

Unwanted Utopias
Technopolitical Futurities and Streaming Video Under Platform Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that predicting the future is a political act. In the era of digital platforms and amid a glut of future-oriented thinking, tech companies build competing modalities of the future, which seek to codify an imaginary and an ideology through rhetorical and material actions to preshape the future into what this dissertation terms unwanted utopias. The key aspect of this corporate project is to secure their place in the market, a future position which fundamentally holds both value and virtue. As compelling as these narratives have been for investors and the general public alike, as evidenced through the case studies of TikTok, Disney+, and Twitch, this dissertation argues that the power to influence the shape of what's to come is not so easily engineered.

Disney+ provides a moral-economic framework for (re-)positioning the platform brand as guiding principle for the future of media and social responsibility alike. By aligning legacy and futurity, Disney+ is imagined as the uniquely qualified arbiter of a better future that is brought to bear on the global media marketplace. TikTok maintains a model of platform sociality as organized by content ties rather than social ties, reformulating social relations into an architecture where the self is not only completely commodified and algorithmized, but rendered antisocial from its fragmentation and perpetual iterative circulation, into an endlessly refreshed presentness. Twitch demonstrates the need for a move from “what is labour” to “when is labour,”

because work happens on platforms when you are paid, further articulating how the future of work is imagined by the platform economy.

Analysis of temporal modes of technopolitics is necessary for understanding how this form of power is wielded within the platform economy according to existing capitalist logics. An examination of the process of uneven future-making, then, can chart a way forward for genuine alternatives.

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Introduction

Time is a site of material struggle.

Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime*, pg. 105

The future holds immense power. More to the point, being able to *wield futurity*, to have some control (perceived or actual) over the story of the future, is a significant historical nexus of power. A convincing story, or accruing enough capital (economic, social, cultural, political) to force a story into being, not only encroaches on the collective imaginary, but often enough ends up having material consequences, a parallel shaping of the imaginary and of physical reality. I refer to the imaginary here as Charles Taylor (2002, 91) does, the idea that the “imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.” This is, in a sense, aligned with a familiar notion of history as a record of its victors; as Walter Benjamin (1940) wrote: “Those who currently rule are however the heirs of all those who have ever been victorious. Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time.”

Our rulers over futurity, our modern victors, are today the leaders of Big Tech companies, from the typical players of Google, Meta, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon in the United States, to Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance in China, to the many other regional powerhouses around the globe.¹ Entertainment conglomerates, which tech players increasingly own or are a piece of,

¹ As of 2021, the American and Chinese companies accounted for almost 90 percent of the market capitalization of the world’s largest digital platforms (UNCTAD 2021, 2).

likewise shape global imaginations. Alongside tech and entertainment: money. Likewise, the largest venture capital firms, including Andreessen Horowitz, Sequoia Capital, Kleiner Perkins, Founders Fund, Tiger Global Management, and SoftBank, insert themselves into this power through billions in investment, alongside the largest asset managers — BlackRock, Vanguard Group, State Street — collectively holding controlling stakes in practically every major tech firm. At this point, it goes without saying that this massive network of monied activity and ownership not only structures global relations and the circulation of the world economy, it also influences our culture, our social milieu, and our political discourse. In the twenty-first century, governments, organizations, and citizens (though, of course, there are dissenters) have largely ceded the domain of the future to the visions propagated by these companies, their industry representatives, and their investors. Put quite plainly, the power to exert influence over our collective conception of the future has been handed over to these companies.²

Today, there are countless articulations of the future, none reducible to the other, some celebratory of new technologies and others anchored in critical traditions, from theoretical and philosophical inquiry to vernacular discussions in our everyday lives. Financial markets are populated by futures contracts and exchanges, stock futures, and speculation, a system of abstractions and commodities characterized by risk mitigation that exist purely within the portfolios of venture capitalists and corporate investors (Halpern 2023). Queer theorists and activists are intimately interested in the future, and whether it will have a place for them — Lee Edelman (2004) wrote of the death drive of reproductive futurism in his landmark book *No Future*, while José Esteban Muñoz (2009) wrote of queer futurity as a hopeful horizon.

Afrofuturism combines science-fiction and technology to imagine Black futures defined by an

² As Anna Kornbluh (2023, 92) puts it: “The company, in its most cutting-edge incarnation, has become the arena in which narratives and fictions, metaphors and metonymies and symbol networks at their most dynamic and incisive are being generated, worked through and transformed.”

Afrodiasporic perspective, even as writers like Kodwo Eshun (2003) acknowledge the political minefield of futurism as a project. Environmental science and theory are inescapably occupied by what the future may or will hold, attempting to find sustainable futures for the planet through empirical and statistical environmental data (O'Brien and Lousley 2017). A particular strain of political and philosophical thought, from Arendt to Bloch to Benjamin, is characterized by its future-directed analytical methodology, whether dystopian or utopian. Some scholars have recently explored abolitionist futures within a digital and global economy, focused on decolonization and transformative justice (Branson et al. 2023).

Of course, the technology sector is uniquely obsessed with the future, with what is coming next, with which start-up is worth investing in, with how technology can or will change the world. Silicon Valley is full of futurists, such as Paul Staffo, who teaches at Stanford University and is the Chair of "Future Studies" at Singularity University, an incubator and consultancy service co-founded by fellow futurists Peter Diamandis and Ray Kurzweil. This form of futurism or futurology, as Yuriko Furuhashi (2022, 60, 61) argues, "produced numerous techniques and methods of future forecasting regarding scientific, technological, industrial, and economic trends, each of which were brought to bear on governmental policies," and so it is "defined first and foremost by the idea of the manipulability—or engineerability—of the future." Futurism, in this conception, is rational and mappable, deterministic and scientific, "an object of calculation" which is "propelled forward like a projectile on its parabolic flight path" (Furuhashi, 62). Staffo (SFGate 2006, emphasis added), though, calls himself a forecaster instead of a futurist, suggesting that "I have opinions about the future, of course. But my whole posture is to be *detached* and to identify what I think will happen and not allow my judgments of what should happen to get involved." His pronouncements, then, are presumably reasoned, rational, and

without bias. Kurzweil, meanwhile, is a proud futurist, working on life extension technology in the lead-up to the approaching singularity, when machines will overtake humanity (as the theory goes). Kurzweil (2010), who works at Google, is known for making headline-catching predictions, including, “By the time we get to the 2040s, we’ll be able to multiply human intelligence a billionfold,” and “By the 2030s, the nonbiological portion of our intelligence will predominate.” Even when these predictions do not come true, Kurzweil has an answer, as when confronted about how we did not end up with self-driving cars by 2009 as he had once forecasted: “If I had said 2015, I think it would’ve been correct, but they’re still not in mainstream use. So even the [predictions] that were wrong were directionally correct” (Eugenios 2015). Or put slightly differently, “propelled forward like a projectile on its parabolic flight path.”

Tech CEOs and investors likewise get in on the game, such as Peter Thiel, the billionaire venture capitalist and co-founder of PayPal. In Thiel’s book *Zero To One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future* (2014, 31, 66), he bemoans how “globalization replaced technology as the hope for future,” and explains away any delayed technological success by stating that “most of a tech company’s value will come at least 10 to 15 years in the future.” This is a common idea among these tech titans, that the future, including profitability, is always only a few years away, perpetually deferred around the bend, just over the horizon. To wit, SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son paraphrased a Japanese proverb in 2022 (Slodkowski), responding to concerns about the investment company’s falling shares: “Peaches and chestnuts take three years and persimmons take eight years, even fruit takes that long. I’m confident if you wait five to 10 years there will be something delicious.” Somehow, there remains great power and influence in these forecasts — Tesla and Twitter/X CEO Elon Musk, for example, has repeatedly changed the fortunes of

various cryptocurrencies or other businesses with only an errant tweet (Shukla 2021). Taking a ‘scorched earth’ view of things, Jonathan Crary (2022, 54, emphasis added) compellingly argues that “decisions about what product lines will sustain profits and growth have effectively made these companies into the official futurologists of our time, *the regulators of our expectations*.”

There is a palpable contrast between this general glut of future-oriented thinking and the simultaneous inability within public collective will to imagine a future that is different from that which is merely an extension of the prescribed present.³ This dissertation, then, looks critically at the production of some kinds of tech futurities. By looking at several figurations and models of futurity in conjunction with platforms and the stories they tell about human futures, this dissertation seeks to holistically parse these strands of thought, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, which are embedded in corporate rhetoric and which inevitably inform practice and public action. If technology companies and their platforms are indeed the regulators and engineers of our expectations, a critique grounded in bringing together platform studies and future studies is imperative.

Taking my cue from scholars like Devon Powers (2021), who has closely examined the worlds of trend forecasters, futurologists, and other prognosticators, I take a critical view of future-oriented rhetoric and practice, because, as she puts it, “it’s important for everyone to be aware when the future is being used as snake oil to persuade us of the inevitability of what is really just another marketing plan.” For nearly two decades, platform companies in particular have transformed not only social interaction and community, but also the global operations of capital and other geopolitical forces. This intertwinement between capital, technology, and sociality is adding additional challenges to those wishing to outline a future that is aware of and

³ Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2019, 161) sums up this ‘futurability’ condition as an “impotence of political will.” As he notes, “financial capital is not planning for any future, as the future is now, in the instantaneous valorization of virtual value and in the devastation of the radial spaces of physical territory.” (139)

informed by the past. These are the challenges this dissertation grapples with, offering conceptual development and interdisciplinary analysis that offers a way of bringing together platform studies with critical future studies to make significant interventions in both areas.

There are other history-inflected, future-oriented voices we can draw on. As Lizzie O'Shea (2019, 7) argues, the history of digital technology ought to be mined for its *usable pasts*: “By building a shared appreciation of moments and traditions in collective history, a usable past is a method for creating the world we want to see... It is an argument for what the future could look like, based on what kinds of traditions are worth valuing and which moments are worth remembering.” The philosopher Ernst Bloch (1995 [1954], 18) argued that a grounding in history is crucial when crafting *concrete utopias* in the present — indeed, he could have been writing today when he states, “The world is full of propensity towards something, tendency towards something, latency of something, and this intended something . . . means a world which is more adequate for us, without degrading suffering, anxiety, self-alienation, nothingness.” These propensities, tendencies, and latencies are borne out within the existing and imagined utopias of tech companies, none of which appear to be “adequate for us.” Likewise, I think of Adrian Daub’s *What Tech Calls Thinking* (2020), which unpacks the ideological and intellectual understructure of Silicon Valley, from Ayn Rand to Marshall McLuhan, taking the air out of traditional and pervasive tech shibboleths like “disruption,” “content,” and “genius.” Curiously, Daub doesn’t touch on “future.”

This dissertation, then, focuses squarely on the future as the primary ideological understructure of the platform economy, expressed through various models by distinct actors which can tell us much about how temporal politics are wielded as a form of power that is protected by corporate platform entities as their sole responsibility for a better future.

These corporate impositions have a measurable and distinct impact. Astrid Mager and Christian Katzenbach (2021, 231) argue, “Technology companies not only take over the imaginative power of shaping future society from state actors, but partly also their ability to govern these very futures with their rhetoric, technologies, and business models.” We now live, by hook or by crook, within this scenario — what I am calling *unwanted utopias*. One might then ask: unwanted by whom? It is not simply “the users” as a monolith, not least because many are satisfied enough to make use of these platforms every day without considering what sort of future is being manufactured. My claim in this dissertation is that these unwanted utopias, in short, are hugely beneficial for the companies involved in their cultivation, in the “take over,” but are far less useful or favourable for the billions of people across both the Global North and South who use these technologies and these platforms in their daily lives. Moreover, the phrase recognizes the way many classes and identities are routinely excluded from these platform futures, as any form of marginalization frequently obscures many creators and users from the platform’s present. The point, then, is that these utopias are primarily *extractive* from users in a way that is primarily *lucrative* for the platform, both economically and culturally. Even so, we all are encouraged to imagine our own seemingly inevitable place within these futures, under the thumb of platform power, and there is no question of whether anyone else wants it, it is simply imposed. These utopias are constructed, narrativized, and disseminated with the purpose of foreclosing on alternatives that could challenge the status quo of the platform economy, with the result being the authorization of “minimum viable futures” (Hoffmann 2020).⁴

This dissertation narrates and analyses competing tech futures by articulating three representative examples of corporate claims on temporality (from Disney+ and its parent

⁴ Anna Laura Hoffmann uses this phrase, adapted from Lilly Irani in her book *Chasing Innovation: Making Entrepreneurial Citizens in India* (2019), to help describe her conception of data violence, and how discourses of inclusion in tech disguise these companies’ dedication to an oppressive social order.

company The Walt Disney Corporation, TikTok and its parent company ByteDance, and Twitch and its parent company Amazon), focusing not only on the gaps between industry self-description and actual practices, but also, more importantly, how this storytelling seeks to shape and *own the future*, to the point that our collective conception of a future — any future — is defined and reined in by these corporate visions, in various competing ways.⁵ In the end, this is intended to illustrate the dominant form of power as it exists under platform capitalism, a compendium of *temporal modes of technopolitics*.

I have chosen these three video-based platforms because they each stake a particular claim over temporality via the articulation of a future imagined with their particular model at its centre, from Disney’s media future, to TikTok’s social future, to Twitch’s labour future, all wrapped in their unique time-based modalities. I deliberately do not separate streaming subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms like Disney+ from video-based social media platforms like TikTok and Twitch, as they have otherwise largely been divided into subfields and separated in much academic analysis, because my chosen analytic of futurity necessitates putting these platforms into conversation, *specifically* in the context of film, television, and media studies. Put simply, these are platforms of moving images, each organized and curated according to a mixture of decisions made by algorithms, technicians, executives, investors, and, occasionally, talent, whether Hollywood filmmakers or content creators.⁶ As scholars like Ramon Lobato and Amanda D. Lotz (2021) have shown, it’s important to consider each platform in a fuller market sense and also in its own context. In practice, each of my chosen platforms has

⁵ And, it should be noted, to varying degrees of cultural embeddedness.

⁶ This is to say nothing of how, for most of us on these platforms (and increasingly so over the last two decades or so), there is little distinction to be made between “professional” and “amateur” content anymore — we scroll through it all as it blends into a single feed of individualized consumption. For more on aspects of this shift, among others, see Johnson 2023; Bishop 2023; and Cunningham & Craig 2018.

been interested in constructing a utopia of its own, and pushing a technopolitical project to convince users, policymakers, and investors alike of its *value* and its *virtue*.

A temporal mode of technopolitics refers to strategies and methods undertaken by these corporate actors to “seize the means of imaginative production” (Vizoso & Byrnes 2023), or in other words, to exert control (or the appearance of it) over temporality itself. Or in this case, over futurity. As Sarah Sharma (2014, 6) has explained, many theorists of the twenty-first century (she refers to them as “speed theorists,” honed in on instantaneity and fast capital) have focused on a shift from geopolitics, a politics based in space, to chronopolitics, a politics based in time. For Sharma (6), this is too simple an explanation, because they end up sounding just like “marketers and multinational corporations who want us all to believe the same thing: that we are again on the verge of utopia, living in new times.” Sharma (8) argues that lived time is not only sped up but differential, and made up of multiple “inequitable temporal relations,” and this has a distinctly political dimension: “Temporalities do not experience a uniform time but rather a time particular to the labor that produces them. Their experience of time depends on where they are positioned within a larger economy of temporal worth.” This idea is absolutely key to my understanding of temporal (techno)politics in this dissertation, and will be built on in what follows.

This recalls Brian Massumi’s (2015) compelling concept of *ontopower*, the power to pre-shape reality and the future by drawing on the qualitative, transformative excesses of the present, as entwined with neoliberal financial capitalism. Originating from his analysis of military doctrine in the United States moving from Cold War-era deterrence to post-9/11 pre-emption, ontopower is likewise applicable, he argues, on a wider societal scale. As Massumi (2017, 13-14) explains in a later interview:

I said earlier that the economy has become a regime of power in its own right. What I meant is that the capitalist process has made itself an ontopower... I try to look at some of the consequences of the way in which capitalism's ontopower extends to the production of the very capitalized individuals, the capital life-forms, that populate its field. The fact that capitalism has found ways to productively access matrices of emergence means that it now increasingly functions at the *infra-individual* level wherever capital flows – which is everywhere. Capital seeps down to the affective level of felt potential, before life potentials have concretized in a determinate form of life, where life is as-yet emergent.

It is my contention, then, that it is the platform economy, the markets it creates, and the institutions that form it, that wield this “as-yet” temporal power over the “felt potential” of digital futures. This will be a relevant background throughout this dissertation's three chapters.

The future – potential, in Massumi's account – is a site of contestation, and also the site where power is asserted. As Amanda Rees put it in *Wired*'s “The Future of Futures” issue in 2021, “Whatever the approach of the forecaster, and however sophisticated their tools, the trouble with predictions is their proximity to power.” Indeed, she adds, it's a very simple formula: “Those who can influence what people *think* will be the future are often the same people able to command considerable resources in the present, which in turn help determine the future.” Writing these words in the biggest mainstream publication known in the 1990s as one of the cheerleaders for the ‘Californian Ideology’ (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) and for much of the popularizing of technological determinism as a desirable trajectory is not insignificant. In the rawest of terms, these narratives become embedded and codified in the popular discursive understanding of what is to come, amid a chaos of popular discussion about the future, thereby setting public expectations about technology and society itself — the engineerability of the future.⁷

⁷ I am not adopting his approach specifically, but it is worth noting Ernst Bloch's method of speculative materialism here, which he uses to at once examine the radical openness of the indeterminate future with contradictions in the natural world. As Cat Moir (2016, 342) puts it, “In Bloch's speculative materialism, then, there is a goal, latent as potential, in the material tendency toward self-realization, including what he calls its ‘self-reflection’ in

Past Futures and Platform Studies

“The fight for a free, fair and open digital future isn’t more important than any of those other fights, but it is *foundational*. Tech is the terrain on which our future fights will be fought. If we can’t seize the means of computation, we will lose the fight before it is even joined.”

— Cory Doctorow, *The Internet Con: How to Seize the Means of Computation*, pg. 25

This inquiry draws on and intervenes into existing studies of platforms, particularly from the analytical perspective of political economy, including the challenges of platform governance and regulation, the programmability of algorithms, and the tools that are available for cultural production and its circulation. Platform studies is a complex field with varying disciplinary orientations alongside a strong practice of consistent collaboration across disciplines (including economics, management, communication studies, policy, digital media and cultural studies, to name just a few). Since the development of platform studies, there has been exponential interest in the logics and relations of computational media, precisely because of how intimately we encounter them in everyday life. As digital media has come to dominate our lives, placing us into Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s (2016) realm of “habitual new media” and their addictions, much work has investigated the role platforms play in our lives, and the particularities of certain strategies employed by these companies to sustain growth and capture our attention. For example, scholars like danah boyd (2014) and Whitney Phillips (2015) have popularly chronicled the intensities of our digital lives, tapping into the operations of these affective networks and how users respond to the codes and design offered to them. Others like Geert Lovink (2019) and Alexander Cho (2017) have usefully unfurled the political consciousnesses

consciousness and ‘self-manifestation’ in the qualitative leaps from one form of being to another. The process of materialization has an inherent, logical orientation toward an ultimate future.”

and affects mediated by platforms, exposing the epistemic and cultural consequences of programmability; Tim Hwang (2020) likewise chronicles the platforms as marketplaces of attention via their reliance on advertising mechanisms.

Tarleton Gillespie (2010) early on oriented us toward unpacking the rhetoric used by the tech sector, which provides an opportunity to question these logics. Gillespie chronicled how the term ‘platform’ itself is deployed by tech companies to carefully position themselves to users, advertisers, policymakers, partners, and investors, strategically controlling the discursive understanding of what they do and how they do it. *They set the terms* for how they want to be perceived and judged, all the while seeking to organize how public discourse circulates — this premise is crucial to my argument in this dissertation that futurity, and future studies, is a useful analytic for platforms, based on this original conception of term-setting for the future. Gillespie called for more precise language and analysis for these platform interventions and their consequences, while pointing to the ways in which this effort is stunted by their vague claims of neutrality and “progressive openness.”

In the years following this call to action, others have shifted from rhetorical analysis to argue that platforms are like infrastructures, the intermediaries by which services are rendered, cultural production is located, and corporate power is organized (Nieborg & Poell 2018; Plantin et al. 2016; Helmond et al. 2019; Athique 2020). As other (sub)fields join with platform studies, more perspectives on the gendered nature of platform design (Bivens & Haimson 2016), the racial implications of algorithmic bias (Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019), the application of theories of affect to platforms (Hillis et al. 2015; Cho), and many other approaches have added much of value to these debates. The politics, ethics, and governance of platforms and digital technologies are a pressing concern for scholars, and bringing this into conversation with long-standing

debates within media industries and economics is where I position my proposed intervention alongside scholars like Dwayne Winseck (2017) and Lin Zhang (2020), who pointedly examine the political economy of platformization and its globalized consequences. Still others, like Rob Larson (2020), argue for the full socialization of platforms as a radical leftist solution.

What's needed, however, is further consideration of how these theories have been applied to our platformized present. Looking to Jameson's late capitalism (drawn from Ernest Mandel), Shoshana Zuboff's surveillance capitalism (2019), Nick Srnicek's platform capitalism (2017), Paul Mason's postcapitalism (2015), Jodi Dean's communicative capitalism (2010), Brett Christophers' rentier capitalism (2020), McKenzie Wark's something-worse-than-capitalism (2019), Christian Fuchs's (2022) digital capitalism, and numerous other periodizations of this era of digital capital, it is clear that, if nothing else, we are eager to term this as a somehow-new era that necessitates explication and demarcation. My research contends with these arguments, which have constructed overlapping fields of inquiry into contemporary capitalism and its modes, creating a critical apparatus obsessed with the production of novelty as its own problematic form of futurity. This is not exactly a critique of periodization as such, but an acknowledgement, as Sharma reminds us, of multiple temporalities, and power relations extending beyond the analytic of fast or new capital. I hope to demonstrate the mechanisms of control and convergence that organize our lives based on visions of the future that belong to a small handful of people at the top of the global platform economy who have outsized influence on our collective futures, bringing a crucial clarity to these debates by drawing on the throughlines and patterns that emerge within their narratives.

I do so by focusing on three tech companies that shape these narratives of the future, or seek to, in representative ways that reflect on industrial conceptions of where media, sociality,

and labour are headed. The very idea that ventures like Disney+, TikTok, and Twitch encapsulate is that of the tech “disruptor,” a digital infrastructure that intends to become the sectoral leader, capturing a place for itself in the imagination of a culture as a destination of present and future entertainment, connection, and even remuneration. This research, then, contributes to the growing body of scholarship devoted to understanding what is distinct about platform or digital capitalism, recognizing its historical positionality and trajectory while at the same time acknowledging its crucial differences. What critical future studies offers to platform studies, in particular, is drawing out the implications of Gillespie’s point about how platforms set the terms for how they are to be perceived — that this control over the narrative has significant temporal consequences, as the terms are set and become more difficult to reset. Critical future studies, then, also provides an opportunity for platform and cultural studies more broadly to strategize and set new terms for critique and, perhaps, for living with technology.

