

Jonathan Crary

Afonso Dias Ramos

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## Practices of Radical Refusal

Almost a decade after publishing *24/7*, an acclaimed essay about how the contemporary economic system forces us to work 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, abolishing the possibility of rest or even sleep, the US theorist Jonathan Crary talks to *Electra* about his newly-released book, *Scorched Earth*. This new work is an uncompromising analysis of how the digital era has failed to bring about the radical change that it once heralded, and instead revealed itself to be incompatible with the idea of a sustainable planet and of interdependence among human beings.



As the early days of utopianism about the internet seem to be an increasingly distant mirage, there has been no shortage of indictments of the costs and consequences of online life in recent years. After the international success of a small essay about the shrinkage of sleep and the nonstop circus of technocratic life in modernity, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), Jonathan Crary has returned with one of the most uncompromising putdowns of digital capitalism in his book, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (2022). 'If there is to be a liveable and shared future on our planet,' Crary states in the opening line of this pamphlet, 'it will be a future offline, uncoupled from the world-destroying systems and operations of 24/7 capitalism.' This provocative book puts forward the idea that the digital age means both social disintegration and environmental collapse. We have arrived at the terminal stage of global capitalism, Crary argues, as he openly exchanges the nuanced detail of academic writing for the forcefulness of social pamphleteering. 'The internet complex', he claims, 'is the implacable engine of addiction, loneliness, false hopes, cruelty, psychosis, indebtedness, squandered life, the corrosion of memory, and social disintegration', as 'the speed and ubiquity of digital networks maximize the incontestable priority of getting, having, coveting, resenting, envying.' The verdict is loud and clear: 'The internet has crossed a threshold of irreparability and toxicity', as we now face 'a world operating without pause, without the possibility of renewal or recovery, choking on its heat and waste.'

Jonathan Crary is the Meyer Schapiro Professor of Modern Art and Theory at Columbia University in New York, and has also been a visiting professor at Princeton and Harvard University. He was a founding editor (and continues to be co-editor) of Zone Books, an independent nonprofit publisher. An acclaimed political theorist, critical thinker and art historian, Jonathan Crary is the author of indispensable studies about the formation of visual culture in the 19th and early 20th century, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (1990), and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (2000).

AFONSO DIAS RAMOS In *24/7*, you remarked: 'That books and essays written on new media only five years ago are already outdated is particularly telling'. What prompted *Scorched Earth* nine years later? The urgency and drive of this book seem different.

JONATHAN CRARY After *24/7*, I worked on a number of different projects and only gradually realised that I needed to do a follow-up of *24/7*, that *24/7* didn't adequately address what I saw as worsening and potentially catastrophic developments and trajectories. I should say, first of all, that *24/7* was a conscious shift in terms of my own identity as an intellectual in that I wanted to move away from academic language and academic format. It was hardly a complete break because if you look at my footnotes, there's still a number of literary and philosophical references. But *24/7* showed me that I could reach a wider readership beyond my academic work. Instead of getting emails mainly from scholars,

graduate students and artists, I began to hear from people from many different backgrounds, often completely outside any academic umbrella. When I began *Scorched Earth*, I wanted to push that even further. Certainly I couldn't pretend that I'm not an intellectual but I wanted to discard some of the limitations of academic discourse. The rhetorical choices I made in writing *Scorched Earth* were different even from *24/7*. At the beginning of the book, I mention the historical tradition of the political pamphlet as it began in 17th century England and other places. I wanted the text to be a form of agitation, of incitement. I knew that it would be a polarising work and the responses since the book came out have proven this to be the case. But to go back to your question, just looking at the titles of the two books, *24/7* and *Scorched Earth*, one could ask: what are the inevitable consequences of a 24/7 world, as I described it? What are the consequences of the lights never being turned off, or the engines never being shut down? What results from a non-stop world of production, consumption and resource extraction – all of those things that I identified there? Very simply, the result is a scorched earth. One of the things I tried to do in this book was to expand some of the connotations of this familiar phrase. The environmental dimensions of a scorched earth were only one aspect of what I wanted to evoke. For me, a scorched earth is equally understandable in terms of capitalism's degradation of human communities and its impoverishment of interpersonal and social experience. That is why what I call the 'internet complex' and its 24/7 omnipresence are one of the defining drivers of the crisis that we find ourselves in now. In both books, I'm addressing some of the devastating impacts of capitalism on a planet that should be organised around what is life-affirming and supportive of mutuality and community.

