

The Message is Murder

# The Message is Murder

Substrates of  
Computational Capital

Jonathan Beller

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# Introduction

*“A labyrinth of symbols,” he corrected. “An invisible labyrinth of time.”*

—Borges

It’s not information that wants to be free; it’s us. *The Message is Murder* deduces from the informatic flux that informs the screen-mediated misrecognition endemic to the phrase “information wants to be free,” the concept computational capital in order to track the background calculus of capitalized power as it restructures representation, finance, identity and sociality from the mid-twentieth century forward. Engaging in discrepant readings of Jorge Luis Borges, Alan Turing, Claude Shannon, Alfred Hitchcock and Karl Marx in a first section on discourse, informatics and the value-form, and in studies of photography, cinema and computation as deployments of a logistics of racialized and gendered domination in a second section, *The Message is Murder* analyzes the unthought formations of violence presupposed by and consequent upon the everyday functions of communication’s media, media that are increasingly programmed and programmable—informatic.

It’s not the brand that wants to free itself from the slave. To register the violence endemic to everyday transmissions, this book argues—and in its own way demonstrates—that the rise of information itself is an extension of the ongoing quantification and instrumentalization of the life-world imposed by early capitalism, and further that the abstraction of “information” and its mechanization as “computation” take place in the footprint of the calculus of the value-form and the leveraged value-expropriation of labor by capitalized industry.

The decline of the Fordist factory and the rise of post-Fordism make ambient computation the *mise en scène* of new types of work and new types of exploitation. This situation is most familiar today—if also poorly understood—as “digital culture.” The fact that the worldwide generation of inequalities relies on the generation and intensification of discursive, visual and screen-mediated social difference resultant from its processing by “digital culture” is not an incidental factor in the rise of computational capital and its metrics of quantification but a key feature

of its formation. Built on an axiomatics of racial inequality and gender inequality, today's codifications, abstractions and machines, far from being value-neutral emergences intelligible in some degree-zero history of technology, are rather racial formations, sex-gender formations, and national formations—in short, formations of violence. As we shall see, digital culture is built on and out of the material and epistemological forms of racial capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and permanent war. This violence is literally inscribed in machine architectures and on the bodies and lives of all who are other, particularly those of the Global South, and increasingly the rest. It is recapitulated and re-inscribed by the normal functioning of informatic machines under the protocols of computational capital—an assemblage that as with the name “digital culture,” is once again indexed while being conceptually reduced when rendered in the vernacular as “the media.”

*Brief introduction to the study*

*The Message is Murder* offers a sustained riposte to Marshall McLuhan's oft-repeated formulation “the medium is the message” which locates the primary significance of a new medium in its far-reaching transformation of the sense ratios and its secondary significance in the new practices its mediation of another (prior) medium's content makes possible. Here we see that the world-media system is a means to securitize violence. The book is written in a dissident relation to the burgeoning field of media studies and the deracinated technocratic imaginaries that too often inform its practices. It views the generalized stupidity, ignorance and psychosis as well as the criminal avarice and securitization of countries like the United States of America as screen products—direct results of cinema, television and computation functioning as media of capitalism. Both content fetishism and platform fetishism obscure the geo-political implantation of these media formations—an implantation that is inseparable from both political economy and coloniality. The forces that not only shape our intellect and imagination, but also have in fact become inseparable from what these are, create and indeed *are* the media infrastructure of capitalization. This text then, as a work of writing, of media theory, and necessarily, of financial counter-speculation, must go to some lengths to argue that informatic media formations neither emerge nor function in spaces without qualities, histories, or, for that matter, inequalities. This re-mediation means to say that math, science

and information are not as is usually presumed value-neutral, degree zero conditions of emergence. To take the measure of today's machines and their constitutive operations, to understand the message that is our media, we must do more than focus on *technics*; we must attend to the surround.

