

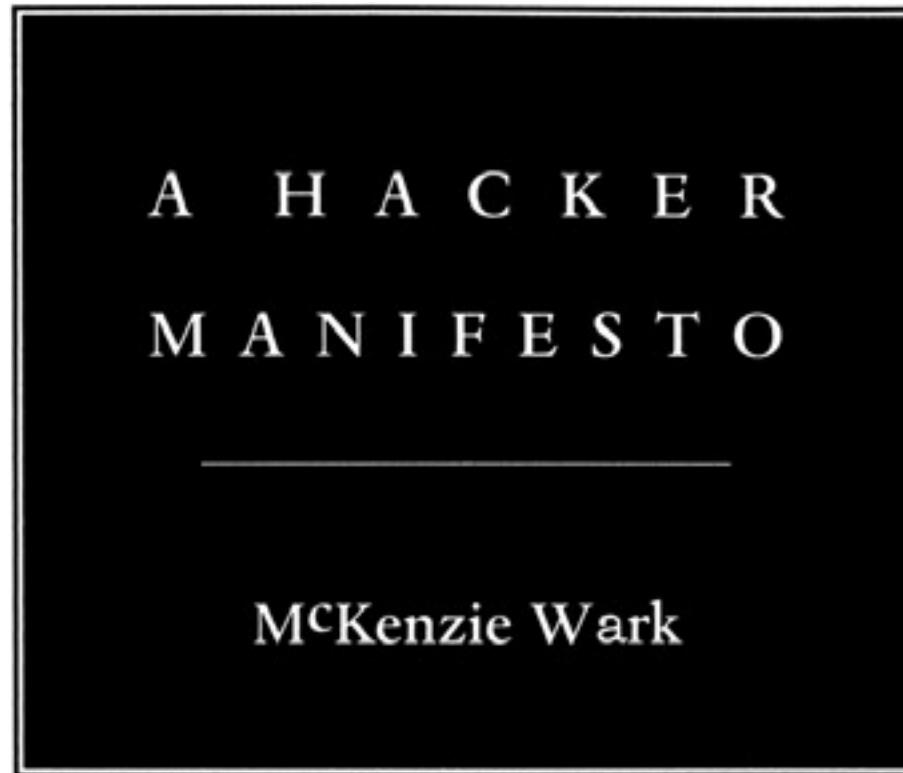
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The expatriate Australian media theorist McKenzie Wark's new book, *A Hacker Manifesto*, is a strikingly original and passionate clarion call to critique the illusions of the ever-increasing commodification of information in our neo-liberal world order of cyberspace and globalisation. It is a book whose origins emanate from Wark's active participation in a variety of digital gift economies on the Internet, such as the nettime list serve, fibreculture, and other related 'collaborative filtering' net sites of shared creativity and knowledge. In other words, the book's self-reflexive engaging and important conceptual architecture—of critiquing the global privatisation of digital information, by insisting on finding new alternative speculative ways of freeing information, creativity and knowledge from the established social order of our commodity economy—is essentially based on the author's singular interest in examining the complex relationship between knowledge and action.

Hence the book's strategic discursive wisdom in not trying to present a grand totalising perspective on a given theme, but something more modest, experiential and wholistic, predicated on a poetic synthesising capacity to speak about a more limited world, albeit one of extreme aesthetic, cultural, political and technological importance.

Wark is however, acutely aware of the many contradictions of trying to create a book that turns on itself—in the hope of articulating a theory that accompanies the practice of sharing knowledge in a digital gift economy—in the light of his own role as an academic when universities are becoming rapidly corporatised in a new globalised world. For example, Wark in a recent interview, argues against the whole notion of education as a process of converting knowledge into something that can be administered and commodified and instead subscribes to the practice of making knowledge an expression of "creating relatively stable islands of useful or interesting information' available for everybody."¹

So Wark as an educator is based in America at the New School, whose interesting history reflects the contradictions and tensions of today's tertiary education world, in that the university college, which was founded by John Dewey [among others] started as an adult education site. It also incorporated the University of Exile, which in turn, as an tertiary institution took in European refugee scholars and intellectuals fleeing from Nazism, like Hannah Arendt and many other Jewish thinkers.²