A D R But if *24/7* is about that non-stop world without rest, or the experience of no longer having an on-off switch, *Scorched Earth* comes across more like a call-to-arms, a principled decision to log off and sign out, or what you call a 'practice of radical refusal'.

J C My first sentence that opens the book poses one of the important forms of refusal, which is to refuse the many restrictions on our political and social imagination. If we are going to imagine some kind of liveable planet honestly and realistically, our vision of a post-capital, post-growth world simply cannot include the technological milieus that we inhabit now. I don't say that they will totally disappear. However, the lazy assumption that we could move beyond a capitalist organisation of the planet and yet still be living our lives within the systems designed and administered by transnational corporations is one of the great delusions of the moment. How can there be a post-capitalist world in which the institutions essential to 21st century capitalism persist and flourish. There are parallel delusions connected with solutions to climate change, for example the fantasy that electric cars are some kind of answer. In actuality they represent an intensification of capitalist patterns of consumption and production that are making things worse, with the reckless resource extraction needed to supply people with electric vehicles and their batteries. In the US, powerful interests continue to block funding for high-speed rail and mass transit.

The fundamental ways in which we need to change how we live our lives are completely excluded from mainstream discourse.

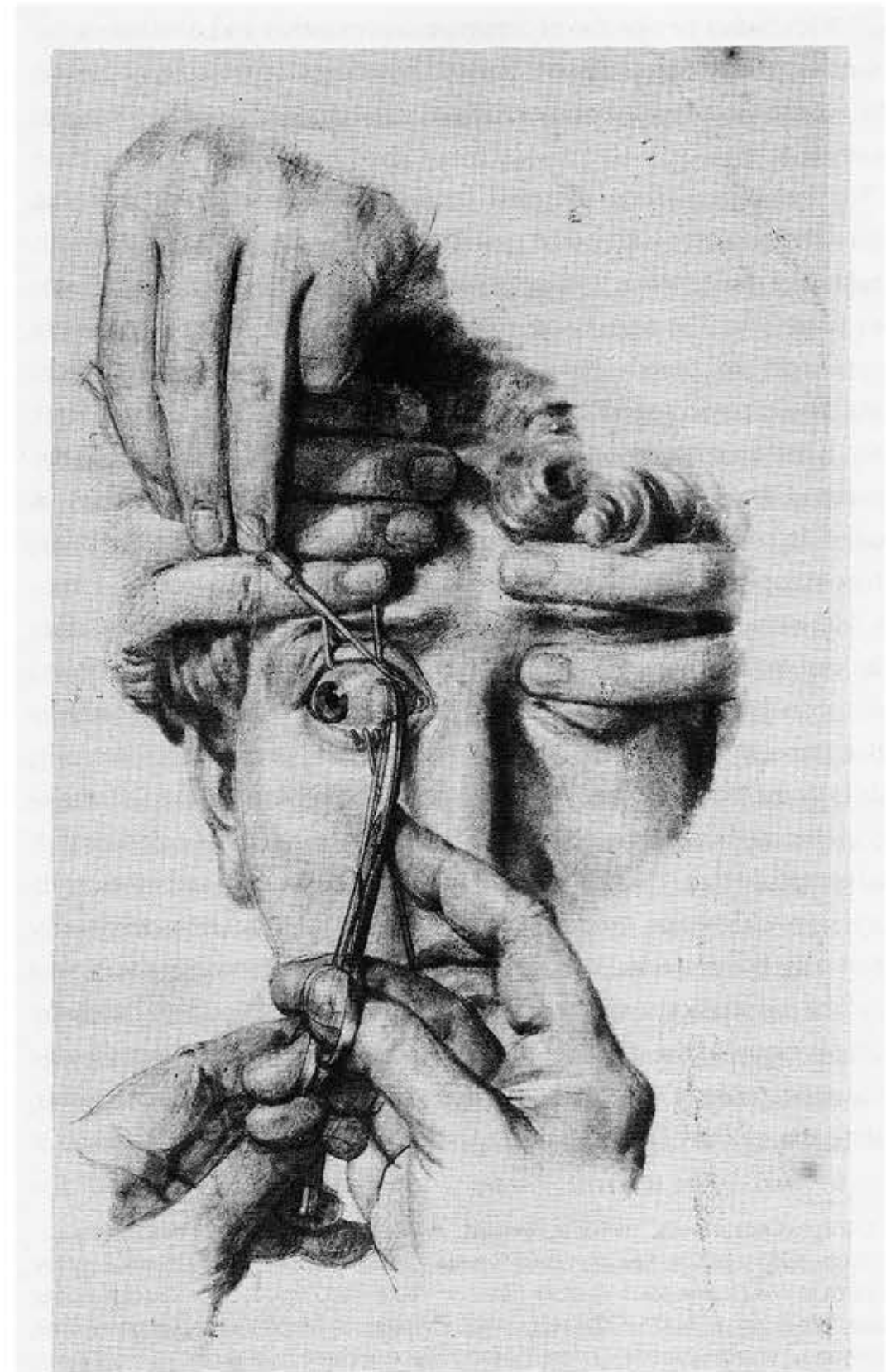
**A D R** The climate crisis briefly appeared in *24/7*, but it came to the fore in *Scorched Earth*. In the interval between them, there has been a wave of literature claiming that a post-capitalist economy should embrace digital technology, as it can liberate us from work. You are very adamant that on the contrary, it is incompatible with a habitable earth and egalitarian