in 1967) intersect with financial speculation? How does debt manifest financially, ecologically and psychologically?

Data centres, digital colonialism and ecological debt

Data centres have become necessary for banking and finance services for many years and rely on maintaining a fortress of architectural, electronic surveillance and human resources security measures. The importance of data centres is growing with the demand for mobile, online and virtual colocation services in anticipation of future integration of artificial intelligence (AI), cryptocurrencies and blockchain. Most smartphone owners use a financial app, so stock trading by individuals is expected to increase into the future. High-frequency trading (HFT) is now normal practice within Wall Street trading firms. Data centres are crucial for HFT, ensuring the competitive data speeds required for algorithmic analysis and the fastest speeds for competitive trade actions. Data centres are also essential for facilitating risk compliance, especially in the wake of 9/11 and, increasingly, forecasts of the impact climate disasters on bank, finance and corporate infrastructure, capitalism and economies in general. Shoshana Zuboff notes that ‘surveillance exceptionalism’ blends technological opportunism and superpowers’ transgression of usual social contracts: a desire for total information awareness trumps democratic norms. This is exemplified by the surveillance capitalism of Google and its flourishing under the protection of the so-called war on terror (Zuboff 2019: 82, 117–118, 194, 324). Zuboff explains further that it was by embracing Google and surveillance exceptionalism that the NSA internalized and repurposed Google’s predictive algorithms, including Google’s ability to ‘predict future behaviour’ (Zuboff 2019: 118).
Facebook has ten data centres on North America, four in Europe and one in Asia. India, Australia and other countries whose citizens use Facebook have recognized patterns such as this as a form of data colonialism and digital colonization. Countries are increasingly passing laws that require citizen data to be stored on domestic local servers. India’s advanced digital culture and technical capability has contributed to its successful push for ‘localisation’ of citizen data. But for other countries such as Indonesia, as Michael Kwet says, ‘Assimilation into the tech products, models, and ideologies of foreign powers – led by the United States – constitutes a twenty-first-century form of colonisation’ (Kwet 2019: 4). Randell-Moon (Chapter 14) examined unpayable settler debts to First Nations and their Country in Australia. Automated debt recovery for Australian social security overpayments, known as Robodebt, has allowed the Australian state to use new techniques of digital colonialism. As Monique Mann and Simone Daly argue, Australia itself acted as Global North to deliver invasive welfare surveillance and traumatizing debt punishment to its own internal Global South (Mann and Daly 2019).

Data centres have a significant carbon footprint and are predicted to consume a fifth of global electricity by 2025. Forty per cent of total energy consumed by data centres goes to cooling information technology and data processors. Data centres in cold countries definitely have an advantage. In Switzerland, a data centre has adapted a former military bunker in the snow Alps, and in Norway the heat generated by data centres is being recycled to heat thousands of homes. With the reality of climate change, ecological debt increases with any increased use of data centres for economic or other purposes.

**Psychogeographic debt and séance**

Psychogeography is a term primarily associated with the writing of Guy Debord and the Situationist International. Psychogeography as a practice involves a revolutionary technique of the *dérive* described by Debord as ‘a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances’ (Debord 1958: 2), drifting and walking about cities with observed attention to lost or hidden histories. The Situationists are known for their radical anti-capitalist political theory and influence on the
Paris student and worker riots of May 1968. They had a fierce and unforgiving integration of art and politics. The Situationist movement grew out of Surrealism and Lettrism, and, despite distancing itself from Surrealism’s less strictly political work with artistic occultism, some aspects of engagement with telepathy and occultism are suggested by Alexander Trocchi’s Sigma Group within Situationist International. For example, in Trocchi’s text ‘The invisible insurrection of a million minds’ (Trocchi 1963) he advocates using ‘mental ju-jitsu’ and ‘perpetual brainwave’ in manifesting the ‘spontaneous university’.

Professor of human geography Steve Pile (2005) has connected the work of the Situationist International to a psychoanalytic and psychic turn in contemporary geography. Pile investigates hauntings and telepathic communications in public space, drawing upon the work with telepathy by both Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud. Like Benjamin and Freud, Pile’s theory engages with telepathy discourse to explore the magic and phantasmagoria of urban society and structures – spatial, temporal and semiotic. The Situationist psychogeographic dérèive developed and further radicalized the technique of Benjamin’s flâneur observations of bourgeois capitalism. For Benjamin, the flâneur was one who casually wandered through the city, at once entranced by its sensory riches and alienated by its overwhelming modernity. Pile’s geographic work explores occult globalizations of urban modernity, and the dream-like, ghost-like experiences of city life. The intersection of the walking body and the city is a ripe area for exploring haunted subjectivity, haunted psychoanalysis and the haunted politics of urban space.

