

The Quirks of Digital Culture

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CONTENTS

<i>About the Author</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1. Digital Culture and Its Quirks	1
2. The Order of Things	11
3. Total Recall: The Past, Present and Future	39
4. The Comforts and Discomforts of Connection	55
5. The Demands of On-demand Culture	81
<i>Notes</i>	87
<i>Index</i>	105

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David Beer is Professor of Sociology at the University of York. He is the author of *Georg Simmel's Concluding Thoughts* (2019), *The Data Gaze* (2018), *Metric Power* (2016), *Punk Sociology* (2014), *Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation* (2013) and *New Media: The Key Concepts* (2008, with Nicholas Gane) and is the Editor of *The Social Power of Algorithms* (2018).

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DIGITAL CULTURE AND ITS QUIRKS

Last year I began to put a lecture together on memes. I was searching through pages and pages of memes, trying to familiarise myself with what was going on. It was like standing at the edge of a huddle of people who were all laughing together at an inside joke. Some of the memes made sense, lots were unpalatable or offensive, but many more passed me by. And these were just the ‘normie’ memes, those considered most mainstream and uncool, I didn’t even manage to locate the inner circle that is defined by the ‘dank’ meme. What these pages of memes visualised for me was the deep complexity and unfathomability of this scene. I was confronted with an insider/outsider terminology and images, trends that arrive and die-out quickly, heightened ephemerality and the piling-up of cultural detritus on a mass scale. It was not just my age that put me on the edge of all of this, the fragmentation and scale of these formations are baffling in itself.

There is something intangible and hard to grasp about culture today. The sheer scale of the mediated world that we are exposed to often seems unfathomable. Its glossy surfaces distract from its shadowy, splintered interior. The dazzling glint makes it hard to see its workings. The big tech companies encourage us to be ever more connected, as if that is the solution to all problems. The more connected we are, they say, the greater the possibilities and the purer the social experience. Based on some powerful promises, in the last 10 years a dizzying range of devices and media platforms have worked their way into our lives, shifting how we live, what we know, what we encounter and how we connect with each other. ‘Platform Capitalism’,¹ as it has been called, may be burgeoning, but we also have something close

to a new type of *on-demand* or *platform* culture emerging. As we live *on* and *within* platforms, so culture takes on and becomes mediated by their properties. There are some noticeable and profound changes to culture that are occurring with these moves. As a result, algorithms order that world for us, curating it, giving us the bits that they, according to their coding models, think that we are most likely to react to. We end up with a reductive and smoothed-out version of the deafening noise of content that is out there. A whole new politics of visibility is emerging, in which power is in the hands of those who manage to get heard over the rumbling noise of all that content. This type of glossy visibility is embodied in various ways, from social media influencers and famous YouTubers, to celebrities' social media profiles through to algorithmically defined news feeds and recommendations. The volume of content out there is chaotic and messy, a massive cultural din, a cacophony of voices, ideas and views.

Writing in April 1970 the Marxist thinker Louis Althusser offered a series of reflections on the reproduction of capitalism. The resulting essay 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus'² attempted to understand how ideas and beliefs could circulate in ways that enable the structures, hierarchies and labour practices of capitalism to continue. We need not buy into all of the arguments in that essay to see value in one of the key concepts that it offers, 'interpellation'. In one famous passage Althusser claims that '*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*'.³ His argument continues by suggesting that we become subjects when exposed to the ideologies woven into culture. As such, these ideologies 'recruit' us as subjects. Althusser continues by building towards some distinctive imagery:

*ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individual into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'*⁴

The concept of interpellation is about attention, inescapability and the way in which ideology finds us. This combination of features is captured in Althusser's claim that: 'assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round'.⁵ As we spin

to face the voice, we are interpellated. The point here is that we can't help but turn towards the hailing voice and in so doing we are exposed to those ideologies embedded in culture. We become interpellated in our reflex response to hearing those calls. This doesn't just pose questions about the drawing of our attention, it also requires reflection on which hailing we respond to, how we react and how we become subjected to wider ideas about the world. There is, Althusser goes on to claim, no outside to ideology and we can't resist the hailing. Althusser even suggests that we can be made to feel that we are somehow outside or removed from how ideology works and how it acts on us, but this is to mislead ourselves.⁶ It is this moment of the subjection of individuals to culture that we could question further. We might wonder how interpellation works in today's fragmented and complex mediated landscape.

