

Data Trash

the theory of the virtual class

smelling the virtual
flowers and counting
the road-kill
on the digital
superhighway



Arthur Kroker
Michael A. Weinstein

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Arthur and Marilouise Kroker

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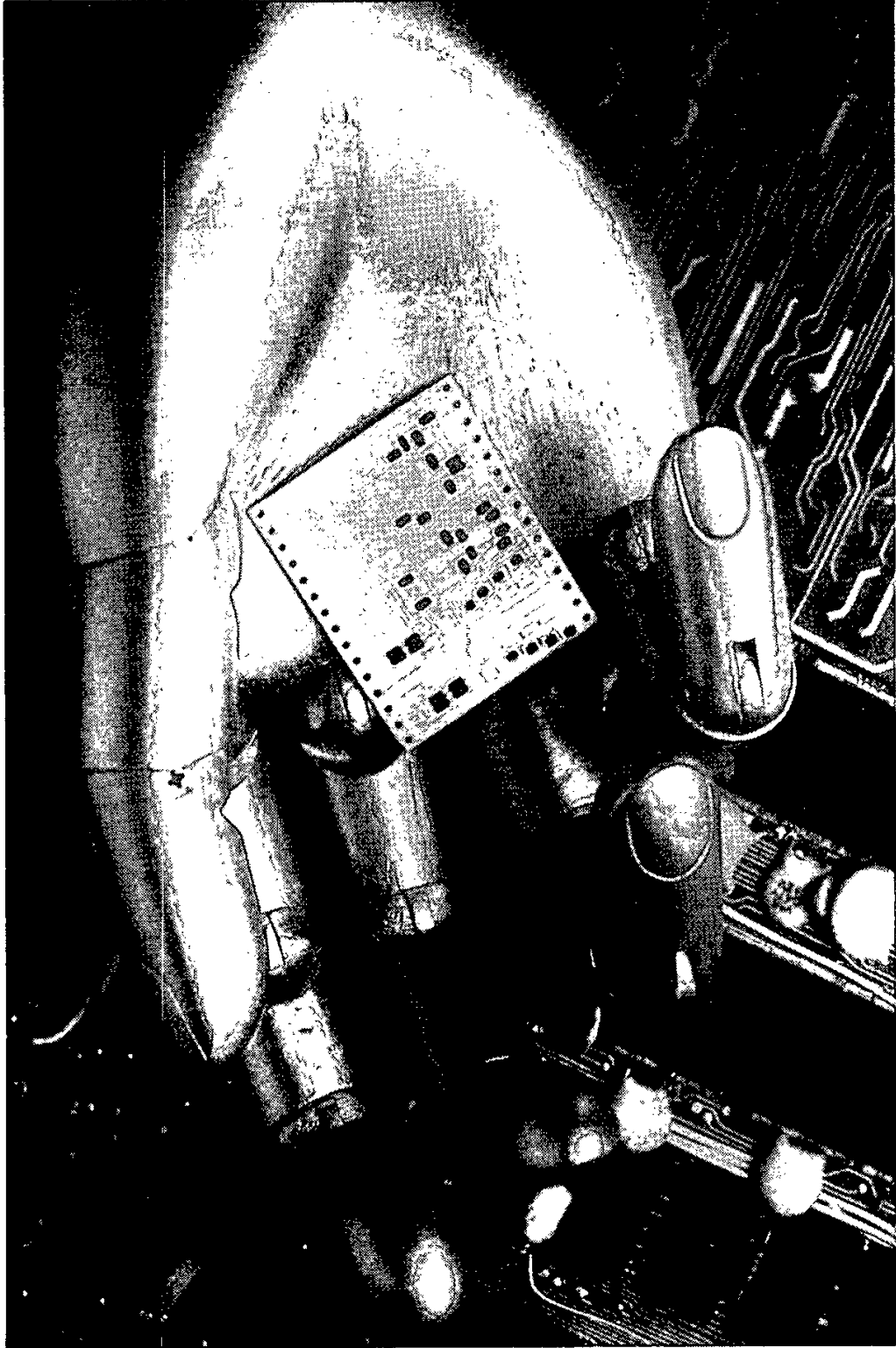
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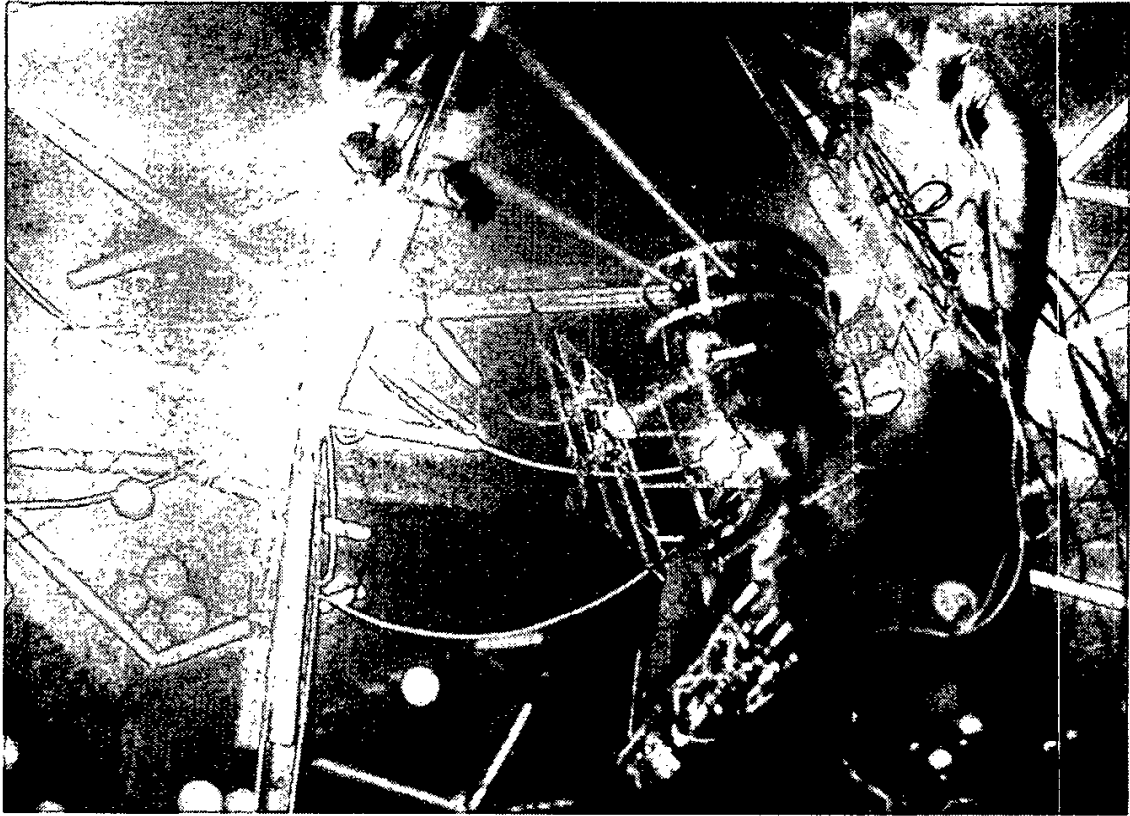
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PREFACE

