

Book Review: Critical Technology: A Social Theory of Personal Computing

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Book Review

Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Critical Technology: A Social Theory of Personal Computing*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. ISBN 0754640094, 152 pp., £44.95 (hbk).

Theoretical critiques of new media and technology tend to focus upon ‘cutting-edge’ realms such as the internet, virtual reality or biomechanics, neglecting ‘mundane’ platforms like the personal computer (PC). *Critical Technology* provides a counterbalance to this academic drift towards more outré aspects of technological development. While Kirkpatrick’s neo-Marxist analysis of the personal computer will be considered outmoded by some, I suspect that it will be quietly welcomed by those interested in the realities rather than reification of the information society. Indeed, one reviewer has already heralded the book as ‘genius’ – an accolade discretely displayed on the back cover.

Genius or not, the central theme of Kirkpatrick’s thesis is that the computer is a contested space within which important social conflicts are played out. While, sociologically, this is not a radical position the book offers a series of thought-provoking discussions on the social implications of computer users’ understanding of the coded mechanics determining how their machines actually work (rather than understanding what they are programmed to do). For Kirkpatrick, a ‘deep understanding’ of computers is a crucial means of empowerment, agency and equal citizenship in the information age. Conversely, exclusion from such understanding leads to an almost inevitable disenfranchisement.

A recurrent theme throughout the book is how the dominant technological rationality of contemporary personal computing inexorably leads to a reproduction of the ‘power differential that runs through capitalist society’ (p. 10). Kirkpatrick uses this observation to argue that we need to identify and encourage alternative uses of computing which challenge the existing high-tech hegemony. Drawing inspiration from 30 years of computer ‘counterculture’ – such as games enthusiasts, amateur software modifiers and the early computer hobbyists – the book explores a number of ways in which users can be encouraged to develop a deep understanding of how PCs can be controlled and creatively shaped.

From its title onwards, *Critical Technology* owes much to the work of Andrew Feenberg, with Kirkpatrick building upon Feenberg's writing on technological hegemony as an expression of dominant social interests reflected and reproduced through technology design. This debt to Feenberg means that the genesis (and indeed genius) of Kirkpatrick's thesis is slightly second-hand and will feel overly familiar for some readers. The influence of Max Weber and Sherry Turkle also loom large in places, with Turkle's account of computers, games and hackers being central to Kirkpatrick's argument.

There is much of interest here for the *Time & Society* reader. Indeed, amidst the central concerns of power and reproduction, time is a recurring element of Kirkpatrick's analysis. For instance, the often unintentional reproduction of capitalism's dominant interests within the evolving design of personal computing is neatly illustrated in Kirkpatrick's depiction of the early North American computer hackers of the 1960s and 1970s, whom he portrays as unwitting originators of the technocapitalist, time-intensive working practices which most PC users are now subjected to. Kirkpatrick describes how these hackers deliberately and joyously engaged with computers along almost time-oblivious lines – fervently believing that the perfect computer program was not an activity to be hurried. Thus, hackers would lose all sense of time, eschewing 'the joys of real-time interactivity' (p. 29) in preference for a timeless immersion with the machine and the code during 'hours of experimentation and frustration in pursuit of a solution would then be followed by yet more tortuous hours refining it and making it the best one possible. For them, the effort of achieving this strange perfection was more important even than the function or effect being worked on' (p. 32).

As Kirkpatrick then goes on to describe, this time-rich intellectual immersion with the computer was soon lost in the rigid and 'efficient' forms of computer software resulting from the initial labours of these early programmers. Indeed, many of *Critical Technology's* examples illustrate how personal computing now embodies an automated heart-beat of capitalist society, enforcing a high-tech Taylorism where time is routinized, regulated and ordered to the Nth degree. All of this, of course, is sustained by the work of the time-rich and time-oblivious programmers working to develop the coding which drives the software. Meanwhile, most end-users remain ignorant of how such programming is produced and how, more importantly, it could be altered.

As such, Kirkpatrick's choice of case study material lends some interesting and occasionally powerful insights into the constrained and 'cynical' application of technology in contemporary society. Yet, on occasions his supporting examples are inelegantly forced into the flow of the book. For example, aligning the early hackers at MIT with Weber's 17th-century Protestant sects feels unnecessary and clumsy. Other tenuous comparisons are drawn between modernist art and computer interfaces, and between computer games and the medieval tendency towards the carnivalesque. For this reviewer such 'high-brow' grandstanding serves only to distract from the basic points being made.

These quibbles aside, *Critical Technology* is a solid addition to the literature on

technology and society. In fusing critical social theory with studies of old 'new media', the author has made a significant contribution to the field. The book draws upon a wide range of sources – not least an impressively close reading of a human–computer interaction literature which is often impenetrable for non-technologists. This book has definite value in lucidly portraying the ambivalence of technology in contemporary capitalist societies. Overall, it forces the reader to critically reflect on the gulf between what personal computers could potentially do within different social and political circumstances compared to those prevailing in contemporary capitalist society. For this alone it should be recommended.

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