forms of life. Your book is never anti-technology, but you are forceful that 'there are no revolutionary subjects on social media'

**J C** Another pervasive delusion is how we have been conditioned to equate 'technology' with a very small category of apparatuses and networks that are the property of a handful of global technology corporations. Yet anyone critical of those products or who questions their necessity is vilified as being 'against technology'. This is absurd given the immense diversity of techniques and materialities that human ingenuity, over thousands of years, has bequeathed to us. Yet many people, including some who agree with me, are intimidated and are fearful of being labelled and marginalised as 'Luddites'. In a sense, we are being asked to accept an idea of the future which is actually a paralysing and perpetual present in which these mandatory technologies are 'here to stay'. The future has been reduced to a question of what new devices we will be obligated to buy and construct our lives around.

**A D R** But interestingly, your book is never primarily concerned with data mining or online surveillance, or the popular critique of surveillance capitalism. You shift the focus away from that discussion that has come to monopolise the discourse today.

**J C** What I'm critical of is how most of the arguments against data mining and surveillance capitalism presuppose that the existing technological arrangements are reformable, and that the social atomisation and the homogenisation of experience is not problematic as long as what we do online is kept private. And there's an assumption that we can recover a benign and 'democratic' side

**"The future has been reduced to a question of what new devices we will be obligated to buy and construct our lives around."**



*Drawing by Nicolas-Henri Jacob in *Traité complet de l'anatomie de l'homme* by Marc-Jean Bourguery. 1839.*



A boy wearing a futuristic space helmet and goggles demonstrates the wonders of *Robert the Robot*, a toy manufactured in 1959 by the Ideal Toy Corp.

