THE CRITIQUE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DIGITAL CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY
The Critique of Digital Capitalism
An Analysis of the Political Economy of Digital Culture and Technology

MICHAEL BETANCOURT

Please buy the book from Punctum Books:

· Paperback: 262 pages
· Publisher: Punctum Books (January 7, 2016)
· Language: English
· ISBN-10: 0692598448

Anything that can be automated, will be. The “magic” that digital technology has brought us — self-driving cars, Bitcoin, high frequency trading, the internet of things, social networking, mass surveillance, the 2009 housing bubble — has not been considered from an ideological perspective. The Critique of Digital Capitalism identifies how digital technology has captured contemporary society in a reification of capitalist priorities, and also describes digital capitalism as an ideologically “invisible” framework that is realized in technology. Written as a series of articles between 2003 and 2015, the book provides a broad critical scope for understanding the inherent demands of capitalist protocols for expansion without constraint (regardless of social, legal or ethical limits) that are increasingly being realized as autonomous systems that are no longer dependent on human labor or oversight and implemented without social discussion of their impacts. The digital illusion of infinite resources, infinite production, and no costs appears as an “end to scarcity,” whereby digital production supposedly eliminates costs and makes everything equally available to everyone. This fantasy of production without consumption hides the physical costs and real-world impacts of these technologies.

The critique introduced in this book develops from basic questions about how digital technologies directly change the structure of society: why is “Digital Rights Management” not only the dominant “solution” for distributing digital information, but also the only option being considered? During the burst of the “Housing Bubble” burst 2009, why were the immaterial commodities being traded of primary concern, but the actual physical assets and the impacts on the people living in them generally ignored? How do surveillance (pervasive monitoring) and agnotology (culturally induced ignorance or doubt, particularly the publication of inaccurate or misleading scientific data) coincide as mutually reinforcing technologies of control and restraint? If technology makes the assumptions of its society manifest as instrumentality — then what ideology is being realized in the form of the digital computer? This final question animates the critical framework this analysis proposes.

Digital capitalism is a dramatically new configuration of the historical dynamics of production, labor and consumption that results in a new variant of historical capitalism. This contemporary, globalized network of production and distribution depends on digital capitalism’s refusal of established social restraints: existing laws are an impediment to the transcendent aspects of digital technology. Its utopian claims mask its authoritarian result: the superficial “objectivity” of computer systems are supposed to replace established protections with machinic function — the uniform imposition of whatever ideology informs the design. However, machines are never impartial: they reify the ideologies they are built to enact. The critical analysis of capitalist ideologies as they become digital is essential to challenging this process. Contesting their domination depends on theoretical analysis. This critique challenges received ideas about the relationship between labor, commodity production and value, in the process demonstrating how the historical Marxist analysis depends on assumptions that are no longer valid. This book therefore provides a unique, critical toolset for the analysis of digital capitalist hegemonics.
THE CRITIQUE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DIGITAL CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY
© Michael Betancourt, 2015.

http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/

This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors (in a way that does not suggest the authors or punctum endorse you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license.

First published in 2015 by punctum books Brooklyn, New York http://punctumbooks.com

punctum books is an independent, open-access publisher dedicated to radically creative modes of intellectual inquiry and writing across a whimsical para-humanities assemblage. We solicit and pimp quixotic, sagely mad engagements with textual thought-bodies, and provide shelters for intellectual vagabonds.

Cover Artwork: Michael Betancourt, 2014_023 (0:01; 07:15), July 18, 2014.png. Book design by Jake Valente.

ISBN-10: 0692598448

Facing-page illustration by Heather Masciandaro.
The Valorization of the Author

The digital translates social activity into commodity forms; the creation of “social networks” challenges traditional conceptions of intellectual property and this change makes clear how the rights assigned to the ownership of information come into question with the development of digital technology. That social networks violate privacy and survive through using their member’s information to sell ads is a commonplace observation; the creation of free services enabling anyone with access to them to become an ‘author’ signals a move away from the productive action of humans and towards the automated surveillance (pervasive monitoring) of data collection, collation, and retrieval. This transformation reflects a fundamental shift in our conception of both identity and authorship—with implications for the idea of intellectual property as well.

Digital capitalism’s transformation of non-labor (the various iterations of “social media” and “networking”) into a new type of automated, immaterial production, suggests a new form of authorship that is derived from the historically paired varieties of authorship—the role and status of the author: there is both an empirical (or naive) interpretation and a critical interpretation of the concepts “author” and “au-
With digital technology, a third conception of authorship—the digital author—emerges: the valorization of an individual’s specific, social behavior, an ‘author’ made possible by the data management and recording potentials of digital computers. The concept of ‘privacy’ is therefore utterly foreign to this transformative valorization; the violation of privacy is essential for the transformation of activity into commodity: this is the reason that social networks will and must violate the privacy of their members—for companies such as Facebook or Google to function, they need to collect as much information about their users as possible in order to better tailor sales pitches to the individual interests and tastes of each particular member of their audience—Google’s initial demand that the users of “Google+” use their actual names, rather than be anonymous, is a reflection of this desire to more directly and closely associate specific individuals with the database of information collected about them. The resolution arrived at for this transformative use of another’s existing, recorded labor has already appeared: the battle between musicians and radio over the use of recorded music (records) on air. With musical performances, the performers are theoretically compensated through various licensing procedures, thus avoiding the unpaid valorization of their labor by radio broadcasters. A resolution to the problems posed by digital technologies is still forthcoming. This issue of “authorship” assumes a new status as (historical) capitalism expands into previous, purely social domains as it becomes digital capitalism; understanding the significance of this new digital author depends on acknowledging the ways it exceeds both the empirical and critical conceptions of “authorship.”