DATA TRASH

Virtual Reality is the dream of pure telematic experience. Beginning in the cybernetic shadowland of head-mounted scanners, wired gloves, and data suits, virtual reality has quickly become the electronic horizon of the twenty-first century. A cold world where bodies get prepped for downloading into data, where seeing means artificial optics, where hearing is listening to the high-speed world of sampler culture, where travelling becomes a nomadic journey across the MUD (*Multiple User Dungeons*), and where communication disappears into the high-speed fibre “backbone” of the Internet. In virtual reality, flesh vaporizes into virtuality as (twentieth-) century bodies are repackaged with (twenty-first-) century cybernetic nervous systems for speeding across the electronic frontier.

The gigantic nova of technotopia pulses with such brilliant energy because western society is in the terminal phase of a slow, but nonetheless fatal, fade-out. A prolonged evacuation of the energies of the social where the biological organism flips into the electronic body, and where the cult of the “wired” is the ruling rhetoric of all the technological fetishists.

The wired body is perfect. Travelling like an electronic nomad through the circulatory flows of the mediascape, it possesses only the virtual biological form of a multi-layered scanner image. Abandoning the heavy referential history of a central nervous system, the wired body actually *grows* a telematic nervous system that is freely distributed across the electronic mirror of the Internet. A product of neural tapping and image-processing, the wired body is the (technoid) life-form that finally cracks its way out of the dead shell of human culture.

Technotopia is about disappearances: the vanishing of the body (into a relational data base), the nervous system into "distributive processing," and the skin into wetware. As technology comes alive as a distinctive species, we finally encounter the end of (human) history and the beginning of virtual history. A waiting time of *growing bodies* for endless circulation through all the synapses and gateways of the data networks. A euphoric space where subjectivity drains away into televisual memories, and desire is recombined into a vertiginous matrix of doubled possibilities. Virtual reality skin-grafts the logic of the ambivalent sign onto the "standing reserve" of the social. Here the delirium of the recline of western civilization is experienced as both the ecstasy of crash culture and the catastrophe of *our* burn-out in digital culture.

Cyber-Flesh Scanning the Media-Net

Taking virtual reality as the (ir)real world of the electronic frontier, *Data Trash* operates like a deep space galactic explorer. Approaching the media-net with long-distance (theory) scans, it sweeps the virtual world with a rapid series of media probes, mapping the political economy of virtual reality and recombinant culture. It then arcs away with some final sampler images of crash history. Here, technology means the will to virtuality, and virtuality is about the recline of western civilization, an historical non-time marked by recurrent bouts of spasmodic violence and random crashes of all the big referents, which are all horizoned by the ascendant politics of liberal- and retro-fascism. Unlike the 1890s with its romantic invocation of catastrophe scenarios, the 1990s emerge as an era of general cultural recline: a time of cynical romanticism and cold love, where the body disappears into a virtual imaging-system, and where even catastrophes are reversed by the media-net into specular publicity for a crash that will never happen. On the one hand, the weakened body becomes a prosthetic to the media-net; and on the other the body electronic is data trash struggling to come alive again in recombinant form: to quick-learn how to survive the spasms and crashes of (digital) life on the virtual road. Reclining (into virtuality) *and* data trash (with a will?) This is the fate of the body electronic in the interminable countdown to the Year 2000.

Focussing on contemporary American politics but developing a more general historical thesis, *Data Trash* traces the will to virtuality as it becomes the primal impulse of pan-capitalism (virtual political economy), the mediascape (virtual culture), and post-history (virtual history). Using the literary device of media event-scenes, the theoretical analysis of *Data Trash* is mutated and accelerated by ongoing transformations in the cultural politics of the media-net. And why not? *Data Trash* is itself a wavering event-scene: a violent interzone between the will to virtuality and battered (human) flesh.

CHAPTER ONE

The Theory of the Virtual Class

Wired Shut

Wired intends to profit from the Internet. And so do a lot of others. "People are going to have to realize that the Net is another medium, and it has to be sponsored commercially and it has to play by the rules of the marketplace," says John Battelle, *Wired's* 28-year old managing editor. "You're still going to have sponsorship, advertising, the rules of the game, because it's just necessary to make commerce work." "I think that a lot of what some of the original Net god-utopians were thinking," continued Battelle, "is that there was just going to be this sort of huge anarchist, utopian, bliss medium, where there are no rules and everything is just sort of open. That's a great thought, but it's not going to work. And when the Time Warners get on the Net in a hard fashion it's going to be the people who first create the commerce and the environment, like *Wired*, that will be the market leaders."

Andrew Leonard, "Hot-Wired"
The Bay Guardian

The twentieth-century ends with the growth of cyber-authoritarianism, a stridently pro-technotopia movement, particularly in the mass media, typified by an obsession to the point of hysteria with emergent technologies, and with a consistent and very deliberate attempt to shut down, silence, and exclude any perspectives critical of technotopia. Not a wired culture, but a virtual culture that is wired shut: compulsively fixated on digital technology as a source of salvation from the reality of a lonely culture and radical social disconnection from everyday life, and determined to exclude from public debate any perspective that is not a cheerleader for the coming-to-be of the fully realized technological

society. The virtual class is populated by would-be astronauts who never got the chance to go to the moon, and they do not easily accept criticism of this new Apollo project for the body telematic.

This is unfortunate since it is less a matter of being pro- or anti-technology, but of developing a critical perspective on the ethics of virtuality. When technology mutates into virtuality, the direction of political debate becomes clarified. If we cannot escape the hard-wiring of (our) bodies into wireless culture, then how can we inscribe primary ethical concerns onto the will to virtuality? How can we turn the virtual horizon in the direction of substantive human values: aesthetic creativity, social solidarity, democratic discourse, and economic justice? To link the relentless drive to cyberspace with ethical concerns is, of course, to give the lie to technological liberalism. To insist, that is, that the coming-to-be of the will to virtuality, and with it the emergence of our doubled fate as either body dumps or hyper-texted bodies, virtualizers or data trash, does not relax the traditional human injunction to give primacy to the ethical ends of the technological purposes we choose (or the will to virtuality that chooses us).