Scholars like Srnicek and others have written compellingly about platforms as deeply meaningful for shifts in the global economy and, like Susanna Paasonen (2021), for changes in cultural behaviour. However, there are too few examples of analysis within platform studies or similar fields that critically examine Big Tech rhetoric in the historical context of futurity, or indeed time itself, as a philosophical or ideological concept — this despite the ubiquity of cultural conversations about how social media and the internet disrupt our sense of time.⁸ In this dissertation, I bring these theoretical strands together to account for the specific temporal and technopolitical impact of these stories *as stories*. Here I draw on my training in film and media studies to show how rhetorics of the future are constructed via interface, narrative, and aesthetics, alongside discourse analysis and methods of critical future studies, which holds a

⁸ Petter Bae Brandtzaeg and Marika Lüders (2018) call this “time collapse in social media,” characterized by a complete breakdown in linearity.

reverence for what Riel Miller (2018) has called “futures literacies,” understanding processes of projection and, more pointedly, popular discourses of the future across “multiple entry points” (Godhe and Goode 2018, 156; more on this in the next section).

Thinkers of the future will be key here, and there is a long philosophical history to draw from. Bloch and Benjamin bring forward the politics of the future and how ideology helps to determine the shape that it takes, and there is an explicit acknowledgement here that these ideologies are themselves crafted according to particular political, social, cultural, and technological tendencies, so it is necessary to uncover the nuances of these tendencies to make sense of their attendant ideologies. Current popular philosophers such as Byung-Chul Han (2017, 12, 76), whom *The New Yorker* dubbed “The Internet's New Favorite Philosopher” in 2024 (Chayka), carry this forward into a mainstream (and perhaps less rigorous) critique, about an uncertain and chaotic digital era wherein “the future is becoming calculable and controllable” thanks to data collection, and yet “Big Data is blind to the future.” Changing the future, Han argues, is up to singular events to open up new space for (collective) action to take place. We can place this in contrast with scholar Sun-ha Hong (2021, 1941), who instead, and more carefully, highlights how “our technofutures often produce the appearance of diverse visions while deepening a structural narrowness of seeing.” In addition to this, there are the social relations which underpin this narrowness, as we encounter seemingly endless claims on the future despite a simultaneous feeling that the future is less open to us, like we are stuck in a waiting room without an apparent exit.

Alongside these thinkers are critical prognosticators, typically speculating with a more analytical approach than the industry’s futurists, about what the future will look like and whether anything can be done about it. This is tied to Sarah Sharma’s (2014) concept of

“power-chronography,” which describes the uneven politics and distribution of temporality in the context of labour, drawing attention to the capitalist social control that takes place through the varied relationships that workers (and so-called content creators) have with time. Sharma helped introduce the idea that there are multiple temporalities, whereby not everything is sped up in the same ways for everyone at the same time, but there are speed ups and slow downs that are *temporally distributed in uneven ways*. Others, such as Melanie Dulong de Rosnay (2016), offer detailed visions of unforeseen alternatives, in her case through an imagined alternative internet or internets with a series of best practices to guide us, like a manual (recalling O’Shea’s wish for usable pasts).

What is at stake for these and many other scholars and writers is how we think about the future, both as an update to the “Californian Ideology” as famously laid out by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1996), shepherded by a future-oriented technological determinism that found its home within Silicon Valley, but also as a conceptual roadmap of the intellectual bedrock underpinning tech titan mythmaking within the platform economy at large. Relatedly, my focus on the temporal power structures of these platforms is a way of disputing Paul Virilio’s (2005) assertion, presaging analysis like Anna Kornbluh’s (2023; see next section), that these categories have been superseded by immediacy thanks to digital media. I aim to reclaim this categorization of space and time following Poell (2020), who argues, building in some ways on Sharma, that we are confronted by a multiplicity of temporalities that are each connected to broader societal and cultural power relations.

As Fredric Jameson (2005, xii) noted, this all occurs within a sociocultural and neoliberal environment dominated by “the universal belief...that no other socioeconomic system is

conceivable, let alone practically available.”⁹ The Utopian form, as he argues, has been fundamentally defined by a radical difference, but “our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production” (xiii). In an age where the mode of production is dictated by platform capitalists, then, the project for this present inquiry aims to gather the narrative data espoused by these tech companies (and the rhetorical complex that surrounds them) to understand the dimensions of the technopolitics of temporality that structure our digital lives and our experience of platformed time, or time spent on platforms – in order, ultimately, to reclaim the future.¹⁰ For critical future studies, then, focusing on platforms and understanding tech’s models of futurity helps position scholars to better understand the contours of our subjugated imaginations – and how to liberate them.

Kyle Stine and Axel Volmar (2021, 12) refer to how media technologies not only constitute material infrastructures but also temporal infrastructures, architectures, and systems, where the result is the careful maintenance of *temporal regimes*, “the guiding principles of ordering time in a given locality or epoch,” which are nevertheless “flexible and open to reconfiguration.” We’ll hold onto and eventually return in the conclusion to the promise of that last point, but for now it’s worth pausing on this relation between temporal infrastructures and technological systems, as these “guiding principles” for ordering time are intimately tied to how technology is now wielded by the biggest companies in the world. If the capitalist economic process itself has become a regime of power, as Massumi argued, then it is organized according to parallel temporal regimes that rely on these technologies to function and prosper in the market.

⁹ Mark Fisher’s arguably even more influential argument about *capitalist realism* — “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it,” (2010, 2) — makes a similar point. In *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), Fisher likewise referred to the “slow cancellation of the future.” Critics have pointed out the limits of this analysis, and indeed we ought to move past an acknowledgement that it is difficult to “imagine otherwise” and embrace a fuller accounting of the material obstacles involved, among other ways to reckon with the affective hangover of Fisher’s argument.

¹⁰ This technopolitics of temporality remains tied to Sharma’s chronopolitics, applied here specifically to corporate claims on futurity.

In short, the temporal regime of platform capitalism must be perceived and known intimately if there is hope for Stine and Volmar's promised openness to reconfiguration.

Cultural Futures and Methods

The concept of progress acts as a protective mechanism to shield us from the terrors of the future.

Frank Herbert, *Dune*, pg. 521

My view is that the issue of the future is one of significant importance for cultural and media studies in particular. By looking at media histories and the political economy of media and technology, I will map these platformized relations and ideological narrativizing as they have developed with the introduction of streaming platforms (whether made up of professional or user-generated content) and other shifts within media ecosystems. Thinking of this temporally will drive an analysis of streaming and video platforms which opens up hidden or obfuscated continuities and naturalizations that are defining the present and future of corporate power and media industries. Devon Powers (2020, 452-453, emphasis added) helpfully reminds us that “imagining tomorrow has long been a central, if under-appreciated, facet of cultural studies.” She goes on to argue:

As it stands, elite interests – often with the aid of futurist professionals – are making decisions about the future on behalf of the rest of us, without our input or knowledge... The kinds of questions that drive cultural studies could bring much-needed critical awareness to future imaginaries, but it will require endowing cultural studies with more robust methods and theories for thinking,

acting, and making change. In short, we need a *futurist cultural studies*. Futurism can increase our efficacy; cultural studies can increase futurism's humanity.

Aside from rare efforts like Lawrence Grossberg's 2010 book *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, in which he argues for cultural studies as a political project based in futurity, Powers sees a dearth of work in the field that takes the systematic study of the future seriously as a major concern for the discipline.¹¹ To address this gap and to bring about a futurist cultural studies, she turns to the emerging subfield of critical future studies. This turn is something this dissertation participates in.

Methodologically, for my part, this dissertation combines a rigorous discourse and rhetorical analysis, focusing on corporate and press material created by the companies themselves, with the visual and textual analysis of the platforms and the content hosted therein, as a strategy to address the perceived complexity of these networks, systems, and representations. Each chapter is focused on one video-based platform as performing a particular *model of futurity*, and as such my research necessarily seeks to capture what Carol David (2001, 218) terms, in relation to corporate reports, the "full rhetorical situation." I bring this to bear on the platform and its model of futurity, which requires an engagement with each platform's interface, design, content, and usage in parallel with the stories of technofutures crafted by the companies themselves, the industry, and the press. This storytelling, in turn, will provide the narrative data needed to reveal much about how each platform sees the future (or wishes users and stockholders to see the future) and what their role (and ours) in that future is imagined to be. Analyzing much of this material, from financial reports to marketing campaigns, requires careful scrutiny, as the main takeaways are routinely taken for granted, as collated in company press releases and regurgitated as future-affirmed gospel by investors, journalists, and members of the

¹¹ "Cultural studies matters because it is about the future, and about some of the work it will take, in the present, to shape the future," (Grossberg 2010, 1).

public. As David (ibid.) argues, one cannot simply evaluate the accuracy of financial data or corporate summaries, for example, as standards of clarity and honesty “are not sufficient or even appropriate for the narrative sections that contain interpretive visual and textual language and designs,” so analyses of this material requires “analysis of the visual and textual design and the myths it purveys.” This method gives insight into the stated “full rhetorical situation” of the documents with the help of a “semiological study” of the signs, myths, and values put forward throughout this material, which, as I argue, can find much assistance through textual and visual analysis methodologies within cultural and media studies.

This dissertation builds, too, on what Benjamin Burroughs (2019, 2-3), terms “digital lore,” a form of industry storytelling as expressed through companies like Netflix “as a tool to constrain the market” and reinvent “audience-viewing practices.” Burroughs’ approach to Netflix is a useful methodological model, as a form of critical media industry studies that careens through various media and cultural contexts, which only becomes more acute when applied to lores of and by temporality — as Burroughs writes, “In times of uncertainty and disruption for the institutional order, there are possibilities for emergent forms of lore due to technological innovations.”¹² Specifically, I examine this material over the full period of each platform’s existence until 2024, which helps to overcome a common challenge for digital methodologies, as these platforms and discourses are constantly changing, advancing, and transforming at a rapid pace. This historical positioning of future-oriented corporate rhetoric will allow me to make claims about the mythmaking of these corporations with the appropriate context — the ultimate fate of these companies (for example, if they are still around and/or successful as you read this),

¹² Colin Crawford (2021, 4) builds on this concept, as well as Timothy Havens’ *industry lore*, to likewise understand *investor lore*: “the emergent discourses among investing actors about what kinds of user experiences are and are not valuable, and which users those experiences will and will not engage.” All are useful terms for understanding how this storytelling works and what it prioritizes.

then, isn't relevant so much as their visions of futurity and their socioeconomic influence or relevance in the period in question.

As we will find, each platform builds its particular model of temporal power into the app's design, interface, and governance of its technical architecture in different ways, and these methods are ideal tools to materialize and unknot these ideologies and codes (after all, as Wendy Chun [2006, 66] reminds us, code "is better than law"). Ludmila Lupinacci (2022, 17) says, "If our sociality is increasingly intertwined with the logics of social media, then the examination of the temporalities that are immanent in these platforms contributes to the understanding of our very conditions of existence today." This will be crucial in each chapter for setting up how this relationship between *platform time* and the cultivation of unwanted utopias is enforced at the level of the algorithm.

By platform time, I am referring to these temporal modes which incur a technopolitical power structure as determined by the platforms. Relatedly, I will employ traditional textual and visual analysis when appropriate, particularly for the chapter on Disney+, as a way to understand this ideological strategy within the original series that are found on the platform which highlight company lore and brand management. This method likewise proves fruitful when examining content on TikTok and Twitch to help illustrate both the experience of platform time as well as social and subjectified differences in content and labour.

Sympathetic to their welcoming of methodological pluralism, I closely follow Michael Godhe and Luke Goode's (2018, 156) description of critical future studies, which recognizes "the value of multiple entry points (for example, investigating how individuals anticipate and imagine their own and their society's future, as well as the ways in which institutions and collectives undertake that imaginative work), and multiple approaches (from focused studies of

exemplary texts to the discussion of discursive patterns and cultural tropes distributed across a broader textual corpus).” Much as Powers (455-6) called for, cultural and media studies must become more pointedly futurist in response to the decisions being made for us about the future: “While we can say that major technology platforms are increasingly powerful and intrusive, a futurist approach transcends critique to plot how political, social, economic, and behavioral trends might shape how those powers develop, and how that in turn might suggest different critical interventions.” In this way, the future is not *just* a site of rhetoric, but “a zone to be occupied, fought over, theorized, envisioned, and possibly emancipated, if our imaginations and our best thinking will allow.”

Applying the methods and aims of critical future studies to cultural, media, and platform studies is a deliberate interdisciplinary wager that is intended to bring out the strengths of each while addressing potential weaknesses as identified by Powers, namely the risk of insularity for cultural studies (put crudely: how can theory be enjoined with a form of praxis?) and the risk of losing the human element within futurity critique. The chosen case studies are exemplary platforms which traffic in future-oriented rhetoric and corporate mythmaking, both in general to maintain brand longevity (see chapter 1 in particular on this point) but also regarding more specific futures of media, sociality, and labour. I have chosen these platforms for patterns and trends I have observed in their address as particularly future-oriented, albeit in distinct registers that are explored in each chapter — to be included, there had to be enough of a corpus of material directly related to futurist positioning from the companies themselves, with a clear attempt to shape how users, investors, journalists, and legislators ought to comprehend these futures.

These video-based platforms have differing relationships to the experience of time for their users, but in each case these relations are directly tied to larger corporate narratives and industry-wide patterns of temporal power and politics. Work like Anna Kornbluh's (2024) on the loss of mediation and a unifying logic of immediacy, for instance, in one sense seems to call for a project like the one I offer here — if Lauren Berlant's (2011, 6) diagnosis in *Cruel Optimism* of the present is as “affectively... immanence, emanation, atmosphere, emergence,” then for Kornbluh (6, emphasis added), “immediacy's temporality might thus be understood as this presence *without future*.” Or, as Kornbluh (13) adds, this stage of “too late capitalism” appears to remake previous periodizations: “Where postmodernism inscribes ‘a crisis of historicity,’ [Jameson 1984, 69] immediacy encodes *a crisis of futurity*, a beclouded nonhorizon.” While this so-called crisis may have affective valence (as you read it, it certainly feels true), this is another symptomatic analysis which tacitly accepts that the future is closed off and gone, when in fact there are a superfluity of futures that are coordinated in distinct ways. In other words, it is precisely this move to crisis which helps to maintain the stuckness of the future, even if inadvertently, rather than seeing these futures as present but hijacked and therefore open to diversion. My project, then, aims to address and outline these hijackings through analysis of particular platforms and their rhetorical, narratological apparatus.

My overall approach to understanding these processes similarly builds on John Cheney-Lippold's (2024) concept of *temporal paternalism*.¹³ In describing his framework of our age of “the silicon future,” Cheney-Lippold (7) posits a “temporal paternalist claim to authority that validates itself not according to argument or empiricism, but to temporal supremacy... The resulting ideological framework affirms capitalist aversion to intervention while it simultaneously positions the silicon futurist as the only figure able to oversee the world's

¹³ As Cheney-Lippold notes, this is adapted from Bliss Cua Lim's (2009) concept of temporal elitism.

technological progress.” To illustrate this in the broadest terms, think of prominent public figures like Elon Musk or OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, and the way they stake a claim on the future based on their supposed expertise, the idea that the answer to the world’s problems are technological and only they can build it because only they properly understand it (their supposed expertise, then, is always also a sales pitch). This paternalism is, first and foremost, how tech companies (and their mostly male leaders), especially in the United States, have for so long avoided proper regulation, via the persuasive (to some) argument that only those leading the industry truly understood it enough to watch over it and, effectively, self-regulate.¹⁴

While the regulatory environment has changed somewhat in recent years, this paternalism ripples widely into public expectations, policy decisions, journalistic accounts, and industrial maneuvers. Succeeding from notional understandings of “chronopolitics,” (Wallis 1970) which explored the relation between our experience of time and our political behaviour, Cheney-Lippold’s (2, emphasis added) most useful contribution to what my dissertation explores is his recasting of technological determinism’s power from being spatial to temporal, arguing that science-fiction writer William Gibson’s oft-cited adage that “the future is already here, it is just not very evenly distributed” (Cuff 2020, 20) is reflective of a “geographical schism between the haves and the have nots,” whereas “the silicon future is *temporally uneven*, a schism between those in the future and those in the present.” The silicon futurists, in other words, are already living (comfortably) in the future, and everyone else joining them there, someday soon(!), is a foregone conclusion — unwanted utopias.

¹⁴ “With that temporal advantage comes a useful political effect—there is neither time nor reason for critique,” (Cheney-Lippold, 2).

A Crisis of Futurity?

More and more people are beginning to realize that the fragmented emotions of anxiety and suspicion that they feel inside them may really be just the raw material for the technology corporations to feed off. It may be that we are really far stronger than we think...As a first step, we have to start imagining what kind of future it is we want to build.

Adam Curtis, *Can't Get You Out of My Head* (2021), episode 6

“The future need not be blindly accepted,” intones the filmmaker Orson Welles, hosting the 1972 documentary adaptation of Arvin Toffler and Adelaide Farrell’s 1970 bestseller, *Future Shock*. Welles makes for an apt host, the charismatic lion behind some of cinema’s greatest achievements and, likewise, an iconic figure of visual culture who struggled to navigate a rapidly changing industry and tastes. ‘Future shock,’ as Toffler and Farrell describe it, results from (the feeling of) too much change in too short a time. Welles himself had spent his career post-*Citizen Kane* trying to find a place for himself, moving from Hollywood to Europe and back again. The year after this documentary, he would release *F For Fake*, which, among many other things, is about how all images are lies, all stories are forgeries of a kind, and the market is their natural habitat. Images, lies, stories, forgeries — all for sale. The final piece of work Welles completed before his death, this documentary sits fascinatingly beside *Future Shock*, as he reflects in both on the authenticity of what we see. Perhaps no one knew better than Welles that “the future need not be blindly accepted,” just as no image or story need be. It is our responsibility, always, to take a closer look. He asks in *Future Shock*: “Is technology always desirable? Changes bombard our nervous systems, clamoring for decisions. New technologies, new values flood into our lives.

The pressure of fast change forces us to question all that we've been taught. Sometimes technology can destroy."

In the age of the platform economy, it is no longer appropriate to ask if technology is always desirable — it is taken as a matter of course, and indeed it is often the only acceptable political or social answer to any proposed problem, through what is called technological solutionism (Morozov 2013). Sometimes, it feels like problems are invented by a startup company that their technology expressly and conveniently provides a solution for. Quoting Toffler and Farrell directly, it is put to us by Welles that "if we can begin to think more imaginatively about the future, then we can prevent future shock, then we can use technology itself to build a decent, democratic, and humane society." To make these critical decisions about what kind of world we want and how technology can help to build it would be to imagine otherwise, and these words, I would argue, have not been heeded.

The many thinkers who have diagnosed some sort of collective inability to "imagine otherwise" are no doubt correct, and yet they leave bare a need to think and theorize beyond such impotence, even if it remains the baseline analytic for my own inquiry. In other words: yes, but now what? Through an understanding of how particular companies, as *self-imposed ambassadors of the future*, have worked to maintain this narrative for their own benefit, we can also gain insight and, ideally, strategies for recognizing their own limitations and failures, which could then be further exploited by alternative imaginaries of the future.

Whether we see ourselves as workers, consumers, or social beings, these corporate actors have been able to control or, more accurately, significantly alter our sense of time and of what could be different tomorrow, strictly limiting the space for us to pick up on our own capability to challenge and push and build. Unlike most of the aforementioned diagnoses, then, it is not so

much a situation of manipulation and modification, but one of obfuscation and deferral. In short, I contend that the future can be reclaimed, though with a lot of work. One place for this work to begin is to illustrate, as I attempt to do in the chapters that follow, precisely how it is that these companies (and the structures that have an interest in their continued success) cultivate temporal narratives which come to dominate our collective imaginary, even — or especially — when that dominant narrative is couched in different language.

In what follows I offer a chapter breakdown to illustrate how I do so in this dissertation. Chapter 1 deals with The Walt Disney Company and its streaming platform, Disney+, through the documentary series created for it as a way to reveal the platform's pitch as the future of media based on a legacy of cultural dominance. This is a temporal narrative of the brand as guiding principle over a moral-economic future that places the platform as the central arbiter of social responsibility — which I call brand futurity, a new way of framing the role of the corporation within the future. The future being sold here is a domineering vision of a media ecosystem completely under the stewardship of Disney and its platform, entrusted due to the brand's legacy and goodwill. Chapter 2 looks at TikTok as a way to reveal where sociality lies when the social has been ceded to content, and to understand how new temporalities and intimacies are formed. This is a temporal and social logic of circulation *ad infinitum*, a future-oriented temporal regime that seeks to rupture social relations in particular ways. The future being sold here is one where social ties are de-emphasized in favour of content trends and groupings, a relationality that reconfigures what social platforms provide. Chapter 3 examines Twitch and its forms of work, or rather modes of work, which it materializes, via a move away from “what is labour” to “*when is labour*,” a temporal analysis of money under platform capitalism, offering a fuller account of how the platform, like Disney+ and TikTok in their own

ways, wields power over temporality as a strategy to exploit existing capitalistic tendencies. The future being sold here is one where labour is discussed as anything-but, while the platform nevertheless reaps all the benefits of an employer.

Altogether, this means not only seeing these corporate futures as empty, though they are, but seeing, too, how they fit into larger temporal regimes whose present technopolitical power conceals its inherent flimsiness — subsequent studies, as my conclusion turns to, can then exploit this flimsiness into their own emergent platform thinking. By drawing on temporal and future-oriented analysis of Disney+, TikTok, and Twitch, I will demonstrate how each corresponds to a modality of futurity that aligns with the enactment and enforcement of their own respective corporate utopian vision. Platform design, process, and mythmaking are, then, exercises in utopia-building and future-making, a marriage of ideological and technical function, and still platform temporality remains under-researched.

For instance, as one example of many, Twitch's story about the 'future of work' never discusses employment as such, out of self-interest, but their operations and rhetoric impact how their content creators understand their work nonetheless. In some ways, the task is simply to read between the lines of this rhetoric as it has been rehearsed over the last two-plus decades of tech development after the dot-com boom — what are the *actual* policies, practices, and affects that get inculcated through this rhetoric? Again, this becomes a decidedly temporal project, and one closely related to obfuscation and deferral as core tactics. The sensation of time is dictated by our experience of the platform and its demands on our time. For most, success in terms of legibility, capital, or social status is always *deferred*, perhaps only one livestream away, or one campaign for the platform to change an exploitative guideline for use. For most, they stick around because the nature of what it is they are doing is actively *obfuscated*, data kept from them on the one

hand to keep them in prolonged thrall to the platform and, on the other hand, an overarching structure of feeling based in our time spent on platforms, which conflates the future of the user with that of the platform.

This temporal project has an ideological dimension. Joel Dinerstein (2006, 573) argues that in an increasingly secular age, corporatist technology overtakes theological comforts:

Once the future replaced heaven as the zone of perfectibility - as powered by technology - “progress” began to function as a religious myth that substituted a sacralized temporal zone (the future) for a sacred spatial one (Heaven). The sacraments of this belief system are new technological products. The presumption of a continuous flow of new technologies has been inscribed in the cultural imagination and has become a teleological signifier of social progress that helps to structure the nation's self-congratulatory can-do optimism in a better future.