The masses of content crammed into and piling up on these platforms constantly shouts for our attention. Louis Althusser's vision of 'interpellation' needs to be rethought a little. The shouts of 'hey you there!'⁷ come from many more sources. We still can't help but turn to face the caller, but where to look first and how long should that thing sustain our attention? Now that street-scene that Althusser used as a metaphor is crammed full of people desperately screaming our monikers, repeatedly. It leaves us spinning. We still can't help but look, we are still interpellated, but we are never quite sure which call to respond to or which way to look. The call is inescapable but has become much more disorientating as we spin to the various sources of that hailing. All these agendas compete for our attention, influencing the systems and the content that shape our everyday lives. There is an inescapable maelstrom of 'pulsating life'⁸ that we are expected to interface with and contribute to. That might seem a daunting prospect when put it like that, yet we have become fairly accustomed to navigating these scenes, it is so familiar to us that we have become highly skilled at managing these environments, even if we can't always cope with them.

The on-demand nature of cultural consumption has also changed the *rhythms* and *gaps* of entertainment and distraction: from stories of the use of our data, the 'flickering friendships'⁹ of social media and fast moving memes, through to the disruption of traditional media outlets and on to the way we are connected, networked and interfaced. It is hard to know where to start if we want to understand what is happening. As the hailing becomes multidirectional, so the ideologies people grab onto to can become

more fragmented. The shifts in culture that we are seeing are outpacing our understanding of them. Algorithms are layered one-on-one, shaping decision-making processes and meshing together different forms of agency. Our phones have moved from momentary tools of connection to being deeply embedded in our everyday and bodily practices. Let me just pause here to check my notifications ... again. Social media haven't just added a new means for maintaining our relationships, they have altered how we live and how we understand those relations. It is worth noting here that Facebook, with a typically virtuous claim about focussing on 'meaningful relationships', plan to add a dating service to their platform to rival Tinder.¹⁰ Couched in this normalising language and despite the concerns over data use it seems that they seek to create greater data intimacy and to intervene ever further into social relations.

Research has also suggested that data are extracted in many different ways by the apps we have running on our smartphones. It is not only the companies operating those apps accessing our data but much of it also ends up circulating into the hands of a small number of tech giants – with 88% of the app harvested data ending up in the hands of Alphabet and over 40% of it in the hands of Facebook.¹¹ This is without even considering the archetypal platform WeChat, that incorporates everything from purchasing to messaging, and which users never need to leave. There is a complexity and scale to data extraction and use, of which most is beyond our awareness. A recent report from Doteveryone has indicated the limited knowledge that people have over their data use, which is complemented by the sense of a lack of control that they feel they have over those data.¹² For instance, that report indicated that 80% of people weren't aware that 'information which other people share about them is collected', culture is unfathomable and so is the data infrastructure through which it is consumed. What we might think of as privacy – and the perception of privacy – has altered as we turn our lives into media content and as the large tech companies and other actors seek to gain insights into how we live, what we do and who we are. If I were writing this paragraph 10 years ago it would have sounded hyperbolic, but now I am probably understating the case. Digital or on-demand culture is not just about what we demand; it also demands things of us. It demands our attention, it demands our activity, it demands our engagement, it demands our lives, our tastes, our choices and our data.

Amongst all this chaos it is hard to understand what is unfolding. The breadth of these fluxes is baffling, ranging from the trivial to the apparently momentous. On the surface it is often the case that the features of our digital culture don't seem to represent much beyond a fleeting moment, a surface effect, some brief flickering event or an attention-grabbing bit of gossip. It would be easy to dismiss such things as glossy, superficial and ephemeral. In many ways they are, yet this doesn't mean that they don't represent something more substantial. It would be easy to ignore a lot of the here-today-gone-tomorrow bits of culture that we routinely encounter and to which we give a little thought. Some of these ephemera, these fleeting things, actually call for us to pause and take seriously what they mean, even if they themselves are quite disposable or appear inconsequential. Those *quirks* matter; they can be used to reveal something; they give us a way into exploring the particular dynamics of the culture and media that shape our lives – affording us ways into seeing the powerful inequalities, prejudices, maltreatments and divisions that are at play along with the new connections, changes and shifts. Digital culture can seem decorative, yet it is still defined by ruptures as much as by the new connections it enables.

As digital culture has been lifted on to media platforms, our everyday experiences are full of quirks. Often unnoticed, these quirks accumulate and occupy our daily experiences. It is possible that they can be the means by which we come, in aggregate, to know the world and to have a sense of our place within it. This book deals with just a few of those quirks. The volume of experiences in the splintering mediascape mean that I am only scratching the surface with my selections, I am only touching upon the underpinning patterns and dynamics. Plus, I am, of course, only responding to things that come into my orbit, which is also inevitably a product of these media circulations themselves. This book seeks to ask questions about what is going on and to find openings, it is by no means definitive or complete. Indeed, we might wonder if a complete vision is possible given the maelstrom of culture and media today. The chapters that follow focus upon these little tangles and creases to explore the often strange but compelling processes that they reveal or encapsulate. Each quirk is a kind of microcosm of the state of things, each can be used to create a small tear through which we might see how our lives are being shaped by these cultural formations.