Privileging the question of ethics via virtuality lays bare the impulse to nihilism that is central to the virtual class. For it, the drive to planetary mastery represented by the will to virtuality relegates the ethical suasion to the electronic trashbin. Claiming with monumental hubris to be already beyond good and evil, it assumes perfect equivalency between the will to virtuality and the will to the (virtual) good. If the good is equivalent to the disintegration of experience into cybernetic interactivity or to the disappearance of memory and solitary reflection into massive Sunstations of archived information, then the virtual class is the leading exponent of the era of telematic ethics. Far from having abandoned ethical concerns, the virtual class has patched a coherent, dynamic, and comprehensive system of ethics onto the hard-line processors of the will to virtuality. Against economic justice, the virtual class practices a mixture of predatory capitalism and gung-ho technocratic rationalizations for laying waste to social concerns for employment, with insistent demands for "restructuring economies," "public policies of labor adjustment," and "deficit cutting," all aimed at maximal profitability. Against democratic discourse, the virtual class institutes anew the authoritarian mind, projecting its class interests onto cyberspace from which vantage-point it crushes any and all dissent to the prevailing orthodoxies of

technotopia. For the virtual class, politics is about absolute control over intellectual property by means of war-like strategies of communication, control, and command. Against social solidarity, the virtual class promotes a grisly form of raw social materialism, whereby social experience is reduced to its prosthetic after-effects: the body becomes a passive archive to be processed, entertained, and stockpiled by the seduction-apertures of the virtual reality complex. And finally, against aesthetic creativity, the virtual class promotes the value of pattern-maintenance (of its own choosing), whereby human intelligence is reduced to a circulating medium of cybernetic exchange floating in the interfaces of the cultural animation machines. Key to the success of the virtual class is its promotion of a radically diminished vision of human experience and of a disintegrated conception of the human good: for virtualizers, the good is ultimately that which disappears human subjectivity, substituting the war-machine of cyberspace for the data trash of experience. Beyond this, the virtual class can achieve dominance today because its reduced vision of human experience consists of a digital superhighway, a fatal scene of circulation and gridlock, which corresponds to how the late twentieth-century mind likes to see itself. *Reverse nihilism*: not the nihilistic will as projected outwards onto an external object, but the nihilistic will turned inwards, decomposing subjectivity, reducing the self to an object of conscience- and body vivisectioning. What does it mean when the body is virtualized without a sustaining ethical vision? Can anyone be strong enough for this? What results is rage against the body: a hatred of existence that can only be satisfied by an abandonment of flesh and subjectivity and, with it, a flight into virtuality. Virtuality without ethics is a primal scene of social suicide: a site of mass cryogenics where bodies are quick-frozen for future resequencing by the archived data networks. The virtual class can be this dynamic because it is already the after-shock of the living dead: body vivisectionists and early (mind) abandoners surfing the Net on a road trip to the virtual Inferno.

“Adapt or You’re Toast”

The virtual class has driven to global power along the digital superhighway. Representing perfectly the expansionary interests of the recombinant commodity-form, the virtual class has seized the imagina-

tion of contemporary culture by conceiving a techno-utopian high-speed cybernetic grid for travelling across the electronic frontier. In this mythology of the new technological frontier, contemporary society is either equipped for fast travel down the main arterial lanes of the information highway, or it simply ceases to exist as a functioning member of technotopia. As the CEO's and the specialist consultants of the virtual class triumphantly proclaim: "Adapt or you're toast."

We now live in the age of dead information, dead (electronic) space, and dead (cybernetic) rhetoric. *Dead information?* That's our cooptation as servomechanisms of the cybernetic grid (the digital superhighway) that swallows bodies, and even whole societies, into the dynamic momentum of its telematic logic. Always working on the basis of the illusion of enhanced interactivity, the digital superhighway is really about the full immersion of the flesh into its virtual double. As *dead (electronic) space*, the digital superhighway is a big real estate venture in cybernetic form, where competing claims to intellectual property rights in an array of multi-media technologies of communication are at stake. No longer capitalism under the doubled sign of consumer and production models, the digital superhighway represents the disappearance of capitalism into colonized virtual space. And *dead (cybernetic) rhetoric?* That's the Internet's subordination to the predatory business interests of a virtual class, which might pay virtual lip service to the growth of electronic communities on a global basis, but which is devoted in actuality to shutting down the anarchy of the Net in favor of virtualized (commercial) exchange. Like a mirror image, the digital superhighway always means its opposite: not an open telematic autoroute for fast circulation across the electronic galaxy, but an immensely seductive harvesting machine for delivering bodies, culture, and labor to virtualization. The information highway is paved with (our) flesh. So consequently, *the theory of the virtual class*: cultural accomodation to technotopia is its goal, political consolidation (around the aims of the virtual class) its method, multi-media nervous systems its relay, and (our) disappearance into pure virtualities its ecstatic destiny.

That there is an inherent political contradiction between the attempt by the virtual class to liquidate the sprawling web of the Internet in favor of the smooth telematic vision of the digital superhighway is apparent. The information highway is the antithesis of the Net, in much the same way as the virtual class must destroy the *public dimension* of the Internet

for its own survival. The informational technology of the Internet as a new *force* of virtual production provides the social conditions necessary for instituting fundamentally new *relations* of electronic creation. Spontaneously and certainly against the long-range interests of the virtual class, the Internet has been swamped by demands for meaning. Newly screen-radiated scholars dream up visions of a Virtual University, the population of Amsterdam goes on-line as Digital City, environmentalists become web weavers as they form a global Green cybernetic informational grid, and a new generation of fiction writers develops forms of telematic writing that mirror the crystalline structures and multi-phasal connections of hypertext.

But, of course, for the virtual class, content slows the speed of virtualized exchange, and meaning becomes the antagonistic contradiction of data. Accordingly, demands for meaning must be immediately denied as just another road-kill along the virtual highway. As such, the virtual class exercises its intense obsessive-compulsive drive to subordinate society to the telematic mythology of the digital superhighway. The democratic possibilities of the Internet, with its immanent appeal to new forms of global communication, might have been the seduction-strategy appropriate for the construction of the digital superhighway, but now that the cybernetic grid is firmly in control, the virtual class must move to liquidate the Internet. It is an old scenario, repeated this time in virtual form. Marx understood this first: every technology releases opposing possibilities towards emancipation and domination. Like its early bourgeois predecessors at the birth of capitalism, the virtual class christens the birth of technotopia by suppressing the potentially emancipatory relations of production released by the Internet in favor of the traditionally predatory force of production signified by the digital superhighway. Data is the anti-virus of meaning—telematic information refuses to be slowed down by the drag-weight of content. And the virtual class seeks to exterminate the *social* possibilities of the Internet. These are the first lessons of the theory of the virtual class.