The artists and activists in Data Centre Séance engage in a psychogeographic dérèive around 33 Thomas Street, witnessing and performing links between surveillance, séance and powers of capitalism. Data Centre Séance is indebted to Debord’s ‘Theory of the Dérive’ (1958) and Benjamin’s wandering flâneur, as a ‘thought debt’ that borrows cultural, social and psychological capital. Data storage and algorithms are now used in unseen yet muscular ways to enforce behaviour modification, mind control and invisible psychic/psychological labouring. One of the participants, Hill, knew the artist Ralph Rumney, one of the co-founders of the Situationist International and the London Psychogeographic Association. After participating in Data Centre Séance Hill founded the Sydney
Psychogeographical Association. The artwork actively nurtured and networked psychogeography as a global social practice.

Benjamin’s telepathy, debt, gambling and surveillance

Almost one hundred years ago Benjamin worked with the intersection of telepathy, surveillance, gambling and debt across several texts. His short text ‘(Tele)pathy’ proposes two options for experimental research: telepathy as media surveillance of criminals; and telepathy as gambling in which the ‘losing gambler often attempts to only to [sic] increase his loss’ (Benjamin 2016). For Benjamin, telepathy, surveillance and debt overlap within the realm of media, in gambling and fortune telling. Benjamin returns to these and related themes of magic and the occult in several papers including ‘On mimetic faculty’, ‘Doctrine of the similar’, ‘Madame Ariane’ from One-Way Street as well as ‘(Tele)pathy’ (Benjamin 2016). It is in the interpenetration of self and the external world that Benjamin imagines unseen signs of debt interacting with visionary telepathetic spheres of clairvoyance.

Eric Downing explains further: ‘Benjamin defines this interpenetrating connection as based on guilt or debt, as a Schudzusammenhang, although he also hedges on the implicit religious context and more straightforwardly calls it a natural life in man (ein natürliches Leben im Menschen). It is this well-nigh ontological connection to everything – to what he also calls bare life (das blosse Leben) – that allows the clairvoyant to connect the subject’s fate to cards, hand-lines or planets, sign-things that, simply by making the connection, make it visible – connect it’ (Downing 2011: 565) Through Benjamin’s notion of bare life, visualizing debt as a force that moves between psychic interiority and the external world suggests a bio power connected to clairvoyant semiotics.

Benjamin’s flâneur works with aesthetics of guilt, shame and debt, as a figure that laps the shop arcades of capitalism, feeding off the fog of its debt-producing economy. Benjamin associates fog and greyness with boredom, and rain with money. Inclement weather and its facilitation of boredom is an essential element in Benjamin’s Arcades Project, through which he developed his writings on the flâneur.
Surveillance capitalism, psychic debt and action at a distance

Back in 2009, the Verizon data centre building and its network of telecommunications provided the fastest ‘golden route’ between Chicago and New York for capitalizing on price discrepancies via HFT. The windowless Verizon colocation data centre skyscraper in New York was the site for artist and activist Mark Read’s projection of the Occupy movement’s ‘bat signal’ and empowering memes such as ‘We are the 99%’ during the Occupy protests two days after the eviction of Zuccotti Park. Also located in Lower Manhattan is 33 Thomas Street – arguably an even more weird, formidable and mysterious windowless data centre. Gallagher and Moltke (2016) note that it is operated by the AT&T’s New York Telephone Company, is the world’s largest centre for processing long-distance telephone calls and thus is arguably the US’s most important data centre, and can access the information of other AT&T data centres.

Capitalism relies on muscular techniques of surveillance such as mind control, and centralized towers have long been used to enforce debt. In the eighteenth-century London docklands, the government was unable to pay dock workers, which understandably led dockyard workers to appropriate resources of value. David Graeber explains that eventually wage labour was introduced and punishment meted out for ‘workplace pilfering’ (Graeber 2011: 353). Samuel Bentham built a giant tower in the docklands and introduced constant surveillance, and this centralized surveillance tower idea was adapted into the Panopticon of Samuel’s brother Jeremy Bentham (Graeber 2011: 353). Surveillance and accounting enforce payments, debts and psychic control. Without a financial payback, a debt can become a psychic wound geared towards revenge. If a debt cannot be paid with money, it can become a psychic debt. Something that can’t be paid back can result in a psychic debt, a mental trauma. Gifts are a force of sort that expect or create some kind of payback even when expressly forbidden. Max Haiven notes that spirituality is often used in society to transform vengeance into debt (Haiven 2020: 49–50).

