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CYBERPUNK
The New Totalitarianism

Sample translation by Simon Pare

We must give the quirks of history a chance—partly
because no one writes to say that everything is doomed.
If so, we should remain silent. I am getting ready.

Albert Camus, 1958¹

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The totalitarian parameter

The 21st century won't govern you; it will program you.

This isn't a crisis of democracy; it's a slide into a new regime.

Totalitarian software has mutated and now flows around the synthetic networks. It is fluid and total, invisible and normative, state-owned and private.

Brains on leashes.

Infinite scrolling, controlled dopamine hits, machines infiltrating our intimacy. Progress is driving a future that is privatized and wild.

When you start to doubt yourself, keep the following in mind: this century doesn't ban you from thinking, it just keeps you so busy you don't know how to cope.

'The future is already here.'

A two-headed Leviathan. One orchestrating the show, while the other codes the system.

From now on, power will be two-headed and shape-shifting.

And now what? We need to desaturate.

Because it's no longer a matter of freedom. It's a matter of dignity.

The only unique characteristic we have left is to remain principled. That will be our perilous path to converting influence into power.

The question

I'm writing from a specific point in history—13 July 2024. At this point there is an image, the image of Donald Trump brandishing his fist after the assassination attempt at his campaign rally in Pennsylvania. At this point there is a tweet by Elon Musk before he signals his fervent support for Donald Trump a few hours later. It was latent. We had been following the back-and-forth between Trumpist bigwigs and Silicon Valley for some years. But the second he posts his message, Musk puts the brutal and instable collusion between technology and political power into overdrive; this collusion is cemented by Trump choosing JD Vance to be his running mate. The alliance between a techno-reactionary fringe and an authoritarian, billionaire demagogue suggests the potential contours of 21st-century (techno-)fascism. Unless, that is, they end up eating one another.

It is the summer of 2024, and we don't yet know that Trump will go on to win the November elections by a distance. We haven't yet seen him sign dozens of executive orders on 21 January 2025, his inauguration day, harming migrants, the climate, public health, and international humanitarian aid, pardoning his followers who stormed the Capitol in 2021, unilaterally renaming the Gulf of Mexico, and giving free rein to an entity known as DOGE so that it can eliminate public services. We haven't seen anything yet, but on 13 July 2024 we can sense that (more or less) all of this is coming.

As I start to write this book, I try to make the snowballing events of the summer somehow cohere, in the belief that we have reached a tipping point. But tipping into what?

For a couple of years now, I've been reflecting on the fact that disasters, crises and wars are following hard on each other's heels, incessantly. A daily diet of tragedy and pixelated humdrum horrors on our screens. France is paralysed by political crisis after the dissolution of the National Assembly in June 2024. Campaigning between the two rounds of the hastily organized parliamentary elections has released the spectre of xenophobia and aggression, the stench of racism too. The atmosphere for foreigners, anyone of mixed heritage, mixed colour, mixed race, people with dual nationality, is absolutely oppressive.

I can still remember the exact moment when my political and intellectual concern shifted into existential angst. Nothing is ever settled for the 'non-natives' of whom I am one. Once more, at the very last moment, France turned back the tide.

How many times, on both sides of the Atlantic, are we going to vote with our backs to the abyss? Every election now, the storm batters harder and harder at the door of democracy. In the stifling atmosphere of this summer, we're conscious that we are the unfortunate contemporaries of something that might eventually devour us.

Are we doomed to relive the nightmare of the 1930s? Any half-serious historian will tell you that history doesn't repeat itself. And yet we need to confront the phantom of fascism and study it carefully. We shouldn't get carried away with comparisons, but nonetheless we must examine the specificities, intensities and forms in which it is reappearing. The lingering intuition, though, is that this is simply the first, almost superficial stage of a more profound shift. A fracture of a more structural kind is currently re-configuring the future.

Beyond its individual personifications, how do we describe what is taking shape if the United States forcefully invents the new grammar of a hybrid form of power, and if the very software of that power is re-programmed by a technological elite that owns attention-monopolizing hyper-technologies.

But we shouldn't get too far ahead of ourselves . . . Let us return for a moment to the prism for interpreting fascism, which must be our starting point when mapping out this new world. In the past, fascism was spawned by ailing political and economic systems of varying degrees of democracy. This led to the rise of movements configured for the conquest of power, which installed regimes based notably on the myth of the man of destiny before they collapsed under a hail of bombs. In our new century, fascism comes in multiple forms. But whereas political leaders—fascist or not, or just a little—replace and resemble one another, interchangeable right down to their supercharged mania, the techno-political units are systemic. They are the strategic choke points of our states and of our lives, which they hold in their grip. When a few deeply anti-democratic-minded tech titans intervene directly in the democratic arena, unelected and with no mandate from the populace, and yet the new load-bearers of our economic, (geo)political and social system, it is not that this *might* constitute a threat—it is already a *problem*. We cannot contain their unfettered power. Our legal system fights, but it is weak. The consciousness of the citizens, frazzled by the scale of the Herculean effort required, awakes only slowly. Meanwhile, some of those units pursue a pre-defined ideological agenda that brooks no opposition.