The empirical use of “author” is unproblematic: it aspires both to simplicity and to transparency, assuming a direct connection between text and the one responsible for it; it is an ontological connection based on production. For this understanding, the author is the one credited with a “by line”: the person responsible for the existence of a specific text. Coupled with an equally simple and transparent conception of “originality,” it produces the “plagiarist” as a negative
form of author—those authors who falsely claim authorship over works produced by others. DRM formalizes these interpretations in technological restraint; for the empirical interpretation, the “pirate” no less than the plagiarist (the “false-author”) performs actions which establish and support the empirical conception of authorship through the implicit embrace of the claims made. This empirical version of authorship is the most common, intuitively recognizable even in the critical interpretation’s referencing of sources for its argument about a more complex, problematic view of authorship found in writings by Roland Barthes, Michael Foucault, Umberto Eco, et. al.—each of whom propose some variant of authorship that questions the status and importance of the author in determining the meaning of the ‘text,’ but not its production.

The critical understanding is complex, and views “authorship” as problematic. This critical conception blurs the lines between one author and another based on their sharing of common ideas, etc. that have been suggested as the general (indexical) state of language and meaning; it is a semiotic/epistemological approach. By invoking suggestions of a commingling between the empirical version of author and false-author (the plagiarist), the critical view shifts the emphasis to the “reader” and interpretation of the “text” as Roland Barthes makes explicit in his essay *The Death of the Author*:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.¹

His critical view of authorship emphasizes the structural aspects of language and culture that produce the concept of “author” as a specific interpretation generated in relation to a text—what Barthes means by the reader “is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.” This concept of authorship, rather than as an a priori figure that determines meaning, emerges from the relationship between a specific text and its context. This reversal of relationships is a displacement of the common meaning of ‘author’ as the determinant of meaning onto the interpreter. The agency of the author in creating the meaning of a text shifts to actions of the interpreter. The designation “Author” becomes an invented (interpreted) role emergent in how the “reader” engages the text; this is the meaning of Foucault’s author-function.²

Yet, this critical view of “author” is not antithetical to the empirical one. Displacing the meanings of a text from the “author” onto the “reader” in Barthes’ The Death of the Author only appears to reject the empirical author’s ontological relationship to the text; it is a fundamentally different understanding of the “author” concept. What Barthes’ analysis focuses on is not the physical, material object-nature of a specific text but the ascription of meaning to it; consequently, Barthes’ “reader” is epistemological, and so is compatible with the empirical (ontological) concept of “author.” His displacement is an issue of meaning, not production.

While the critical and empirical interpretations are not mutually exclusive, their conflation leads to interpretative confusion when Roland Barthes declares the author “dead.” His claim is at least partially rhetorical since it signals a shift in concerns from the singular, intended meaning imposed by

recourse to an “author,” to an open-ended range of potential interpretations and approaches that could be applied with differing results to the same text. This interpretative range suggests an information space such as the “state of information” where multiple interpreted meanings can coexist even when they are mutually exclusive.

§5.1

Roland Barthes’ recognition that “all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” could be a literal description of the recombinatory process (collage/montage/appropriation) where the quotations themselves are explicit, physical reproductions of their sources. Instead of problematizing authorship this methodology reifies it and enables the valorization process whereby authors become commodities in themselves: the conversion into material for manipulation objectifies its source, emphasizing not the interpretation but the physicality of the original “text.” Barthes’ shift in emphasis exceeds Michel Foucault’s observation about the emergence of an ontological view of authorship:

Speeches and books were assigned real authors, other than mythical or important religious figures, only when the author became subject to punishment and to the extent that his discourse was considered transgressive.  

Recombinant practices, instead of focusing on transgressions of discourse, focus on transgressions of property. The legal conflicts over ‘sampling’ in music support this recognition. The complicity of the critical view in the valorization process derives from the distinction between the epistemological (critical) and ontological (naive) approaches impacts on the interpretation of authorship. If the empirical view acts to limit and restrict authorship, the critical view serves to ex-

3 Foucault, “What is an Author?”, 124.
pand it, and this expansion is essential for valorization to occur: valorization of the author as a stand-in for the author’s produced works follows from this framework, the digital valorization of social action follows logically as computer technology responds to the expansions imposed by the aura of the digital.