Information Highway/Media-Net: Virtual Pastoral Power

The “information highway” has become the key route into virtuality. The “information highway” is another term for what we call the “media-

net." It's a question of whether we're cruising on a highway or being caught up in a Net, always already available for (further) processing. The "highway" is definitely an answer to "Star Wars": the communications complex takes over from the "military-industrial complex." Unlike "Star Wars," however, the "highway" has already (de-)materialized in the world behind the monitors: cyber-space. For crash theory there is an irony: the highway is a trompe l'oeil of possessive individualism covering the individual possessed by the net, sucked into the imploded, impossible world behind the screen—related to the dubious world of ordinary perception through cyber-space.

Information Highway vs. Media-Net

The prophet-hypesters of the information highway, from President Bill Clinton, U.S.A., to President Bill Gates, Microsoft, proclaim a revolution to a higher level of bourgeois consciousness. The highway is the utopia of the possessive individual: the possessive individual now resides in technotopia.

This is how the higher level of bourgeois consciousness comes to be in grades of perfection. Firstly, we enter an information highway which promises the "individual" access to "information" from the universal archive instantly and about anything. The capacity of the Net to hold information is virtually infinite and, with the inevitable advances in microprocessors, its capacities to gather, combine, and relay information will be equal to any demand for access. Are you curious about anything? The answer is right at your fingertips. More seriously, do you need to know something? A touch of a button will get you what you need and eventually your brain waves alone (telekinesis fantasy) will do it. Here is the world as information completely at the beck and call of the possessive individual (the individual, that is, who is *possessed* by information). Here, everyone is a god who, if they are not omniscient all at once, can at least entertain whatever information that they wish to have at any time they wish to have it. Information is not the kind of thing that has to be shared. If everyone all at once wanted to know who won the Stanley Cup in 1968 they could have the information simultaneously: cyber-space as the site of Unamuno's panarchy, where each one is king.

At the next grade of perfection, the highway not only provides access to that which is already given, but allows the "individual" to "interact"

with other "individuals," to create a society in cyber-space. The freedom to access information will be matched by the freedom to access individuals anywhere and at any time, since eventually everyone will be wired. The hybridization of television, telephone, and computer will produce every possible refinement of mediated presence, allowing interactors an unprecedented range of options for finely adjusting the distance of their relations. Through the use of profiles, data banks, and bulletin boards people will be able to connect with exactly those who will give them the most satisfaction, with whom they share interests, opinions, projects, and sexual preferences, and for whom they have need. Just as "individuals" will be able to access the realm of "information" (anything from their financial and insurance records to any movie ever made), they will also be able to access the domain of "human" communicators to find the ones who are best suited to them. As Bill Gates of Microsoft puts it: "The opportunity for people to reach out and share is amazing."¹

The information highway as technotopia is the place where "individuals" command information for whatever purposes they entertain and find others with whom to combine to pursue those purposes. As Gates puts it, it is "empowering stuff." Technotopia is the seduction by which the flesh is drawn into the Net. What seduces is the fantasy of "empowerment," the center of the contemporary possessive individualist complex. By having whatever information one wants instantly and without effort, and by being linked to appropriate associates one saves an immense amount of time and energy, and is more likely to make better decisions for oneself. Who can complain about having more information, especially if it can be accessed easily and appropriately by a system of selectors that gives you what you ask for and nothing else, or even better, that knows you so well that it gives you what you really want (need?) (is good for you?), but did not even realize that you wanted?

The information highway means the death of the (human) agent and the triumph of the expert program, the wisdom that the greatest specialist would give you. Expert programs to diagnose you. Medical tests performed at home while you are hooked up to a computer that are interpreted by an expert program. In order to serve you, the "highway" will demand information from you. The selector systems will have to get to know you, scan you, monitor you, give you periodic tests. The expert program will be the new center for pastoral power. This is, of course, still enacted under capitalism. You will have to pay for information with

money and there will be plenty of restrictions on its accessibility. Leave that as a contradiction of the virtual class between the capitalist organization of the highway and its technotopian vision: a contradiction within possessive individualism. More importantly, you will pay for information with information; indeed, you will be information.

The highway becomes the Net. What appears as “empowerment” is a *trompe l’oeil*, a seduction, an entrapment in a Baudrillardian loop in which the Net elicits information from the “user” and gives it back in what the selectors say is an appropriate form for that user. The great agent of possibility becomes the master tool of normalization, now a micro-normalization with high specificity ... perhaps uniqueness! Each “individual” has a unique disciplinary solution to hold them fast to the Net, where they are dumped for image processing and image reception. The information highway is the way by which bodies are drawn into cyber-space through the seduction of empowerment.

Bourgeois masculinity has always been pre-pubescent: the thoughts of little boys thinking about what they would do if they controlled the world, but now the world is cyber-space. The dream of being the god of cyber-space—public ideology as the fantasy of pre-pubescent males: a regression from sex to an autistic power drive.

Against the Virtual Class

The virtual class holds on to its worldview with cynicism or with vicious naïvete. It is a compound of late nineteenth-century Darwinian capitalism (retro-industrial Darwinism) and tech-hype. After what has happened so far in the twentieth-century and is still going on in the way of technological carnage, it is amusing to realize that there are still technofetishists filled with enthusiasm about how technology is going to fulfill their pre-pubescent dream, which they assume unthinkingly that everyone inevitably shares with them. Why? Is it so clear that technology cannot serve anything else than the last man as the pre-pubescent boy who would like nothing else but to play video games forever?

The retro-child. The virtual class is in its utopian visionary phase, filled with cyber-worlds to conquer. What will it be in its consolidation phase when we are fully entrapped in the Net and it starts tightening around us? Normalization will come here too. Radically empowering computer

land is the utopia of a rising class identifying its peculiar occupational psychosis with (a wired) "humanity." When we are immersed in the Net the fiction of the "possessive individual" will be discarded from the virtual class's ideology in favor of some sort of defense of cyber-slavery, in which the virtual class affirms its own slavery, along with that of all the rest, to the Net. This will be the culminating moment of the ascetic priests (Nietzsche). One can only think of Jonestown. The virtual class ushers itself and everyone else into the Net to serve it as image/information resources and as image/information receptors. Wired into the command functions at work and wired into the sensibility functions when off work: the body as a function of cyber-space.

Panic Information Highway

Organizations are in a panic stampede to get on the "information highway," to be players in cyber-space. Everyone wants in on the exploitation of the new frontier and even more they don't want to be killed in the real world, which will be managed ever-increasingly from cyber-space; not to mention the efficiencies of the Net. For the moment the advantages of the Net are not that obvious once you get on, but that is only a temporary situation. The Net is filling up fast with everything imaginable and it's indefinitely expandable.

There is another kind of panic in process about the "information highway." This one from the concerned liberals who are afraid of the power of those who will determine the configuration of the highway. In his report on Bill Gates, John Seabrook provides an enlightening glimpse of Gates's character along with cautionary warnings. We are concerned with the latter, with a specimen of the liberal ideology which counts as the major ideological resistance to cyber tech-hype.