What will the spirit of *our* time be?

In her preface to part three of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote a striking warning that reads as if it awaits conclusion: 'Stalin, like Hitler, died in the midst of a horrifying unfinished business. And when this happened, the story this book has to tell, and the events it tries to understand and come to terms with, came to an at least provisional end.'² A provisional end . . . Decades later, the phantom is once more on the prowl from the shores of the United States. The aim of this essay is not to trace a genealogy of the causes, but to assess their future effects, with which, in a sense, we are already living. It is the material evidence of a risk I have taken.

How could I break out of the hold of the riotous spectacle? I decided to extricate myself, escape the pantomimes pouring oil into the bottomless pit of outrage, get out of earshot of the incessant noise that accompanied them. I challenged myself to analyse them in real time.

The pages that follow are not an academic inventory of techno-authoritarian systems, as they have already been amply studied.³ Nor is this a comparative study of regimes past and present. These pages do not seek to accuse but to elucidate a coming world, using the United States as a probe to ascertain what is happening deep in our liberal democracies; that is the sole perimeter of this book. It aims to decipher the new rationales of acquiescence and control inherent in democratic structures. This text moves away from theories about surveillance capitalism or a post-human future to present a cartography of the new theatre of power. Since the future is not pre-determined, it doesn't aspire to impose any truth, simply to name the phenomenon, understand its language and deconstruct its narratives so we're not left standing on the edges of the world.

In a burst of understanding in *The Rebel*, Albert Camus wrote: 'It is incumbent upon us, at all events, to give a definite answer to the question implicit in the blood and strife of this century. For we are being put to the rack.'⁴ Yes, we are still on the rack.

Cyberpunk dystopia is here

The future is behind us.

In history's murkier moments, we are often too late to detect shifts and upheavals. We don't always gauge the distance that separates our era from its understanding of itself. So let us posit once and for all that the future, whether we await it in fear or hope, is not a prospect still to come. The evidence is unfolding before our eyes: dystopia is not a projection, it's all around us. We live, fascinated, in the world we fear.

'The future is *already here*,' wrote William Gibson, one of the pioneers of the genre of science-fiction (SF) literature known as cyberpunk.⁵ A few years later, he refined his phrase, adding that 'it's just not evenly distributed'.⁶ Bruce Sterling, a theorist of the genre, observed in his seminal introduction to *Mirrorshades* (1986) that the cyberpunk authors were not imagining the future from some neutral, outside perspective: 'The cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fictional world.'⁷ Our present had a similar quality.

I felt that I needed to explore this literature for myself.

In the late seventies and early eighties, science fiction abandoned imagined utopias, and technology went rogue, crafting a world that was dark, violent, sometimes totalitarian, and futureless. The strands of cyberpunk didn't invent other worlds far away; they depicted a pre-apocalyptic here and now, or rather one where the apocalypse is already in progress, drawing on a radical modernity taken to the extreme—a 'hypermodernity'⁸, whose characteristics we recognize. I have dived back into some of the classics of the genre: *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, *Blade Runner: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick and a few other heirs to George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Several hallmarks of the cyberpunk style recur: the technological iron cage is ubiquitous, chequering an overpopulated, over-polluted world in which disillusioned, isolated individuals wander through etiolated megacities ruled by an ultra-centralized authority composed of megacorps, decadent states and invisible techno-overseers who manipulate both people's brains and their bodies in

a fusion of human and machine—all set in a universe generated by computer hackers. Amid this urban chaos, the cyberpunk hero embodies the anti-hero—a loner, a survivalist and a cynic. The Sex Pistols' iconic punk track 'No Future' transposed into literature. The word 'cyberpunk' has since passed into common parlance and hence into the mainstream imagination.

Referring to the cyberpunk universe occurred to me as a good means of explaining these times, because the new totalitarianism I foresee cannot be apprehended from the past. We must perceive what is novel about it in its emerging characteristics, as no strict historical comparison truly stands up to scrutiny.