This summarily describes the benevolent narratology of companies like Disney, TikTok, and Twitch, self-aggrandizing their own inevitable role as *the* harbingers of that “better future.” Joachim Haupt (2021, 239) describes these actions as a way to “disguise the company’s aspiration for profit and power as a necessity on the path to a better world,” evocative of a period in which “companies, especially from Silicon Valley, engage in corporate prophecy to strengthen their position in a future-oriented society.” For Haupt, then, the project is to question “how specific actors construct visions of the future, provide them with collective meaning, and convey their universal desirability.” As Berardi (2) explains, “Power is the selection and enforcement of one possibility among many, and simultaneously it is the exclusion (and invisibilization) of many other possibilities.”

The rhetorical project of these companies is precisely this exercise in power, regardless of their particular suitability to its enactment. In truth, there exist an endless plurality of futures, but many, perhaps most, are invisibilized. Powers (455) argues,

returning to the value of a futurist cultural studies, that we must not merely acknowledge the power wielded by major technology companies, because “a futurist approach transcends critique to plot how political, social, economic, and behavioral trends might shape how those powers develop, and how that in turn might suggest different critical interventions.” To do so, we must understand the power of *discursive closure* and its influence on our everyday — as Annette Markham (2021, 386) argues, “The ability to imagine differently about the near or distant possible futures for life with and within digital and data technologies requires first breaking out of a current discursive frame.”

This discursive closure is, again, intricately intertwined with developments in capitalism and financialization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Jane Elliott (2021, 150) describes this as a logic of *static time*, wherein “time continues to unfold, but what we might call positive futurity – the future as the locus of desired transformation – has been rendered inaccessible.” This is a pervading, repeated logic with a long intellectual history, and yet it operates on a meta level, whereby this defuturity (or postfuturity) thesis is likewise presented as novel again and again. Like Elliott, this dissertation is not intended to simply regurgitate and lament this political and social impotence, despite its clear rhetorical power and relevancy. Instead, by holding it together with the recent history of financialized capitalism, I align myself with sociologist John Urry in his book *What is the Future?* (2011, 9), in which he argues that “powerful actors seeking to realize the future they envisaged often deploy complex rhetorical imaginaries and visions of a future ‘heaven’. These actors perform or produce that future, while characterizing those who oppose this heavenly future as ‘Luddite’.” I am that Luddite! I claim this title in the way articulated by Brian Merchant (2023), Jathan

Sadowski (2021), and other technology critics and scholars, who have corrected the mainstream story about the original Luddites (in short, they did not simply hate technology, they rebelled with precision against how it was weaponized by certain factory owners in England to pay them less) while offering a compelling political economic analysis of how technology and capitalism have combined to propagate these rhetorical imaginaries throughout public discourse. As Urry (189, emphasis added) says, “We have seen how ‘powerful futures’ are almost literally ‘owned’ by private interests, rather than shared across members of a society... Thinking through futures highlights something not articulated in much social science, which is that *power should be viewed as significantly a matter of uneven future-making*.” The Luddite model, then, offers to me a potential way out of these repetitive critiques about static time under these futural conditions.

Sun-ha Hong (2021, 1953) reminds us that these critiques, occasionally called the ‘techlash’ in recent years, cycle in the same way that technofutures do — repeated dreams of flying cars, repeated criticisms of how and why they never arrive (see also: Graeber 2012)¹⁵: “We might reasonably interpret the resilience of such criticism as proof of irreducible popular dissatisfaction with dominant technofutures... As forms of criticism themselves become rote and familiar, they are met with well-rehearsed strategies for deflection and co-option.” As a result, “the repetition of technofutures compromises our ability to diagnose and rework the social relations surrounding those technologies,” and so, “a future repeated is not just a future caught in stasis; it is also other futures that failed

¹⁵ David Graeber memorably wrote about this in 2012: “Defenders of capitalism cannot mean to convince us that technological change has ended—since that would mean capitalism is not progressive. No, they mean to convince us that technological progress is indeed continuing, that we do live in a world of wonders, but that those wonders take the form of modest improvements (the latest iPhone!), rumors of inventions about to happen (“I hear they are going to have flying cars pretty soon”), complex ways of juggling information and imagery, and still more complex platforms for filling out of forms.”

to be adequately imagined, to be given a fair shot, *futures lost*,” (1942, 1954). Perhaps, then, we can reframe and reorient our inquiry into this crisis of futurity — which, I argue, can be better thought of as a futurity that has been *hijacked* — to deliberately move beyond stagnant imaginaries of social and technological relations, which reflect stale futurist proposals of the industrial era, leading to a reworking, which no longer “traps us into a very partial and manufactured view of the possible,” (1948).

These platforms seek to claim ownership over the future itself. Joe Biden (2021) said as much in his first press conference as president: “The future lies in who can, in fact, own the future as it relates to technology.” As Jens Beckert (2013, 226) has argued, much economic thinking is done according to fictional expectations, so that “actions are based on committing to a belief in the materialization of a certain future state, and the pretention that the fictional depictions were indeed true representations of the future.” And finally, as Dan Schiller (2023, 527, emphasis added) explains, “With R&D budgets that rival those of many countries, the tech companies’ significance stems from their role in *leading the recomposition of the overall political economy*, that is, from their innumerable applications of digital technology to wring additional profit out of existing businesses and to spearhead new commodification projects.” My hope with this dissertation is to fathom, interpret, and decipher the stories that tech tells about the future as a strategy to properly account for this rupture in political economy.

The purpose of shepherding all these concepts together is to demonstrate how these visions, or prescriptions, for the future are fundamental impositions on the collective imaginary, supported by and invested in by a financialized economy fully in throe to established tenets of capitalist accumulation, adapted to the platform age. As Ellen Meiksins Wood wrote in *The Origin of Capitalism* (1999 [2016], 8), “The naturalization of capitalism, which denies its

specificity and the long and painful historical processes that brought it into being, limits our understanding of the past. At the same time, it restricts our hopes and expectations for the future, for if capitalism is the natural culmination of history, then surmounting it is unimaginable.” Foregone conclusions upon foregone conclusions. Wood (7) further invites us to understand these capitalist tenets — namely its imperatives of competition, accumulation, profit-maximization, and increasing labour-productivity — as mechanisms which not only guide economic activity but as “social relations in general.” This line of thinking will reverberate throughout this dissertation, becoming particularly resonant in chapters 2 and 3, but it is an essential point in light of these discourses about temporal power and how it is exerted in material ways in the present through invocations of the past and stories about the future. As Wood demonstrates, stories about the history of capitalism have tended to view its present dominance as a natural culmination, making it far more difficult to imagine a different future, let alone to cultivate hope for one. In this way, we can see these maneuvers of temporal power and politics as an extension of existing capitalist logics. This temporal and futurist project, then, is not as new as it may seem, and exists within a number of continuities with these familiar capitalist logics and with historical power relations. Put differently, the objects (platforms) are relatively new, while the temporal critique builds on existing models.

As the science-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler (2000) put it, “the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope.” Taking account of Big Tech’s rhetorical narratives and sleights of hand as attempts to be temporal paternalists and silicon futurists, I argue that platform companies engage in modalities of the future which align with the enactment and enforcement of their own respective corporate utopian vision. We live in an age of unprecedented claims about the future, a superfluity of competing futures, so

what seems necessary, I suggest, is a project that grapples with these claims and seeks to map how they are manifested. The result of these futurity claims, as I demonstrate through my three case studies, which are symptomatic of larger patterns in future-making, is the codification of stories that place us within unwanted utopias. Even so, we will be reminded time and again through this inquiry that the future can be reclaimed, as no story is infallible.

Chapter One

Disney+ and its Media Futures

Introduction

“Asking about my first happy Disney memory is probably the same as asking about my first memory. It’s all Disney.”

— Kevin Feige, *Disney 100: A Century of Dreams*

One Day at Disney is a Disney+ original documentary series that spotlights a different Disney employee in each brief episode, released exclusively on the streaming platform. In the fifth episode, we visit CEO and chairman Bob Iger. Seated in a nondescript movie theater set-up, Iger avoids discussing what he actually does, as employees in other episodes do, and instead speaks about the legacy of Walt Disney and, interestingly enough, what it’s like to work for The Walt Disney Company today, regardless of one’s position. “We’re all, in many ways, not only in the same business but *doing the same thing*, which is trying to reach people all over the world in very compelling ways, trying to touch people’s hearts.” To help accomplish this goal, the company has invested heavily in its streaming platform as the driving force in furthering the Disney narrative, or myth, of its rightful place as the once and future leader in the media industry. This chapter argues that it is this tying together of *legacy* and *futurity* that defines Disney’s position within the marketplace and global media culture.

Disney’s public pronouncements, here and elsewhere, aim to narrativize the synergy between the company’s past and future, and the documentary content developed for Disney+ has become an ideal, instructive place to advance this story, an outlet for this self-mythology. *One Day at Disney*, alongside other Disney+ originals such as *The Imagineering Story*, *Disney*

Insider, *Prop Culture*, *Behind the Attraction*, *Inside Pixar*, *Marvel Studios: Assembled*, and more, suggest that Disney understands its streaming platform, particularly from its initial launch in 2019 and into its global spread through the early 2020s, as a way to build and maintain brand loyalty by giving users a behind-the-scenes perspective on what goes into “manufacturing happiness,” as Iger puts it. These series are useful for analysis because they continue and update a long-held aspect of Disney strategization whereby the company is narrativized as the arbiter of a better future.

In this chapter, I argue that this strategic narration is a significant model of futurity, a corporate imposition of temporal control which impacts social, economic, cultural, and political relations, and, in the company’s ideal scenario, the very possibility of alternative media futures to take shape.

At the same time, the acquisitions of Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm, 20th Century Fox, BAMTech (a video streaming tech company), and more have been lucrative for Disney, not least in the competitive cultural advantage that having them all housed in one streaming platform affords to Disney+. In this chapter, I argue that these two parallel corporate strategies — depictions of the wonder of labour and production at Disney, and organizing these depictions according to the company’s expanded library of intellectual property — are the driving force behind Disney’s approach to online streaming, reflecting a uniquely dynamic, if rapacious, position within the streaming economy. The Disney+ landing interface, for instance, showcases the title cards of its various brands alongside one another, foregrounding its acquisitional power for the user as a show of force, with an implicit promise of a future of ever-expanding content.

Using concepts from critical future studies, I situate Disney’s strategy and promotion of it as part of the company’s investment in *brand futurity*, which I define as an imperious instance of brand management for a digital era structured by financialization, which reorganizes corporate

strategy according to moral-economic visions of that which does not yet, or may never, exist. This chapter also offers conceptual development on this level of brand management and its specific manifestation for this corporation.

Disney has often been at the centre of analyses of media brands. As yet, little work has been devoted to Disney's digital expansionism, particularly in light of the launch of its streaming platform. In the case of *One Day at Disney* and other Disney+ series, corporate strategy, I suggest, is applied according to Martyn Griffin, Nancy Harding, and Mark Learmonth's (2017, 871) concept of organizational readiness, which for them "explores the cultural products (Disney animations) consumed by the future workforce" and the "ways in which they might influence – exert power over – taken-for-granted images, ideals and expectations of work." Organizational readiness, in short, is a way to understand corporate strategy that intends to "train" future employees and set expectations for what their labour will look and feel like, and specifically how media companies manage this process.

This chapter, in part, examines how Disney's interest in portraying itself as a wonderful place to work, where magical productions result in magical media, parallels and reinforces (and seeks to strengthen) the longstanding, legacy-making storytelling of brand management by the company, from the behind-the-scenes trailers for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 to the *Disneyland* TV series in the mid-1950s to the great investment into bonus materials on DVD releases in the 2000s, a continuity tying together technological, cultural, and financial axes of brand futurity.

The organizational readiness to be found within the behind-the-scenes work on Disney+ demonstrates the company's digital strategy in this period of prioritizing the streaming economy, setting up a fantastical image of the future that is inextricable from historical conceptions of Disney brand loyalty and consumer happiness. Thinking through what the company says about

itself now, and the narratives and mythologies it enacts, is an important endeavor for scholars of corporate histories and media industries to comprehend the realities and imaginaries manufactured by the platform economy.

This chapter uses an analysis of Disney+ and its mode of address, particularly through its documentary productions, as evidential means of accessing these issues and tying them to a temporal, future-oriented framework of cultural imaginaries. While these docuseries may seem like a narrow focus to begin this inquiry, put alongside other Disney marketing content, press coverage, and other discursive materials, as I do in this chapter, demonstrates how they are, together, symptomatic of the larger rhetorical whole that accounts for a strategy of brand futurity. The core characteristics of a corporation engaged in brand futurity are: business aligned with the mechanisms of financialization; expansion into new technologies and digital markets; benevolent rhetoric and promotional discourse; and a brand identity tied to legacy — all of which, then, build a *speculative narrative of the future with the brand as guiding principle and center of control*. The company's labourers may also be called upon as key cultural representatives of this futurity, as we will see with Disney. These characteristics will be expanded on in more detail throughout this chapter to understand how brand futurity transforms previous conceptions of brand value.

Disney is positioned here as an “innovator” of brand futurity, marking historical shifts in corporate strategy in the media industries and contributing to the digital rhetoric of legacy, but another prominent example could be Apple and its foray into streaming with Apple TV+, not only by fulfilling the characteristics of the concept but by enacting arguably even greater feats of control over bringing their story of the future into existence. This analysis is utilized as a means to better understand the operation and practice of brand futurity in the streaming age, tying the company's future to articulations of its own past — legacy as futurity.

What follows will also suggest how this form of temporal analysis is significant for media industries and platform studies as a useful framework for situating corporate narratives of value and ownership over the future. In doing so, it argues for a critical futurist approach to media corporations, particularly important for the (future-oriented) streaming era,¹⁶ outlining some methodological considerations for what this would look like along the way. The future that Disney+ assembles and shapes, as gleaned through the brand storytelling of these docuseries and other endeavours, uses this legacy of goodwill and cultural ubiquity to guide the media industry and its consumers further into its paternalistic imaginary of a system it inevitably directs.

Futures Past

Futurities and imaginaries

As expressed in the introduction to this dissertation, I align myself with recent calls for a cultural and media studies that is critically futurist in its approach (though not futurological, à la Toffler [1970]). Devon Powers (2020, 453) calls for a futurist cultural studies, with the understanding that cultural studies can ideally be “praxis aimed at refashioning society toward progressive goals,” and so “futurism can increase our efficacy; cultural studies can increase futurism’s humanity.” As such, cultural studies and futurity are linked as concepts and as a temporality, so that ultimately, the future becomes “more than a zone of capitalist strategy, but rather one of democratic possibility” (455). This chapter brings these methodological concerns to bear on a site marked by futurity: The Walt Disney Company and its digital streaming platform. Contextualizing Disney in relation to its orientation to futurity helps make the case for a futurist

¹⁶ The streaming era Disney+ entered into may have “burst” in 2023 and 2024 to some degree (Press & Karvey 2023), but the promises of futurity have hardly wavered.

cultural studies, as the imposed corporate arbiter of the future of media must be critiqued according to a method that holds these possible futures and cultural hegemonies in conjunction.

This places us within a theoretical framework of future imaginaries, recalling what Joachim Haupt (2021, 239) has outlined as a critical perspective on the strategic use of corporate imaginaries: “In a society strongly oriented by such [corporate] imaginaries of the future, various actors inevitably seek to strengthen their specific visions, and turn them into a collective imaginary, to gain legitimacy and increase their impact. [...] Such a perspective deals with the questions of how specific actors construct visions of the future, provide them with collective meaning, and convey their universal desirability.” In Disney’s case, it is the creation and maintenance of this *universal desirability* that manifests in its strategic brand futurity, whereby a future as defined by the company is not only narrativized to be naturally anticipated by consumers and investors alike, but these imaginaries also “disguise the company’s aspiration for profit and power as a necessity on the path to a better world” (Haupt, 239).

This imaginary is not simply discursive, it is also grounded on certain promises around material and technological shifts – or sociotechnical imaginaries. As Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim (2015, 4, emphasis added) argue, sociotechnical imaginaries are “collectively held, institutionally stabilized and publicly performed visions of *desirable futures*, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology.” It is often not state actors but corporations that wield this power. Jasanoff (27) explains:

Multinational corporations increasingly act upon imagined understandings of how the world is and ought to be, playing upon the perceived hopes and fears of their customers and clients and thereby propagating notions of technological progress and benefit that cut across geopolitical boundaries... Coalitions between corporate interests and the media, through advertising and outright control, are increasingly

likely to play a pivotal role in making and unmaking global sociotechnical imaginaries.

The benefit of using these imaginaries as a way to understand Disney's digital expansionism becomes clearer when placed into the context of platform capitalism and the shift in how corporate firm valuation is determined (Srnicek 2017; Coveri et al. 2021). Some, including Ioannis Lianos and Andrew McLean (2021, 8-9), have further emphasized the impact of financialization, whereby companies are now evermore intent to "engage in 'futurity-led' competition...futurity denoting the reorientation of economic activity towards the future and firm valuation coming to rest on expected future profits." Nowhere is this more apparent, they argue, than in the digital economy. This reflects a longstanding critical attitude toward Disney, as Richard Schickel (1968, 17-18) memorably put it: "In essence, Disney's machine was designed to...forc[e] everyone to share the same formative dreams... As capitalism, it is a work of genius; as culture, it is mostly a horror."

Branding has always had an element of futurity built in. Celia Lury (2004, 6) argues that the brand is like a "platform for action" that anticipates the attachments of its consumer, and Adam Arvidsson (2006, 15) has argued that contemporary brand management "aims at anticipating and programming the productivity of consumers and guiding it in particular directions." However, Arvidsson (13) also notes that brands are "an example of capital socialized to the extent of transpiring the minute relations of everyday life, to the point of becoming a context for life." This is accomplished, Arvidsson suggests, through "programming" consumers in a way that is enabling, or even empowering. The phenomenon of the "Disney adult" — devoted to the wonders of their childhood well into adulthood, and spending the money to prove it — may well be the ultimate version of this. As Amelia Tait (2024) has written about these programmed fans, it's worth noting how the company is quite explicit in its attempts to cultivate

lifelong fans, referring to a 2011 project in which “Disney representatives visited new mothers in 580 maternity wards in the United States, gifting them bodysuits and asking them to sign up for DisneyBaby.com.” In both English and Spanish, bedside representatives extolled the bodysuit’s “bells and whistles,” as the *New York Times* put it (Barnes 2011), tying in the promotion of a Disney Baby apparel line to e-mail alerts from the company as part of a “broader web of products and experiences” through a loyalty program.

One mother told the *Times*, “It surprised me that Disney was in there promoting something right as the baby was born, but we figured as new parents we weren’t in a position to turn free things down,” acknowledging the vulnerable state Disney was targeting. Then-chairman of Disney Consumer Products made the goal explicit: “To get that mom thinking about her family’s first park experience before her baby is even born is a home run.” Why is Disney trusted with all this? As an obstetrician-gynecologist put it to the *Times* (Barnes), there was concern about marketers in maternity wards, “but Disney is a nice company.” Moms and babies are aligned in their long-term commitment to the brand. The Disney adult, then, is “a character constructed just as carefully as Elsa or Donald Duck.” Some carry their love into adulthood alone; some do so with friends; some with partners or perhaps children to whom they try to program their Disney love in turn.

The technically-restrictive subscribers-only space of Disney+ would suggest a break with this approach, but more significantly, Arvidsson (135) states that the culture industries have long “based the valorization of their products upon a measure of the value of viewer attention,” mostly in terms of viewing time, but “what has vanished is rather the very possibility of using time as a measure.” This is obviously a problem for brands, and I argue that Disney has pivoted in the platform era to a new temporal strategy of brand futurity as a solution to this vanishing — this concept, then, provides a way of understanding how the everyday life context of socialized

capital Arvidsson points to has been rejiggered to a future-oriented strategy that “measures” value according to the logic of financialization, which describes how banks, hedge funds, stock exchanges, and corporations hoard economic power by gutting worker power and focusing on financial engineering (Epstein 2005), wherein “a logic of extraction has been replaced by a logic of speculation” (Adkins 2018, 17). In Disney’s case, as we will see, this narrative is expounded in detail in the Disney+ docuseries that deliberately focus on (largely below-the-line) employees as spokespeople for the corporation’s power and its future.

Streaming Disney

One of my claims in this chapter is that it is useful to consider the streaming market in relation to theories of futurity. In what larger context does this concept exist and operate? In a financialized market of streaming competition, the very viability of each enterprise depends on a future-oriented analysis, which invariably impresses upon the content and reception of what is created.

The streaming age, with the growth of competition between countless platforms and the increasing presence of legacy media corporations, has been largely theorized as a volatile space of market contention and consumer choice – often referred to as the “streaming wars.” Roman Lobato and Amanda Lotz (2021) argue that this discursive shorthand has only confused matters, stuck with an insufficient story about direct competition for eyeballs, and data capital and attention value as the means of accumulation (Sadowski 2020; Wu 2016). Kevin Sanson and Gregory Steirer (2019, 1224) similarly suggest that streaming is “a multi-sited, quasi-iterative, and rapidly evolving marketplace, in which legacy practices persist alongside and often in

competition with new modes of production, dissemination, and consumption.” The streaming wars are, in fact, more like a series of battles, internal and external; emphasizing the overarching distribution technology of streaming alone obscures important factors including content, revenue source, business model, geographic scale, and value to each particular corporation.

Lotz (2017) has theorized the streaming ecosystem as one of portals, describing Netflix and other platforms as “intermediary services that collect, curate, and distribute television programming via internet distribution.” Portals have a longer history, however. Jeffrey Layne Blevins (2004) wrote about the notion of introducing internet portals for sharing media content, which Disney attempted with the Go Network, launched in 1999 and closed in 2001. Go was intended as a way to cross-promote the company’s content, and Blevins argued that it was Disney’s failure to create a prominent brand for Go that ensured its fate. In Blevins’s estimation, it was “Disney’s unwillingness to capitalize on its already recognized brands” that hampered Go’s potential success, as “the Disney empire has learned that synergy and cross-promotion were not enough to ensure success in this highly concentrated market” (266, 268). This leads Blevins (268) to an intriguing conclusion: “Perhaps the biggest lesson for new media proprietors is that brand dominance via a walled-garden internet portal is just not good business.”

It is helpful to think of Disney’s early failure in contrast with the massive success of Disney+, which certainly capitalizes on cross-promotion and recognized brands (particularly with Disney’s acquisitions in the years following Blevins’ article) and *makes use of the format’s walled-garden function* to its strategic advantage.

More recently, Shawna Kidman (2021) has argued that Disney has led the franchise era through the use of “corporate auteurism,” whereby brands and their associated executives (Kevin Feige for Marvel, Kathleen Kennedy for Star Wars) not only promote brand value but also rationalize and justify labour practices, management structures, and compensation. As Kidman

(2021, 5) cautions, “Accounts that reproduce Disney’s corporate auteur discourse are likely to lead the public to embrace Disney for its consistent market dominance and its reliable output of likable content in tough times.” This chapter, like Kidman, proposes a different path that instead “hold[s] the studio accountable for setting the conditions” of intertwined labour and media futures.