If Barthes’ argument that the author’s role in writing is to vanish, to become “dead,” so that the text may be encountered as a form of “performance,” where the one speaking disappears within that which is being said, then Barthes’ argument necessarily also expands this largely semiotic and performance-oriented view of interpretations to include context. He argues that authorship is an illusion, and that the structure of all texts is quotational; i.e. that there are no authors in an epistemological sense who (via their unique, original work) can provide a singular final meaning in a text:

The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pecuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. ... Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is explained—victory to the critic.4

Within this description it is also possible to recognize the concept of collage, montage, sampling or appropriation—

“his only power is to mix”—a conception of authorship that corresponds to and implies a “database culture” where the texts any author “creates” simply employ preexisting materials (re)organized, broken down, or (re)arranged into a “novel” form. Fragmentation and subsequent recombination define all semiosis: the production model it provides is serial in nature—a transformation of individual elements through their arrangement into novel patterns governed by past experience and previous examples of type; it is semiotic production. The ability to automate productive capabilities depends on this initial dispersion into elements governed by particular ‘rules’ of structural organization.

In the critical view, the emphasis falls on the interpreter’s engagement (via past experience) with any particular text’s indexical (appropriational, recombinatory) relationship to all other texts, both previous and future. Within this view, the suggestion that meaning is constrained in any way by the text appears to become nonsensical—it is this specific constraint of meaning that Barthes argues against. Understood from within this theoretical framework, the idea that all forms of database culture represent a critique (if not a direct assault) on authorship becomes a logical necessity.

Thus, works that make their quotational nature apparent would be revealing the situation to their audience, making them aware of how authorship is illusory: a simple, easily understood and applied critique; however, this critique relies upon a misconception of the interpreters who encounter a work and the role authors play within this situation, as is revealed by those explicitly quotational works that seek to make the interpreting audience aware of the assembled, “Frankenstein’s monster” quality of authorship. Instead of critiquing the “author” as suggested by the critical view of authorship, the critical—in an inversion of what might be expected from Barthes’ argument—recombinatory (art) works serve to valorize the author and assert not only its continued survival, but its increased and reinforced importance to the interpretation of recombinant or database (art) works. The fact of quotation in these specifically recombinatory
works requires the assertion of priority—*authorship*—implicit as the subsequent use.

As the aura of the digital makes the restriction of access to digital (art) works via DRM inevitable, at the same time it also combines the empirical and critical interpretations of authorship in the valorized form of the “digital author.” Their combination is essential to the process of transition to immaterial commodity enacted by the digital because it implies an expansion of the empirical understanding of authorship along contextual axes suggested in the critical view and instrumentally enabled by digital surveillance: the conversion of context and interpretation to “authorship.” The recombinant modes of production are the most visible, but not the only avenues of this expansion.

§5.2

An interpreter who is unaware of the network of relations that inform the interpretation not only of individual words (terms) in a text, but the various quotations and references implicitly deployed there would not be an interpreter but a direct inventor of meaning: the text would be unknown, literally written in a foreign language. Jonathan Culler recognizes this contextual role in his semiotic discussion of Wittgenstein’s “Bububu”:

Wittgenstein asks, ‘Can I say “Bububu” and mean, if it does not rain, I shall go for a walk?’ And he replies, ‘it is only in a language that one can mean something by something’. [...] Once Wittgenstein produced this positing of a limit [to semiosis] it became possible in certain contexts (especially in the presence of those who know Wittgenstein’s writings) to say ‘Bububu’ and at least allude to the possibility that if it does not rain, one might go for a walk. But this lack of limits to semiosis does not mean, as Eco seems to fear, that meaning is the free creation of the reader.5

5 Jonathan Cullen, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford Uni-
The context Culler mentions, “the presence of those who know Wittgenstein’s writings,” is the crucial component for the meaning Wittgenstein suggested for ‘Bububu’ to emerge: that if it does not rain, he might go for a walk. Without that context it does not have this meaning; without a context meaning is not possible. It is the reader’s recognition of ‘Bububu’ as possibly referring to Wittgenstein’s comment that offers the possibility of it having the meaning Wittgenstein suggested; failing to recognize that about ‘Bububu’ negates the possibility for this interpretation. In a more general form, this contextuality is also true of all language. Thus, the critical interpretation is inherently contextual: any wholly unique text without specific parallels and contextual identifiers is subject to what can be called “semiotic fantasy”: the invention, *tabla rasa*, of meaning.