Phenakistoscope, 1840

**"What I'm critical of is how most of the arguments against data mining and surveillance capitalism presuppose that the existing technological arrangements are reformable."**

that in fact never existed. The liberal dream that we can somehow tame or reduce surveillance capitalism ignores how data mining has become an intrinsic and defining component of the system. I'm basically putting forward an anti-reformist argument.

**A D R** I was also curious about the timing. This book comes out after the pandemic, when social isolation and remote technology were intensified to an extreme degree.

**J C** I finished writing the book just before the pandemic began in 2020. The interval between *24/7* and this new book is, in fact, shorter than it might seem. But when Covid arrived, as an author I thought to myself, 'I don't want to send this in to my publisher now because I don't want it to come out in the middle of a pandemic.' I know other writers reacted in a similar way. Of course, I had no idea then of how long things would be disrupted, but a pause did give me the opportunity to work on it a little bit more. I thought it might be important to somehow address the impact of the pandemic and I started to tweak and modify some of the sections. After a couple of months, I realised I was just making a mess of the book. I was doing something to an argument that I had spent a lot of time trying to make focused. It is not that I don't think what happened during the pandemic is important, but I just decided to have the book be a product of that period up until 2020. But in many ways, it's pretty obvious that what happened then was a confirmation of what I talk about in *Scorched Earth*... the ways in which the pandemic was used to normalise and naturalise the kind of distancing and separations, which I discuss, as an unavoidable part of those networked technologies. And also, there were countless instances of the disturbing psychic and emotional consequences of obligatory online life.

**A D R** You address that turbulence of the present with the urgency of a pamphlet, as you move away from an academic viewpoint. But in a way, you also end up returning to the 19th century, and these two last books resonate a lot with your scholarly studies on attention, perception, and vision. Are those modes of inquiry really separable?

**J C** That is a good observation. I don't mean to imply that there is a big break in my work in terms of the thinking that I'm doing, or the kind of objects that

I'm reflecting on. The real change, for me, was the decision to shift my language and my rhetorical choices. When I say moving away from academic prose, what I'm doing in *Scorched Earth* is to refuse what anybody in a university environment has been trained to do their whole lives: to hang on to a model of so-called objective thinking from a detached position in which an analysis can take place. It is not only the fantasy of objectivity, but also the idea that you will present both sides. For me, in this project, that would have been a trap. Part of that demand of presenting both sides is about the neutralisation of language, it is about divesting language of any insurgent force or capacities. I'm not saying that one should be doing that all the time but it was the decision I made here. Also, to go back to your question about continuity in terms of what I've been working on: I'm an academic situated within a Department of Art History, and a lot of what I do is not really art history. My whole time within the academic world has been about resisting some of the boundaries between fields. Each book I've written has been transdisciplinary in some way. What's at stake is a rejection of specialisation. That is crucial for me. The writer John Berger once said that political thinking is that which refuses specialised disciplines of knowledge. We find the same idea earlier in the work of György Lukács in his discussion of the compartmentalisation of fields of knowledge in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács says that the underlying reality of the world is beyond the grasp of those in a specialised discipline. I have had that idea with me for quite a while, although not in a programmatic way. My instinct has always been to bring together what, from a certain standpoint, is a disparate assemblage of artifacts, objects and themes. But one of the continuities is my preoccupation with the notion of the 'observer' which I began to develop in my first book. In *Techniques of the Observer*, I was really trying to examine some of the ways in which a new conception of a perceiving subject emerged within the West in Europe. In my book on attention, *Suspensions of Perception*, I tried to talk more specifically about the observer in the context of industrialising and modernising institutions in the 19th century, and how the problem of regulating and managing attentiveness became increasingly important. But I was also talking about the limits and thresholds of attention, the way in which attention and distraction were not two separate things but part of a more ambiguous continuum. During my research on that book, I was reading about hypnosis, trance states and other experiences that