In doing so, that is, in paying attention in one way or another to the colonized, the variously embodied and enminded, the possessed and the dispossessed, and, in general to the incorporation and erasure of what from the dominant standpoint appears as external to machines and to fixed capital today, I hope to demonstrate convincingly that most of what we currently think of as technologies, computing machines, and modes of abstraction are imbricated with social practices to such an extent that they themselves cannot properly be said to be stand-alone entities or platforms. Dominant technologies must therefore be seen as racial formations and gender formations as well as programs of capitalization. By this somewhat shocking claim (shocking, at least, to purists of all stripes—for what I am saying here suggests racist *machines* and not just racist academics, racist programmers and racist electorates) I do not mean to assert and do not assert anything ontological about race and gender. Rather, aim is taken at various forms of platform fetishism that draw artificial boundaries between the abstract or technical and everything else. This approach shows—*is designed to show*—that race, gender, media are co-constituents and co-constituted—in short, co-emergent historical formations. Unavoidably today, this co-emergence takes place within and indeed *as* the matrix of capital. Media theory cannot do without critical race theory or critique of political economy. In the current conjuncture, arguably no communiqué is exempt from a decisive relation to what Cedric Robinson rightly termed racial capitalism—or in the formulation I use almost synonymously, computational capital.<sup>1</sup>

The over-arching argument of *Message* is that “the media” as we now call them, are in large part developmental outgrowths of racial capitalism. As such, they (and in a rigorous sense, “we”) are not only means of representation or communication, but means of production. To put this point even more directly, what go under the sign “media” today are in addition to whatever else they are, almost always means for value extraction and for the production and reproduction of inequality. It seems obvious, but inequality is neither just about income nor is it not about income; it is organized and enforced in a matrix of valuation that tracks and weights factors of whiteness, masculinity, geo-location,

citizenship and much more. As this book endeavors to make clear utilizing a variety of attacks on traditional forms of understanding, dominant media formations—including, for example Claude Shannon’s landmark mathematical theory of communication that underpins the capacity to assign numbers to linguistic signs, or, to give another example, the rise of photography—emerge directly out of formations of violence *already presupposed* and thus firmly rooted and re-incorporated in the social and in the imaginary. In their function these and other machines, abstract, concrete, cybernetic, with roots in the plantation, the factory, the colony, the patriarchal household, the university and the jail, reproduce and exacerbate inequality, oftentimes under the guise of a value-neutrality that tends to render their exploitative operations unconscious even if many of the resultant effects do not remain in the unthought, or the unfelt. As we shall see, chemistry, as in the case of photography, and statistics, as in the case of the mathematical theory of communication, cannot be separated from their social basis in racial violence. Suffering (the suffering of others) can never be fully separated from the fact of “Westernized” consciousness and thus logically from capitalizing mediation. Critical race media theory must make these connections.

It is in many ways remarkable that Marx’s labor theory of value has not been widely recognized as being as important as Newton’s theory of gravity. But then again, the orthodoxy of the church was less entrenched than that of capital. Indeed, as 1492 makes abundantly clear, Christian ideology was commandeered by capital as a platform. Ultimately, we must conclude, capital goes deeper than Christ. Consequently, just as Marx set out to reveal the dirty secret of the value form as dissymmetrical exchange between capital and labor, we find ourselves in the position of having to once again investigate that relation as it has mutated or evolved in relation to new machines of value extraction—those that operate on discourse or images by means of number—from within a context that does not perceive the universality of capitalist exploitation. Time and again it seems we must reinvent the wheel. Understanding the historicity of media formations and their (or, again, “our”) current instrumentalization of the *bios* is a matter not merely of intellectual history, or the history of technology; it is, in view of the argument made here, a matter of liberation, and, in the long view, of revolution. It is for this reason—the deferral of revolutionary justice—that I believe that *The Message is Murder* is particularly suited to the current conjuncture characterized by