Past experience is essential to creating fruitful interpretations that are not simply inventions of the interpreter. (This is the *awareness* of “Wittgenstein.”) Meaning arises from the relationship between presently examined work and this previous database of knowledge; Barthes’ claimed “*death of the author*” does not eliminate past experience, it elevates its importance. The audience’s established expertise in recognizing and interpreting *is* what enables the recognition of quotation—of meaning, as Umberto Eco notes in his discussion of serials:

> Any difference between knowledge of the world (understood naively as a knowledge derived from an extratextual experience) and intertextual knowledge has practically vanished ... . What is more interesting is when the quotation is explicit and recognizable, as happens in postmodern literature and art, which blatantly and ironically play on the intertextuality ... aware of the quotation, the spectator is brought to elaborate ironically on the nature of such a device and to acknowledge the fact that one has

*versity Press, 2006*, 181.
been invited to play upon one’s encyclopedic knowledge.6

The awareness Eco observes is the same as Barthes’ awareness of the “death of the author” since it is the absence of the author that the quotations appear to suggest; however, this is not entirely the case. The awareness of an a priori text that is sourced/cited by the “sample” presented within a new work does not necessarily mean the lack of a previous author, nor does it necessarily mean the non-presence of the author in the new instance. The ability to recognize the quotation qua quotation requires a double interpretation by the audience/reader/viewer—the recognition not just of the immanent placement of the particular quotation, but its status as a quotation forces the equally immanent recall of another, absent ‘text’—which necessarily invokes the absent presence of both authors: the one doing the immanent quotation, and the one who is quoted.

Implicit in Eco’s argument is that the significance of the author is redoubled by this quotation and referencing: aware of the quotation, the audience feels they are “in on it” with the new author—i.e., they feel a part of an authorial position based upon their use of past experience to identify the quotations employed. This factor serves to emphasize the role of author. The presence of authorial determinations becomes more significant in those cases where the quotations are explicit and recognized than when they are implicit and unrecognized. By drawing attention to the assembly through quotation, the actions of the new author gain emphasis and assert authority over previous texts. In choosing which pieces to use and which to leave, and what/how to organize them, the quoting author dominates the earlier text, highlighting issues around the author’s intention.

The use of quotation enables the audiences-who-recognize quotations to assume a superficially critical posture in opposition to those audiences-who-don’t-recognize. Recog-

nition of the quotation may create a false consciousness of a
critical position because it can move the engagement away
from critical examinations of the text, substituting the “I
know that!” of recognized quotation for other possible ques-
tions of meaning and use within the new text. Quotation can
serve as a nostalgic reverie focusing on past experiences and
other texts referenced only in passing. Instead of inviting
considerations of authorship, this activity reifies the author-
ship of both the quoted author and its deployment in the new
text, making both authors’ presence and position in relation
to the texts (current/quoted) more explicit, but their author-
ship does not disappear in this process—contra Barthes, it is
reified as the text, as quotation.

§5.3

Digital semiosis (and its implementation as *inmaterial pro-
duction*) originates with the database model for culture im-
plicit in appropriation and sampling, and is suggested by
both Umberto Eco’s conception of past experience and Ro-
land Barthes’ layering of quotations and previous texts (the
palimpsest nature of language and interpretation). It is rec-
nognizable in almost every avant-garde’s approach to new
technologies: sampling / appropriation / cut-up / mash-up /
remix / collage / montage have adopted new terminologies
with each new reproductive technology. It is intimately tied
to the common availability of reproductions, but is implicit
in the organization of moveable type. The (literally semiotic)
recombination of a limited number of physical elements,
their storage and organization (upper case/lower case), and
arrangement (alphabetical order) differs from digital data-
base culture only in speed of access, variability, and scale.

It is the production and modulation of this reverie that forms the
implicit “subject” of avant-garde film maker Hollis Frampton’s 1971
film (*nostalgia*) where the voice-over narration and the image that
narrative describes are disassociated—the narrative precedes the
image in the series.
The underlying principles of fragmentation, storage and retrieval remain constant.

Semiotic reassembly of new work from fragments of existing works is characteristic of (artistic) responses—but not limited to them—the emergence of technological reproduction over the course of the twentieth century extends into present uses of digital technologies without any sign of abatement. While digital semiosis has origins with the *katzencavalier* centuries before the twentieth century, art historical discussions of this approach often begin with Pablo Picasso who combined reproductions with his Cubist paintings in the 1910s; the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov who experimented with wax recordings to make “remixes” in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Soviet montage itself owes its existence to experiments with the reassembly of existing film materials. Surrealist Max Ernst cut up engravings to make “novels”, and Joseph Cornell re-edited Hollywood films with other movies to create his own film, *Rose Hobart*. The author William Burroughs created “cut ups” with audio tape....As new technologies of reproduction became available, new artists performed some kind of recombination of those materials. The listing of these artists and their works could easily continue. This approach is so common it could be called “typical” when artists confront a new technology: it is essential to the digital technology itself in the form of sampling, logically making semiotic reassembly the primary mode for all digital production.

But what is most striking about the repeating pattern of artistic reuse is the increasingly strident claim that this approach constitutes a “questioning of authorship,” especially evident in the later forms that appear at the end of the centu-

---

ry around the idea of “appropriation art.” It is against this background that the reappearance of these forms (with new names like “mash-up” and “sampling” and “database”) in computer based media art—new media—should be considered. This recognition enables an acknowledgement that these procedures are not limited to artistic productions, but are characteristic of all digital, immaterial production.