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had a proximity to attentiveness but were also different. One of the areas that I got into was sleep. I began to research the many discussions about sleep in the West and when I began to write *24/7*, I was able to pick up from there. And now in *Scorched Earth*, I deal with how attention and visibility are manipulated in contemporary institutional and technological environments. By looking at biometrics, I'm kind of doing *Techniques of the Observer* for the early 21st century

A D R But that category of the observer also virtually collapses in your last two books. In *Scorched Earth*, you called out the 'efficient integration of the viewer into the duties and temporalities set by neoliberal institutions [...] the most disturbing consequences of eye tracking have less to do with surveillance and privacy than with the devaluation and routinization of vision.' There are then radical changes in content and in rhetoric. This new no-holds barred approach, along with your early involvement with Zone Books, reminds me of Cary Nelson's famous manifesto in defense of the 'tenured radical'. Is there a case to be made for other academics to change in light of the present crises?

J C One would hope for that to happen, for intellectuals to respond to a state of emergency with a sense of urgency, but unfortunately there are many powerful imperatives and inducements within this institutional world that are working against that. During the long time I've been at Columbia, I've seen the disappearance of what was once a radical core of leftist-oriented thinkers and activists among students and faculty. As a young person, I was very much a part of the anti-war and anti-imperialist movement in the early 1970s and was part of several radical communities oriented towards revolutionary politics. But those cultural and political milieus in the US fell apart during the 1970s. Like many others then, I re-entered the academic world, not having a clear idea of what I was doing. When I became a graduate student in art history, I had no idea how relatively conservative the field was. There were times when I wasn't sure I was going to continue. But let me go back to your question about being in an academic community in North America now. One of the things that I wanted to do with the idea of a pamphlet was to get away from the expectation that academic work has to be about individual originality. I wanted to write something that could connect with shared intuitions and experiences. I wanted to give expression to



David Maisel, *Lithium Extraction*,  
Chile, 2018

what is known in common but often in partial or equivocal ways, so my goal was to articulate these commonalities as effectively and vividly as possible. This is where the expectation of 'presenting both sides' had to be discarded. Also, this is what I meant about the irrelevance of originality. I'm not interested here in individual ownership of some theory or formulation. I also find discouraging how a lot of contemporary discussions of climate change, capitalism and other topics work with a vocabulary that is never going to enter into a world of popular and communal understandings... for instance, the convoluted debates about the causes of the 'Anthropocene' or the 'Capitalocene' or about the supposed obsolescence of 'nature' or of 'the human'. Obviously, these issues aren't unimportant, but I'm doubtful that these academic exchanges are going to impact a larger field of readers and activists.

A D R You have had raving reviews of *Scorched Earth*, but the critical ones tend to be harsher on your supposed solutions than on your actual diagnosis. Some have claimed that more than a post-capitalist future, you would like to return to a pre-modern past.

J C These critics don't seem interested in or capable of arguing against the substance of my work so they resort to distortions of what I've actually written. Clearly, what's intolerable for them is the possibility that the operations of financial capitalism might be superseded in the interests of a more sustainable and equitable future. These are people whose only vision of the future is the numbing perpetuation of present institutions and powers. I actually don't really propose solutions, except for a few sentences on the tasks facing local regions and communities as the planetary crisis worsens. Also, one of the other responses that I've heard is that I haven't given people anything hopeful. Of course, this question of hope is raised in other debates, specifically around climate change. If you paint too bleak a picture, so it is claimed, it is going to make people too discouraged to participate in finding solutions. But most often, I find that the people who are demanding to be given a hopeful set of scenarios are really asking for something that will allow continuing things as they are, justifying pervasive forms of complacency.

A D R Going back to the point about shared understandings, your book includes critics that have issued similar warnings to yours, but it also includes a much broader range of authors. I was curious about your reliance on novelists, and specifically 19th century fiction, such as Balzac, Trollope, Flaubert, Conrad...