This book deals with a series of such quirks. It opens them up, examines them and reflects on what their presence reveals. It looks at the fragments of our fragmentary experiences, what the classical sociologist Georg Simmel once described as ‘the fragmentary character of life’,¹³ to see what each shard might say. I hope that you will see each of the chapters as containing a series of provocations or brief reflections on these rapid and swirling media spaces that we occupy – from old episodes of TV game shows, to the end of phone directories, through to the connections we have with our devices and the personalisation of advertising. Each chapter is an opening, a pause for reflection in this gusting cultural landscape. The chapters don’t fit together to create a complete jigsaw. Instead the book reflects something of what it is like to live in the fragments of a platform or on-demand culture. Looking at the fragments, pausing on the quirks, can give us little glimpses behind the curtain and a sense of what is driving and shaping the highly mediated lives we lead.

This book is presented like a vinyl record, a mini-album or EP perhaps, you can drop the stylus wherever you like. There are no prerequisites, the reader can drop in and out, or you can choose listen all the way through. Each of the chapters unpicks a series of quirks to reveal something more at play. It couldn’t possibly cover all of the events and issues that have arisen over recent years, one of the points is that these fragments are too numerous to be seen all at once. Instead it is selective, buzzing towards things that begin to build a picture. In this sense, what I offer here is inspired by what David Frisby once described as ‘sociological impressionism’.¹⁴ The quirks gathered in its pages are intended to give an impression of the shifts that are now shaping our lives. The importance of *the quirk* is that it gives a little rupture that we can use, in broad brush strokes, to sketch out that impression.

Of course, what I am describing here as platform or on-demand culture – by which we can mean culture produced for and consumed through the many available platforms, from Netflix to Spotify, Facebook to Amazon, Youtube, Google, Instagram, Twitter, WeChat, Deliveroo and the like through to gaming platforms like Roblox or Minecraft – is inseparable from the dynamics of the new types of capitalism that are emerging. In its simplest form this is a kind of capitalism that is almost entirely underpinned by data. Yet this is not the only change. Power is now working in some novel and interesting ways, acting upon us in frequently unseen and unnoticed ways. This is partly about the use of our data, but it goes further.

A BIT MORE CONTEXT: CREW-NECK CAPITALISM

Capitalism has long been defined by collars. Blue or white: collars have crudely demarcated belonging, status and position. A different collar is now taking on a defining role in contemporary capitalism: the crew neck. Like the collars that went before, this collar symbolises an underlying agenda and logic.

The major players in what has been referred to by Nick Srnicek as ‘platform capitalism’¹⁵ embody crew-neck capitalism and its values. They eschew the collar and tie combination in favour of crew-neck comfort. This projects a certain image, of a non-hierarchical, non-commercial and care-free status. An apparent anti-elite elite is created that has positioned itself in a way that seems to render it immune to the anti-elite sentiment – it even draws its status from it. It aligns itself with such anti-elitism and so avoids becoming its target. It is not just that the capitalist’s attire has become more casual, it is that capitalism has taken on an appearance of casualness in order to distract from its behaviours, actions and authorities.

Crew-neck capitalism is about casualisation. Casualisation on all fronts. A casual adornment is symbolic of the casualisation of the relations of production and consumption. The nature of work and the nature of consumer interaction are embodied in the crew neck. Crew-neck capitalism promotes the idea that all labour, like its fashions, should be as casual as possible – hence the crew neck reflects and somehow justifies the now familiar problems of casualised labour. The hyper-insecurity of the gig economy is the archetypal model here. The crew neck says that all work should be casual in style and causal in form. This casualisation of clothing is a veil for the collateral casualties of this form of capitalism. Alongside this, the style of the crew-neck capitalist lulls the consumer towards a sense of comfortable acceptance and reassured engagement with their products.

The crew neck itself is symbolic, it tells you not to worry, it says that they are one of you not one of them. Rather than being some distant money-maker, the crew-neck capitalist likes you to think that they share your outlook and values. The attire erodes the sense of distance and veils power. It is more than a clothing choice by these powerful individuals, it captures and projects certain properties. A casualness of demeanour could well distract from what Zygmunt Bauman once referred to as the ‘collateral damage’ of capitalism.¹⁶

The crew-neck capitalist can make off-the-cuff comments about protecting the integrity of national elections and no one will recoil in horror. Indeed, it can be seen as helpful of them to make such promises. They seek to be trusted with this bizarre and worrying level of power that they wield. They want you to feel ok about it.