It is equally pertinent to pay close attention to how boundaries of platform competition are narrativized by corporations, a practice that Colin Crawford (2021, 4) describes as *investor lore*, “the emergent discourses among investing actors about what kinds of user experiences are and are not valuable, and which users those experiences will and will not engage.” While Crawford (106) compellingly suggests that Disney, like HBO, AT&T, and others, has been forced to “become Netflix” due to that company’s persuasive “speculative fictions,” I argue instead that, keeping in mind Lobato and Lotz’s points on differentiation, Disney is not necessarily, or wholly, competing with Netflix, but is building something singular and all-encompassing, a *separate mode of address that enacts a separate mode of futurity*, a paternalistic exclusivity that trades on magic and nostalgia to imagine a fully-Disneyfied media future.

This is where we can directly draw the connection between my concept of brand futurity and John Cheney-Lippold’s (2024) temporal paternalism, as discussed in the introduction, which likewise emphasizes corporate claims to authority over temporality and progress writ large. As I argue in this chapter, though, brand futurity expands on, or modulates, this state of affairs by examining Disney’s plainly unparalleled status within a global cultural imaginary — to put it bluntly, it is generally easier for the public and investors alike to buy into Disney’s role as a benevolent guide into the future than, say, TikTok or Twitch. While each chapter in this dissertation is focused on forms of temporal paternalism as exerted by these companies in distinct ways, brand futurity only applies here (again, Apple could be another example, albeit

outside the bounds of this dissertation) to Disney, a unique and useful case study for analysis into these temporal technopolitics and the control they seek to wield over the economy and culture.

Where I agree with Crawford (107) is his insistence that “today’s temporalities of value generation mobilize ever greater debts and ever faster exchanges, channeling profits into the hands of a shrinking few, and casting value ever further into the future.”

These “shrinking few,” the executives, shareholders, investors, and top talent, design narratives that turn this into a desirable mode of futurity for the many, a corporate campaign of cultural indoctrination that, as we will see, intimately ties brand futurity to consumer happiness.

The Wonderful World of Work

“Walt was a futurist. He always thought about the good things that are going to happen. And that’s the kind of songs we write for him.”

— Richard Sherman, *Disney 100: A Century of Dreams*

Disney Drudgery

Developed and released exclusively for Disney+, the documentary series *One Day at Disney* was released less than a month after the platform’s launch. Spun off from a feature-length documentary of the same name released just days earlier on the platform, the episodes last only 5 to 7 minutes, seemingly intended to be binge-watched. The show serves, on another level, as a promotional reel for The Walt Disney Company writ large, with stops at various theme parks, filming locations, news and sports channels, cruise lines, and other sectors and divisions. Across 51 episodes, *One Day at Disney* showcases a diverse workforce for the company (Iger uses the word “diverse” three times in his episode), from ride show technician Pablo Tufino to storybook

artist Grace Lee. An instructive example would be Lupe de Santiago, a seamstress at Disneyland for over 30 years. As we watch her work at her station, she is voicing the typical talking points of the series. She says, speaking in Spanish, “This work for me is not a job, for me it is something satisfying.” Then, switching to English, she adds, “My work is not my work. It is my passion.” And later, “Disneyland is like family to me.” This short episode fully encapsulates the brand message: working at Disney isn’t work, it’s *passion* (Duffy 2017; Hong 2022). Moreover, workers at Disney parks are not called employees but *cast members*, reflecting an intentional symbolism that they are part of the creative process, instrumental to the flow of branded storytelling regardless of one’s position; they are all ambassadors of happiness.

The intention here is not to invalidate the experiences of these workers. Instead, it is to draw purposeful connections between the stories that Disney tells about itself, and how these stories become culturally, socially, and economically embedded, establishing a continuity that aims to affirm the company’s position in/as the future of media. Disney’s long and conflictual history with labour is well-documented, including by Janet Wasko in her landmark book *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (2000). Wasko (19-20) recounts that by the end of the 1930s, many workers were deeply dissatisfied with their working conditions, “especially due to the inconsistent wage scales, the erratic distribution of bonuses and other forms of compensation.” In 1941, the Screen Cartoonists Guild (SCG) was recognized by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) as the bargaining unit for workers at Disney studios, and subsequently charged the company with unfair labor practices. The SCG voted to strike in May, and it lasted for nine weeks as Walt Disney himself nearly got into a fistfight with strikers (Wasko, 20). For a short time, the 1941 strike harmed the company’s reputation as a wonderful workplace.

For most of the twentieth century following the SCG strike, Disney developed a much more glowing respectability in the market, and it became easy for the general public to believe that it really was the happiest place on Earth to be an employee. For instance, a 2016 poll by *Fortune* found that Disney ranked as Americans' most desirable employer, beating out Big Tech icons Google, Amazon, and Apple (Zillman 2016). This moment, however, marks when some of this veneer was fading (that same year, Vermont senator Bernie Sanders said at a rally that Disney “pays its workers [at the park] so low that many are forced to live in motels because they can’t afford a decent place to live” [Zillman]).

For example, an anonymous former cast member recounted in 2016 (Meltzer), “When you go to work at Disney, your most important job is to keep the illusion of Disney alive.” She describes taking a “Disney indoctrination course,” wherein they are manipulated due to their emotional attachments to Disney so that “you pretty much sign your life away, agreeing to work whenever and however long Disney wants -- and you're happy about it. Like somehow getting to work 80 hours a week in a 120-degree costume for \$6.90 an hour is the greatest thing you could possibly be doing for humanity.” In 2017, Disney World workers rallied in Orlando for pay increases. This followed the Department of Labor finding Disney guilty in March 2017 of forcing employees to pay for costumes out of their own pockets, and that the company failed to properly compensate workers for overtime (Calfas 2017). Disney was ordered to provide back pay totaling \$3.8 million to 16,000 impacted workers — a win, but a paltry sum for the company. In fall 2018, the union drive was successful, with a plan to implement a \$15 minimum wage by 2021, which was reportedly finally reached in October of that year.

In recent years, media coverage has sat along these divided lines. In 2020, *The Nation* published an article by Peter Dreier called “Disney Is Not the Greatest Place on Earth to Work,” which argues that while ticket prices have sky-rocketed at Disney’s resorts and executives’

bonuses have ballooned, workers' wages have stayed stagnant. Further, multiple human rights groups, beginning in the 1990s, have reported on Disney's use of sweatshops in the Global South, including findings by the National Labor Committee in 1996 that workers in Haiti were being paid as little as 12 cents an hour. Reports came out into the 2000s about horrific conditions in Bangladesh, China, and elsewhere, from unpaid overtime and unsafe conditions to child labour and sexual harassment. Dreier then refers to a 2018 survey he conducted with Disneyland employees called "Working for the Mouse," which found that 11 percent of workers reported having been homeless at some point in the last two years, and three-quarters of respondents said they couldn't afford basic expenses every month.

Even Abigail Disney, grand-daughter of company co-founder Roy Disney, wrote an op-ed for *The Washington Post* in 2019 entitled, "It's time to call out Disney — and anyone else rich off their workers' backs." Still, other mainstream outlets like NPR and The Associated Press (2021) remain happy to publish pieces that read like Disney ad copy, such as "Some Original Staffers Say They're Still Happy To Work At Disney World After 50 Years," which highlights some longtime workers. Recounting Disney World's growth over the years to 77,000 cast members in 2021, the piece adds, "What never changed was the original employees' devotion to the pixie dust, the dream machine created by Walt Disney and his Imagineers."

Disney Stories

Disney+ is the culmination of a decades-long campaign, largely initiated by Iger as CEO, to dominate the media industry through aggressive acquisitions and, eventually, digital expansion. As Wasko (44, emphasis added) argues, these acquisitions "represent a significant

investment in content that expanded the corporation's scope and established Disney as not just a universe but as a *multiverse*." In part, the multiverse concept recognizes that as Disney forcefully diversifies its holdings, such as by expanding more explicitly into adult-targeted entertainment through its purchase of Fox, there are not only increased opportunities for synergistic projects and cross-promotion but also for segmented worlds that deliberately exist outside of the traditional Disney brand but nevertheless add to the company's profits and longevity. When sports fans sit down to watch ESPN, it is unlikely they think about Mickey Mouse, but sure enough their subscription to ESPN+ adds to Disney's revenue stream!

The multiverse also illustrates the need to examine Disney according to a political economic analysis, "emphasizing the economic as well as the ideological, or production as well as consumption" (Wasko, 5). Disney is a natural arbiter of this corporate-media coalition, controlling its empire through consolidation and technological infrastructure, a legacy institution seeking to dominate using its structural and historical weight to impose itself and make it seem eminently desirable for all, the window to a better world — unlike with other streaming platforms, the promise is not only for convenience, variety, and entertainment, but *goodness*. Similarly, while Disney has often been future-oriented in terms of spaces like EPCOT and Tomorrowland, these were physically-situated explorations of modern technologies and values. At the very least, this describes how Disney has been popularly theorized, and part of my intention here is to bring this understanding forward in time, emphasizing the *temporal* element when Disney has tended to be thought of as *spatially* dominant by the press and scholars like Wasko.

A key benefit of thinking through the corporate use of brand futurity as a framework for Disney is that, without abandoning spatial considerations, Disney's digital strategy and its temporal register comes into clearer focus. A strategy structured by brand futurity seeks to bring

together conceptions of future economic returns with an approach of corporate and cultural hegemony defined by benevolent ideals and values. The overall meaning is simple, then: especially within the context of the platform economy, assumptions about corporate behaviour and storytelling are reassembled according to a logic of future-oriented worldbuilding, a temporal technopolitics tinged by moral, cultural, and economic progressivism.

For example, and to make a brand-unfriendly but effective comparison, think of how common it is for professional porn productions to feature behind-the-scenes footage of the performers enjoying their jobs, often included as part of the product itself (Berg 2021). As a result, a consumer feels they can enjoy the content guilt-free. The Disney docuseries, giving behind-the-scenes looks at what certain workers do and how magical it is, serve a similar function, ensuring the future strength of the brand through a platformized representation of corporate benevolence, whereby Disney continues to be understood in the public consciousness as the world's happiest place to be and to work. Recalling Griffin et al.'s concept of organizational readiness, Disney+ subscribers are then essentially understood as possible future employees, either literally or otherwise as unpaid fans/brand ambassadors for life, and these series and this overall brand strategy are the first steps to training for Disney work expectations.

Regimes of Anticipation

Bob Chapek took over as Disney's CEO on February 25, 2020, and with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, he soon focused on the one asset that remained relatively untouched by the public health situation: Disney+. By fall of 2020, Chapek announced a major reorganization of the company, giving streaming pride of place by focusing on developing productions intended

for the platform, alongside a new distribution arm intended to emphasize the platform's content pipeline (Flint 2020). Chapek joined Disney in 1993 in the home-entertainment division, eventually becoming a key architect behind the “Disney vault,” a highly successful business strategy that kept certain films off store shelves to create demand for them, when they were released – in other words demand through artificial scarcity. This strategy counted on the temporal imperative to buy while you can, a creative corporate maneuver that wielded the psychological persuasion of the limited-time-only offer to the benefit of a company defined by making children happy — your child knows that failing to purchase *The Jungle Book* now, while out of the vault, will mean they won't get to watch it for an unknown period of time.

Iger appointing Chapek as his successor surprised some, for Kevin Mayer, Chairman of the Direct-to-Consumer & International branch, was believed to be the frontrunner thanks to his role in spearheading the launch of Disney+ and assisting in the acquisitions of Marvel, Pixar, Lucasfilm, and 21st Century Fox. Iger, though, saw something of value in Chapek's effective business strategy over 27 years with Disney, saying (The Walt Disney Company, 2020a), “Throughout his career, Bob has led with integrity and conviction, always respecting Disney's rich legacy while at the same time taking smart, innovative risks for the future.” Chapek would be the man for the future, according to Iger (though, the future didn't last long as Chapek was ousted in 2022 by Disney's board, replaced by Iger)

At Investor Day 2020, Chapek and other speakers repeatedly referenced how Disney+ is the only streaming platform that can offer the massively popular suite of content it contains. In addition to Marvel, Chapek said, “our other studios, with their own prolific collection of intellectual property, are developing new storylines and characters that will expand our popular franchises well into the future - and all of it will inevitably become part of Disney+, further

enriching the unmatched offering of content available on the service,” (The Walt Disney Company, 2020b, 7). Similarly, as Iger puts it in his *One Day at Disney* episode:

What I want for everyone that works for us is not just success, but I want them to experience what I’ve experienced over the years and what people who have worked for The Walt Disney Company, including Walt Disney, have experienced over 96 years, and that is the impact of telling a great story on people all over the world. We know what the essence of a good story is, and what a good Disney story, and a good Marvel story, and Pixar, and Star Wars, I could go on and on.

“I could go on and on” reads like a portentous statement that reveals the ongoing and perhaps never-ending bench of properties that Disney has ownership of, and will surely, it is implied, continue to collect.

The success of investing in the creation of this multiverse and maintaining its complex relationality appeared to be paying off as Disney+ hit 130 million worldwide subscribers by the end of 2021 (Weprin), only two years after its launch, and the company projected to hit between 230 million and 260 million by late 2024 — yet, as of November 2024, Disney+ sits at 158 million, while Netflix sits at around 280 million. Not quite the future they had hoped for, yet Iger (The Walt Disney Company 2024) insisted Disney is “well positioned for growth and optimistic about our future,” as they continue to leverage “the deepest and broadest set of entertainment assets in the industry to drive attractive returns and further advance our goals.” Iger, again, returning to the familiar comfort of legacy as futurity.

As Matthew Ball (2021), a venture capitalist and former global Head of Strategy with Amazon Studios, has written, “By bringing all of its franchises and titles together into a single platform, Disney can better tell its stories and build love.” This monetization of love – much discussed in analyses of internet labour (Duffy 2017; Tokumitsu 2015) – can in the Disney case be better theorized, I argue, as a strong instance of brand futurity, whereby workers and

consumers alike are brought into Disney’s capital-intensive mirage of a brighter tomorrow. These docuseries, then, usefully demonstrate how this manifests for Disney as it increasingly funnels its strategy to Disney+.

Enchanting Club Entertainment and Programming

Storyliving by Disney communities will feature separate club memberships* with distinct offerings, including:

- The member clubhouse—a gathering place, infused with creativity by Disney Imagineers
- A mix of special Disney experiences and everyday activities
- Special excursions curated for members—from day trips to multi-day vacations
- Enrichment programs that provide lifelong learning opportunities
- A variety of health and well-being programs and activities
- Resources and support to foster volunteerism

*Cotino™ club membership is voluntary with an additional fee



Figure 1 — Storyliving by Disney, promising a “mix of Disney experiences and everyday activities”

Disney’s projected 2024 subscriber claim is as it turns out a case of corporate “hot air,” which Michael Hockenhull and Marisa Leavitt Cohn (2021, 306) conceptualize “to denote the dynamic of hype as a performative phenomenon that is simultaneously vacuous and productive.” While these announcements may be based on little or no data, they not only impact market and shareholder perception but can also materially impact jobs at the company or other aspects of its multifarious business.

This is related to other discourses around Disney and the production of sociotechnical imaginaries more generally. In 2021, Disney announced a new project called “Storyliving by

Disney,” planned communities for Disney diehards offering housing, dining, shopping, and other curated experiences designed by Disney Imagineers (figure 1). Regardless of whether these communities actually come to fruition (as of December 2024, the first homes are currently planned to open in 2025), it is a reminder of Disney’s broad commitment to imagining new ways to provide a *fully*-Disneyfied life experience for its fans, recalling (but not mentioning) the failure of its previous attempt at this kind of project in Celebration, Florida in the 1990s (Ross, 1999).

This cyclical yet confident vision demonstrates a continuing brand strategy of future Disney cities, where life itself, not simply entertainment and leisure, is defined by the company. As Hockenhull and Cohn (316) argue, these financialized “futures position subjects temporally, through regimes of anticipation, hope, and speculation.” Vincanne Adams, Michelle Murphy, and Adele E. Clarke (2009, 254) argue that these regimes determine our relationship to the future in the present, creating a “*moral imperative*” to orient towards a particular future.

This moral imperative is key, and characterizes Disney’s strategic approach to maintaining an “all-encompassing consumer environment” (Anderson 1994, 18), its working goal since at least the 1950s – made new once more in the digital era. To tie in with the short-lived Disney+ Day, the company released ads that showcased their upcoming slate of content, with titles like “The Future is Limitless” (2020) and “The Future is Bright” (2021) — to put it crudely, the company ties a limitless and bright future to the future consumption of their content. Disney, like other streaming platforms, makes speculative claims about its future success, but with a uniquely powerful notion of the presumed goodwill nature of wonder and awe perpetuated by its original programming on Disney+.

Manufacturing Happiness

“Disney+ was launched in November of 2019, and it was joining an already crowded streaming field, but maybe had the edge in one way: nearly 100 years of content to offer.”

— Chris Connelly, *Disney 100: A Century of Dreams*

The Disney+ docuseries can be separated into two general groups: overarching brand stories, and those focused on specific branches such as Pixar or Marvel. The former group, including *One Day at Disney* and *Disney Insider*, is focused on reinforcing a larger Disney mythology that brings forward the company’s nearly century-long tradition. In this way, they recall the beginning of Disney’s efforts in television, with the launch of the *Disneyland* series in 1954, hosted by Walt himself. As recounted by Christopher Anderson (1994), that show’s purpose was to promote the opening of the Disneyland park in Anaheim with behind-the-scenes footage of its development. Moreover, Walt Disney envisioned the series as “a vast, commercial web, a tangle of advertising and entertainment in which each Disney product—from the movie *Snow White* to a ride on Disneyland’s Matterhorn—promoted all Disney products. And television was the beacon that would draw the American public to the domain of Disney” (Anderson, 18).

Mirroring Walt’s ambitions of the 1950s television market as the medium for establishing a burgeoning media empire, these Disney+ series likewise give “recognizable symbolic form to Disney’s elaborate economic transformation,” (19) only in this case reflecting the company’s digital expansionism. As with *Disneyland*, these series are a mishmash of sneak peeks, parks footage, and behind-the-scenes looks at various projects for film and television. Now, with an expanded library of intellectual property, the shows are able to make even more stops from across the corporation, from bringing the Muppets to the Haunted Mansion to a look at Pixar’s *Onward* followed by a sneak peek at the Hulu production of *Little Fires Everywhere*. Just as

Disneyland “[made] it possible for the first time to unite the disparate realms of the Disney empire,” (19) the Disney+ series seek to promote brand continuity across all corporate products and divisions.

In addition, despite the interest both eras have in depicting behind-the-scenes work, there remains no real engagement with labour conditions or relations at the company, despite the lavish attention paid to what the workers create and their supposed indispensability to the smiles put on consumer faces, only given voice when it is to share in the happiness and fulfillment of their employment. My analysis here, by focusing on the media form of the Disney+ docuseries, prolongs John Thornton Caldwell’s in *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008), in which he describes the importance for scholars to learn from the media industry’s habitual self-reflexivity through behind-the-scenes content and, moreso in my approach here, how media workers are shown to understand what they do through promotional materials. To wit, Anderson (24) writes, “Disney’s depiction of the production process was selective; it ignored the economics of filmmaking in favor of focusing on the studio’s technical accomplishments.” Instead, the window given into the production process is intended to highlight the ingenuity of Disney’s craftspeople, which, over all else, encourages viewers to ultimately spend their money to see the finished film, park ride, or other product, to complete the experience introduced in the series. Wasko (104) explains how Disney’s employees are kept under tight control and, “despite the techniques that some employees use to find their own pleasures and satisfaction in their work, the company usually gets what it wants.”

The more division-specific docuseries, including *Inside Pixar*, *Behind the Attraction*, and *Marvel Studios: Assembled*, serve to further the reach of this brand continuity, showcasing the technical abilities of each property branch (in animation, theme park design, visual effects, etc.) while obscuring the actual labour of the workers involved and guiding viewers toward further

passive consumption, guilt-free. By focusing on worker ebullience and the resulting spectacles, these shows delimit the brand's overall willingness to acknowledge that the behind-the-scenes sneak peeks they valorize and promote are nevertheless beholden to numerous below-the-line employees working for Disney simply because they're one of the largest employers in states like Florida and California. As the aforementioned "Working for the Mouse" employee survey notes, 68% reported being food insecure and over half of those who rent their housing called it "overcrowded" (Dreier). This erasure of labour precarity and the lived realities of tens of thousands of Disney employees, then, helps make the futurity of Disney possible by self-mythologizing "Disney work" in ways that befit a speculative fantasy of a branded lifeworld experience without acknowledging labour as a potential exploitative wrinkle in the fabric — Disney's goodness seems inevitable and eternal, then, as people will always want to work for the world's long-standing 'Happiness Factory.'

Meanwhile, *One Day at Disney*'s visits with various Disney employees, or cast members, ostensibly put a spotlight on the workers, giving viewers a brief window into their lives as labourers. It is simple enough to point out the self-serving quality of this exercise, tying employment with Disney to a diversity of identity and experience and an overarching social responsibility that the company fulfills through the satisfaction it gives its workers. Beyond this, it qualifies as a savvy strategic method of using brand futurity to align the happiness within what is created and who creates it, and therefore with the company and the platform itself as the only place you can find it.

These slippages matter, as the technology of the streaming platform allows for and encourages these rhetorical and affective synergies across properties and company branches. Brand futurity, then, is a way to make sense of a digital repository of consumable content with a shared core goal of communicating Disney's assured positive placement in the future of media.

To be clear, this is distinct from a more traditional and presentist understanding of branding, based on drawing in customers now. Instead, a strategy of brand futurity, befitting the demands of a platform economy, imagines the future as the primary site of meaning-making and corporate legacy.

Like most streaming platforms, Disney+ does not release viewership data, so it is unclear how popular its docuseries are. My argument is not based on an assumption that Disney fans are watching these shows en masse — they very well may be unpopular, but they nevertheless serve a separate function as subjects of analysis for *how the company sees itself, how the company wants the public to see it*, and what it offers to the future, which likewise helps to place corporate strategy into context. Telotte (2008, 18) convincingly argues that Disney documentaries and other content showing behind-the-scenes technology demonstrate “Disney’s corporate attitude towards the technological and even celebrate its technological achievements, rather uncritically suggesting what our own attitudes towards the technological might be.”

Work and labour matter a great deal here, as depicted in these brand-managing documentaries, as a nexus between the ongoing production of the Disney legacy in the present, and into the future. Elana Levine (2005, 72) has written about the synergistic power of Disney, with the Lifetime Television documentary series *Weddings of a Lifetime* as a case study, a show which “not only typifies media industry strategies in an age of conglomeration but also evidences the complex textual meanings produced through such institutional practices.” For Levine (72, 86), this blurs any “pretensions to ‘reality’” which become further fractured, and indeed “the fantasy images are so compelling because they are supposed to be real.”