Seabrook frames his warnings within a bit of short-range futurology. There is a new kind of computer on the way that will change our lives in incalculable ways: "The new machine will be a communications device that connects people to the information highway. It will penetrate far beyond the fifteen per cent of American households that now own a computer, and it will control, or absorb, other communications machines now in people's homes—the phone, the fax, the television. It will sit in the living room, not in the study."² The cyber command-machine: the entrance to the highway: the lip of the Net.

Seabrook notes that Bill Gates's current ambition is to have Microsoft be the source of "the standard operating-system software for the information-highway machine, just as it now supplies the standard operating-system software, called Windows, for the personal computer."³ The standard operating-system will be the program that makes possible specific uses of the Net, all across the Net. Seabrook believes that by supplying the standard operating-system software for the "information-highway machine" Gates would gain great power: "If Gates does succeed in providing the operating system for the new machine, he will have tremendous influence over the way people communicate with one another: he, more than anyone else, will determine what it is like to use the information highway."⁴

Seabrook shows a misunderstanding here of the "influence" of the virtual class. What is the "influence" of a standard operating-system? Would there be major differences among possible alternative competing operating-systems for the information-highway machine that would alter significantly "the way people communicate with each other?" Or, as with the phone system, is the object simply to facilitate entry into the Net? If the latter is so, no power in any conventional sense accrues to the organizational leader who wins the competition to supply the system. Gates understands this. He wrote to Seabrook that "the digital revolution is all about facilitation-creating tools to make things easy."⁵ This is the gospel of the last man, not of the "technology-oriented dictator" that one of his competitors is afraid that Gates might become. There is greater power, of a wholly different kind than the conventional power to order people around, in ushering people into the Net, in being the agent of technological dependency. This is the power of silent seduction, of giving accessibility to cyber-space. Bill Gates is not Zeus, casting thunderbolts, but Charon, taking us across the electronic Styx into virtuality. Seabrook, the techno-humanist liberal on a diversionary mission, is concerned with what goes into cyber-space. He accepts the techno-hype and is afraid of a techno-fascism that he refuses to acknowledge has already been instituted. Gates only cares that we all get into cyber-space: the seducer as great facilitator.

Gates, indeed, has no interest in the conventional politics of the communication revolution. As much as Seabrook tried to get him to acknowledge the question of power, Gates would resist. He made his position plain in commenting that the highway would have some

“secondary effects that people will worry about.” That is not his problem, however: “We are involved in creating a new media but it is not up to us to be the censors or referees of this media—it is up to public policy to make those decisions.”⁶

“Public policy” is what goes on to get the flesh to adjust to the Net. The greater project is beyond policy, transcendent to it—that is the project of wiring bodies to the Net. That everyone will be wired to the information-highway machine is an historical inevitability that puts politics in its place as a local clean-up activity around the Net. This is technotopianism in its purest and most cynical form. Compare it to that other computer entrepreneur, the retro-fascist Ross Perot, who uses the wealth he has gained from the information industry to finance his appeal to a nationalistic policy. The technotopian has no such leanings, but with vicious naivete depends on liberal-fascist allies in government to protect the Net. Gates has identified himself with Technology, the greater power, the one that will finally be decisive. Through the silent seduction of the operating-system.

The Virtual Class and Capitalism

The computer industry is in an intensive phase of “creative destruction,” the term coined by Schumpeter and used by the neo-Darwinian macho apologists for capitalism to refer to the economic killing fields produced by rapid technological change. The Net is being brought into actuality through the offices of ruthless capitalist competition, in which vast empires fall and rise within a single decade (Big Blue/Microsoft). Under the disciplinary liberal night watchman’s protection of “private” property-rights, capitalist freebooters destroy one another as they race to be the ones who actualize the Net, just like the railroads of the nineteenth-century racing across the continent. This means that the virtual class retains a strict capitalist determination and that its representative social type must be a capitalist, someone who is installing the highway to win a financial competition, if nothing else. If one is not so minded in today’s computer industry they will be eaten alive. You will only be able to get personal kicks and pursue your (ressentiment-laden) idealistic views of computer democracy in this industry if you sell. So you hype your ideas and your ideals become hype—that is the twisted psychology of the

virtual class: not hyped ideology, but something of, by, and for the Net: ideological hype.

There are pure capitalists in the cyber industry and there are capitalists who are also visionary computer specialists. The latter, in a spirit of vicious naivete, generate the ideological hype, a messianic element, that the former take up cynically. It's the old story of the good cop and the bad cop. How come the good cop tolerates the bad cop? So much for the computer democracy of cyber possessive-individualists. The economic base of the virtual class is the entire communications industry—everywhere it reaches. As a whole, this industry processes ideological hype for capitalist ends. It is most significantly constituted by cynicism, not viciously naive vision. Yet, though a small group in numerical proportion to the whole virtual class, the visionaries are essential to cyber-capitalism because they provide the ideological mediation to seduce the flesh into the Net. In this sense the cynical capitalists and the well-provided techies are merely drones, clearing the way for the Pied Piper's parade.

A frontier mentality rules the drive into cyber-space. It is one of the supreme ironies that a primitive form of capitalism, a retro-capitalism, is actualizing virtuality. The visionary cyber-capitalist is a hybrid monster of social Darwinism and techno-populist individualism. It is just such an imminently reversible figure that can provide the switching mechanism back and forth between cyber-space and the collapsing space of (crashed) perception.

The most complete representative of the virtual class is the visionary capitalist who is constituted by all of its contradictions and who, therefore, secretes its ideological hype. The rest of the class tends to split the contradictions: the visionless-cynical-business capitalists and the perhaps visionary, perhaps skill-oriented, perhaps indifferent techno-intelligentsia of cognitive scientists, engineers, computer scientists, video-game developers, and all the other communication specialists, ranged in hierarchies, but all dependent for their economic support on the drive to virtualization. Whatever contradictions there are within the virtual class—that is, the contradictions stemming from the confrontation of bourgeois and proletarian—the class as a whole supports the drive into cyber-space through the wired world. This is the way it works in post late-capitalism, where the communication complex is repeating the pattern of class collaborationism that marked the old military-industrial complex. The drive into the Net is one of those great capitalist techno-

projects that depends upon a concert of interests to sustain it, as it sucks social energy into itself. The phenomenon of a collaborationist complex harboring a retro-Darwinian competition is something new, but is stabilized, in the final analysis, by a broad consensus among the capitalist components of the virtual class that the liberal-fascist state structure is deserving of support. Indeed, in the U.S.A. in the 1990s the state is the greatest producer of the ideological hype of the "information highway." The virtual class has its administration in the White House. The concerted drive into cyber-space proceeds, all in the name of economic development and a utopian imaginary of possessive individualists.