A Hacker Manifesto is elegantly designed and written in a highly lucid and aphoristic style that immediately evokes the great essay tradition of Western literature and philosophy [Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, Michel Montaigne, Edward Said and Friedrich Nietzsche]. In fact, Wark's essayistic prose style and his own creative approach to the role of theory in art, creativity and scholarship suggests someone who is, in Edward Said's terms, 'a hybrid writer', that is a writer who goes beyond the genres of fiction, cultural theory, history, philosophy etc., and displays an ironic, radical, playful and self-questioning, mixed-genre style of writing that is concerned with "the overturning of orthodoxies, idols and myths".³

Stylistically speaking, *A Hacker Manifesto* consists of short, numbered paragraphs or theses, written with a minimum number of quotes from past and present relevant thinkers, who are central to the author's underlying argument for the democratisation of the digital image. Wark's self-reflexive, abstract prose style is tightly constructed as argument and it vividly denotes the old minimalist adage that 'less is more.' Wark's style indicates a highly nimble, erudite and restless/perceptive mind that questions the foundational beliefs of his own theoretical discipline as a cultural and media theorist and is concerned with the challenge of writing a substantially readable and multi-faceted book that will work as a poetic, discursive tool-kit to decode the prevailing doxas of our information age.

It is a fairly remarkable and thought-provoking book whose conceptual cogency and call-to-arms to a new radical vision, both in content and form, suggest its anchorage in a number of rich intellectual traditions. It has been inspired in so many different critical ways by Karl Marx, Friederich Engels, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and especially by the Situationist Guy Debord's trail-blazing work *The Society of the Spectacle*. True to form, Wark throughout the book endeavours to turn these authors against themselves for the sake of enunciating his uncompromising and profound vision of a better shared world of creativity, knowledge and social equality.

But Wark's book not only relies on these various theoretical traditions for its important arguments on our current epoch of digitisation, copyright and 'intellectual property', but it has also been influenced by the avant-garde traditions of Dadaism, Surrealism, the Situationists and Fluxus. In this context, the author mobilises a persuasive and elegantly written case for the way in which these various artistic and critical traditions share a basic important critique of the notion of creativity as an individual property. Instead, creativity is seen as the aspirations, dreams and desires of people in general, rather than the individual.

In this context, what matters is the collaborative input artists like the Cabaret Voltaire made towards their ideas as artists—as authors they were not too worried about who owned what. Though as Wark points out, it is precisely that issue that later destroyed Dada: namely, who

actually created the word 'dada'?³ Similarly, the early history of computer art and programming is another example where certain people guarded very jealously their codes, whilst others shared theirs in the hope of finding a new way to draw.⁴

It is in this collaborative, open-ended 'in between' spirit that Wark wrote his book, seeking through his digital collaborations new ways of liberating information from its various material and scarce forms: in other words, attempting to explore the cultural politics of authorship, creativity and the new digital technology. Nothing less than finding how the new is collectively created and shared in everyday life.

Indeed, Wark's book is arguably a highly erudite, accessible and stimulating book that represents in its 'crypto-marxist' ambition a fundamental updating of Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto* for our new digital millennium. For, it asks of us systematic discussion of 'the property question' in our public and private lives as consumers and hackers of digital information.

This implies looking at the critical issues of the culture, economics and politics of information in our world. Just exactly who is benefiting from the exploitation and expropriation of information in our era today? Information today is being increasingly privatised by the big transnational drug, media and technology corporations, just as common land was privatised in Europe five hundred years ago.

Wark acutely scrutinises the critical transformative historical stages of our commodity economy and how it has evolved over the years. According to him, it has first commodified land, then agriculture, and now information is the third commodified phase [the so-called 'new' economy]. Consequently, each phase of commodification represents a new development in, what Wark calls, the abstraction of the world. Concomitantly, each phase of the commodity economy also indicates the establishment of a new property form: land property, capital and for today, 'intellectual property'.

