Biting the Apple (or not)

iPhones, iPads, & MacBooks are a narcissist's dream, but can they also be an organizer's tool?

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It seems apt now, a few months after Steve Jobs passed away, to turn a skeptical eye to the energetic display of grief that followed the news of his demise on October 5. For a few weeks thereafter, one could hardly turn on the radio, open the newspaper, or cue up the blogs on one's iPhone without encountering another paean to the creative genius of Apple's creator, another toast to the brave new world incubated by his products. Quibbles about the advisability of transferring our social and cultural lives to screens were shrugged off as misanthropy, or worse, Luddism.

But we should take advantage of the renewed attention to Apple's place in society to talk about what this corporation means for us. More specifically, its seems a good time to turn some serious critical thought towards the rapid preponderance of Macintosh products in many peoples' daily lives (especially in those urban and intellectual centers where most of such critical thought is generated). Also, what this might mean for our behaviors, our bodies, and — dare we say it? — our politics. Such analysis, of course, has been sorely lacking.

We can start by evaluating what seems to be the most typical approach to an Apple critique. Situationist Guy Debord warned in his Society of the Spectacle that a confluence of labor-time, spatial dislocation, and exposure to mass media was alienating individuals from their lives and the people around them. The "spectacle" worked to actively reify — turn into a thing — as much of one's existence as it could, with the end goal of making us all a bunch of brain-dead producer-consumers.

Unlike other Marxian eschatologies of the mid-twentieth century, Debord's analyses proved pretty accurate, and the marketing-saturated, brand-defined, money-measured world in which we find ourselves today is just an extreme version of the early 1960s developed West that Debord found so repugnant.

Using Debord's paradigm, we can see Apple as a kind of standard-bearer of technocracy's progress. The iPhone is the handheld spectacle: real human interaction replaced by text-filled blue and green bubbles, space presented as a 3.5 inch roving map, entertainment and release largely monetized and prepackaged. The more time one spends with Apple's products, the more effectively one is swallowed into a world governed by virtuality and commerce rather than, say, immediacy and reciprocity. The prevalence of these products means that the texture of experience is increasingly manufactured in Apple laboratories in Cupertino, California. The ease with which

users are drawn into such a seemingly unhealthy dynamic is at least partly explained by the seduction of Jobs' creations. One wants to pick up an iPhone and fiddle around with it; the OS X operating system is hard not to get lost in.

John Zerzan, the most vociferous expounder of the anti-technology critique of the spectacle (Debord himself had great hopes for the emancipatory possibilities of computers), has perceptively noted the Biblical overtones of the name of Jobs' company in his lecture "Against Technology."

We bite the Apple; we can't resist it. The MacBook, iPhone, and iPad are a narcissist's dream toy. It's as though the pond of Greek myth could play me my favorite songs, give me directions to my favorite restaurants, provide me representations of my favorite friends. The screen becomes me. I become the screen.

What's overlooked in this approach, though, is the intensely social nature of Apple's technology. Conviviality is the distinguishing feature of the brand, the cultural marker that motivates those Mac vs. PC ads or the seemingly universal impression that Apple is somehow cooler than its rivals.

People use its products not just to organize and entertain themselves when alone but also to chat with other people and to share things — and sharing, in the carefully crafted architecture of the Apple social world, often leads to buying. Less cynically, the convenience of mobile Internet connections, webcams, and location-based software can help people to overcome traditional barriers to social organizing and agitation.

Macintosh products, along with others, have played at least a small role in helping the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements move briskly along.

We find ourselves stuck, then, with a contradiction between two pretty convincing positions: Apple's products cut us off from authentic experience and trap us in a false reality of auto-gratification, and Apple's products open up new frontiers of experience in which we can share and socialize with others.

Where do we turn for an answer?

First, we have to decide our criteria for judging personal technology. For whose benefit are these products supposed to work? The individual? Society? Do we praise or condemn them based on their effects on isolated users or on the community as a whole? Is self-expression or camaraderie more important? Is involution the price of larger and more effective social networks?

Similar questions have been bandied about in some form or another since the beginnings of political philosophy, and before we try to answer them it's worth noting that personal technology companies, Apple included, don't really care (if you'll forgive assigning emotive agency to them) about the distinction between person and collective.

In fact, part of the strategy behind making an iPhone an essential part of one's daily routine is precisely the blurring of the line between me and all of you. This blurring is accomplished not least by the physical identity of the two terms: on a 3.5 inch screen, you and I collide; our words, pictures, and GPS markings overlap and intermingle. Individual expression becomes communal expression and vice versa, with opinion and assent marked by stars next to song titles or numbers next to an app's download statistics.

Everything is at once private ("My Location," "My Photos") and public ("Ted is on the Boston Common," "Ted has shared a photo"). Space, speech, and property, perhaps the three most reliable indicators of the line between the individual and society, are silent.