The Hyper-Texted Body or Nietzsche Gets a Modem

But why be nostalgic? The old body type was always OK, but the wired body with its micro-flesh, multi-media channeled ports, cybernetic fingers, and bubbling neuro-brain finely interfaced to the "standard operating-system" of the Internet is infinitely better. Not really the wired body of sci-fi with its mutant designer look, or body flesh with its ghostly reminders of nineteenth-century philosophy, but the hyper-texted body as both: a wired nervous system embedded in living (dedicated) flesh.

The hyper-texted body with its dedicated flesh? That is our telematic future, and it's not necessarily so bleak. Technology has always been our sheltering environment: not second-order nature, but primal nature for the twenty-first-century body. In the end, the virtual class is very old-fashioned. It clings to an antiquated historical form—capitalism—and, on its behalf, wants to shut down the creative possibilities of the Internet. Dedicated flesh rebels against the virtual class. It does not want to be interfaced to the Net through modems and external software black boxes, but *actually wants to be an Internet*. The virtual class wants to appropriate emergent technologies for purposes of authoritarian political control over cyberspace. It wants to drag technotopia back to the age of the primitive politics of predatory capitalism. But dedicated (geek) flesh wants something very different. Unlike the (typically European) rejection of technotopia in favor of a newly emergent nostalgia movement under the sign of "Back to Vinyl" in digital sound or "Back to Pencils" in literature, dedicated flesh wants to deeply instantiate the age of technotopia. Operating by means of the aesthetic strategy of over-

identification with the feared and desired object, the hyper-texted body insists that ours is already the era of post-capitalism, and even post-technology. Taking the will to virtuality seriously, it demands its telematic rights to be a functioning interfaced body: to be a multi-media thinker, to patch BUS ports on its cyber-flesh as it navigates the gravity well of the Internet, to create aesthetic visions equal to the pure virtualities found everywhere on the now superceded digital superhighway, and to become data to such a point of violent implosion that the body finally breaks free of the confining myth of "wired culture" and goes wireless.

The wireless body? That is the floating body, drifting around in the debris of technotopia: encrypted flesh in a sea of data. The perfect evolutionary successor to twentieth-century flesh, the wireless body fuses the speed of virtualized exchange into its cellular structure. DNA-coated data is inserted directly through spinal taps into dedicated flesh for better navigation through the treacherous shoals of the electronic galaxy. Not a body without memory or feelings, but the opposite. The wireless body is the battleground of the major political and ethical conflicts of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century experience.

Perhaps the wireless body will be just a blank data dump, a floating petrie-dish where all the brilliant residues of technotopia are mixed together in newly recombinant forms. In this case, the wireless body would be an indefinitely reprogrammable chip: micro-soft flesh where the "standard operating-system" of the new electronic age comes off the top of the TV set, flips inside the body organic, and is soft-wired to a waiting vat of remaindered flesh.

But the wireless body could be, and already is, something very different. Not the body as an organic grid for passively sampling all the drifting bytes of recombinant culture, but the wireless body as a highly-charged theoretical and political site: a moving field of aesthetic contestation for remapping the galactic empire of technotopia. Data flesh can speak so confidently of the possibility of multi-media democracy, of sex without secretions, and of integrated (cyber-) relationships because it has already burst through to the other side of technotopia: to that point of brilliant dissolution where the Net comes alive, and begins to speak the language of wireless bodies in a wireless world.

There are already many wireless bodies on the Internet: Many data travellers on the virtual road have managed under the weight of the predatory capitalism of the virtual class and the even weightier humanist

prejudices against geek flesh, to make of the Internet a charmed site for fusing the particle waves of all the passing data into a new body type: hyper-texted bodies circulating as "web weavers" in electronic space.

Refusing to be remaindered as flesh dumped by the virtual class, the hyper-texted body bends virtuality to its own purposes. Here, the will to virtuality ceases to be one-dimensional, becoming a doubled process, grisly yet creative, spatial yet memoried, in full violent play as the hyper-texted body. Always schizoid yet fully integrated, the hyper-texted body swallows its modem, cuts its wired connections to the information highway, and becomes its own system-operating software, combining and remutating the surrounding data storm into new virtualities. And why not? Human flesh no longer exists, except as an incept of the wireless world. Refuse, then, nostalgia for the surpassed past of remaindered flesh, and hyper-text your way to the (World Wide) Webbed body: the body that actually dances on its own data organs, sees with multi-media graphical interface screens, makes new best tele-friends on the MOO, writes electronic poetry on the disappearing edges of video, sound, and text integrators, and insists on going beyond the tedious world of binary divisions to the new cyber-mathematics of FITS. The hyper-texted body, then, is the precursor of a new world of multi-media politics, fractalized economics, incept personalities, and (cybernetically) interfaced relationships. After all, why should the virtual class monopolize digital reality? It only wants to suppress the creative possibilities of virtualization, privileging instead the tendencies of technotopia towards new and more vicious forms of cyber-authoritarianism. The virtual class only wants to subordinate digital reality to the will to capitalism. The hyper-texted body responds to the challenge of virtualization by making itself a monstrous double: pure virtuality/pure flesh. Consequently, our telematic future: the wireless body on the Net as a sequenced chip micro-programmed by the virtual class for purposes of (its) maximal profitability, or the wireless body as the leading-edge of critical subjectivity in the twenty-first century. If the virtual class is the post-historical successor to the early bourgeoisie of primitive capitalism, then the hyper-texted body is the Internet equivalent of the Paris Commune: anarchistic, utopian, and in full revolt against the suppression of the general (tele-)human possibilities of the Net in favor of the specific (monetary) interests of the virtual class. Always already the past to the future of the hyper-texted body, the virtual class is the particular interest that must be overcome by

the hyper-texted body of data trash if the Net is to be gatewayed by soft ethics.

Soft ethics? Nietzsche's got a modem, and he is already rewriting the last pages of *The Will to Power* as *The Will to Virtuality*. As the patron saint of the hyper-texted body, Nietzsche is data trash to the smooth, unbroken surface of the virtual class.

Soft Ideology

So then, some road maps for following the digital route taken by the virtual class across the landscape of the body recombinant.

Map 1: The Digital Superhighway as Ruling Metaphor

The high-speed digital superhighway is the ruling metaphor of the virtual class. As the class that specializes in virtualized exchange, the information superhighway allows the virtual class to speak in the language of encrypted data, circulate through all the capillaries of digital, fibre optic electric space, and float at hyper-speed to the point where data melts down into pure virtualities. The information superhighway is the playground of the virtual class. While defining the virtual class, it is also the privileged monopoly of global data communication.