what, politically at least, looks like fascism. The revanchist return of the phallic pig as leader, this time, as leader of the “free world,” with its racist and sexist id-grunts causing so much pain, is a systemic iteration—the output of an alien calculus capable of capturing and/or bypassing everyday intelligence. One is reminded here of the AI prosthetic composed of the old white man/corpse with a cable plugged into his open skull in China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*. In response to the inter-facialization of power in such ghoulish form (and leaving aside for the moment the tremendous aesthetic repulsion generated by the mere faces of the white monsters in White Houses everywhere), this book is in dialogue with and is to some extent written by the long-standing protests and movements organized against inequality from multiple quarters on the left. Here, but polemically stated, not just here, race, gender, mediation, financialization, and exploitation are of a piece and must be thought together if a radical left is to reinvent itself in the rising geopolitical concatenation of the many fascisms—what I think of as a new geopolitical form: fractal fascism interfacing what has become a kind of platform totalitarianism. This thinking of the separated (and indeed segregated) together, in terms suggested by the notion of an historical or planetary totality organized by computational media working as the fixed capital of the distributed social factory is a disturbingly difficult task given its profound importance. What is at stake in a critical race media theory is the very question of radical comprehensive transformation. The inertial structures of understanding, perception and semiosis inveigh against a concerted revolutionary praxis of theory, in part because of institutional pressures and conventions of “disciplines,” and in larger part because these resources of the senses, the intellect, and the will are subsumed and automated in the operations and renderings of “technology” itself.

This latter issue of cognitive subsumption by ambient technology poses the problem of so-called common sense—particularly as technologies and the thoughts they script are increasingly vectors of capitalization. With media convergence and the rise of what I call Digital Culture 2 (DC 2) all prior media platforms: books, films, videos, photographs and even language itself, are being subsumed by computation. I say DC 2 because I argue in this book that what passes today for “digital culture” (and therefore as a kind of radical break) is actually digital culture 2.0. Global commodification, settler colonialism, the mercantile system, the middle passage, slavery, plantations, and industrial capitalism instantiated a first order digital culture (Digital

Culture 1 or DC 1) with universalizing aspirations through the globally expansive assignation of quantity to qualities from the early modern period forward. This earlier period of digitization had many names, most tellingly if also disavowingly perhaps, “Humanism,” but its overarching operation was the (uneven) commodification of life. “Man,” the new trump card that legitimated historically unprecedented forms of violence and genocide, was the measure of all things, but few thought to ask, what, was the measure of “man?” We no longer really have to wonder about the answer to that question since financial relations have so thoroughly and humiliatingly taken even *his* measure as a matter of practice. Those dispossessed of wealth cannot claim humanity and indeed “humanity” constitutes itself in and through the very dispossession of those who are denied communion in its sweetness and light. The legitimation of these relations of exploitation by which certain minority populations lord their humanity over the very people and peoples from whom they have procured it—precisely the peoples whom they have reduced in their own self-serving narcissism and psychosis to sub- and in-human status—are among the many pyrotechnics of the value form—one if its messages, you might say. Today media recreates Lords of humankind, as lords of the various media pathways to devaluation and dispossession. One technical effect among many, one message that inheres in the operations of “the media.”

But even this ruse of humane sovereignty is collapsing from its internal contradictions. From airline accommodations to state proclamations, the civil veneer peels off, leaving only aggression, crass vindictive behaviour and bad manners. From a decolonizing perspective, the movement of “Humanism” (DC 1) to “Posthumanism” (DC 2), along with the rise of digital machines represents not a break but a shift in the granularity and scale of exploitation and struggle. Colonialism merely gives way to Computational Colonialism. “Man,” formerly the subjective presentation of the universal value form of capital is an antiquated technology slated for replacement by a new order of colonization. Where for the subject “Man” the colonial world was perceived as populated by a sea of infantile sub-humans, in the post-human world, machine-dividuals perceive a matrix of images to be managed. Those of us who perceive that vital aspects of our extended being are enslaved, othered, black, see the master, whether embodied, machinic, affective, spatial, proprietary, algorithmic or whatever, as an alien presence, a body-snatcher. We strain ourselves to warn each other, “Get out!”