The slipperiness of Apple's impact on individuality and society — and the implications that has for a critique of the company and what that critique might base itself on — is perhaps best explained by the fact that we're talking about a product (read: commodity). You hold it in your hand, you store it with your information, you receive calls on it: it's yours. The steep price of this little gadget represents a significant investment of your own labor-time and the right to call it your property.

But wait: that large Apple logo on the back, on the loading screen, in the apps, suggest a different ownership, the claim of another master. Proprietary software (which you don't own and can't control) is required to run your product. If you disobey — as many first-generation iPhone owners did by switching their service to non-approved carriers — the corporation sends a killer app and shuts down "your" gadget. It's almost as if the metal case, the hardware, the power charger were indisputably yours, but everything that they are capable of — the whole reason you bought the thing in the first place — are beyond your domain.

And, that other stuff is not just in the control of Apple, Inc.: in order to fully take advantage of your MacBook or iPhone or whatever, you have to engage, immerse yourself in an online social network or text friends or mark your location in stores — in other words, hand your device over to other members of society. The value of any individual Apple product is thus almost wholly determined by factors outside the owner's control, and what we had thought was the ultimate tool of self-absorption turns out to be useless unless given over to others.

Again, the individual and society are blurred beyond distinction.

So, we still don't know how to judge personal technologies like Apple's. It's unclear whether we can even pose the question of how they benefit or disrupt individual and societal dynamics. One thing we can fruitfully assess, though, is Apple's cultural standing. It's important to keep in mind that the company is much more than a purveyor of toys.

It is a veritable cultural institution, both a brand and a symbol that derives its identity largely, but not entirely, from what it makes. In working towards a critique of the corporation, then, we have to confront not just the use of its products but also the widespread perception of its allure.

What was most surprising about the reaction to Jobs' passing was not its size — this is a man, after all, who had a rather large effect on many millions of people's behavior — but the way in which Jobs was hailed as some type of creative icon, an almost mystical Silicon Valley guru.

Since the late nineties, Apple has occupied a rapidly growing niche of "other" technologies whose smartness and sleek design set them apart from the staid, suit-like conformity of IBM or Microsoft. By buying and using alternative products, one apparently became alternative oneself.

Indeed, Apple is one of the most powerful brand markers that people use to establish their tenuous, amorphous identities as consumers. Cultural cachet is instantly established by pulling out a MacBook in a crowded cafe. What's more, once one is inside Apple's products the opportunities for brand-identification proliferate, with iTunes libraries and app downloads saying a lot about who you "are."

Of course, Jobs' company is not after cultural standing or coolness. Those are merely means, among many others, to a single end: profit. By inverting this means-ends equation and selling consumers on its authenticity, Apple is able to both dominate the market and keep its prices high. More important for our discussion, though, is that this branding game serves as a gigantic blind for the pressing question: how desirable — for an individual or for society — is the widespread use of Apple products?

Distracted by Apple's encroachment of cultural space and our reaction to that movement (if Bob Dylan is in an iTunes commercial, then it must be okay for me to use it), we don't think to question its validity. Even more effective as a means of bracketing the issue of their ethics is the drummed-up rivalry between products made by Apple, IBM, or Sony.

If we take sides, we don't take time to ask why we're standing on the battlefield in the first place.

This is the monologue of the spectacle that Debord warned about. The essential choice — between having laptops or smart-phones and not having laptops or smartphones — was never really presented, only the choice between which type and how fast. Even more interesting questions, like which parts of personal device culture are good and which are bad, whether we can take some parts of Apple's software and leave others, or how to interact with cutting-edge technology as something other than a consumer, are similarly expelled. Apple wants these questions to get lost; we oblige by swallowing what's given to us and begging for more.

The common response to such calls for corporate accountability — or at least for corporate questioning — is that one doesn't have to buy the company's products if one doesn't want them. Fair enough, but Apple is not just some merchant innocently peddling his wares on the side of the road. It has a tight grip on the daily interactions and habits of a large chunk of our population, has control over where much of digital technology is headed in the next few years, and has seriously damaged the physical and mental health of many of its half-million Chinese workers. It at least seems fair to question its influence on our behavior, our perception, and our bodies.

The upshot of all this is that we need to move our discussion into new terrain.

The nearly unanimous head-bowing following Jobs' passing was depressing enough in its uncriticality. Similarly lackluster, though, would be a debate that pitted an image of evil, alienating technology against liberating, joyful gadgetry.

We can start by asking why someone would think purchasing Apple products makes them a more interesting person, or how to use an iPhone without assuming the identity of an iPhone user.

We can ask if location software can be turned to better uses than tracking your shopping patterns, or how videochatting could be used as a tool for alleviating prisoners' isolation.

What about the technology's potential for education? The possibilities for political liberation?

In order to ask these questions, it's important to keep in mind that the sole manner of weighing in on the discussion need not be the decision to buy or not to buy. Apple's impact on our individual lives and on our society is far more than economic. Recognition of this necessitates confronting Apple, within our movements and in our own consciousness, at every level where it presents itself.

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