The equation that our age has to solve is technopolitical in nature. It is based on the alliance between 'big tech' and 'big state'. The big state is an empire state that derives a good deal of its power from, and thanks to, the tech titans. Few states can currently claim this status, the exceptions being the United States and China. It is noteworthy that only big states have been able to nurture the big tech companies that have developed into hybrid and systemic actors. As the possibilities for projecting technological power, and therefore domination, increase, this exacerbates the threats to our freedoms at proportional scale and speed. The new technopolitical paradigm encounters very little resistance, as our technologies, our lives and our imagination are primed to welcome it.

The hypermodernity of the cyberpunk universe prepared the building blocks of dystopia long ago. What remains to be tested is the resilience of the moral boundaries that need to be breached if we are to tip from total technology into totalitarian technology.

Our lives are now dual: each of us now enjoys two planes of existence, a real life and a virtual life, the latter necessitating at least as much care and attention as the former. This second life is enclosed in the maze of interfaces and tends to absorb the first and hybridize it. Given that it is privately owned and exploited by anti-democratic agendas, technology has no trouble coordinating a techno-totalitarian system. What strikes you as inconceivable may already surround you. Keep your eyes open for the small invasive and invisible signals drowned out by the incessant noise of the innovations of our age.

Cyberpunk dystopia materializes this discrepancy between reality and how it is perceived.

Look around you. Don't you have a vague feeling that we are experiencing a moment of collective dissociation? We sense that the old systems are crumbling, and yet we carry on as if nothing were happening. This gap between reality and appearances is reminiscent of the idea of 'hyper-normalization' described by Alexei Yurchak in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*⁹ about the fall of the USSR—a world that had already collapsed and yet everyone

pretended to go on living in it. The hypermodernity of the city, a world trapped in polycrisis, the ubiquity of interfaces, the unfettered power of big tech, surveillance technologies downplayed as security safeguards, a sense of solitude, cognitive saturation. What we call 'reality' is already an interface. What we believe to be 'freedom' might be nothing more than a parameter of comfort inside a control system hidden from sight. This isn't the future, just daily life in a world that no longer knows what it is. Welcome to the real. Welcome to cyber-dystopia.

No future? Hyper-future!

It was a short passage in Gibson's *Neuromancer* that tipped me off, the link it made between cyberpunk and totalitarianism:

Night City was like a deranged experiment in social Darwinism, designed by a bored researcher who kept one thumb permanently on the fast-forward button. Stop hustling and you sank without a trace, but move a little too swiftly and you'd break the fragile surface tension of the black market; either way, you were gone, with nothing left of you but some vague memory in the mind of a fixture like Ratz, though heart or lungs or kidneys might survive in the service of some stranger with New Yen for the clinic tanks.¹⁰

'Social Darwinism': a vision of the law of the 'fittest', the best-performing, the most fertile, applied by an authority obsessed with brutality and efficiency. This isn't new. The reactionary entrepreneurs in the Valley already sorted 'good' employees from 'bad' and demanded exemplary loyalty. Here, totalitarianism is recycling Darwin's theory, which Herbert Spencer actually bastardized by equating cultures to 'bodies', much to Darwin's chagrin. This amalgam gave birth to a pseudo-scientific justification for racism and then for Nazi eugenics. When transposed to our world, do we detect in it an incipient transhumanism? The augmentation of humankind, or rather of a chosen elite—the people with the financial and genetic means to be selected by the all-powerful technological god . . .

I carried on digging. Remarkably, *Blade Runner* by Philip K. Dick is one of the narratives that comes closest to the obsessions of the Valley's technologists. A portion of humanity has departed for Mars, while the others coexist—and occasionally hybridize—with androids possessing consciousness. This abandoned world seeks simulacra of spirituality that have coalesced into a new religion known as Mercerism after its guru Wilbur Mercer. An excerpt:

It has often been said by adherents of the experience of Mercerism that Wilbur Mercer is not a human being, that he is in fact an archetypal superior entity perhaps from another star. [...] Wilbur Mercer is not human, does not in fact exist. The world in which he climbs is a cheap, Hollywood, commonplace sound stage [...] 'Ask yourselves what it is that Mercerism does. Well, if we're to believe its many practitioners, the experience fuses [...] men and women throughout the Sol System into a single entity. But an entity which is manageable by the so-called telepathic voice of "Mercer". Mark that. An ambitious politically minded would-be Hitler could—¹¹

A multi-planetary, hybrid civilization and a new Hitler: that's what I read. Once our guardrails have been dismantled, one after the other, does the cyberpunk universe, now omnipresent, contain the seeds of political catastrophe? Of one thing I was certain: the 21st century will not be defined by the return of historical fascism but by the emergence of a more elusive, more sophisticated anti-democratic version. A different type of fascism, hypermodern in guise, but still only a 'transitional fascism'.