As the language of the virtual class, the information superhighway is where the virtual class lives, dreams, works, and conspires. Not accessible to all, the information superhighway with its accelerated transfers of data, voice, and video is open only to those possessing the privileged corporate codes. And not evident to everyone, the information superhighway is also a site of global power because it remains an invisible, placeless, floating electronic space to the un-virtualized classes, to those, that is, who have been abandoned by the flight of the virtual class to the telematic future. Here, virtual power is about invisibility: the endocolonization of the unwired world of time, history, and human flesh by the electronic body.

A space-binding technological medium of communication, the information superhighway invests the electronic body of the virtual class with a new language, fit for twenty-first-century simu-flesh and fibrillated nerve tissue. Neither the late twentieth-century language of cyberspace

(with its romantic invocation of pure electronic space as the site of a “consensual hallucination”) nor the traditional laboratory language of recombinant genetics, the information superhighway speaks the digital language of the world’s first post-flesh body. Post-flesh? That is the electronic body of the virtual class: accessed by serial arrays of BUS ports, animated by its 3-D graphic interfaces, coded in its Web by its designated URL’s (Uniform Resource Locators), energized by the telematic dream of instantly disposable cybersex machines, and reduced in its bodily movements to a twitching finger (on the cyber-dial). The electronic body is equipped with a surfer’s consciousness, and is obsessed with its own disappearance into the inertial gridlock of high-speed. A pure virtuality, the electronic body is always in flight (from itself): it constitutes a sampler spectrum of the media force-fields which it navigates with the assistance of communication satellites parked in deep-space orbital trajectories. Certainly not a cyber-body, a “pure virtuality” is where the electronic body is reborn as a living, (telematically) breathing simu-flesh: a specimen of evolutionary implosion where technology merges with biology, the result being the post-flesh body of the virtual class. Not a passively engineered product of recombinant genetics, the electronic body as a pure virtuality has its neural synapses coded with an instinctual drive to cut, clone, and retranscribe the genetic strips of new media culture. Multi-media by nature, space-binding by instinct, and driven by an obsession compulsion towards its own disappearance down the information superhighway, the electronic body of the virtual class is the first mutant-body type to appear on the long-range scanners of the awaiting twenty-first-century.

Map 2: The Information “Superhighway” Does Not Exist

Or maybe it is just the opposite? If the information superhighway can be the ruling sign of the virtual class it is because it has no existence other than that of an old modernist metaphor concealing the disappearance of technology into virtuality, information into data, and the highway into space-binding electronic circuitry. In this case, the concept of the information superhighway simultaneously performs a revealing and concealing function with respect to the virtual class. It reveals the deep association of this class with high-speed virtualized exchange, but it conceals the drive to global power on the part of the virtual class in favor

of a comforting, romantic myth of outlaw travel across the electronic frontier.

Take apart the dense ideogram of the information superhighway to see what is inside and all the political tactics of the virtual class suddenly spill out: its promotional rhetoric, its policing methods, its doubled strategy of an ideology of facilitation and an actuality of virtualization, its ruling illusions of immersion and interactivity, and its missionary commitment to technotopia. The opposition to the virtual class also emerges: a growing political critique based on hyper-nostalgia ("Back to Vinyl"), reinforced by an alternative aesthetic refusal of the virtual class based on over-identification with the electronic body ("Data Trash").

Map 3: Seduce and Virtualize

Functioning as the political ideology of the virtual class, the information highway delivers up the body to virtualization. While its promotional rhetoric is cloaked in a seductive ideology of facilitation, in actuality the ruling metaphor of the information superhighway is a policing mechanism by which human flesh is gripped in the cyber-jaws of virtualization. The ideology of facilitation? That is the promotional culture of the virtual class which speaks eloquently about how the expansion of the high-speed data network will facilitate every aspect of contemporary society: heightened interactivity, increased high-tech employment in a "globally competitive market," and a massive acceleration of access to knowledge. Not a democratic discourse but a deeply authoritarian one, the ideology of facilitation is always presented in the crisis-context of technological necessitarianism. As the CEO's of leading computer companies and their specialist consultants like to say: *We have no choice but to adapt or perish given the technological inevitability associated with the coming to be of technotopia.* Or, as the virtual elite summarizes the situation: *We will be jettisoned into the history dump file if we don't submit to the imperatives of digital technology.*

Map 4: The Information Elite

Monarchs of the electronic kingdom, the information elite rules the digital superhighway. Having no country except digital-land, no history

but for their passing electronic traces, and no future other than the conquest of cyber-culture, the information elite is a global fraternity (mostly male) of data hounds flying the virtual airways. Fueled by missionary enthusiasm for the emergent technologies of technotopia, it is at the empty centre of virtual power.

But like all high priests before them, from the ancient Egyptian ecclesiastics and the Christian Cardinals to the Soviet Commissars, the information elite are practitioners of a dead power. A precondition for operating at the centre of any power is the sacred knowledge that power is dead, that its signs are always cynical, and that the price for revealing this secret is expulsion or even death. The information elite lives under the double sign of cynicism and an eternal law of silence. If it should reveal the cynicism within or betray the secret of dead power to the uninitiated its offending member would be executed immediately (or in the twentieth-century version dumped from the virtual class in a classic buyout). Information is a dead sign, and the information elite is the priestly keeper of the eternal flame of the nothingness within.

Map 5: Soft Ideology

[Nickelodeon's] expansion into preschool territory was part of a larger, marketing strategy for the company. . . "We recognize that if we start getting kids to watch us at this age, we have them for life," . . . "That's exactly the reason why we're doing it." In its fifteen years, Nickelodeon has conquered the marketplace for children between 6 and 11 years old.

New York Times, March 21, 1994

Soft TV is the new horizon of the electronic body. An integrated multimedia world where the networks of cyberspace and television suddenly merge into a common telematic language. Cablessoft, Videoway, Smart TV: these are the futuristic (CompuTV) collector points for accessing, harvesting, and distributing the remainders of the virtual body.

Soft TV expresses perfectly the ruling ideology of the virtual class. When the networked world of the information superhighway is finally linked to TV, then the will to virtuality will be free to produce fully functioning networked bodies: cybershoppers, cyberbankers, and cybersex. Soft TV is an electronic televisual space populated by body dumps where

human flesh goes to be virtualized. Itself a product of the will to virtuality, soft ideology is necessarily virtual: a series of ruling illusions about the efficacy and inevitability of the virtualization of human experience. Here, the future of the hyper-human body is translated into the language of public policy for immediate circulation through the international networks of political power. Consequently, the soft ideology of the virtual class is based on three key illusions.