A crew-neck capitalist is fairly easy to spot. They usually run a large tech company – or they might be found in prototype form in smaller start-ups or in those interloper companies that get bought up by the tech giants. The exit strategy is a valued asset of the nascent crew necker.

Most common with some of the biggest tech firms, this is a mode of presentation replicated increasingly in other types of companies. It calls out: I don't need to dress for the job I have, because status doesn't matter, I built it and now I just happen to run this thing.

But it is not just the clothing that matters, rather the clothing is representative of an approach, an image and a set of ideals. The casual tone and familiarity permeates down into our interactions with these companies and platforms. This tone is peppered across the interactions and points of contact that we have with crew-neck capitalism (some of which I will highlight in later chapters). It is highly likely that we have all experienced the causal tone and over familiarity of an app or software update message, or we have received messages of Christmas or birthday wishes from a company that doesn't know us, or we have faced the constant encouragement to tell them, our capitalists friends, what is going on in our lives. It is a learned unprofessional tone that eases us into a sense that no one around here is anything like a hard-nosed capitalist, no one, we are reassured, is in any way trying to exploit us. They just want us all to connect together to make a better world. They project the friendly facilitator type image, playing down the money, power and influence.

The casualness brings a kind of distancing from older more formal approaches, the new tech is not managed in those old ways, so they tell us. The tech leaders no longer see themselves as distant from their customers. Instead, the casualness in the clothing and tone is part of an attempt at giving an impression of a break down in hierarchy. They are no longer dominating us or managing the production of value from our custom, instead they are like us and they have the enhancement of our experiences in mind. At least that seems to be the message. Everything is about the user experience and how that can be enhanced, even where the notion of experience

is itself used as a way to render acceptable the use of our data and the targeting of our lives.

The crew-neck capitalist seeks to sell ideals; these are ideals or visions of a kind of pure or perfect experience that can be pursued in perpetuity. This future, which they assume we also want, stands as a kind of imagined perfect experience in which we are never disrupted, in which our social spaces are ever more tailored to us, where we encounter the things that suit us or that reinforce our identities. This pure experience that they promote as being our shared destination is, they imagine, free from malevolence and subversion, it is exactly, they suggest, as we would want it to be. A perfect and perfectible social environment where all they are prioritising is our experience. That is the vision of the crew-neck capitalist. They make out that our experience is central to everything and that serving that experience is their calling; the rest, it would seem, falls into place in response to that calling. Their mission, far from being economically driven, is simply to remove the impurities from those experiences and to make them increasingly pure. The notion of *experience* becomes a powerful part of the rhetoric of the crew-neck capitalist, it is the thing they fall back on to justify and legitimate their every action.

Overall, their T-shirts tell us not to worry for they are one of us rather than being one of those other exploitative capitalists. It is important not to be distracted by their casual attire or their informal tone, these techno-capitalists mean business. And their business is to turn our lives into economic value. This model of capitalism requires a casual faux-familiarity because it is reliant on us sharing things with it and engaging with it on its own terms. These media demand intimacy, and so they need a familiar feel.

We find the casual tone of the crew-neck capitalist all around us in the platforms of our digital culture, we hardly even notice its presence, it has already become too familiar. We are often addressed in a kind of ironic or playful tone, a tone intended to make us feel at ease, like we can trust the platform and like they are one of us, providing the things we want, sharing our values and having our best possible experiences as their goal. They often assume that we share their ideals or their visions of a desirable future. When we hear casual discussions of purer experiences, perfect convenience or growing connections, the question we could ask the crew-neck capitalist is what they are using that pursuit of a pure experience to achieve. It may

well be used to justify some attempts to extract more data or to make some form of surveillance and targeting seem like it is in our best interest.

This is the capitalist underpinnings of our cultural scene. The book feeds out from these initial observations, thinking about the way that those forms of power seep into everyday life in different forms whilst also considering how the features of our digital or platform culture open up what is happening within capitalism in some revealing ways. The language of convenience, experience and opportunity are part of this. If we want to understand how life is transforming, we need to understand what happens when culture moves onto platforms. Some of the biggest questions we face today – about how politics works, about how we connect with each other, about how we are nudged or our behaviours are guided, about how discretion might be eroded or social relations unhinged, about how we might withdraw or how we might get tangled into intense interaction, how worlds and worldviews are shaped, and so on – are connected with the types of platform-based culture that we now participate within. Culture has changed in the last decade or so, the platform defined cultures that have emerged are not as inconsequential or superficial as they might seem, they are all about power, politics and the remaking of what we might still want to call the social world that we occupy. This book is not an attack on these platforms, I am not whining about some lost halcyon or analogue days, it is an attempt to acknowledge and understand something that will continue to have a profound influence over our lives long into the future. How we then choose to live within platform culture can at least be something we have an active part within.