Zuboff also looks at how debt is managed via telematics to telecommunicate information primarily for vehicles known as ‘economies of actions’ and argues that these techniques of control are used to
modify behaviour; for example, drivers are motivated to wear seatbelts for insurance purposes, and when drivers fall behind in payments vehicles can be disabled via telematics (Zuboff 2019: 215). According to Zuboff, telematics are a form of tele-debt-and-risk-surveillance and a form of muscular mind/body and behavioural control. Zuboff shows how the latest tele-tech innovations facilitate debt and surveillance techniques used to predict and control human psyche and action via new telekinetic techniques of action-at-distance.

**Five thousand years of telepathic psychic debt and beyond**

David Porush’s work on the simultaneous development of writing and telepathic alphabetic consciousness is firmly located at the start of the timeframe of the first agrarian empires (3500–800 BC). Porush and Graeber are both very concerned with this timeframe and this same mushrooming of similar social developments within Mesopotamia, India and Egypt that were dominated by virtual credit money, before the shift to metal coinage and bullion in the Axial Age (Graeber 2011: 214). Organized religion arose at this time too, forever altering structures of spiritual experience and psychical cognition. Porush’s exemplary attention to telepathy resonates with both anthropological thought and cybernetic research. Significantly, Porush also focuses attention to imperialism, slavery, trade and taxes in his text ‘Telepathy: Alphabetic consciousness and the age of cyborg illiteracy’:

In fact, everywhere pictographic writing makes its advent, we find the sudden emergence of what I call tech-writing empires. These civilizations were akin to the rationalized hive structures of ants or bees. In China, among the Aztecs of Mexico or Incas in Peru, in Babylon, Sumeria, and Egypt, we see the same pattern of social, epistemological, and metaphysical organization arise when writing is discovered. Along with these scripts come other inventions so predictably similar that they seem to derive directly from imperatives in the nervous system itself, amplified or newly grown by use of the new cyborg device: centralized authority in god/kings; a monumental ziggurat-like or pyramidal architecture; hierarchies of priest-scribes; complex, self-perpetuating bureaucracies; fluid but clearly demarcated social/economic classes; trade or craft guilds; imperialism; slavery; canalizing educational systems; confederations of tribes into nations; standardized monetary...
systems and trade; taxes; and so on. Almost every conceivable aspect of empire, in its gross forms, was entailed in pictographic writing. (Porush 1998: 63)

For Porush, the advent of accounting and the alphabet is the invention of a new form of mind reading and telepathy, and it is accompanied by transformation of the earth into rectilinear clay tablets, rectilinear school tables and buildings, and he refers to this as a process of city-building ‘canalization’. The transformation of the brain through reading and writing also lead to a geological and architectural transformation of agrarian culture into city culture and empires. A psychic debt for humans is also an ecological debt because of human’s ability to transform their environment with their brains. The problem of telepathy is one of evolution, debt culture and its acceleration for Porush, something that some other theorists of telepathy and cognitive capitalism also explore, such as Warren Neidich and myself (Drinkall 2016; Neidich 2019). Human powers of economy and the invention of coinage accelerated cultures of capitalism, indebtedness and metabolism of natural resources. Ecological debt has clearly emerged after a period of time when for several centuries debt was held in check via religious ethics, values and beliefs. For a while, Christianity considered loaning and charging interest repayment as morally wrong and usury was a high crime, but ecological debts operate beyond financial logic and are grounded in material telluric reality. As Andrew Simms notes, the Renaissance brought increased trade and need for financial borrowing. This softened religious ideals and the West began running up not only financial debt but also ecological debts (Simms 2005: 55). Ecological debt works with energetic feedback loops and has an automatized revenge upon the human psyche, body and architecture with global warming and novel viruses and as animal worlds collide through mass farming, deforestation and mass migration of animals south to seek cooler climates. Szeman (Chapter 1) reminds us of the persistence of fossil fuel economies in spite of tech booms, and Ly (Chapter 12) reminds us that ‘green capitalism’ relies on the continued sacrifice of extractive zones in the ghostly landscapes of Inner Mongolia. In this chapter I have traced out the entanglements between surveillance capitalism, unpayable psychic debts and the energetic costs of the ghostly data centres which haunt the cityscapes.
of global financial centres: big data eco-energy debts create big weather.

Further resources


Works cited