Their historical continuity with work by the historical avant-garde suggests these approaches (whatever their name) have become banal rather than disruptive since popular entertainment and capitalist finance (in the form of financial ‘products’) can successfully redeploy these approaches. Acknowledging this fact raises a basic question about how these recombinatory practices challenge traditional author/viewer conventions, as well as why this approach continues to make fundamentally the same claim that these actions constitute a “questioning of authorship.” The elimination of the author (and the author-function described by Michel Foucault) disassociates all semiotically produced work from those responsible for it—suggesting the aura of the digital in this action to elide the physical (ontological) author from consciousness.

By examining the belief that recombination “questions authorship,” it becomes apparent that these approaches constitute a means to avoid the potential shocks each new technology implies by an assertion of traditional roles for audience and viewer. Thus, their repetition takes on a dual character: at the level of praxis where it appears through the reuse of reproductions (the “raw” material of the work), and at the conceptual level as the specific procedure of adoption and reassembly. Both are subject to the denials characteristic of the digital aura and the aspiration to the state of information. Their implication in agnotological procedures is evident through the process of spreading-out that semiosis enables: the generation of alternative configurations and ar-

---

9 There are many sources for this claim, but it figures prominently in Douglas Crimp’s “Appropriating Appropriation,” in On the Museum’s Ruins (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 126–136.
rangements within a given set of potentials makes the agnotologic a natural potential application of semiotic processes concerned with elaboration and expansion. It is the coincidence of agnotological and epistemological constructions that makes the distinction between factual and non-factual problematic. The recourse described by Foucault’s authorship function, where by the appeal to past authority serves as a claim made about the immanent text, exceeds the semiotic process of assembly and organization: it is an emergent valuation not present in the semiosis, but through the recognition and role of quotation *superimposed upon* that semiosis.

Thus, these repetitions, instead of disrupting conceptions of authorship (and originality, etc.), serve as a means to assert these values through the principle of “variation.” Umberto Eco has noted that viewers, aware of the rupture in appropriated or quotational works (and sampling cannot be anything but quotational), are aware of their nature as a repetition. What is of interest to the viewer is the way the new work *re-configures* the old:

The real problem is that what is of interest is not so much the single variation as “variability” as a formal principle, the fact that one can make variations to infinity. Variability to infinity has all the characteristics of repetition, and very little of innovation. But it is the “infinity” of the process that gives a new sense to the device of variation. What must be enjoyed—suggests the postmodern aesthetics—is the fact that a series of possible variations is potentially infinite. What becomes celebrated here is a sort of victory of life over art, with the paradoxical result that the era of electronics, instead of emphasizing the phenomena of shock, interruption, novelty, and frustration of expectations, would produce a return to the continuum, the Cyclical, the Periodical, the Regular.10

With the shift to “variability”, the more explicit the quota-

tion, the more the audience may be expected to recognize it, and thus the more directly it plays the new instance against the original one. Variations imposed through semiosis become the critical focus in relation to the original work. Instead of eliminating the authorship, or even critiquing it, the semiotically reassembled (sampled/remix/appropriated) work emphasizes the role of the author (in the originating source) precisely because it is the differences (if any) that matter: the role of artist-as-author is not minimized here, it is maximized. The artist reestablishes traditional positions for both artist and viewer: the artist dominates, transforming an existing work into something “new.” This emphasis on the productive dimensions of semiosis serves to obscure the significance of those sources, even as it valorizes them: it is the “new work”—semiotically generated—that becomes the focus. The earlier work is of great necessity to this process, but it is simultaneously negated by the assertions of novelty made implicitly by the new construct.

This image of artistic domination over materials is familiar—it is the traditional view of “genius” in a different guise. The coupling of such a traditional view of authorship with a consistent artistic practice whose name mutates, (but whose procedures vary only slightly), and which is also a common financial technique in digital capitalism, imposes a specific conclusion about the recombinatory procedure: that instead of challenging traditional notions of authorship, it tends to assert them while inviting the audience to (un)critically engage the work using their encyclopedic past knowledge of the sources for the “new” work. The original sources “disappear” in this sleight-of-hand, following the denials of physicality in the aura of the digital. The audience is active in their engagement with the work, but such “activity” is a potential in any viewing situation and should not be regarded as unique to recombinatory works.

At the same time, this engagement with a “critical” or “active” audience is only superficial. The “activity” is one of comparing the new instance to established forms. This action assumes the prior authority of the existing work. The recom-
binatory actions exist in parasitical relation (as variations) to their source materials. By drawing together existing materials in new ways, the “variability to infinity” Eco describes comes into the interpretation, creating a false belief in a challenge to authority and the conventional role of the viewer: the repetitions inherent to remixing existing materials escape the psychological dangers unheimlich works may pose through a reliance on established expertise and the implicit understanding of the “rules of the game” involved in appropriations.