With each successive phase of the development of the commodity economy, we get an enclosure of the commons [that's to say where everybody can assess a given asset like land or capital] in direct favour of a private property right. Thus, as we can see at this given historical moment, intellectual copyright has evolved out of patent, trademark and copyright, thereby suggesting a radical shift from a kind of a social compromise to an exclusive private property right.⁵

Wark's Marxist view of the commodity economy therefore italicises a class conflict between those who own the means of production in the form of private property and the respective class that is displaced and dispossessed of what they owned in the first place. Hence, as some commentators have put it, I think a little too schematically to say the least, *A Hacker Manifesto* represents a new 'Communist Manifesto' for the digital era. The book is certainly that in terms of its Marxist manifesto configurations, but it is also much more.

What we therefore see with the successive three phases of the commodity economy is as expected: farmers against landlords, workers against industrialists and now, hackers against what Wark calls 'vectoralists', the latter being those who possess intellectual property and the relevant vectors of communication that information moves along from one site to another. The vectoralist class consists of multinational companies that have—especially since the introduction of the Internet in the 1980s and other associated new technologies—as Steven Shaviro puts it, well-recognised expressions of copyright concepts and texts that have been in public circulation for many years.⁶

Who are the 'hackers' of the new digital economy whose creative ideas are being exploited by the multinationals? They are the producers of information [what Wark calls 'abstraction'] and as an emerging class of hackers they represent a very wide array of creative and curious individuals—artists, scientists, musicians, software developers, biologists, researchers, filmmakers—in a word, anyone who is innovative and involved with the production of knowledge in our society.

Wark argues for the position that all these seemingly separate cultures of writers, programmers, scientists, musicians, biologists etc.—despite their respective specialised knowledge and ways of thinking—critically share a common class interest in preserving from exploitation their own autonomy as information producers, mindful of the way the farmers and labourers of the preceding phases of the commodity economy lost out to their respective exploiters, the landlords and the capitalists. Crucially then for Wark digital hackers are today located in a long front-line struggle against class exploitation.

Wark's book contains many valuable critical insights into the economics and politics of the new digital information economy, especially in perceptive advocacy of how the 'vectoralist' class is exclusively concerned with the domination and control

of information and the related realisation of its value in terms of patent, copyright and trademark. What matters nowadays in the new emerging geopolitical world of economics is that whoever owns the corporate brands and copyrights, also controls innovation and new products.

Therefore, Wark correctly posits, that hackers according to his definition, with their sensibility and ethic of producing a new meta-information of ideas, perceptions and sensations that emerge from the basic stuff of raw data, are the class, which is germane to the freeing of digital information from its capitalist forms of expression and ownership.

This means that we need to critique any romantic notions we may have about hackers and the open-ended, collaborative and rhizomatic modes of producing the new digital information and by the same token, to question the traditional 'moral panic' viewpoints mainstream culture may have about 'hacktivism' as a process of information dissemination, political action and creative problem-solving. Jenny Marketou, the Greek-born, American-based new media artist and educator recently stressed the necessity of seeing beyond the 'white noise' of the media's negative views of hackers, net artists and

*hacktivists—as destructive agents of resistance and protest—instead seeing them as individuals, who are engaged [like Wark himself] in questioning the cultural and economic logic of the Internet, in order to take it forward to a freer space of public creativity and information.*⁷

Wark is, therefore, interested in showing the collective process and manifold creative value of this new emerging class of cultural hackers/producers of the new digital information. Thus, the act of hacking as a process of criticising our late-capitalist culture lies at the core of contributing to the formation of the emerging digital gift economy. Despite capitalism's valorisation of creativity as an individual act, cultural hacking vis-à-vis the 'vectoralist' class suggests not only a profound class struggle in the Marxist sense of the term, but a fundamental questioning of creativity as a social collaborative process. Wark's broadening of the term 'hacker' to include all kinds of producers of digital creativity and information is one of the book's smartest theoretical manoeuvres. By doing this, Wark radically acknowledges and expands the mutual common interests shared by artists, scientists, technologists, musicians and so on, that go far beyond the divergences and the convergences of C.P. Snow's famous dual cultures debate of the late 1950s and early 1960s—by focusing on what all these hackers

of information share in. And that is, contrary to certain objections, producing creative ideas, forms, techniques and products that always end up as property.