J C I've always thought of literature as a parallel form of historiography, as a kind of social map or diagram. That has been part of the way I've worked for a long time. It's the same way I use works of visual art: to relocate them outside of an aesthetic context. For example, I discuss Rosa Bonheur's painting *The Horse Fair*, which has long been maligned by art critics and art historians. One of my teachers at Columbia was Edward Said, and this was before he wrote his book *Orientalism*. As an English professor, he taught 19th century British literature, and it was one of the best courses that I have ever taken as a student. I owe a lot

to how he taught us to read the texts. Joseph Conrad was one of the writers he focused on, along with Hardy, Eliot, D H Lawrence, Wilde, Woolf and others. In fact, I almost included a section in my book on Conrad's *Nostromo* for its dark portrayal of extractive capitalism. Clearly, there's something about the 19th century novel, beginning especially with Balzac, that is an essential window onto important patterns of social organisation and interaction. But these concise references to fiction were meant to occur alongside my very brief discussions or citations of various philosophers, sociologists, political theorists and others. These names are included as acknowledgments of my dependence on the thinking of many others and as signposts for readers who want to explore further, whether it's Ivan Illich, Simone Weil, Martin Buber, Norbert Elias, Sartre, Marcuse, Bernard Stiegler, Aime Cesaire, Enrique Dussel, Gunther Anders, Norman O. Brown, Silvia Federici, David Abram and many others.

A D R In some sense, the present problems are not completely new developments?

J C The reason why I focus on the last twenty years and I go back to the mid-1990s is because, for me, that is a decisive turning point, with the installation on a global scale of the networks that we are inhabiting and living within now. But obviously, a much longer-range historical understanding and background is crucial. When I use the word 'capitalism', on the one hand, I'm looking at a set of relatively recent developments, the beginning of the post-Reagan and post-Thatcher period, like so many of us who are writing about these kinds of periodisation. Obviously, the overused notion of 'neoliberalism' is relevant here. On the other hand, I'm also going back to Rosa Luxembour, Gustav Landauer and others in the early twentieth century, because obviously what is happening now is inseparable from earlier unfoldings and developments of this system.

A D R At the same time, you oppose those who believe that the 'digital age' is here to stay. This is not like the 'Bronze Age', you argue. It is not permanent, it is precarious.

J C It is impermanent in that it is dependent upon the revenues and human labour of a handful of major global corporations. Talking about precariousness, we can also consider the unprecedented developments that have occurred since the start of the Ukraine war, including the collapse of many assumptions about globalisation that had seemed irrefutable not long ago. The end-of-history fantasies after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union all saw the internet as an essential component of a new homogenised planet where circulation and communication were to take place in a fully interconnected world and in a global marketplace. We were told then that all this was 'here to stay', that national borders would become obsolete but the Ukraine war is just one indication that a unified unipolar world is gone. Who can say what impact these new schisms between the West and other parts of the world will have? Everything that was evoked by the idea of the 'world wide web' is now precarious. I don't think that anyone has a clear understanding of where things are heading. I'm working on a new book, not totally sure what direction it is going to take,

but it is being shaped by some of the instability that we are seeing now. I'm trying to think of a form that I want the book to take.

A D R Is the upcoming book a follow-up, or is that still undetermined?

J C Yes, it will inevitably be some kind of follow-up. I'm sketching out some ideas that are gradually coming together. One of the topics I'm looking at is the range of localised political and activist initiatives that are loosely connected around *buen viver*, southern thought, conviviality, de-growth, eco-feminism and many long-standing indigenous practices and concepts. What strikes me is how the foundations of American political, social and economic life are the antithesis, the frightful inverse of these various projects of building mutuality and interdependence between people, community, other species and the environment. I'm going to be asking if it's conceivable that the relentless acquisitiveness, greed, competitiveness, and individualism that are at the heart of a now sociocidal America could ever be transformed into something less toxic and less violent. Of course, I'll be exploring how the internet complex is fully aligned with the pathologies of American society and how these continue to be implanted elsewhere.