Figure 2 — Disney+ home page in 2024, with tabs for each major brand

Disney’s brand concerns extend to its digital interface, as Disney+ is organized, as of December 2024, according to sectors of intellectual property, as you’re invited from the home page (figure 2) to explore tabs devoted to Disney, Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars, National Geographic, or Star (which holds 20th Century Fox content).¹⁷ Notably, this is the only streaming platform I am aware of that organizes its offerings according to its IP “channels.”¹⁸ Perusing these offerings, the platform encourages engaging with particular Disney products according to prominence and repetition, often with the same program showing up in different segments (New to Disney+, Recommended For You, etc.). There are original *Simpsons* shorts that pay tribute to Disney marquee brands, including *Maggie Simpson in The Force Awakens From Its Nap* and *The Simpsons in Plusaversary*, the latter released on #DisneyPlusDay in 2021 and featuring the

¹⁷ Mike Van Esler (2021) argues that online TV interfaces are key sites for branding, tools that signal user agency but in fact delimit it as a way not only to direct viewer attention but also to emphasize core brand values. Also, these options vary slightly according to one’s region (this shows what we encounter in Canada), but in all cases the homepage is organized according to these IP channels.

¹⁸ Amazon Prime, for instance, offers many subscriptions to other streaming sources, but these are separate partnerships that users pay extra for, and are not organized as being part of Prime’s direct offerings.

Simpson family alongside characters from throughout the Disney roster. Maleficent, for instance, bars Homer's entry to Moe's Tavern and says, "I'm sorry, you don't seem to be one of *us*," holding up a tablet with the logos for Disney, Pixar, ABC, FX, Marvel, Lucasfilm, Hulu, National Geographic, 20th Century Fox, and ESPN. Later, Lisa sings, "Streaming's a dream for Disney, all content in one place." Even the satirical edge of *The Simpsons* is sanded down to fulfill a larger company-wide purpose, as the "joke" here is simply about acknowledging the largesse of the parent corporation — ha, ha. There are other shorts featuring Olaf, the snowman in the *Frozen* films, called *Olaf Presents*, retelling a variety of classic Disney stories like *The Lion King*.

The opening animation for *Disney Insider* is a perfect example of how this brand synergy is visualized, beginning at a cartoonist's table, careening through a Disneyland-style theme park with icons for the company's many properties, from the Avengers tower to the Millennium Falcon, from Pixar Studios to the ABC building, from the Disney Animation Studios building to the National Geographic rectangular logo floating in place. At every turn, the streaming platform has found ways to combine its intellectual properties to encourage cross-property engagement and to keep viewers within this world of supposedly endless wonder. As the streaming market has intensified with greater competition, Disney appears to be betting on their vast libraries of ever-expanding brands to differentiate their product for subscribers, with the iconic and trusted core brand as the vibrating nucleus.

If we consider the Disney+ interface layout in the context of this chapter, as a demonstration of legacy-as-futurity corporate strategy, the meaning is clear. Legacy is presented to Disney consumers quite plainly through these IP icons. Consider, for instance, whether the vast library of content under the "Disney" tab is equivalent to what is under the "Star Wars" tab, and of course it is not. Yet, in terms of how this legacy is presented, they are made equal, as

representations of media history, collectively housed under the Disney+ banner. In this way, then, the platform makes an implicit claim that “legacy,” under its umbrella, is synonymous with IP. Disney is Pixar is Marvel is Star Wars is National Geographic is Star/Fox, not just a compendium of content but an assertion of media legacy and history through the prism of IP accrual and, finally, its visual manifestation as a series of icons on the app millions of families open every day.

Again, as I have argued in this chapter, this narrative is presented as one of enduring domination over the media market, a future that is stable and steady precisely because of how reassuring this positioning is for consumers looking for a platform to stay loyal to. There is even a way to interpret the placement of the icons as a recognition of how a user may “grow up” with the platform over time, moving from Disney cartoons to Pixar features to Marvel entertainment to Star Wars battles to National Geographic educational content to Star/Fox’s more adult offerings. From the platform’s point of view, a subscription, then, is necessary, through each phase of a child’s life and beyond. Legacy as futurity.

Toward a Better World

The anticipatory regime of the platform, with the magical presentation of Disneyfied labour and an organizational structure around acquisitional might, exhibits a corporate commitment to brand futurity that positions Disney as *the* company to bring about a better world of consumption and happiness for all. Here we should again recall Disney’s first foray into television, the *Disneyland* series hosted by Walt in the 1950s. By paying close attention to Disney history, Anderson (23) writes, “the determination to recycle the Disney library shaped the

series during its early seasons, making *Disneyland* an electronic museum devoted to the studio's artistic achievements." The Disney+ docuseries are the successors to this strategy, housed as they are in an actual "electronic museum" devoted to the Disney legacy as initiator of a future likewise defined by Disney. As variously centred on ecstatic longtime employees, upcoming brand spectacles, or the ease of cross-property travel, these shows not only build hype for Disney products across its multiverse but they also contribute to the cultivation of a collective imaginary that Disney+ seeks to impose on its subscribers (and future workers). If nothing else, what has changed between the 1950s and now is this move from addressing consumers to addressing *subscribers*.

Considering Disney as future-oriented is inevitably tied to particular historical relationships to branding, (trans)media, intellectual property, and legacy, its building and its maintenance. With an understanding of Disney+ as the culmination of this project, the influence of this company in the collective imaginary takes clearer shape.

This imaginary, this story, is where value is located, and these docuseries serve a particular function in this process, not only inviting users to experience the achievements of the company's happy workers, but also certifying the *collective cultural memory of the company as the past and future of happiness*. As *The Imagineering Story* explains, "Creating happiness is hard work." As *One Day at Disney* and *Disney Insider* remind us, this is a strategy that cuts across the entire conglomerate, matching Wasko's (262) concluding argument that the company has turned to exploiting technological development alongside the promotion of social responsibility and corporate goodness. The *One Day at Disney* episode featuring Lucasfilm Events senior manager Este Meza is a case-in-point, repeatedly cutting to shots of overjoyed crowds, hooting and hollering, as Meza states that seeing the effect of his work "really reaffirms the positive aspects of humanity." Mythologized as the Happiness Factory, Disney and the

curation of this imaginary is tightly controlled and expressed on Disney+, the one-stop shop for media consumers in the streaming age — and beyond.

This reflects a more general phenomenon in understanding the political economy of public and private industry and government, as Kyle Edward Williams (2024) chronicles the myriad consequences of a society which hands over public and social problems to private companies to solve. This is likewise a major theme for positioning the influence wielded by Silicon Valley and its prognosticators, always seeking to sidestep the more fundamental problems posed by capitalism and inadequate public services by offering technological “fixes” or conveniences (for some) in the name of innovation and progress. As Williams (11) argues:

For Silicon Valley entrepreneurs no less than Fortune 500 CEOs, a shift has occurred: the bottom line is out, and changing the world is in. Call it conscious capitalism. Or shared value. Or corporate social responsibility. Many consumers, regulators, and activists expect big-business executives to act like good, responsible citizens and steer their firms accordingly—maybe more now than ever before. And many leading executives are more than willing to heed the call.

Disney, I would argue, is ideally positioned to heed that call, thanks to a long history and legacy of corporate and cultural goodwill amassed, in large part, through strategic inroads progressively made into governmental and economic power.

As a helpful demonstration, consider how Williams goes on to quote Florida governor Ron DeSantis, who ignited a culture and legal war with his state’s biggest employer, The Walt Disney Company, in 2023 when DeSantis attempted to hit back against Disney’s special governance and taxing district around Walt Disney World near Orlando. Disney had, in a somewhat rare move, publicly declared their disapproval for DeSantis’ “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which sought to impose restrictions on public schools being able to provide instruction about

sexual orientation or gender identity.¹⁹ As Williams quotes DeSantis, who was referring to ESG (the investment principle of environmental, social, and governance ideals) but would wield the same rhetoric against Disney, “corporate power has increasingly been utilized to impose an ideological agenda on the American people.” To be clear, I do not seek to sanction DeSantis in any way, as he had his own cynical agenda to weaponize against “woke capital,” as it would come to be called by some opportunistic politicians, but at the same time (a broken clock is right twice a day), he has a point about the overreach of corporations as ideological powerhouses, particularly in Disney’s case, as they essentially have the legal leeway to run their own kingdom within Florida (the Storyliving project has acquired similar special governance and taxing powers in North Carolina and California).²⁰

Henry A. Giroux, in his landmark cultural study on Disney, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (1999, 19, 35), wrote of the company’s position as a “teaching machine,” which outlines “strategies of escapism and consumerism that reinforce an infantilised and utterly privatised notion of citizenship,” with the purpose of depoliticizing ‘Disney citizens’ through infantilization — as Giroux told *The New Statesman* in 2024 (Tait), “you infantilise people so they can’t think, so they can’t act.” In other words, not only are consumers made passive (as in Adorno and Horkheimer’s [1944] conception of the culture industry), they are likewise trained as future consumers, and even future Disney workers. As the arbiter of corporate social responsibility, Disney fans are imagined as Disney citizens, entrusting the company with the future itself as a moral imperative, a role the company has been eager to take on at least since

¹⁹ For more on this legal battle, see Schneider (2024). As reported by Stewart and Barnes (2024), Bob Chapek’s handling of this issue is specifically cited by Bob Iger as one reason he lost confidence in Chapek’s ability to lead the company into the future.

²⁰ As BlackRock CEO Larry Fink put it in his 2022 ‘Letter to CEOs,’ “Stakeholder capitalism is not about politics. It is not a social or ideological agenda. It is not ‘woke.’ It is capitalism.”

visiting those new mothers in the hospital, signing both parent and child up for a lifetime of Disney.

Conclusion

Disney 100: A Century of Dreams (dir. Dave Hoffman), which has been quoted several times at the beginning of sections throughout this chapter, was a special edition of ABC's *20/20* in 2023, a feature-length documentary now streaming on Disney+ which features interviews with employees from across Disney properties and sectors. It opens with actress Ariana DeBose, star of the animated film *Wish* (2023), which itself was imagined as a way to capitalize on the company's 100-year anniversary by telling a story about, yes, the apparently-iconic "wishing star" central to the company's logo, signature song ("When You Wish Upon a Star") and several of its films. DeBose tells us, succinctly capturing the company ethos, "Disney is for the legacy, it's about what happens for years to come."

These brazenly indulgent efforts in celebration of the company's centennial typify a strategy which suggests a sort of reimagining of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's (1944, 97) prediction for the modern age (at the time in response to television), which "promises to intensify the impoverishment of the aesthetic material so radically that the identity of all industrial cultural products, still scantily disguised today, will triumph openly tomorrow in a mocking fulfillment of Wagner's dream of the total art work," the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In this version, The Walt Disney Company is coordinator and operator of that total art work.

The corporate strategy of Disney as I've described it is a vision of a future that is all-Disney, all the time, and its users are trained to see this as a utopia, *the utopia*, that they desire. It is the gateway to happiness, and to a happier workforce. In this way, legacy media

articulates its adaptability to the streaming market, whereby the development of new futures nevertheless align with (or, rather, are made to align with) long-standing company values and lore, with the welcome addition of new properties and technologies. By articulating the concept of brand futurity, this chapter has demonstrated this form of corporate strategy as a useful framework for understanding narratives of value and ownership over the future in the digital age — in this case, a future not unlike the one imagined in *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell 2004), where all films are called “disneys” by the year 2144...if not sooner.

Cultural studies scholars ought to continue thinking through specific models of futurity. In this chapter, by examining Disney’s efforts not from a spatial perspective (Wasko) but a temporal one, I have demonstrated how legacy-as-futurity has been coordinated as a convincing (if imposing, if limiting) claim for the company’s domineering position in the future of media. Ultimately, Disney+ is a suite of content with constant reminders, including its original documentary series, of just what Disney should mean to you. As Kristina Dewberry, an Imagineering construction manager at Disneyland showcased in an episode of *One Day at Disney*, knocks on a spaceship crafted for the *Star Wars*-themed Galaxy’s Edge park project, she says with confidence, “This...this is forever.” That’s the idea.

Chapter Two

TikTok and its Social Futures

Introduction

Since the beginning of the web 2.0 era, the way we have generally understood the social media websites and apps we use everyday has been to see them as social mechanisms, spaces and tools intended to engender connection between users. Debate followed on the nature of those connections, but from a technical standpoint, it was broadly true that these digital platforms were programmed and organized in a way that sought to facilitate social bonds: here is your News Feed, with updates from your friends and family; here is someone you may know and wish to follow. Even as these platforms became more dominated by recommendation systems, bringing in more and more content from users or entities unfamiliar to us, there remained a baseline network structured around people you knew and chose to follow. This baseline would not last.

As Chris Stokel-Walker (2021, 7) points out, unlike with most social platforms, TikTok's algorithm recommends and provides videos according to "a 'content graph', looking at what you've previously engaged with, rather than a 'social graph' – which accounts you follow." What this also means, though, is that our digital social environment as we have come to know it is reoriented by an algorithm that has very little interest in your actual social milieu.²¹ It is, I'd argue, not a coincidence that by 2022 and 2023, tech and internet commentators began to lament the loss of the "social" in social media. The consensus among this group was that the web 2.0 era of social media, from Myspace to Facebook to Tumblr to Twitter, was coming to an end. "The Age of Social Media is Ending," wrote Ian Bogost (2022) in *The Atlantic*. "Social media is

²¹ Recall the foundation of Wendy Chun's (2018) argument on homophily here, which was precisely based on social graphs, not content. This chapter will return to this point.

doomed to die,” lamented Ellis Hamburger (2023) in *The Verge*. “The Future of Social Media Is a Lot Less Social,” Brian X. Chen (2023) summarized in *The New York Times*. Or, putting it a little differently, *The New Yorker*’s Kyle Chayka (2023) sought to answer the question of “Why the Internet Isn’t Fun Anymore.” One way to begin our inquiry, then, is to ask: where is the social in the age of TikTok?

This chapter offers conceptual development in the context of TikTok and platform sociality. Through analysis of a number of concepts, from the algorithmic logic of the refresh to temporal regimes of power to platformized marketplaces of intimacy, I sketch out ways in which TikTok provides an opportunity to (re)think through some of the accepted wisdoms within studies of social media, and media industry studies more broadly. My objects in this chapter are TikTok’s promotional and marketing material, the trends and patterns of its content creation, the platform structures it provides, the stories it tells about itself in various different environments, and more. Collectively, this allows me to develop a discursive analysis of how all these inputs craft a model of the future in the platform’s image. For instance, my choice of materials in the sections below on corporate discourse were chosen with an eye toward drawing out not only how the company sees itself, but how it wants to be seen by marketers and content creators alike, a dual rhetorical address that is borne out through my selection of sponsored reports, marketing guidelines, and the platform’s Creator Academy resources — a paternalistic attempt at control. Similarly, later on in the chapter, my focus on content examples like NPC streams and algospeak are deliberate choices for illustrating the platform as a marketplace of intimacy, and how all these materials work to align the future of the user and creator with the future of the platform itself. One way to understand this chapter, then, is as an inquiry into the temporality of intimacy, as well as the intimacy of temporality, and how both manifest through the social logic of the

platform. Eventually, this chapter, then, will determine TikTok's structure of feeling, referring, as Raymond Williams (1977) suggested, to the trajectory of ways of thinking and feeling under a given context, or more precisely, how affective structures must be understood as social phenomena.

Wendy Chun (2018, 66) memorably argued that “networks create and spawn the reality they imagine; they become self-fulfilling prophecies.” If that's true, it is crucial to understand that the future as a thing to be planned — the plannable future — is a social relation to begin with. This futurity, of reality as imagined and fulfilled, has become the domain not of governments, organizations, or citizens, but of technology and, more to the point, the companies that wield it. As Sun-ha Hong (2022) shows through example, we can think of the obsessive development of artificial intelligence and its ability to *predict* as the technology's “skeleton key to all social problems,” which operates a “modality that entrenches the longstanding fantasy in which social problems are made conceivable only as objects of calculative control” (372). These technological advancements are seen as *social goods*, and we soon find ourselves within “a hegemony of closure and sameness” (372) from these visions, and, as he puts it elsewhere, “such repetition helps sustain stagnant imaginaries of social relations underpinning those visions,” (Hong 2021, 1940).

This holds true throughout the tech industry. The future, as perpetually viewed from the present, becomes stuck in place as we struggle to imagine a social relation that is not beholden to the whims, pitches, and visions of these corporations. Moreover, as Randy Martin (2013, 97) argued in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the financialized logic of the derivative was, is, and must be social: “Attributes of giving and taking risk, seizing something for oneself and acting through others, attaching a future to a present pass laterally through all these myriad

expressions in a manner that constitutes a social logic.” Similar to how data-based algorithms like TikTok’s sort us into endless niche demographics, Martin (101-102) notes how a derivative social logic is based in a “bundling of attributes” as a way to generate value, abstracting the resultant disparate moments that people have found to “move together” — resulting in a “dispossession of self and ownership.” This social logic of the derivative confronts the logical impulse of calculative control Hong referred to, rendering sociality as another form of surplus value “whose account we can never settle,” Martin (102) adds.²² Martin’s conception is central to my argument in this chapter: using TikTok follows this social logic, then, breaking us up *ad infinitum* and putting us back together into these attribute bundles, and generating perpetual value from their splintered circulation.

I relate this to Ashley Carse and David Kneas’ (2019) conception of the unfinished temporality of infrastructure in helping us understand social phenomena. More specifically, Carse and Kneas articulate how the materialization of planned infrastructures is often deferred, delayed, or never finished at all, and so “unbuilt and unfinished infrastructures can become the axes of social worlds and sites where temporalities are knotted and reworked in unpredictable ways” (10). This may not initially seem like an intuitive connection for me to make, as these corporate technologies tend to be ‘finished’ in the sense that they are released for public use and, often enough, become central to our everyday lives. However, first consider that these technologies, especially social media platforms, are continually updated, reworked, reprogrammed, and otherwise remade, like a project that is never finished by definition — being in perpetual beta, in Tim O’Reilly’s (2005) influential web 2.0 terminology.

²² And yet Martin (103) finds a way forward, where we can make use of this conception of affiliated attributes over a consolidated subject position to find a “a reconceived horizon of communism” whereby the fact that we “move together but not as one” can become a social locus of mobilization.

Similarly, Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell (2022, 14) argue that smart technologies are the means by which “uncertainty about the future is managed through constant redescription of the present as a version, demo, or prototype of the future,” and that this has severe implications on sociality, as “earlier discourses about structures and *the social* are replaced by concerns about infrastructure, a focus on sensor systems, and a fetish for big data and analytics.” Moreover, Carse and Kneas tie their infrastructural concern to Laura Bear’s (2016, 489) influential concept of “timescapes,” which invites scholars to move past dominant timescales under capitalist modernity, chiefly the linear project timelines we are familiar with, toward “other practices of time.” Carse and Kneas suggest shadow histories (paths not taken), present absences (sociomaterial leftovers from unfinished or abandoned projects), and other examples, and the pivotal point is that infrastructures are “time-knots,”²³ (Chakrabarty 2000), whereby social life is shaped according to non-linearity and fragmentation. Enter TikTok.

TikTok, at the time of writing, has around one billion monthly active users, and, importantly, in an app ecosystem that only cares about attention, it boasts the best engagement, with an average use session of 10.85 minutes — the next closest app, Pinterest, sits at only 5.06 minutes (Statista 2019). Whatever the actual numbers, it is undeniable that TikTok’s cultural impact has grown exponentially, as its biggest stars move into traditional and streaming media and fuller narratives are shared on TikTok itself, from livestreamed comedy and game shows to actors portraying characters over extended periods of time, recalling early YouTube stunts like lonelygirl15, or incredibly long multi-part “story time” series intended to keep viewers hooked from video to video as algorithmic bait.²⁴

²³ More on this in a moment.

²⁴ As *The New York Times* (Kircher 2024) reported following a particularly viral example, Tareasa Johnson’s 50+-part saga “Who TF Did I Marry?!?”: “On YouTube, extra-long videos are known as storytimes, a format popularized largely as a result of the platform’s monetization structure. (The longer the video, the more ads that could be played during said video.)” Likewise, “If Homer were a TikTok influencer, Odysseus’ encounter with

Let's begin to situate where a platform like TikTok fits within the framework I suggest here of using infrastructural temporality of the unfinished as a way to understand social relations.²⁵ The "For You" page on TikTok, which algorithmically feeds videos to you according to what it thinks you want to see, is undoubtedly an experience of time-knotting, deliberately designed to disorient the user into a constant stream of content, though 'disorient' may be the wrong word, as the experience is intended to draw in the user and keep them hooked (several studies have been conducted looking specifically at addiction to TikTok, including Qin et al [2022] and Mayasari & Darmayanti [2023], but either way it's clear and sufficient enough to say that users spend lots of time on the app). Videos appear from random people in random locations, with little emphasis on people you have actually chosen to follow unless you deliberately open the followers feed, and it's never clear why the algorithm decided to show a particular video to you, but the implication is always that there must be *some reason*, some inference the system has made based on what you've watched and liked previously, something it knows about you that you may not even know yourself. You are bundled with others – but with whom? Perhaps there is some excitement in this unknowability.

A key element of how TikTok works is that, alongside the fudging of geographical and spatial identifiability, it seeks to *eliminate the temporal*, or at least fundamentally rupture it. In practical terms, and to be more precise, this means that your feed of videos will feature videos published only moments ago and videos from months before, and you almost certainly won't know which is which because videos are not posted with a date, and the algorithm (seems to) prefer so-called "evergreen" content, videos that won't seem out of date weeks later — dances,

Polyphemus the Cyclops would cut just before our hero blinds the monster. For that, you'd have to watch the next video. And the next, and the next."

²⁵ This notion is linked to geographies of informality in Global Majority regions, and the breakdown of infrastructural temporalities in global media processes; see Larkin, 2008. It's also worth emphasizing that typical understandings of infrastructural temporality may suggest a sense of permanence or longevity, but what is key here is the specific temporal register of *the unfinished*.

sure, but also lifestyle content, tutorials, pranks, jokes, day-in-the-life vlog-style videos, and so on. Everything comes to feel tied to that very moment, each brief flick of your finger scrolling into a perpetual neverending present. As the platform explained in its Creator Portal (later renamed the Creator Academy), a resource for aspiring creators to gain tips and tricks for success on the platform, “The For You feed generally pulls content from videos posted within the last 90 days, and videos generally see a peak in engagement in the first few days. However, videos can continue to be recommended so long as viewers keep engaging with them.”²⁶ TikTok takes the timelessness of the endless scroll, employed by many platforms, and further ruptures our relationship to the temporal by erasing any sense of content provenance or temporal boundedness, for it all is happening right now *for you and you alone*.

This is not entirely a new concept for social media, as Petter Bae Brandtzaeg and Marika Lüders (2018), picking up from Chun’s (2008, 148) notion of the “nonsimultaneousness of the new” in new media,²⁷ developed the concept of “time collapse” as a clearer way of understanding a more general context collapse that routinely takes place on these platforms. Naturally, this goes back to Goffman (1959), whereby people identify various audience types and perform accordingly in different social situations — it is human nature to tailor our performance of self differently depending on the social setting we find ourselves in. A context collapse occurs, then, when an unexpected clash of selves and settings takes place, such as when you host a party where your work friends meet your school friends for the first time and one realizes the divergent versions of the self they have historically performed in these settings.

²⁶ This text is taken from the version of the Portal that existed prior to 2024; with the introduction of the new Creator Academy in March of 2024, this text can no longer be found, and it is unclear if the 90-day window is still a general rule for the recommendation algorithm.