The digital gift economy is therefore a complex collaborative knowledge economy, where what you offer as an individual creative hacker, shapes what you can actually take away with you in a reciprocal equation of mutual creativity, knowledge and respect. This therefore emphasises a new digital information that is about all of us accessing it in our respective ways and fundamentally realising its overall scarcity in the new global world of transnational companies, privatisation of knowledge and unilateral power.

Wark's cardinal belief that digital information seeks to be free and that there is no 'natural' scarcity, as it is important to think of the digital not just as technology but also as a fundamental social transformation of the world at large. Therefore, it is important not to fetishise technology, but to think of its critical context in everyday culture—in other words, to be vigilantly cognisant of the 'social physics' [Avital Ronnell] of technology. One is obliged to think of technology, not as a thing in itself but as a process and to question its basic capacity to 'enframe' [Martin Heidegger] the very way we create and talk about it.

As a manifesto, not only does it draw upon—as earlier noted—the traditions of Marx and Engels, Lukacs, Benjamin, the Dadaists, the Surrealists and the Situationists, but it also importantly relies, as Shaviro reminds us, upon the sociological ideas of Marcel Mauss and his theory of 'the gift'.⁸

Wark's wide-ranging and intensely radical vision of a society steeped in a class conflict between the 'in between' cultural hackers of new digital information and the 'vectoralists' who seek to own and dominate this new digital gift information—central to society's future cultural and economic horizons—is supported by many different examples emanating from art, culture, economics, history and technology.

Wark's book as a manifesto applies to conceptual artists as cultural hackers as much as it does to many different net artists/hacktivists, such as the group Electronic Disturbance Theatre, the British artist group Mongrel, the Bologna group known as 0100101110101101.ORG and the Knowbotic Research collective based in Zurich [among many other salient examples]. This is not to overlook of course, the highly important instances of the free software movement, file swapping amongst many

different people, the Creative Commons project and DJs doing mash-ups etc.

In conclusion, the new cultural hackers are crucial to the rapid historical 'third nature' development of abstraction that has taken place in the wake of the respective media developments from the telegraph to the telephone and television, to today's many different media vector flows of the commodity economy. More and more, each successive stage of abstraction from 'second nature' [i.e. the built environment of farms, buildings, factories and roads] to the 'third', which attempts to address the many internal contradictions of second nature and represents a more abstract form of development than the previous one.

A Hacker Manifesto is an optimistic and indispensable work for anyone who wishes to comprehend the multiplying complexities of our digital culture. It is a book that also affirms the far-ranging discursive and poetic wisdom of treating the production of new information as a collective gift of cultural hacking to ourselves. It is also utopian in its modest, self-reflective way, as it is in itself an exemplary instance of hacking—of forging a new world out of the ruins of the present one.

[In memoriam: Joan Brassil, sculptor, video artist, poet]

Notes

¹ See *First Monday [FM]* interview with McKenzie Wark, Vol 9 No 12, December, 2004: http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue_9_12/index.html

² *Ibid.*

³ Edward Said, 'Michel Foucault, 1927–1984', in *Edward Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, London: Granta Books, 2000: 189

⁴ Cf. interview with McKenzie Wark by Richard Mitchell, *Other Zine*, 5 October, 2004: 5: http://www.otherzine.com/otherzine/otherzine07/vol_wark.htm

⁵ Op. cit., *First Monday* interview, 2004

⁶ Steve Shaviro, fibreculture, 'On A Hacker Manifesto', *October* 24, 2004

⁷ *Artzine* interview with Jenny Marketou by Claudia Gianett, 'Hacking vs Hacktivism': http://www.artzine_journal.com/site_en/interview_morel_en.html

⁸ *Ibid.*, Shaviro, *October* 24, 2004: 4