To claim these semiotic recombinatory practices commonly found in new media—sampling, appropriation, remixes, mash-ups, etc.—challenge traditional author/viewer conventions cannot be accepted as true. As Eco has noted, these practices constitute a shift to a pre-modern convention set where the traditional established work that is the subject of the transformations is elevated in status, and the artist appropriating serves to reify that status, while viewers, aware of the conventionalized variability at the heart of appropriation, recognize in the artist’s actions an assertion of authorial dominance over the original work as well as a (paradoxical) subservience to that work.

§5.4

The empirical sense of author appears within and is supported by the practice of quotation and appropriation by digital technology. It emerges in the development of the Internet between 1996 and 2006 first from the practice of link pages containing “hyperlinks” on personal web pages, then via “search engines,” followed by the later forms of personal sites such as “blogs,” and in the concept of “social networking” based on shared links and relationships. The commercial development of “portals,” such as the website Yahoo.com, that present a variety of links to other sites (in the form of search and as indexed categories of sites), are recognizable as business adaptations of the earlier personal, non-commercial web page.

This kind of authorship is based on interest and cita-
tion—social behaviour and human agency—rather than production: the early practice of “surfing” from website to website following their links to each other is the simplest (and most direct) variety of quotational authorship: by linking to another text, the author gains value from the referenced text; blogs retain this linking practice. It is also reified as in the deployment of social media and social networking—as both “liking” and “following.” Authors who have the “best” links within this framework are the “best” authors gaining status (value) within their communities, a position determined by what they appropriate.

Thus, the commercial “portal” presents a great variety of content, and will often incorporate a search feature as a way to gain access (thus authorship) to as much material posted on the Internet as possible; this model is recognizable in both Yahoo.com and in sites such as Technocrati.com (for blogs) or del.icio.us (social networking based on links—“bookmarks”) and Topsy.com (reifying the authorial nature of links, combined with search). Group-based projects such as open source software, or the various wikipedias where skilled authors collaborate on common projects, are different from the authorship apparent in social networking only in degree. Participation in these activities requires expertise and the same donated labor that builds (is) the databases of social networking.

In every case, value accrues to the business based on its ability to locate and organize ‘authorship’ and connect that audience to merchants and advertisers; at the same time, authors will actively seek to add their works to these sites, and in the case of del.icio.us, open source projects, and social networking generally, such as Facebook.com or Myspace.com, the business itself is valorized by the work of large numbers of individual authors whose contributions generate the database (are the database) that lies at the center of all these technologies. By shifting all activities into potential varieties of authorship—ranging from personal interests to highly skilled labor requiring training and experience—it becomes possible to recognize the conversion of all activities into potential
commodities via authorship enabling the invention of a new digitally-based, immaterial production residing within (over) all social activity.

Valorization proceeds through the appropriation process on both sides of the quotation—as the source who is referenced and as the one who references—as the reversibility apparent in the mirroring of Barthes’s death as valorization shows. Thus appropriation becomes a signifier for authorial value: the referencing inherent to semiosis appears literally in this valorization—the more often an author is reused the greater the value assigned to that author. This understanding of authorial significance appears in the rankings (importance) of scientific and medical journals, as determined by the number of citations to articles published by those journals appearing in other articles. In recombinant music, no matter how small the sample, the original artist or artists gain control over the new work that employs that sample by virtue of their being appropriated. Within the structure of websites it is even more explicit: Technocrati.com ranks blogs based on how many other blogs link to their contents; Google.com’s search results are weighted not just by relevance to the search terms entered but by linkages; advertising rates on websites is based on “click-through”—how many people follow the ad link—not simply on audience delivered as with traditional print and television media. In financialization, this semiotic production leads to multiple levels of tranche, as with mortgage-backed securities that were sold, recombined, and sold again in a cycle of recombing the recombined.

This link procedure reveals the connection between social networking and authorship. Social networking only appears to suggest a transformation of these connections; it is an extension of the author-cult where all actions are reconfigured as quotational, all relationships quantified as affinity groups, and social behaviors are transformed into immaterial commodity (as digitally orchestrated demographics). Barthes’ reasons for declaring the author dead become the supports and proof that authors exist. As theorist Nicholas Rombes
has noted, the empirical sense of author has proliferated throughout digital technologies:

Rather than extinguish once and for all the auteur, the rise and hegemony of digital technologies and culture have only reinforced the author concept, and have in fact helped to create new forms of authorship that are being acknowledged in the broader public....And yet, denunciations of authorship have always tended to strengthen the cult and authority of those doing the denouncing. In fact, it was Barthes who called the author into being and whose denunciations helped create the conditions for the dictatorship of the author in the digital era.11

These “conditions for the dictatorship of the author” take the form of the assumed critical position assigned to recombinant procedures: recognizing the fabric of quotations, references, and reuses that characterize language and the interpretation of meaning does not mean the “death of the author.” It produces, through the recognition of quotations by the interpreting audiences, the simultaneous database nature of culture and the expertise deployed by both author and audience in their encounters via the text. The indexicality Eco observes in the use of direct, obvious sampling from past works serves to valorize both those past works specifically and the role of the author generally. Each new producer, in employing this semiotic reassembly, in becoming an author, also engages in illusory creation—the newly organized work—which has a false independence from its sources.