²⁷ “Digital media was supposed to—in its very functioning—encapsulate the enlightenment ideal that better information leads to better knowledge, which in turn guarantees better decisions. As a product of programming, it was to program the future,” (Chun 2008, 155).

Brandtzaeg and Lüders observe that these collapses are far more likely to happen online than off, and indeed we have come to understand social media as spaces where these performances are flattened into an overarching audience. To put it plainly, once it became clear that you could be tagged without your consent in a photo that you don't want certain people to see, it became necessary for this flattening to develop so social media users could feel as though they have some control over how they are perceived in an always-on digital age. With so many competing contexts online, many users adapted by curating what they share so that one's presence on LinkedIn would not conflict meaningfully with one's presence on YouTube, and so on. Collapses can still happen, of course, and this is, in part, why there has been much discussion in platform studies about the difference between platforms with real-name policies, which require users to register with their legal identities, and those that allow for anonymity or pseudonymity to varying degrees.

Notably, Brandtzaeg and Lüders point out that these studies almost always focus on *spatial* collapses — a Facebook post being misinterpreted sans context when re-posted on Twitter, for example — but have not properly considered *temporal* collapses. As they argue, “time, in the context of social media, cannot be understood as a continued progression of events that occur in apparently irreversible sequences from the past through the present” (3). Instead, we might say, it becomes an experience rooted in time-knots. I take Dipesh Chakrabarty's term of time-knots, used to describe the ongoing and variable reverberations of historical chronology, to refer to TikTok's temporal collapse and how it is distinct from similar collapses on other social platforms. This recalls not only Chun's nonsimultaneousness of the new but an associated temporal boundlessness. As Chakrabarty (2000, 112) explains, “it is because we live in time-knots that we can undertake the exercise of straightening out, as it were, some part of the

knot.” Here I use the concept of the time-knot to explain not only the algorithmic temporality of TikTok, but more significantly, how social relations are then (re)structured.

From this perspective, we can begin to ask how social relations are organized by a platform like TikTok, which is rooted in a specific form of temporal collapse. What does this collapse look like, and what are its implications? A core concern in what follows, as with Twitch and its relationship to labour in the next chapter, is naturally *monetization*, and the increased social influence of what we’ve come to call influencers, or sometimes creators.²⁸ As Rob Horning (2023, n.p.) and others have observed, the result of this group’s growth, parallel with the platforms that host them, has been a new conflation of consumption with production. Horning explains:

Platforms have massively expanded content consumption of all kinds, but not because users demanded to consume more: instead, they have driven users to produce more media, which also registers as consumption. Platforms have developed ways to turn users’ consumption into production, offering them easy-to-use tools and templates (including likes, reactions, and other kinds of prompts) and automatically turning behavioural data into a means of fine-tuning individualised content feeds. In this paradigm, consumption becomes an analogue of productivity—a form of data processing whose value is harvested by platforms.

In particular, when it comes to the easy-to-use tools and templates that encourage consumption-via-production (or: data-processing), TikTok is arguably at the top, with its duetting feature (allowing a user to post their video in split-screen alongside someone else’s video they want to comment on or otherwise respond to), the stitching feature (likewise a way to respond to another’s video, usually by opening with theirs before moving into your own), the simplicity of

²⁸ There is something to be said about the rise of the term ‘creator’ being beneficial for the platform companies. As Rebecca Jennings (2022) wrote for *Vox*: “What is a value judgment, at least implicitly, is the word itself — ‘creator’ — which connotes innovation, art, even godliness. It’s attractive in a way that ‘gig’ or ‘freelance’ or ‘temp’ or anything else isn’t. And yet the only reason we use the term to describe this segment of workers is that one of the biggest companies in the world designed it that way: After purchasing the multi-channel network Next New Networks in 2011, YouTube adopted its term ‘creator’ to describe the users that made up the platform.” In addition, Jennings added, “the happy connotations of ‘creator’ also distort the reality of the work” involved.

using another user's sound to soundtrack your own video, and many other intuitive, user-friendly tools.

Influencers or creators, then, become the nexus by which we can comprehend what it means to share on social platforms, as Emily Hund (2023, 8) describes what they do as seeking to “monetize their digital presence and adopt the ideology of the marketplace for their own self-expression,” in a way that many users come to take their cues from. In the same way that an ex may lament how you didn't love them but only the *idea* of them, as Horning puts it, “influencers don't exemplify particular lifestyles so much as the idea of having a lifestyle itself. They demonstrate how to remediate experience as commercial discourse—how to create content.” It's crucial to underline, as Horning does, that this was a top-down process that began with how platforms like TikTok were organized and the incentives to create they provided, rather than developing according to what users themselves desired from a social platform. In a very simple sense, influencers made the best of what they were given.

As a consequence, Hund (2023, 8) argues, influencers “ended up creating a value system that advanced the erosion of the boundaries between individuals' inner lives and commercialism, asking us to view ourselves as products perpetually ready for market, our relationships as monetizable, and our daily activities as potential shopping experiences.” It's worth adding that this advanced erosion of the boundaries put around subjectivity under capitalism is really about a basic survival mechanism under its platformized present, a self-preservation based on an acute awareness of our precarity as labouring social beings.

Here, we ought to draw on past conceptualizations of stardom, power, and capital, most notably P. David Marshall's (1997) pre-digital era argument about an already palpable hyper-individualization in the formation of power in modern culture, almost like singular

containers for collective identity, and Richard Dyer's (1979) similar notion of stars as constructed commodities. "Star power," then, shifts in the age of the influencer/creator, not only shaped by different forces (put simply, no longer by studios and the celebrity press, but by platforms and their algorithms) but also, as it becomes a cultural imperative to be always-on as a working subject (Crary 2014), the influencer/creator appears to effortlessly, even gracefully break down the boundaries of work and play. This influencer/creator is thereby responsible, whether aware of it or not, for keeping up the appearance of social relations under intensified algorithmic regimes of surveillance, extraction, and consumption. All of us, in this way and following the influencer/creator's cue, understand on some level that being visible and *meaningful* on social platforms is largely a matter of having a continuous awareness of what the platform and its architecture want from us. This chapter will return later on to this discussion of sociality, work, and monetization on TikTok, and the role of the influencer/creator therein.

If the narrative of Disney+ is one where the future of media content is tied to a powerful mythical past of corporate benevolence, and the narrative of Twitch, as we will see in the next chapter, is one where the future of labour is quite directly drawn to a way of seeing the self as full of potential future return on investment, then it seems the narrative of TikTok, and the future it is selling, is one where the social relations of tomorrow are similarly being aligned with time-knotted algorithmic, and platform-imposed, demands and incentives. The following sections of this chapter seek to explain how this narrative has been crafted by the platform, alongside the press, industry actors, and others, and how we can situate this storytelling within historical formulations of social relations, beginning with an examination of TikTok corporate material, analyzing how the company presents itself to various entities and how it narrativizes the content on its platform; then, picking back up on the infrastructural, an examination of

TikTok’s content clusters, and how they are inextricable on the platform; and finally, an argument on the future-oriented temporal regimes of social platforms, and TikTok’s particular organization of hierarchical and transactional power, which filters into social relations.

The Tales of TikTok

What is the story of TikTok? How does that story get told, and by whom? This section will explore how the company itself tells this story to reach different audiences, from Congressional hearings intended to address politicians and the general public alike to more internal- or advertiser-facing marketing material to user/creator-instructional material, and how these corporate-led efforts seek to set the terms by which the rest of us, from legislators to content creators to casual users, are to understand the company and its platform. Altogether, this analysis will grant insight into the company’s temporal paternalistic strategies across rhetorical modes and addressees, particularly in terms of how content and its consumption is imagined and materialized, and how this is managed at a time of increased scrutiny for the platform — which, I would argue, forces an even stronger corporate interest and effort in “controlling the narrative.”

Social Infrastructure

One way to understand TikTok, as it certainly has been for legislators and the media, is to consider it to be a geopolitical player that could suggest an invigorated Chinese inroads into global tech influence, a new model to take over from the Silicon Valley mold, especially on the level of digital social relations. As Stokel-Walker (235, 240) puts it, “If the first few decades of

the world wide web were crafted in an American model, the future could look a lot like the way Chinese interact with technology – in more ways than one,” whereby the real issue, amid national bans and other moral panics, is one of the balance of tech power at the level of the state, of “tech supremacy between the United States and China. Whoever wins this battle wins the future.” This point is significant, and is explored in depth by a number of other scholars, among them Steve Rolf and Seth Schindler (2023), who frame this as a logic of state platform capitalism between the US and China, and Marc Steinberg (2020), who insists we do not accede to the “techno-orientalist underpinnings” of this “neo-Cold War paradigm,” nor the “increasingly entrenched misperception of a bi-polar Internet world.”

It is worth noting that, as a response to growing geopolitical pressure in 2020 and 2021, TikTok created Project Texas, Project Clover, and other regional initiatives centred around the construction of data centres to host regional user data, among other goals. For instance, Project Texas, in partnership with the American company Oracle and its cloud technology, seeks to protect American data: “No data goes in or out of the U.S. TikTok platform without going through gateways that will be controlled by an American-based trusted technology provider (the TTP) and monitored by both the TTP [trusted technology provider] and USDS [the company’s special purpose subsidiary, TikTok U.S. Data Security],” (TikTok USDS). While the full political ramifications of this situation, which remains in progress at the time of writing,²⁹ are beyond the scope of my analysis, the kerfuffle does usefully demonstrate a couple of important points about TikTok as a social platform worthy of critical attention: first, its position as a platform owned by ByteDance, a Chinese tech company, and the differences between how the TikTok platform is managed and narrativized versus how Douyin, its Chinese counterpart, is managed and

²⁹ As a second Trump administration begins, it is impossible to predict if the American demand for ByteDance to sell TikTok to a US buyer or face delisting from American app stores, or some other arrangement, will come to pass.

narrativized (see Kaye et al. [2020] on parallel platformization); and second, as an invitation to consider the materiality of the platform and its technologies as the core of its imposition of what we might call a social architecture.

Social architecture in its digital, non-urban planning context tends to refer to attempts to modify user behaviour according to programmed designs and protocols, often to normalize power relationships under capitalism. It's important to separate my analysis of social architecture from that of scholars like Shoshana Zuboff (2019) in her popular conception of surveillance capitalism. To put it simply, Zuboff argues that the problem is the surveillant practices of tech companies that seek to alter user behaviours, but that the capitalist foundation of the economy is worth protecting. In other words, these companies are a danger to society because they are operating according to a *perversion of capitalism*, a rogue element that acquires power via unorthodox strategies of data extraction and user surveillance, an affront to personal privacy and autonomy in the digital age.³⁰ This is an idea about social architecture that ignores the political economy of capitalist power and domination as it actually plays out “on the ground” — the admittedly difficult-to-measure social values of everyday practice, and the features of our social environment that have been rapidly normalized into a feeling of inevitability. As the sociologist Zoë Cave (2021) has written, these social values are deeply intertwined with the technical structures imposed by capital, even as they

stand in stark contrast to the context of where objective rationality, market logic and quantitative *value* preside. When the logic of the market can be applied to everything, all objects, things and people are allocated a value, reducing everything to exchangeability. But, because *values* are hard to capture with rationalised language, they are seen as subjective, emotional and so, by binary default, superfluous.

³⁰ This conception is counter to Evgeny Morozov's (2022) argument about the techno-feudal thesis that suggests we have finally moved past capitalism into a new feudal era: “today, it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the *continuation* of capitalism as we know it.”

This matters in part because so much economic and cultural discourse revolves around the valuation of these relations, particularly as we now view *everything* as commodified. Still, a proper, holistic analysis of anything, including technology or capital, must nevertheless reckon with the full spectrum of (subjective) value within its purview, to position the actors in their full context. Zuboff's analysis suffers, then, for its narrow focus on how companies like Facebook *corrupted the logic of the market*, without an account of its social corruption that engages with the logics of labour, ideology, or power itself.

A better way to make sense of how these companies operate and, more to the point, narrativize their pursuit of power is to think of them as committed to the maintenance of *social infrastructures*. A distinction with a difference. First, this means placing a platform within its full context, as outlined by Mark Davis and Jian Xiao (2021, 115) in their call to complicate how we de-Westernize platform studies: "It is the task of scholars, then, to open up and reregionalize platform studies so as to address the question of what different historical, state and cultural imperatives drive the platforms in their different cultural contexts, and from this to address the increasingly pressing question of what diverse hegemonic roles platforms play, now, in a multipolar world." It is for this reason that my analysis is not so interested, for instance, in conducting a direct comparison between TikTok and Douyin, at least in part because the data I am working from would not give a comparable window into Douyin. But also because my interest in social infrastructures moves me in the direction of understanding hegemonic power relations through the social and temporal dimensions of the platform, and TikTok's affordances and limitations provide a meaningful demonstration of these incentives precisely within such a

multipolar technological moment.³¹ In this sense, I anchor what follows in a distinctly re-regionalized North American context, recognizing the limits of this approach alongside what it offers more directly to my larger temporal analysis. As Jessa Lingel (2020) argues, a spatial analysis in this mode tends to exclude no matter what, dependent on culturally-specific metaphors that may not travel. On the other hand, a temporal analysis can hopefully offer a broader experiential insight into these power and social relations. Second, as Amy Horton and Joe Penny (2023, 1729) argue, it is important to engage with the political economy of social infrastructures to track “contested socio-material configurations of practices, people, and places that unevenly afford sociality, social reproduction, and survival.”

I relate this approach, which originates in urban geography, to my earlier invocation of Carse and Kneas’ social infrastructure framework based in timescapes, as infrastructural phenomena — data centres, undersea fibre optic cables, modems, routers, websites, apps, phones, tablets, cloud connections, storage, payment systems, and so on — cohere into “social worlds and sites where temporalities are knotted and reworked in unpredictable ways” (10). TikTok’s emergence and rapid sociocultural dominance — often enough the most popular posts on other apps are re-posting something from TikTok, or Douyin; moral panics and trend pieces routinely originate from TikTok content; the culture, in the early 2020s, *is* TikTok — alongside its algorithmic systems, structural affordances, cultural contexts and incentives, and narrative storytelling or mythmaking all signal a social infrastructure worthy of critique.

Content Graphs

³¹ Moreover, TikTok, like most platforms available globally, works quite differently depending on which region you are using it in, as guidelines within the terms of service or other legal documents vary greatly between TikTok in North America, say, and TikTok in different parts of Europe.

We should have a clear understanding of what we mean by “content” before we examine the specificities of TikTok’s organizational (and algorithmic) approach to it. We will return in the next section to how this is mobilized on the platform itself, but for now it is important to re-emphasize the point made by Stokel-Walker at the beginning of this chapter on the function and impact of a platform organized according to content graphs rather than social ones.³² It is helpful to refer to Adam Arvidsson’s explanation of how social graphs function so that we can understand how content graphs differ. As Arvidsson (2016, 10, emphasis added) explains, in relation to his analysis of Facebook:

The probability that a posting will appear on the page of a user depends not on some socially anchored common characteristic (like, for example, common demographics), but on the place of the objects that represent, respectively, that posting and the user, within the topological map of the Facebook social graph...*It is important to note that the inference here is not primarily about the content of the posting*, nor the nature of the relationship in real life. Rather it is an inference that uses past patterns to make an argument about the probability of future directions. Because I have taken an interest in this user’s postings in the past, it is probable that I will do so also in the future...On the basis of an inference of such future interest, Facebook makes a decision regarding the present allocation of informational objects.

While social graphs, Arvidsson (11) goes on to note, similarly “pay no attention to other aspects of the life of the underlyings – the users,” we can begin by saying that with content graphs, the content of the posting is indeed the primary basis of algorithmic inference. TikTok’s algorithm likewise makes use of past patterns to determine likely future directions, but social connections have lost their primacy to the future-oriented pleasures of content.

To be as clear as possible: Even referring to TikTok as a social media platform is not accurate; it is a content creation platform. It is my contention that on TikTok, *the social* is

³² To illustrate this, I think of Stefanie Duguay and Hannah Gold-Apel’s (2023) account of TikTok’s short-lived attempt to replace the app’s “Discover” tab, which surfaces trending hashtags and videos from strangers, with a “Friends” tab, and the outcry that resulted from users who missed the “Discover” tab, which was slowly reintroduced.

content, or more specifically, content on the platform is intrinsically tied to the types of social behaviour and interaction that the app encourages and makes available for monetization (and vice versa), as connections facilitated by content graphs looks quite distinct from those facilitated by social graphs, and this has implications in the Marxist understanding of the social and in studies of social media.

On TikTok, this understanding of content ties is hyper-intensified and further abstracted for both creator (author) and user (reader), not only via advanced and intuitive interface features of content production such as duetting, stitching, overlays, and more (all of which operate according to platform affordance, not user/author intention), but also according to the circulatory logic of the content graph and its relation to this mode of prescribed actions.³³

As Bhandari and Bimo (2022, 5) found, applying the walkthrough method to the platform, TikTok users may find themselves unable to or rather uninterested in navigating much beyond the algorithmic feed, because “visually, such [other] activities are presented as secondary to the content presented by the algorithm . . . While other platforms obfuscate the fact of algorithmic intervention, TikTok dispenses with this illusion by highlighting the role its algorithms play.” This can be seen in figure 3, a screenshot from my personal TikTok account upon opening it, automatically (as ever) brought to the For You page, which has assumed, not wrongly, that I would like to see content related to an artist I enjoy (Charli XCX). The “Friends” tab is there at the bottom, though de-emphasized — why would you bother when the algorithm has already provided *for you*?

³³ This references Alan Liu’s (2004, 63) early internet analysis of how users “become operators of black box machinery who select criteria for prescribed actions.”

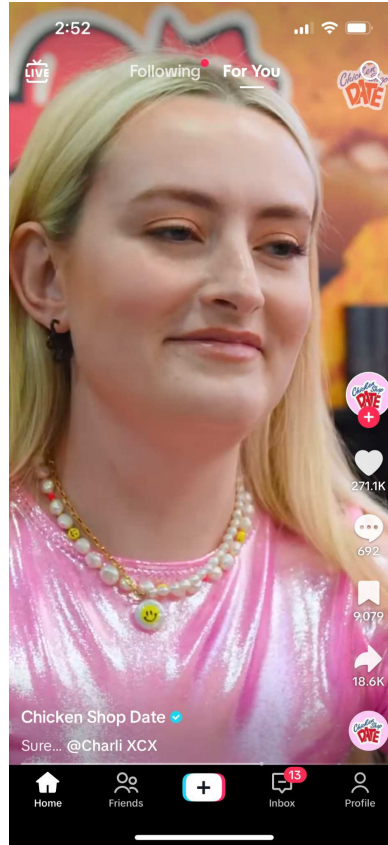


Figure 3 — Screenshot of my personal For You page upon opening TikTok

I argue, then, that on TikTok we can witness a confluence of Marxist and digital social relations, as content circulates in such a way that it does not hierarchize individuals and the connections between them, per se, but does arrange them according to different, often completely obscured demands — class-based social relationships manifest through prescribed content graphs. Put simply, Marxist understandings of the social emphasize how economic factors govern social relationships, which inevitably leads to the alienation of the labouring self. As Marx (1844, 17) argued, “a direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour, from his life activity and from his species-life, is that *man is alienated* from other men.” With this basic notion in mind, sociality is understood as something that is intrinsically estranged — from itself, from others, from society — under capitalism, and social classes operate and are

hierarchized accordingly. While Marxist scholars may quibble with this description of the Marxist model of the social, at the very least I would argue that it demonstrates how exchange relationships are inherently social relationships, and that this creates an unavoidable tension.

This sits rather comfortably alongside recent conceptions of sociality online, not only from vernacular discussions about outrage and division through digital discourse but also through the functionality of network effects themselves and the fragmentary circulation of content which is routinely described as alienating, to the point of it becoming a common sense deduction about modern life, from Tiziana Terranova's (2000) influential early internet diagnosis of 'free labor' to Mark Andrejevic's (2010) argument on increased surveillance as a way to gin up the exploitation of alienated digital labour to Kane X. Faucher's (2018) evocation of online social capital as an acute rendering of Marxist alienation. For Marx, then, we can say that people relate to commodities as objects, not as products of human labour, and likewise, I'd argue, TikTok relates people to content (commodities) while designing a space that obscures a social relation between people and the work that goes into content creation. This chapter, and this section specifically, seek to hold these meanings of sociality together, aiming to draw out how a platform like TikTok exploits these factors, as expressed through various discursive and marketing materials as well as through the practice of discoverability as organized by algorithmic content graphs.

Corporate Discourse

To situate this analysis, we can begin with an examination of TikTok self-description to help guide us through this ecosystem of sociality, largely from marketing reports and platform-initiated surveys which reveal internal mythmaking. First, a high-profile example of

attempting to “control the narrative,” and steer (or determine) the imaginary of platform content for legislators, marketers, creators, and competitors: TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew testified to US Congress on March 23, 2023 in a hearing conducted by the House Energy and Commerce Committee, a bipartisan grilling that was broadcast in snippets across news programs and social media in the days and weeks that followed. It was also, crucially, an opportunity for Chew and his preparation team to speak directly to consumers and users, occasionally leaning into the feeling that the American political gerontocracy just doesn’t understand social media (for instance, references from legislators to viral “challenges” on TikTok that don’t actually exist), or otherwise repeating lines of argument to solidify how the public, too, should see the platform. The hearing stands as the most public offering of company ideology to date from the company. One of the most interesting moments occurred during an exchange with Representative Darren Soto, a Democrat from Florida, who pushed Chew on TikTok’s ownership by ByteDance and that company’s ties to the Chinese Communist Party. In part, Chew’s response was sharp: “I don’t think ownership is the issue here. With a lot of respect, American social companies don’t have a good track record with data privacy and user security. I mean, look at Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, just one example” (Hendrix 2023). Chew’s point, and it is an effective one, is that to single out TikTok simply due to its Chinese ownership is rather disingenuous considering what American tech companies are able to get away with. This is particularly useful as a rhetorical strategy because it signals to the public that, even if TikTok does do similar things with your data, it is no different than what these homegrown companies do, so placing them on a higher plane of scrutiny is hardly fair.

As the media coverage following the hearing showed, Chew and TikTok had a tall order, and while a total ban remained a possibility at the time due to concerns over free speech and

other legal hurdles, it was difficult to imagine a cooldown of tension, particularly as relations between the US and China generally stayed in a state of strain.³⁴ Again, the geopolitical dimension of TikTok is largely beyond the scope of my analysis, but what is relevant about this hearing for this chapter is that it was a moment for the company to present a story about itself. For instance, in his opening statement, Chew was sure to offer reassurance, that TikTok is “a place where people can be creative and curious,” and where close to 5 million “mostly small businesses go to find new customers and to fuel their growth.” He concluded by proposing TikTok’s four commitments: keeping safety, particularly for teenagers, as a top priority; protecting US data from unwanted foreign access; making sure TikTok remains “a place for free expression” unmanipulated by any government (including, presumably, the US); and that they will give access to their source code, algorithms, and other data to independent third-party monitors to keep them accountable. Despite these efforts, the media noted that the story was inherently troubled: “TikTok, and its CEO Shou Chew, never really stood a chance,” as Vox put it (Morrison and Paz 2023); “Lawmakers Appear Unconvinced by TikTok Chief’s Testimony,” said *The New York Times* (Kang et al. 2023); “TikTok will have to navigate a tenuous path forward to avoid serious consequences from Congress,” reported Axios (Gold 2023). Indeed, in a statement after the hearing, TikTok spokesperson Brooke Oberwetter said, seemingly admitting the company had lost the rhetorical fight that day: “Shou came prepared to answer questions from Congress, but, unfortunately, the day was dominated by political grandstanding that failed to acknowledge the real solutions already underway” (Gold).