With that warning in mind, another of the fundamental theses informing this book is that discrete-state machines, that is, “computers,” emerge in the footprint of problems scripted by the value-form. One could indeed argue this thesis by tracing the modern computer back to the brilliance of Charles Babbage and Lady Lovelace and their early nineteenth century efforts on “the analytic engine” and “the difference engine” to industrialize mathematical calculations via steam in order to save human labor in calculation. Or one could look to Marx’s fragments on the machine that describe the fixed capital of industrialization as a “vast automaton.” We might see clearly from these texts that the blueprint for modern computation already lay in the routinizing and bureaucratizing functions of the industrial machine as it applied not only to labor but to thinking, and as consequent from the suddenly apparent God-like power and range of machinic calculus following upon capital’s “liberation of the productive forces;” their liberation, that is, from the producers. The “conscious organ” of the industrial machine, namely the worker, gives rise to the conscious organ of the post-industrial machine—you.

The expropriation of the worker’s product meant and always means not just expropriated labor in a deracinated sense, but expropriated subjectivity—the early Marx’s “sensuous labor.” The mechanization of routine mental processes was a dream of both industry and computation. For capital, even in the industrial period, there was and remains a use-value for the development of metrics, the systematicization of most efficient means, and the development of systems of account: the factory code, the streamlining of work-flow charts, the “one best way,” Taylorization, and elsewhere “Fordism” or “Americanism,” shows us that. “The one best way” set its sights on not just corporeal but on the cognitive function of the “trained gorilla.” The expanding footprint of industrial capital required the mechanization and automation of the development not simply of machines of value extraction and disciplinary regimes of work through the by now traditional methods of wage-labor, but of the very methods and techniques of capital expansion: banking, management and communications infrastructure, monitoring of work-flow, inventory tracking, and the increasing integration of all human processes with methods of account: in short, cybernetics and information management. The overtaking of the icon “man” as the privileged point of subjectification by the new and astonishing agency of financialized intelligent machines reveals man for what it was—a now obsolescent platform of

the operating system of heteropatriarchy and racial capitalism during DC 1.

Additionally, when bureaucratic (scientific) management becomes an industry in its own right, information becomes the general name for its product, its medium. The stuff we call “information,” though ostensibly ahistorical, has a history—we are only beginning to discover how important that history is. For this book however, in order to expose certain aspects of information that are generally unacknowledged, I will rely not on industrial history, nor strictly speaking on the history of information theory, but upon various mid-twentieth century accounts of information that show it to function homologously to valuation. In historical hindsight the glimmers of an emergent informatics can be quite clearly apprehended as the direct and necessary elaboration of aspects of the operation of the value form in domains from which it was historically excluded but nonetheless needed to be colonized if the algorithm of profit was to continue its do or die expansive course. As will be indicated, the story of information is the story of the financialization of the formerly extra-economic domains including culture, communication and cognition. Information becomes the privileged medium of capital’s message.

As with the argument that contemporary media are media of racial capitalism, I will be less invested here in offering a historical proof that information evolves in the footprint of the value form and more interested in deploying the argument as a heuristic device. If these two arguments: 1) that contemporary media are media of racial capitalism and 2) that information evolves in the footprint of the value-form, explain multiple phenomena better than other schemas, if they offer unexpected connections and provide new possibilities for thought, research and action, I will consider the arguments made.

Informatics implies the generalization of a quantifiable environment, an environment quantifiable in principle and one that opens everything in its purview not only to mathematical analysis but to a computable calculus of risk/reward, that is, to statistical analysis and to capitalist exploitation. It opens, in short, a new territory extending to all scales of space and time. It penetrates and surveys the colonial surround while inventing new forms of employ. As we shall see, “information” is not just “a difference that makes a difference” as Gregory Bateson famously suggested, it is a dialectical advance of the calculus of the value-form as historically worked up in the organization of the life-world by the system of abstractions

short-handed as “capital,” innovated in order that the financialization of all that appears, has appeared or could ever appear becomes historically possible, historically probable. The difference that information makes is in the first and last instance a social difference: revising Bateson, information is the difference that makes a social difference.