The mirrorical return of the author marks the expansion and extension of the author concept proposed by Barthes as a critique, not as proof of its disappearance, but as demonstration that anything can be interpreted (thus treated) as authorial. The authoring of activities that previously would not have been regarded as authorship is essential to the valoriza-

tion of these actions: for example, the browsing of products (Amazon.com’s “page I made” that lists products viewed while on-site), or the proposition that collecting links to websites of personal interest (del.icio.us and social networking generally) can be understood as productive actions. By treating these activities as forms of authorship it becomes possible to recognize Barthes’ layers of past actions and references being made explicit, and then treated as potential commodities, with authoring as the vehicle for the exchange of value. Without the ability of digital computers to record and track actions, this kind of authorship would be infeasible, if not entirely impossible (and improbable), because of the scale of labor required to perform these same tasks without automation.

Expanding concepts of authorship are produced by the digital technologies that enable their existence. Thus expansion is symptomatic of the aura of the digital: the transformation of everything that can be digitized into a digital form (the universal aspiration to the state of information) also transforms every action recorded into a demonstration of individual authorship (the ideology of automation). The universal authoring of lives serves the valorization process that requires both constant surveillance and the imposition of digital rights management (DRM) as a way to extract value from digital works. Expansion of the author concept therefore signals the commodification of all activity and the full emergence of the immaterial production characteristic of digital capitalism.

§5.5

The valorization of authorship demonstrates how the empirical and critical interpretations can interact, reinforcing both the extension of authorship beyond its traditional boundaries (as per the critical emphasis on contextuality and recombin-ration) while at the same time reifying the implicit potential of

the empirical interpretation’s basis as a productive activity. It is the combination of productive action and contextual extension that creates the digital author. Neither the hypothetical actor of the empirical view, nor the figure vanishing into the ground of its sources proposed in the critical conception, the digital author is an immanent effect of the aura of information operating through the ideology of automation, where all actions, activities, events, objects (*ad infinitum*) become digital, and thus elevated to the state of information.

The digital author is valorized by this transformative fantasy into information, not as consumer or producer (hence a subject with human agency), but as a commodity. Achieving the status of ‘author’ within a database culture means a transfer of role from actor to commodity—this is the end-result of the valorization process, not simply the maintenance of previously valuable commodities produced by the traditional actors of the empirical interpretation, but an extension of authorship-as-commodification, of author-as-commodity and the dominance of semiosis deployed in immaterial production.

Once all decisions that might previously be considered instances of human agency become instead forms of authorship (the effect of combining the critical and empirical interpretations), the author becomes a commodity: the digital author. It is an inversion of the disappearing-into-context proposed by Barthes, et. al. The digital author emerges as the specific contexts apparent through each individual action: human agency redefined as authorship, as a range of authorial actions that when taken together define a single, specific author. The collection and trading of these authorial entities is simply the logical extension of the business relation implicit in the empirical view’s ontology and identified with Foucault’s author-function.

Roland Barthes’ argument, instead of heralding the death of the author, shows the way to its inevitable extension, expansion and subjugation in immaterial production. It is a side-effect of how the aura of the digital imposes a steadily larger domain for property rights via the concept of “intellec-
tual property” as a necessity for maintaining the circulation of capital. Within a database culture all forms of authorship are potentially valuable, and all information necessarily requires an ontological link to a specific source (the “author”). This then demands the valorization process just as it is the underlying mechanism for the extension and maintenance of authorship. Contextuality thus creates more and new varieties of author and authorship, in the process proposing the eclipse of human agency. The digital author lacks agency precisely because there is no longer any distinction between action and inaction—reflecting the nodal form of the state of information—both are equal. The valorization makes each choice significant and therefore valuable: all decisions produce authorship and so have an equal commodity status.

The valorization of authorship reiterates the fundamental conflict of DRM: the ownership and possession of digital works (such as the digital author). Even as database culture transforms all actions into varieties of authorship, (such as Amazon’s “the page I made” that tracked and revealed shopping as authorship), the valorization process implicit in this transformation equally raises the question of ownership: the empirical interpretation’s ‘author’ who acts and so creates the work, or the database collector who is the critical ‘author.’ In effect the link between the digital aura and capitalist expansion of both markets and commodities inevitably appears as the valorization and extension of authorship along with the simultaneous elision of the ownership role traditionally assigned to authorship by the empirical interpretation. The change in status for digital authors corresponds to the dissolution of human agency inherent in this transition.