³⁴ As of January 2025, the TikTok ban is again apparently imminent, as the American government passed the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act in April 2024, with TikTok filing a lawsuit against the legislation the following month. As this dissertation is being finished, the ban seems liable to be implemented, perhaps within days. My analysis, of course, captures this moment, reflects on the company during this period, and offers insight into the social relations of content creation and platforms — regardless of what happens to the app itself in America, which, after all, is but one market for ByteDance.

The effectiveness of Chew's testimony that day is less interesting than how it fits into the platform's larger, ongoing narrative of itself. A post attributed to "The TikTok Team" (2023) shared two days before the hearing, for example, sought to celebrate "our mission as we continue to inspire creativity and bring joy across the United States for more than 150 million people," and an embedded TikTok video featuring Chew in a relaxed hoodie, in which he laments the proposed ban of the app, and that "this could take TikTok away from all 150 million of you," inviting users to comment with what they love about the platform so that he can bring that information to their elected representatives. This language is deliberate, in that it invites users to see the ban as a threat to them, not only to the company — it will be taken away from *you*.

Similarly, the company's "What's Next Report 2024" (TikTok 2023b), geared primarily toward marketers to help shape brand strategy, includes some surprising descriptions of how TikTok envisions what it offers and how users engage with that content. The report, supported by data from the Global TikTok Marketing Science team (gathered in part by third-party market research firms such as Marketcast, Metrixlab, and Edelman Data and Intelligence) refers to a transformative mindset to direct content, Creative Bravery: "Brands that will see most success will regularly pique global curiosities, flip traditional story arcs, and deepen trust with their audiences." Moreover, and particularly picking up on the formulation of flipped story arcs, Sofia Hernandez, Global Head of Business Marketing for TikTok, is quoted as saying, "In an era where storytelling has become predictable, TikTok showcases creativity without a typical beginning, middle or end." Here, we can see how marketers, creators, brands, and talent agencies alike are encouraged to engage in a content strategy that is explicitly time-knotted — it is non-linear and fragmentary, defying typical temporal logic without traditional story arcs. In a section entitled

“Storytelling Unhinged,” the report goes on to explain, in a rousing rendition of marketing-speak:

Ends of stories are starting first. Multiple story arcs can happen at once. Communities are making up fictional celebrities and narratives. Against the backdrop of what's often felt like an overwhelming reality, TikTok users have embraced a shared community of what's been dubbed #delulu or delusional comfort. Rooted in fandom culture, #delulu is a blend of fantasy and manifestation - adopting a fake-it-til-you-make-it persona for audiences to tap into, fantasizing about their hopes, dreams or self-defined delusional realities.

While wielded as an advertising term, this notion of *delusional comfort* is actually a cogent appraisal of the affective experience of using the platform, and one I will return to. TikTok operates on #delulutime.

Interestingly, within TikTok’s Creator Portal, they recommend that creators do the opposite: “All of the best TikTok videos have one thing in common: They all tell a story. It doesn’t matter if it’s a travel video, a makeup tutorial, or a fitness routine — great TikTok videos usually have a clear beginning, middle, and end.” This contradictory messaging, particularly the expected aspirational tenor of the Creator Portal in contrast with the more quantitative analytic approach of the marketing report, is not uncommon for TikTok or indeed any platform, and further reflects the navigational labour that creators must do to make informed decisions about their content and best practices for how to reach new audiences. It is also indicative of TikTok’s overall content goals, as they make much of their money through ad sales and targeting, suggesting that the framework of their marketing report is intended to set the tone for content creation and its circulation.

Knotted Up

The “What’s Next 2024” report goes on to further highlight the threat of “analysis paralysis” on users, and one way TikTok overcomes this problem is through “serendipitous scrolling,” the algorithmic discovery function of the platform that rewards hyper-specific targeting (for creators and brands) as a way to stand out. Indeed, the report concludes that amid this glut of content, experimental narrative structures “guide viewers past the first few seconds,” particularly for ads, which keeps users watching 1.4 times longer, according to a Metrixlab study. Moreover, as Ashley Rudder, Chief Creator Officer at Whalar, a talent management company for creators, puts it in “Made for TikTok,” a slick, official talk show on the app, “Remember, this isn’t TV. It’s culture. It means that your brand is now stepping into [a creator’s] space, you have to look and feel like that. The instant you try to script it, it’s over.” In other words, the difference between the storytelling of the creator or marketer is, ideally, negligible — it should be difficult to tell the difference, and upending coherence is put forward as a key strategy to manage that. This is a good indicator, I argue, of how the platform understands itself and how it wishes to be understood.

One suggestion for this style of “storytelling”? The NPC trend, whereby creators act as game-like non-playable characters, hovering and repeating the same phrases like a video game character: “The TikTok community has transformed this character into a breathable archetype, pretending to be an npc in real life scenarios, and reacting to TikTok LIVE audience participation.”³⁵ From here, the report leans even further into the recommendation to engage with self-defined delusional realities *as an answer to* “today’s overwhelming reality” — it’s no longer as simple as users turning to TikTok “when the world feels heavy,” but now, “TikTok audiences

³⁵ This chapter will return to the NPC trend as a form of marketized intimacy.

are building a shared community of delusional comfort to provide a spark of lightheartedness in an overwhelming reality.”

Again, all of this is sold as a way to garner social authenticity through unhinged storytelling and the cultivation of delusional realities. In episode 1 of “Made for TikTok,” Chief Creative Officer of advertising agency Deutsch LA Matt Ian says, “We don't own this brand outright anymore. We are stakeholders in a brand that's owned by us and our fans. We are collaborators with our fans.” This is typical ad-speak, on one hand, but it is also a reflection of an overarching, TikTok-shaped content strategy whereby creators and brands meld into an assemblage of non-linear and fragmentary images and sounds, all monetized as a way to placate overwhelmed and disoriented users and fans, recalling Renyi Hong's (2022, 5) notion of passionate work as a discourse for “dictating how life is to be led happily and well *despite* economic hardship...a means of attenuating the psychic drain of economic uncertainty and income scarcity.”

In another report, “What's Next: Shopping Trend Report,” (2023) aimed chiefly at marketers, TikTok points to how easy it is for its users to become creators, and therefore “any customer can become a Creator”: “By inspiring authentic content creation and excitement among viewers, brands can encourage audiences to try out products for themselves and spark more content creation cycles.” According to a cited 2022 TikTok Marketing Science Global Ecommerce Study conducted by Material, a creative communications agency, 49% “of TikTok users create a post about a product/brand they purchased from,” which is, they claim, two times more likely versus users on other platforms. Putting the accuracy of that figure aside, we can see a particular rhetoric of content creation that deliberately matches platform functionality and interface to the blurring of user, creator, and marketer. For instance, with the “Branded Mission”

(TikTok 2023a) function on TikTok, advertisers can “crowdsource authentic content from creators on TikTok, turn top-performing videos into ads, and improve brand affinity with media impressions.” The middle option is especially intriguing, that a brand can reach out to a video that has already gone viral, perhaps one that features their product or service in some way, and *retroactively* turn it into a branded piece of content, paying the creator to maintain the “brand narrative” and monetizing their engagement and data.

Likewise, the Creator Marketplace is exactly what it sounds like: a space with hundreds of thousands of creators listed alongside the communities they engage with, their expected budget, and other relevant information to help facilitate an ease of “co-creation” between creator and brand. A brand can search for what they want and reach out to specific creators that fit with their strategy, all of which occurs through what they call the “customer-to-creator pipeline” which serves to “amplify your brand message, showcase product features, and more.” Again, this user-creator-brand synergy, whose fuel is “authentic content,” is about making this fragmentary circulatory logic, and the diffuse distinctions between ads and user-generated content, make complete experiential sense to the app scroller.

Addressing audiences in an age of increasing fragmentation, then, is another strain of TikTok’s appeal to advertisers. Another 2023 report, “Storytelling in the Next Creative Renaissance,” co-produced by TikTok and the advertising agency TBWA, reflects on the general loss of a monoculture. Sounding not unlike a cultural studies analyst, and a now-familiar one at that, they write that 106 million tuned in for the *M*A*S*H** finale in 1983, but only 2.9 million watched the *Succession* finale live forty years later in 2023. Through both spatial and temporal distortions and abstractions of the digital age, the report argues, “this splintering of audiences and fragmentation of media makes it harder than ever to reach a mass audience - while costs can

also be an obstacle.” The answer is the further niche-ification of culture, due in large part to what the report calls TikTok’s “algorithm bubbles,” another way of understanding the platform’s genre clusters, which the report describes simply as “pockets of content being fed to certain groups of people.” To accomplish this, the report acknowledges that “marketers and brands love the word authenticity, so much so that it’s almost lost its meaning,” and so authenticity “levels up to incorporate vulnerability. Brands are baring their souls, digging into themselves to discover what they truly care about and what they want to be - and are communicating those values to the world.” This certainly resembles discourse that has surrounded social media platforms for well over a decade struggling to stand out within the attention economy, yet the difference, as TikTok sees it, lies in the power of these algorithm bubbles as a new era for content creators, whereby subcultural and reputational social capital is translated *through* this fragmentation into higher revenue. As Tim Hwang (2020, 51) reminds us, “The amorphous, shapeless concept of attention has been transformed into discrete, comparable pieces that can be captured, priced, and sold.”

Likewise, in the Creator Portal (until the Creator Academy rebrand in March 2024 — an obvious rhetorical move to paternalism, as “academy” denotes education from on high), TikTok (2024a, figure 4) recommended that creators “avoid working with the brand altogether if the partnership doesn’t feel natural to you, so that your content doesn’t appear inauthentic,” and even suggests that if you actually like the brand, “you might lower your pricing just to work with them.” Moreover, when developing content for brands, creators are advised that “part of the allure for branded content creation is that a great branded post should feel as though it naturally belongs in the TikTok ecosystem.” As long as you stay true to the platform, you will succeed. The fragmentation is the point.

Brand Affinity

Brand affinity is how much you like the brand. Do your values and the brand's values align? Will working with the brand enhance your personal brand for future audiences and other brand partnerships?

Your affinity for the brand might play into how you set your rates for the campaign. If you have a high affinity for a brand, then you might lower your pricing just to work with them. Conversely, if you work with a brand you feel more neutral toward, then you might be more inclined to maintain the market price for your partnership.

It's best to avoid working with the brand altogether if the partnership doesn't feel natural to you, so that your content doesn't appear inauthentic.

Figure 4 — TikTok Creator Portal section on “Brand Affinity,” captured by the Internet Archive Wayback Machine

What all this tells us — why it matters — is that as a platform, TikTok’s modus operandi for content and its circulation is an investment in its pursuit of temporal paternalism, tying each creator’s (socio-economic) future to the future of the platform — consider how the app blasted a message to its American users after Congress introduced the bill to ban it in March 2024: “Stop a TikTok shutdown. Let Congress know what TikTok means to you and tell them to vote NO,” (Maheshwari & McCabe 2024). The platform even included a button for users to call their representatives. Under increased scrutiny by legislators, the press, and users alike, these corporate efforts demonstrate a content strategy where creators are coaxed into understanding their social capital as tied to their maintenance of everchanging algorithm bubbles in a bid to harness the overwhelming time-knotted disorientation of our reality into a fragmented future of endless reassurance. Put differently, TikTok exercises its paternalism by encouraging creators via rhetoric, marketing, Creator Academy tools, and more, to condition user expectations about content as a way to find solace amid the chaos. This operates, as we will see in the following section, according to the temporal logic of the refresh.

The Refresh Logic

My analysis thus far of TikTok and its relation to platform sociality and temporality has circled around the challenge of identifying its structure of feeling, though without confronting the question directly. This section seeks to chart, through further conceptual development, how I understand the dominating structure of feeling for TikTok, and how it is intimately related to the basic platformized function of the refresh. Now that we have explored the corporate positioning of how the company would *like* to be understood, this section begins with an examination of the app's algorithm, as it is mythologized, before moving on to interrogate the 'algorithmized self' as managed and overseen by the temporal logic of the refresh, which straddles the future and the present at once. This section, then, is concerned with what everyday practice on TikTok, and the temporal logics we find within, can tell us about how sociality is experienced, shared, and commodified — beyond rhetoric. The guiding question is, *what is the structure of feeling that articulates these logics?*

The Algorithm

Sometimes, the TikTok algorithm seems to know you better than you know yourself. That's the common perspective on the specific power of the platform's technical architecture, anyway, repeated in headlines and across social media: How does it know everything?! Perhaps no other algorithm in social media is as heralded as TikTok's, as users and observers alike can't help but refer to "the algorithm" as the mysterious, obscure master of the universe. In seemingly no time at all, perhaps only a day or two of scrolling, you begin to feel as though TikTok's algorithm has developed a full profile for you, always adjusting to your interests and showing

you things you didn't know you had to see (there is, of course, always a measure of confirmation bias, as you forget the many videos that whiz by without much of a connection, but you *really* remember the one that feels like it was made for you specifically). What gets missed, however, is how TikTok's real innovation is not the creation of user taste profiles — this is social media's bread and butter — but instead, the cultivation of *genres* that apprehend organic (or artificial, it hardly matters) trends and turns them into stories with particular audiences to target. Genres, then, are a better way of understanding how things spread and harden into identifiable narratives on TikTok, an organizational method of creation and algorithmic reorientation of the social. Viewers are constantly encouraged and goaded into transitioning to become creators, with easy-to-use tools like video “duetting” (creating a side-by-side response to someone else's video), video comment replies, and stitching (which lets you directly include someone else's video in your own). Not only does this work harder than other You-ser centric social media to date to make every user a creator, but it invites them to participate in the storytelling experience of the platform.

TikTok also keeps making videos longer, as the maximum length is now thirty minutes (at the time of writing), in a bid to better compete with YouTube, build up engagement time, and make content easier to monetize. It also allows for longer, contained narratives. On a platform that is inherently ephemeral in some sense, as videos from creators you've never seen before flit past your personal For You page, this is certainly one way to help build creator loyalty, as the platform seems to understand that a key appeal of the creator economy model is the ability to follow along with the stories of other people — their lives, performances, shows, or whatever else. As we begin to see a growing interplay between media spheres, audiences, and categories, TikTok and the construction, development, and maintenance of its genres are a clear influence on

how “content” is being transformed, as we began to see in the previous section (remember, *the social* is turned into content, and this content is what is shared and monetized).

Much of the best scholarly work on TikTok’s algorithm so far, including by Crystal Abidin (2021), Zongyi Zhang (2021), and the TikTok Cultures Research Network, examines how content goes viral, what sort of people are able to be successful long-term, and, increasingly, what role the platform has in geopolitics and the spread of misinformation. Some, like Natalie Collie and Caroline Wilson-Barnao (2020), consider how the algorithmic centrality of TikTok may challenge the future of creative work more generally, as it suggests the primacy of values like engagement and potential for data collection instead of, say, normative values of aesthetics. While certainly useful, these studies nevertheless fail to fully capture how users on TikTok learn to tell the stories of themselves, or how forms of sociality emerge on the app, or how the content strategy outlined earlier manifests through affective experience of the platform. The following section attempts to do just that.

The Future of the In-Between

Rebecca Coleman (2020) argues that today’s defining structure of feeling, following Williams’ application of the 1970s experience of broadcast television as flow, is one of *the refresh*. For Coleman (50), the centrality of time and temporality to our modern mediated cultures is a given, and refreshing emphasizes our digital experience of “multiplicity, intensity and the non-chronology of time,” which places us within a present temporality — “that is, a temporality that is both ‘now’ and ongoing,” this moment and the unknown next. Coleman’s (79) description of this digital experience maps well onto the TikTok For You stream, which doesn’t so much resemble Williams’ flow, which captured an uninterrupted whole, but instead is a

continuous in-between, “defined not in terms of external beginning or end points but in relation to its own contraction and/or expansion through the ways in which it continues and/or is subject to restarts and/or repetitions; the ‘againness’ of the present” — “always in the midst,” as she poetically puts it. This therefore characterizes the everyday, unexceptional pattern of modern life on platforms like TikTok, and as Wendy Chun (2017, 7) reminds us, habit is “ideology in action.” The refresh, then, represents futurity for us instead as a refreshed present, as a company or platform can make claims about futurity while inculcating this habitual presentness into our everyday digital experience of the in-between.

This is a future, then, that is fundamentally *stuck in place*.

What does this pattern, a flow that renders our experience “always in the midst,” tell us about the social infrastructure of a platform like TikTok, especially in the context of how it actually works? The artist Isabel Munson (2021) has mused that no platform is more successful than TikTok at facilitating the interconnection of capitalist logics and personal self-discovery:

Just as the apps seek to categorize users, personalize content, and accurately target them with advertising, users seek to categorize their self, interests and identities and accurately convey their essence in a profile. This model of the self mimics that of the feed — an endless source of content that will keep flowing, generating data, refining, indexing, and articulating identity...It’s paradoxical to seek stability within platforms that incentivize flux, virality, and mimetic copying. But TikTok, and algorithmic feeds in general, make this broader contradiction seem coherent: Identity can be both stable (who you “really” are) and constantly changing (a form of “human capital” that can be accumulated and manipulated as circumstances demand).

Munson identifies a domineering social logic at play on TikTok, whereby the self is commodified based upon a coalescence of one’s desires, interests, and identities as understood and regurgitated by the algorithm and rerouted further into streams of content. The self, it seems,

becomes *wrapped up with the algorithm*.³⁶ Bhandari and Bimo (2022), for instance, update previous theories about the networked self in the online age to explain TikTok's cultivation of the "algorithmized self," constituted by unique self-making models based on awareness of the algorithm, what it wants, and how to trick it or play it to one's benefit. As the rest of this chapter will explore in more detail, this is a social-algorithmic relation pushed by TikTok in a way that resembles Taina Bucher's (2016, 94) work on algorithmic imaginaries, as she insists we move beyond the so-called epistemological challenge of the 'black box' problem of studying algorithms (how can we study something that is withheld from view and seemingly barely understood by its engineers?) and instead re-embrace familiar methods, asking us to "take those beliefs, values, and imaginings that the algorithm clearly solicits as a point of departure," for we should not "fear the rhetoric of magic surrounding algorithms, but instead productively feed on it by examining some of the cultural imaginations that exist." What are the dimensions, then, of this social-algorithmic relationality on the platform, as this imaginary comes to bear?

Let us think back, then, to Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder's (1996) foundational analysis of an online infrastructure as a heuristic approach to studying the social relations of technology, and the importance of asking not 'what is an infrastructure?' but '*when* is it an infrastructure?' This reminds scholars like myself, as Jean-Christophe Plantin and Aswin Punathambekar (2018, 168, 171) elaborate in their study on digital media infrastructures, to position ourselves and our analysis appropriately, for "what an infrastructure is quite simply depends on the status of the person looking." This perspective, and I would add particularly the *temporal* status of the person looking, better allows us to consider "the political economy of these platforms-qua-infrastructures," and opens up study on "the relationality of technology, the

³⁶ For explicit and illustrative examples of what this looks like, see the below subsection "Marketplaces of Intimacy."

scalability and temporality of infrastructures, the reliance on invisible labor and maintenance, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion.” As we should know well by now, TikTok “knows” you only to the extent that it is able to place you as a possible audience member for one of the genres it has cultivated, for content and for ads. As Rob Horning (2020) puts it, the illusion of the algorithm “aims to produce a desire that you can recognize as your own, which in turn stabilizes your sense of self as someone with legible tastes.” In other words, there is a *comfort* in identifying with the genre clusters that TikTok provides us with, to feel known — even by black-boxed sociotechnical code (we might call this a *delusional comfort*). Moreover, these genres tend to grow outward according to a memetic logic that seeks to “program” sociality in users, through a constantly adjustable method of data tracking that, we should remember, remains shaped by “the algorithm” and users *together*.

I argue that this places us in a version of what I have elsewhere (Pitre 2022, 100) called “experiential seriality,” a “platformized aesthetic of enforced continuity in the infrastructural pursuit of total user dependency.” Developed as a concept to make sense of how Facebook understands its Watch feature as a video-based competitor to YouTube in data collection and analytics at the moment of the company’s wider pivot-to-video (rather than as a legitimate streaming media competitor), experiential seriality emphasizes how users actually interact with these features in their daily lives, encouraged to maintain engagement for as long as possible and thereby building a narrative experience of the platform aesthetic itself rather than the content consumed. In other words, a user is compelled to stay put on the platform to continue viewing, and this reliance on a particular platform for entertainment, information, social engagement, and more is concentrated into an overall story of *the time they have spent there*. Building again from traditional theories of flow, this concept parallels other approaches to understanding TikTok and

similar platforms reliant on the endless scroll as instantiations of media forms and practices that congeal within a digital economy of attention, such as Tina Kendall's (2021) pandemic-era notion of TikTok's "binge-scrolling" as a response to the new, strange temporalities of mid- and post-pandemic online life, whereby something eventful might be around every single refresh, and TikTok becomes the localized provider of this affective eventfulness. We feel as though we must keep scrolling, and our sense of time itself is warped as a result.

Under this pursuit of encircling users' social (and temporal) experience online, at the very least we can see this as a serialization that prioritizes the creation, management, and spread of genre clusters among audiences. There are countless examples, from larger communities like BookTok to more localized, annual trends like Alabama Rush Week (RushTok) to endless tiny niches of role-players, interconnected narratives between content creators, and much more. Undergoing a proper taxonomy of these examples is beyond the scope of this (or any) project, but the point is that simplistic accounts of "the algorithm" fail to chart even the basic ways TikTok has been harnessed by its users as a tool to tell stories of all kinds and connect in myriad forms. It's easy enough to imagine that even if TikTok removed the algorithmic For You feed, users would miss it, as *the collective imaginary of the code itself has imposed itself as a desirable social infrastructure*.

This balance of opportunity and control is specific to each platform, and this structure inevitably defines what is created and how it is seen and interpreted; and too often these distinctive rules, regulations, and norms are conflated. TikTok challenges critical scholars, perhaps more than any other platform to date, to carefully and critically engage with parameters set for creators and how they work within them or push them to their limits. As work by Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill (2023, 4) shows, the "sides" that TikTok creates — like the genre

clusters I refer to, such as BookTok, their case study — are “relational, individualistically positioned, and exclusionary,” as

the phrase “side of TikTok” does structuring legwork to define communities and differentiate them from others. It is a metaphor describing collective experiences and positions a community in relation to others. TikTok sides are networked and imaginative; users form collectives based on shared interests even though they will never know other community members; these interactions and imaginaries take form based on TikTok’s networked technologies.

In this way, I argue, a spatial analysis is clearly insufficient, as we must likewise closely interpret how these sides, clusters, communities, networks, and imaginaries are placed not (only) within a space but through time.