The Illusion of Interactivity: Consider Microsoft's newest corporate venture, *Cablessoft*, which is actively promoted under the sign of enhanced interactivity. Cablessoft is a multimedia world linking the programming language of computers with television screens to produce fully integrated media. Cyber-Interactivity is, however, the opposite of *social* relationships. The human presence is reduced to a twitching finger, spastic body, and an oversaturated informational pump that surfs the channels, and makes choices within strictly programmed limits. What is really "interfaced" by Cablessoft, is the soft matter of the brain. It is a standard operating system for melting previously externalized technologies of communication into the human nervous system. And what is the Cablessoft brain? It is multi-platform, multi-media, and multi-disciplinary: a hyper-mind that has its neuro-synapses fired by directly accessed signals drawn from passing data storms on the big bandwidth. The hyper-mind creates tele-consciousness in its wake. Imagine Star Trek's image of the Borg stepping out of the television screen and patching into the Cablessoft mind. Not the interesting ("You will be assimilated") Borg of the early episodes, but the smarmy Borg of the latter episode. The "good Borg" has a veneer of individual consciousness, but an inner reality of suburban consciousness that just wants to do good for the human race. Cablessoft, then, is that point where the individual mind embedded in spinal nerve tissue disappears, and is replaced by *our* circulation as phasal moments in a new medium of cybernetic intelligence. Under the entertainment cover of the ideology of facilitation, Cablessoft promises to mind-meld (our) brains into a circulating process of cyber-intelligence: a total human mind scan for the body electronic.

The Illusion of (Cyber) Knowledge: Soft TV is also sold under the sign of the "knowledge society." Techno-hype has it that wired culture delivers us to a vastly expanded range of human awareness. What is not said,

however, is that for the virtual class, true knowledge is cold data, and the very best data of all is the willing read-out of the human sensorium into the info-net. That is why there is such an immense social pressure today for everyone to get on the Net. Unlike the 1950s, with its promotion of technology under the sign of "good industrial design" for consumer society, the 1990s is typified by the glorification of virtual technology under the banner of "good body design" for the cyber-culture of tomorrow. In virtual culture, knowledge is literally vacuumed from all the orifices of the body, society, and economy, downloaded into data storage banks, and then sampled and resampled across the liquid media-net, and all this in perfect synch with the expansionary momentum of the recombinant commodity-form. When knowledge is reduced to information, then consciousness is stripped of its lived connection to history, judgment, and experience. What results is the illusion of an expanded knowledge society, and the reality of virtual knowledge. Knowledge, that is, as a tightly controlled medium of cybernetic exchange where thought has a disease, and that disease is called information.

The Illusion of Expanded Choice: Soft TV has a veneer of expanded (consumer) choice, but an inner reality of growing desensitization and infantilization. A multi-channelled world driven by the need for information by all the drifting cyber-minds projects itself perfectly by the promise of 500 channel television. A channel for every firing synapse, a data stream for every retro-mood. If there can be such intense demand for quantum leaps of televisual information ports for the hungry cablessoft brain it is because the cyber-mind has already patched to a new emotional territory. Not expansive minds for expanded (Soft TV) choice, but a fantastic infantilization of the televisual audience, with its fever pitch connections between (emotional) primitivism and (multi-media) hyper-tech. Why the charismatic appeal today of scandal TV and talk-show formats privileging the deterioration of the public mind? It is because virtual culture has already evolved into a new, more insidious phase of nihilism: that moment where self-hatred and self-abuse is so sharp that we willingly deliver ourselves up as the butt of the TV joke. The cultural condition that makes this possible is that, like the training programs for CIA assassins with their repeated exposure of agents to brutal scenes of torture, Soft TV functions on the basis of desensitization. Floating

corpses, live executions, rape TV: all delivered under the sign of media fascination, and all with the intent of desensitizing the soft mass of the cyber-audience to the point of its humiliated complicity in the evil of the times.

Map 6: The Red Guard Meets Generation X

The editors of *AXCESS* magazine, published in San Diego, recently wrote about themselves as the “young entrepreneurs”: the leading-edge members of Generation X. At about the same time, a CBC TV program, entitled “Red Capitalism,” interviewed former members of the Red Guard who have now become full-fledged participants of the rising Chinese entrepreneurial class. So what happens when the old ideological competition between capitalism and socialism disappears, and Generation X meets the Red Guard on the world stage, they look in the mirror of shared economic interests, and discover to their pleasant surprise that they are exactly the same (virtual) class? Perhaps this fusion of unlikely partners in a global virtual class of young entrepreneurs who are finally liberated from Cold War ideology was best expressed by a high-ranking official at the Boeing Company when asked about the linkage of human rights issues with the extension of “most favored nation” status to China. He argued that there should be no relationship between politics and trade: “We are living in the age of global competition.” Without a twinge of nostalgia for the disappeared rhetoric of “jobs for Americans,” the official from Boeing is joined in this chorus for unimpeded free trade by multinational corporate leaders (think of the American multinational directors in China who castigated the U.S. Secretary of State for criticizing the Chinese record on human rights) and government officials (the Canadian Minister for External Affairs has recently announced a new public policy in relations with Latin- and South America whereby trade is cut loose from human rights issues). A fundamental political objective of the virtual class is decoupling the linkage between free trade (virtualized exchange) and human rights. That is why the technotopians of Generation X and the ex-cadres of the Red Guard are hyper-linked by the same ideology. With the death of communism, the world has undergone a big political flip. In the glory days of the Cold War, business

would have justified its expansionary interests in the name of fighting the Red Menace. Today the virtual class valorizes its recombinant interests in the name of emancipating business from the shackles of (Cold War) political rhetoric. Like meaning before it, human rights issues slow down the rate of circulation of virtualized exchange, and, consequently, they must be eliminated from the political history file.

The 1990s, therefore, are typified by the rapid decline of the hard ideologies of capitalism and communism, and by the ascendancy of the soft ideology of the virtual class. Soft ideology? That's the will to virtuality as the common language of the new managerial elites of the post-capitalist, post-communist, and also post-technological society.

Itself a product of the will to virtuality, soft ideology is necessarily virtual: a series of ruling illusions about the efficacy and inevitability of the virtualization of experience. Here, the future of the hyperhuman body is translated into the language of public policy for immediate circulation through the international networks of political power. When the Red Guard meets the (technotopian) members of Generation X on the common ground of missionary enthusiasm for pan-capitalism, they insert themselves into the political economy of virtual reality as its leading elites. As the young entrepreneurs of Generation X, the virtual class finally has a name. Under the sign of the Red Guard gone technotopian, it also has an historical destiny—creating a new global “cultural revolution” on behalf of unimpeded virtualized exchange. Finally, in the fusion of the young entrepreneurs of Generation X and the Red Guard, it has a grisly political method: sacrificing human rights at the altar of virtual (economic) expediency. We're living in the new morning of a big (ideological) sign-switch. The Cold War of hard ideology may finally be over, but the new Cold War of soft ideology, the one that pits the virtual class against all barriers to its global sovereignty, is just beginning.