However, such tendencies towards elision are not simply linear or unidirectional—instead, by observing one tendency it is possible to recognize a resurgence of human agency at the same time and employing the same means. While recombinant methods do valorize the authorship of their sources, they also generate novel works whose place and role within this schema are ambiguous. Their ambiguity—as valorizers and violators of the commodities valorized—offers a space
for human agency to re-enter. The paradox that ensues from the assertion-elision of human agency suggests the fractious nature of the digital (valorized) author and reflects the Janus face of the digital. The transition to a database culture does not replace previous authorial conceptions. The conflict between these conceptions—naive, critical, digital—is symptomatic of the ideology that defines the aura of the digital. The illusion of production without consumption (in the expansion of authorship via valorization) encounters the physical reality of the particular individuals whose actions are commodified in this process; it collides with the issue of human agency embodied in the authors it valorizes.

The valorization-authorship relationship presents a paradox that depends on human agency, since without human agency, the valorization process cannot proceed (on any level.) What this valorization means for human agency is much closer to the idea of ‘disenfranchisement’ where agency becomes impotence and actions only proceed so long as the outcome is regulated or predetermined. Since the digital is an imaginary domain (reifying capitalist ideology) where in the guise of ‘information’ all actions become types of authorship (as informed by the aura the information). From within this framework human agency becomes both the method of valorization and the commodity produced. It is elided in the process of conversion.

§5.6

In returning from the imaginary domain of the digital to the physical domain, the valorization of authorship reveals itself as not as authorship, but as enslavement. By achieving the state of ‘author’ without compensation for the capital generated through their valorization, these extensions of authorship transform all activity into capital-producing labor (without compensation). Thus the valorized digital author represents a new ‘slave’ class in database culture, one where the ‘slaves’ fail to recognize the conditions of their slavery.

The underlying dynamic of the valorization process is not
production—nothing is actually produced that could not exist otherwise—but neither is it a form of consumption. The valorization is semiotic: it proceeds from a shift in meaning, a transferal, accompanied by a process that resembles a form of automated surveillance. It is a form of opportunistic exploitation.

By extending authorship, markets discover an expanded (immaterial) arena for the extraction of wealth, but not one accompanied by an increased production of capital or shift in the production-consumption dynamic. Instead, it is an extension dramatizing the ideology generated by an interaction of the aura of the digital and the aura of information: valorizing authorship serves to more efficiently expedite the transfer and expand the accumulation of existing capital (wealth). As in semiotic production, no new capital is produced by this activity. Each new form of authorship is merely an expansion of an existing market into new areas of (social) activity with the “goal” of converting all (social) activity (uncommodified forms of “labor”) into commodities.

Both the recombinant mode and the critical view of authorship serve to increase the aura of (established) digital (art) works. Just as they validate the expansion of authorship, recombinant works are also complicit in the valorization process, serving to increase and extend the value of established works, thus making the imposition of DRM necessary (essential) to maintain and assert the property value inhering in commodity status.

The increase in value that recombination provides is the underlying feature of database culture generally. (It is the economic basis for it, and for its expansion of authorship.) However, no valorization has meaning except within the social relationships that define all exchange values. This connection demonstrates the slavery of the digital author precisely because the expanded, digital author is only possible with the complicity of the individuals being valorized: the transformation of human agency into exchange value is not (generally) reciprocal for the valorized. Hence, valorization serves to produce wealth from the immaterial labor of the
valorized: the databasing process that renders all actions equally valuable does not compensate those whose actions are the source of that database.

While the extension of authorship implicitly suggests a differentiation between the semiosis characteristic of immaterial production and the valorization of human agency, the distinction between these is simply one of degree rather than category: both, rendered as information, are commodities within the marketplace. The recombination of existing works increases the value of the appropriated originals as it denies their role in the semiotic process; the transformation of human agency only appears to produce new commodities (authors) for commercial exploitation—in both instances the valorization is not productive. It is simply a shifting of functions within an established system (capitalism)—but is neither an enlargement of the ‘system,’ nor an annexation of additional “spaces” that are not already included within that ‘system.’ Instead, reifying the ideology of automation, it is exploitation of the ability (already present and in use) of digital technology to record actions and activities. Like the worm that swallows its own tail, these valorizations only appear to produce new sources of capital, labor and wealth. Instead, they are simply a recirculation of existing values: this extension of authorship is therefore a symptom-effect of the fantasy of production-without-consumption that defines the digital. Within such a conception of authorship, the empirical and critical interpretations no longer function as they historical have; each gives way to a hybrid, “digital author” whose identity is apparent in its function as commodity.

This digital author—a commodity—is as foreign to the empirical and critical conceptions of author as the epistemological and ontological authors are to one another. It should be recognized as a third term in the authorship concept, related yet fundamentally independent of ontological and epistemological concerns: where Barthes’ “reader” (the critical author) resides in an impersonal construction without history, biography, or psychology—the context of a work’s reception, the digital author translates agency apparent in/as
history, biography, and psychology into immaterial commodities. They are the parameters defining the differences between one digital author and another. Where both critical and empirical authors are productive—both entail the generation of new texts because both authors entail the extension of agency, the digital author’s status-as-commodity presents a closing off of potential production for the digital author, where instead of agency, this author is a token of exchange in a semiotic system of reassembly, surveillance, and constraint.
Please visit michaelbetancourt.com for a complete archive of work and research by Michael Betancourt