The development of digital metrics of account—discrete state machines and their many affordances—are in fact new ways of pricing what are effectively the productive and reproductive metabolic activities of socio-historical life. Along with that comes the invention of new forms of work and new modes of valorization. One could hope for more from critical theory than simply finding out that as a new condensation of social logic the Facebook “like” is a pinnacle of human achievement—and it would be overhasty to conclude that the present regime of financialization exhausted the possibilities that inhere in the paradigm of information, just as it would be overhasty (or at least pointless) to conclude that there was no hope for a planet playing host to the virulent, material intelligence of computational capital. But, for there to be some new, salient hope, we must clearly mark the transformation of labor (attention economies, neuro-power), of the value-form (derivatives, web-based “likes,” crypto-currencies), of fixed capital (social-media, computers, codifications of race and gender through encoding skin, fashion, bodies, minds, religions and regions) and of accumulation strategies (media companies, sovereign debt, border walls, spectacle, clouds)—as symptoms of DC2 and its far reaching liquidation of tradition ... and of traditions, and we must solemnly note, of many of the people who had and still have them. “We” must begin to reckon with historical tragedies and crimes, as well as with ongoing tragedies and crimes as precisely the racial, gendered, nationalist formations of violence that inhere in what we think of simply as “technologies.”

Though it may be as obvious as it is troubling to point this situation out, in some circles it is still necessary to underscore as significant that there are those whose chances of liquidation are for programmatic, but nonetheless historical reasons, proportionally higher. Witness the brilliantly statistical ring to Ruthie Gilmore’s widely cited definition of racism: “Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>2</sup> What are the media of this calculus and what are their histories of formation? In this text we will find that racism, in addition to being state-sanctioned, extra-judicial, institutionalized and otherwise

legitimated is machine-sanctioned, data-visualization-sanctioned, and financialization-sanctioned as well. As statistically mediated, racism is part of what became “the science of distribution.”<sup>3</sup>

From this description of a relationship between financialized machine-media and “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,” the reader may perceive in outline the overarching media theoretical claim that informs this book: Racial Capitalism plus the notion of informatics as an extension and intensification of the dynamics of the value form diagrams a rudimentary notion of what I call Computational Capital. This term means not just capitalism as a computer, nor simply capitalism with or by means of the digital computer, it means capitalism as a digitally enabled program of accumulation and dispossession; capitalism as the deployment and intensive development of algorithms of inequality.

Digitization as we know it and live it is inseparable from financialization, informationalization and statistical analysis, and inseparable again from the imposition of standards of normativity and deviance that encode and thus over-determine the semiotic parameters of bodily phenotype, geo-location, gender and sexuality, among many other variables. As Robin Kelley explains in “Thug Nation: On State Violence and Disposability,” and as Katherine Mckittrick, drawing on Simone Browne shows in “Mathematics Black Life,” archives, metrics, words, and mass media representations, are the result of and repository of racial violence, and they reproduce racial violence.<sup>4</sup> If digitization results in what Matteo Pasquinelli has called “algorithmic governance” and what Benjamin Bratton terms “platform sovereignty,”<sup>5</sup> then the rise of DC 2 means a new stage of colonization. These descriptors, it must be emphasized, are ways of talking not about information in the abstract, but about the current form of *capitalist* society, where “control,” as Sebastian Franklin calls it, has been submerged into the material operations of apparatuses, without any necessary alleviation of inequality. Rather than seeing an abatement of racism in the play of “color-blind” technologies, we experience its automation. What I am calling computational colonialism means an extractive and violent mediation at scales ranging from the sub-atomic to the planetary that result in the devaluation and dispossession of people(s). It is presided over by in/post-humans (though for the satisfaction of some “humans”). “Platform totalitarianism” more accurately reflects my own view of a systemic aspiration that must be fought at every turn; it flags the degree of capture and the multiple