Temporal Regimes

As I have argued, TikTok’s sorting of content and of social relations, as a co-constitutive process, means that users and creators come to see their own future as bound up with the future of the platform. This temporal paternalism likewise manifests through user behaviour, especially as a form of social capital that, I suggest, is distinct from that of the web 2.0 era, broadly understood, and so is being weaponized in unfamiliar ways worth paying close attention to. This is the further encroachment of the social logic of the derivative as the domineering force of power under platform capitalism. As Arvidsson (2016, 4) argues, “the social logic of the derivative is increasingly applied to the valuation of the kinds of lived intangibles, like inter-personal trust and individual reputation, that make productive cooperation possible in complex decentralized networks.” Users and content are indiscriminately bundled into sets of attributes which are fragmented, commodified, and circulated to create value, to some extent for

users but largely for the platform (again recall Martin's [2013, 102] notion of this social logic resulting in the "dispossession of self and ownership"). This section, then, makes the effort to bring these logics to bear on the TikTop app experience, evinced via marketplaces of intimacy that are encouraged by the platform, and beginning from a discussion of how monetization is technically operationalized for users and creators.

Kyle Stine and Axel Volmar (2021, 12) refer to how media technologies not only constitute material infrastructures but also temporal ones, where the result is *temporal regimes*, "the guiding principles of ordering time in a given locality or epoch," which are nevertheless "flexible and open to reconfiguration." This matters because the temporal regime of platform capitalism's futures, here represented by TikTok and its algorithmic social sorting, which seeks to impose a coherence to the fragmentary relations it provides, must be perceived and known intimately if there is hope for this reconfiguration. To tie this once again to Carse and Kneas (2019, 10), on TikTok the platform works to create a user experience that coheres into "social worlds and sites where temporalities are knotted and reworked in unpredictable ways." TikTok researchers are sure to point out that this doesn't mean users should not critically think about how they engage with platforms and their algorithms, as indeed more of this reflection is needed and can encourage further "algorithmic antagonisms" (Heemsbergen et al. 2022), but are instead arguing that these interventions will always be limited by the platform and what it chooses to allow, an unavoidable hierarchy of power and social relations, now and with each subsequent scroll inside the platform's garden, its temporal regime.

Tip Your Creator

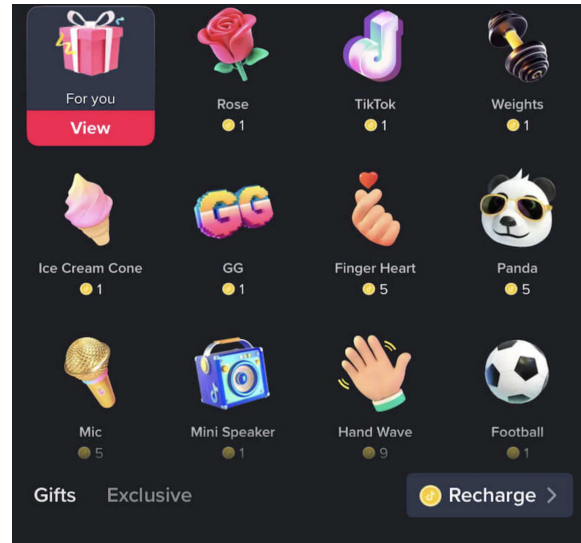


Figure 5 — a selection of Gifts a user can purchase to give to their favourite creators

Rather unlike many forms of platform payment, such as Twitch Bits, TikTok Tips *are* money — but still this meaning is obscured by the platform. “Thanks to features like Tips, you and your viewers can further your connection and foster a positive, giving environment on TikTok,” the company explained in its Creator Portal. A giving, charitable environment, where you can monetize your content, and where “viewers will be able to see who tipped you and in what amounts,” all the better to cultivate an in-crowd of access, of transactional intimacy. The more you tip, and the more often you do so over time, the closer your connection to the creator can become. The Tips feature has been discontinued as of 2024, replaced by similar functions such as LIVE Gifts, which users can give to creators during livestreams, and Video Gifts (figure 5), for regular videos, among other tools, but the relationality remains the same: pay your favourite creators with gifts, and you just might be recognized, either live or in their next video. At the time of writing, these Gifts, through an unclear process, can be translated into Diamonds, which TikTok (Support, accessed 2024) rewards “to creators based on the popularity of their content,” and a certain number of Diamonds collected can then be put toward a “reward payment

from us, such as money or virtual items.” You also need at least 10,000 followers to be able to enable Gifts. Users buy these Gifts using Coins — as of December 2024, 70 Coins are worth \$1.05 CAD, and Gifts can cost anywhere from 1 Coin to 44,999 Coins (worth approximately \$770 CAD) for TikTok Universe, a LIVE Gift which sends a notification to *all* livestream viewers that the creator was just Gifted it. These Gifts are aesthetically simple, pleasing, gamified, and exceedingly common sights in comment sections for popular videos.

It is easy enough, as many commentators and scholars have done, to argue that sociality on digital platforms has been wholly commodified and monetized, so that self-branding becomes the core skill of any emerging worker in the platform economy, and every social interaction is available to be mined for capital in various forms — social, economic, cultural, and so on. It is another matter to describe what this looks like, and what its implications may be, particularly as the details of this process remain ever in flux. As Lana Swartz (2020, 5, 16-17) argues, we must think of money, or more specifically payment, differently: “as a communication medium dependent on particular technologies,” which results in the creation of “transactional communities” which “delineate who is able to talk to one another, to participate in the conversation,” — we could certainly refer to the usage of LIVE and video Gifts as the monied stuff of TikTok’s transactional communities.

Moreover, this helps us understand how exchanges occur in both monetary and social terms, but as Adrian Athique (2020, 555) has argued about the internet and the relations it facilitates, the transactional layer is the base: “The expansive integration of markets and economies via digital systems rests upon an integrated commodity form that allows all transactions to become subsumed within a single market process,” and so *all* communicative actions are also regarded as social transactions, as we witness “the convergence of goods and

services, time and information, and interaction and expression, which, in turn, allows for a cascading set of derivative markets centred upon the aggregation and algorithmic processing of transaction records of all kinds.” The social logic of the derivative. As such, it becomes hugely significant how social dynamics on each platform, and moreover within each imagined community on each platform, can change significantly with even the smallest of technical tweaks, from Twitter’s many (often failed) attempts to capitalize on its users following Elon Musk’s takeover of the company in 2022, to endless subtle updates to proprietary algorithmic code on TikTok or elsewhere, or the introduction of new Gifts or marketplaces. In many cases, these changes will also impact how countless creators make a living on the platform, and it becomes “part of the job” to track these updates when possible and adjust your practice accordingly.³⁷

As a reminder, in my use here, an experience online that can be described as *time-knotted* is based in a fragmentary and discrete logic, which occurs on algorithmic content feeds, though in its most sophisticated form on TikTok, it doesn’t necessarily feel disorienting but almost calming, like being lulled to sleep by an alarm clock. You lose minutes or hours, sucked into random people’s lives and stories for a moment like it’s the most interesting thing in the world before moving on to the next one and never thinking about them again. Indeed, much of TikTok’s success and the way it rapidly came to dominate public discussion is attributed to its algorithm, as discussed in the previous section, which remains hidden from public view, a mysterious power that is lorded over the lesser algorithms of competing platforms, a narrative that the tech media is content to endlessly repeat (Smith 2021).

³⁷ A quick note on how the work of the platform studies scholar in some ways parallels that of the content creator, at least in the sense of never-ending new updates and changing rules and guidelines that creators must abide by and scholars must incorporate into their analyses. By the time you read this, it is very possible that TikTok has completely redone their payment and Gifting systems, as they have before; the argument I am making hopefully transcends these changes and reflects the larger machinations of these platforms and their affordances.

To wit, as of 2024 when ByteDance is facing the possibility of TikTok being banned in the United States, it has been reported that the company feels they would rather exit from the US entirely than sell the company, since keeping their algorithmic architecture is more important, particularly to keep up the power of its Chinese app ecosystem which relies on the same architecture and is where ByteDance makes most of its revenue (Wu & Zhu 2024). Your simple act of scrolling, consuming endless TikTok videos, and then being encouraged by the app's easy-to-use tools to create yourself, establishes an ouroboros of creation and consumption under the direction of the unseen algorithm and the trends it helps to shape and codify. Of course, as mentioned, it's worth remembering the essential human element of the algorithm, not only its inherent existence as something programmed and endlessly updated by humans, but also the reported ability of engineers to simply press a 'heating' button to show a piece of content to whoever they want, when they want, to essentially force it to go viral (Baker-White). Moreover, while it may seem obvious, often enough we talk about the power of the algorithm without carefully emphasizing its co-constitutive manner with the human user it seeks to interpret, and their relations with other users, and so on.

We must return to position ourselves more specifically within the discourse of influencers and creators as both workers and performers, which many scholars have examined in great detail. We might think of this as a *logic of the influencer*, a web 2.0 manifestation of digital presentation and material entanglements, which has often been centred around the notion of authenticity among scholars and the public alike. This influencer logic and its antecedents now coalesce and transform with the platformized experience of time as programmed by apps like TikTok.

Let us first, though, return to analyses of influencers to situate our discussion within a longer history of critical approaches to platform-based sociality and the value systems at play.

José Van Dijck's (2013, 4) concept of "platformed" sociality was an early move to describe how social media platforms mediate social activity and interactions, suggesting that social media functions as a "new online layer through which people organize their lives," which "influences human interaction on an individual and community level, as well as on a larger societal level, while the worlds of online and offline are increasingly interpenetrating." Zari A. Taylor (2023) rightfully points out that "all social media platforms articulate a vision of what constitutes 'authentic' sociality through interface elements designed to structure and coordinate interaction," as platform affordances "encourage, constrain, and enable certain actions," which conditions our "ways of relating to one another and to networked resources." As Hund further argues (7), the web 2.0 era (roughly encompassing the early 2000s to the present moment) brought about a situation where

authenticity is not just a social construction but an industrial one, continually tussled over by a sophisticated and complicated profit-making enterprise whose decisions about what expressions of reality are valuable help determine what types of content and tools for communication and self-expression are available to the world's billions of social media users.

Oddly, though, Hund (6-7) also claims that it was "the industry's participants" — meaning the "influencers and those who aspire to be them, marketers and technologists, brands and sponsors, social media corporations...talent managers and trend forecasters," who have "created logics and tools for social media communication."

While this accurately captures, I'd argue, the overall state of affairs, it also seems to subtly muddy cause and effect, fudging somewhat the directionality of purpose within the industry. What I mean is that she claims that it is the social and industrial construction of authenticity, ostensibly by all these participants with the corporations as an equal player among many, that determined "what types of content and tools" were made available as a result. This

has certainly been true to some extent, but I argue that it gets the situation somewhat backward, as in the vast majority of cases it is the users and influencers who have been made to respond and adapt to the tools and forms of content provided to them by the platforms. This may seem like a trivial distinction to make, as the flows do proceed in all directions in a general sense, but it remains significant nonetheless to point out the innate power differential in platform affordances — users are always made to act within the limits and affordances set by the platforms they populate — what Nieborg and Poell (2018) call the platformization of cultural production, to which we can add the platformization of subjectivity. The corporations, which ultimately design and implement these tools and determine the nature of the implementation, must be given their proper placement in this power dynamic.

More recently, though, the business of content creation has shifted in important ways in the early 2020s. In Taylor’s examination of BeReal, the app which pings every user at the same time to post a new pair of photos within two minutes as a form of short-lived sharing, she notes that app’s “ability to coordinate interpersonal and global connections to a specific temporality.” TikTok, we may begin to say, similarly coordinates these relations, but according to no specific temporality at all, or one that is, again, intensely time-knotted and “always in the midst.” As Hund (151) identifies: “The influencer industry’s...problems and potential are no longer contained to creative industries that have been dealing with the influencer logic for years, but that there is proven progress and unlimited possibilities for the logics and technologies to take over more and more people’s experiences of daily life—from their workplaces, to their leisure time, to their communications with other people.” Again, I would argue that we must take this conception even further, as this version largely still comprises much of what characterized the pre-2020s practice of the influencer, which tended to be contained within linear and predictable

temporalities (particularly before the widespread adoption of algorithmic feeds) and there remained a generally acknowledged difference between an influencer and a regular user.

With TikTok, every user is a proto-influencer – an influencer-to-be. The older influencer logic also positions the takeover of daily life experience as one purely of technology, and not of capital (even if the association may be implied in the fuller context of Hund’s book, granted). What seems to differentiate the newer moment is how this social rubric of what we might call total self-monetization is further engulfed by capital to render it not only commonplace but indeed the accepted baseline for *authentic* social communication and interaction. As Horning puts it, we already know that we now live in a context where “all forms of communication are understood to be promotional,” (learned through the web 2.0 influencer era) and as such, influencers and creators have, largely inadvertently it should be said, come to “disseminate the always tenuous techniques for making that discourse track as non-exploitative.” Or as Taylor puts it, “these logics trickle down as average users mimic ‘influencers’ in self-branding strategies that perform ‘realness’ in strategic ways,” which has the added effect of “transforming the mediated aesthetics of authenticity.”

Marketplaces of Intimacy

These logics are a normalization of platform-based power dynamics over payment and interpersonal connection based on how these influencer processes come to seem inevitable according to influencer aesthetics and platform structures, again reminding us of the social logic of the derivative. Horning, as many others have pointed out, notes that an influencer’s real talent is at “navigating algorithmic recommendation systems and learning how to maintain attention through their protocols.” In a world of work and sociality “increasingly run by automated

decision-making algorithms,” this talent, or set of knowledges and ways of being for acting on this knowledge, becomes the primary selling point of the influencer as a desirable role, the job that many children claim to aspire to, and it is this ability that, inevitably, likewise renders it within our discursive online experience as not only habitual and aspirational but, again, non-exploitative.

This move is a somewhat subtle one, despite its cultural ubiquity, and requires further elaboration. Horning puts this into a context of, as the title of his article suggests, how this idea about influencer labour “trains us for the future of work,” as imagined by these platforms and the algorithms that run them. As he describes it, this kind of algorithmic mastery is now an “economically contingent demand in how to co-exist with algorithms and ultimately how to seem more socially valuable than a bot.” It is mirrored across platform work of various kinds, from the calculative prowess of gig work (van Doorn 2020) to discursive management for YouTubers — as Sophie Bishop (2019) put it, it’s not about technical expertise but algorithmic knowledge, or in her terminology, algorithmic gossip among content creators. Indeed, as Bishop argues, gossip is one for the main means for unboxing the black box.³⁸ It is also this catch-22 that gets much discussed in the context of, say, generative artificial intelligence or other AI tools, whereby the value attached to the human becomes useful insofar as it becomes able to “co-exist” with and effectively navigate the algorithmic systems themselves. Perhaps, then, the human manages to appear admirably *distinct from a bot* due to this navigational work, giving them a social and economic advantage on these platforms through labour processes that come to be imitated by regular users regardless of whether they intend to monetize their content.

As we get used to life with algorithms, then, TikTok seems to pose a problem, particularly if we recall that its structure of feeling, I argue, can be described as one of temporal

³⁸ As Taina Bucher (2016) put it, algorithms are “neither black nor box.”

collapse, and more specifically, the refreshed present of the platform experience, where the future is always stuck in place. This temporality, this obfuscatory futurity (recalling Jane Elliott’s [2021] “static time”), asks us to question the social relations that are cultivated here, determined as they are by content graphs and ideally, in the platform’s value system, serving a baseline transactional layer. This also seems to help in addressing or indeed transcending the contested notion of authenticity on social media — perhaps authenticity now merely refers to being honest and relatable about one’s inherent commodification. The rest of this section seeks to understand, through some direct content examples, how this temporal mode results in social and economic consequences that are suitably fragmented and knotted, relevant to Adkins’ (2018, 131) point about new social forms which are “concerned not with equilibrium states or stasis but with disequilibrium and asymmetry.”



Figure 6 — TikTok user Pinkydoll performing as a non-playable character (NPC)

An illustrative example of what this looks like in practice on TikTok is the phenomenon of “NPC streams,” which garnered much attention in 2023. Creators on the platform, particularly by using its livestreaming function, began to act like NPCs — background “non-playable characters” in video games that tend to repeat the same non sequitur phrases and perform the same movements over and over, while making blank or exaggerated facial expressions like a pixelated virtual character would. This had been happening for some time on TikTok and other platforms, including Twitch, but the practice gained mainstream media attention when one user, the Montreal-based Pinkydoll (figure 6), had her videos shared all over the internet (especially on Twitter, where many reporters spent their time) and go viral among, well, normies (slang for regular consumers with standard tastes). In the videos, she would continuously say things like “Yes, yes, yes... mmm, mmm, ice cream so good, ice cream so good,” to the pleasure of her viewers and the utter bewilderment of those unfamiliar.

While this trend may not seem especially intimate at first glance, as the creators are quite explicitly engaging in a dispossession of selfhood, there is a closeness implied which recalls Swartz’s (2020) conception of transactional communities. Here, as Christine H. Tran (2023) has argued, not only were we witnessing the new logic of the influencer in action, but also “just the latest genre of creators who divide their bodies into marketplaces of intimacy.” As seen in figure 2, gifting users see their usernames and their gift appear to everyone, overtop of Pinkydoll’s body, which likewise responds to user payments, and as she repeats the requested phrases, over and over again. I would argue that this is an obvious materialization of the algorithmized self. The aesthetics of these videos are not unlike the experience of playing a video game, with the

NPC taking up the screen and responding automatically to your prompts in real time, and in this case there is a crucial transactional element in play, again both monetary and social.

This particular form of almost total embodied depersonalization isn't necessarily representative of the future of work writ large in the sense that Horning and others argue, for that threatens to welcome a reactionary moral panic as often happens when trends like this one "break containment" and reach a general audience. Still, as Tran suggests, this is an economy of intimacies whereby creators *give over* their fragmented bodies in exchange for donations, subscriptions, and gifts, participating in algorithmically-successful trends and utilizing the platform's full suite of tools to keep attention and money flowing (at the time of writing, a creator must have at least 1000 followers to unlock the livestream function, meaning a user must exhibit at least a basic level of platform, or algorithm, skills to take it a step further). As Tran explains, "Buying an NPC streamer a virtual gift triggers a chain reaction of the absurd: the gift will appear in a creator's stream as emojis like ice cream cones, balloons, or even squids. NPC streamers then react accordingly to the specific image on their screen. Squeals, catchphrases, lip smacking and a myriad of gestures result. These broadcasts offer built-in incentives to keep engagement going." Noting this is not exactly new, as streamers on Twitch, earlier camming websites, and elsewhere have undertaken the same strategies, the NPC streamers nevertheless "render their bodies as intimate interfaces," and have thereby "gamed our eyeballs into profit" — by gaming the algorithm, if it needs to be said.

In addition, NPC streamers like Pinkydoll can also leverage one platform's success into another, as she encouraged fans to also subscribe to her OnlyFans for more explicitly adult content. "The economics of online fame are closely tied to a more invisible economy of online sex work," Tran argues, which recognizes, among other things, the fragmented, time-knotted

organizational method of creation and consumption on TikTok: gaming the system according to genres of prepackaged content streams that defy temporal linearity, and the maintenance of social relations as transactional intimacy which are shaped in this image. Shaped, it seems, into an addictive form of (delusional) comfort, now and into the unknowable social future.³⁹

To illustrate this further, briefly consider another trend example on TikTok, the phenomenon known as “algospeak,” referring to how language develops and changes according to algorithmic platforms. This concept has long been a part of navigating through online life and platform programming, but the aggressiveness of TikTok’s algorithm alongside its cultural dominance has led to a new situation. As Eleanor Stern (2024) pointed out, a useful example is the phrase “Boycott MAC! They support unaliving watermelon people,” which was used in the context of Israel’s genocide on Palestine. The phrase means “Boycott MAC! They support killing Palestinians,” as “unaliving” has become an algorithmic workaround for “killing” and “watermelon people” has been used by some as a workaround for “Palestinians.” As Stern explained, linguists would call this a “replacement vocabulary,” and in this case, “a good deal of evidence suggests that TikTok censors more or less as it pleases,” and moreover, TikTok’s community guidelines (2024b) are vague to the point of incomprehension, giving themselves total latitude. Stern (emphasis added) writes of how this is a top-down corporate process:

A TikToker can’t simply adhere to the rules of the platform (which are unknowable) — they have to intuit the thought processes that underlie those rules. In doing so, the TikToker reinforces these unspoken rules. *By carefully acting according to what they believe the platform desires, the speaker creates and articulates those corporate desires.*

The algospeak that TikTokers use to avoid censorship once again asks users to model themselves after the platform, and to associate their own future on the platform with the platform’s future.

³⁹ This idea about the intimacy of temporality and the temporality of intimacy, while significant here, will return in the next chapter in the context of Twitch and livestreaming.

Like the NPC trend, these embodiments of the algorithmized self invoke themselves as platform or corporate ambassadors, consciously or (more often) not, though to be sure, this doesn't mean they always necessarily serve their purposes.

To me, though, this matters because it signals the enforcement and maintenance of the temporal regime as imagined by the platform, through the structure of these transactional communities which are maintained through this social (infra)structure of feeling of addictive comfort. In other words, as creators navigate and attempt to master the algorithm (even if mastery is always elusive), we are reminded that social graphs have been replaced by content graphs, and those graphs are best understood as marketplaces of intimacies that wield temporal power. Similarly, Adkins (2018, 2) describes our current moment as one determined by a frenetic logic of speculation which is itself a mode of social organization: "it is along the flows of this indeterminate and nonchronological time that strategies to generate surplus via money and finance subsist, and it is the nonsynchronous tempos and rhythms of this time that mark the distinctiveness of a mode of social organization ordered by a logic of speculation." This temporal regime is further propped up on TikTok by amorphous guidelines, shadowy control, and specific platform affordances which obscure the future-oriented nature of how these intimacies are circulated through the algorithm, in a way that keeps users and creators coming back for more, in an imagined perpetuity. In a sense, TikTok's own inner temporalities contradict each other and constrict creators into a self-financialization that serves the platform's content-first purposes, a contradiction that serves a business model that is *rooted in ecommerce far more than in social media*, resulting in a social order built in the algorithm's transactional image. This is an endless refresh massaged by empty promises of algorithmic mastery and transactional capital, which is, for most, elusive and illusory. This socio-temporal logic, then, feels distinctly antisocial.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, the content creator is imagined as a figure of the data derivative, Louise Amoore's (2011) concept to describe how social relations are governed under structures of data extraction. Arvidsson (2016, 5-6) takes this up and further explains, anticipating the algorithmic logic of a platform like TikTok, how "the data derivative represents a technique that seeks to govern individuals not through intervening in and reeducating their bodies and minds, but by making probabilistic inferences from data gathered from their movements and activities, and acting on these." This, Arvidsson argues, consequently means we are within the social logic of the derivative as espoused by Martin (2013), which "operates to reconfigure social relations so that they become fit for financialization," (Arvidsson, 3). This works "as a way to give value to the so-called 'intangible assets' that have become crucial to capital accumulation," which, as mentioned previously, is more and more about things like trust and reputation, authenticity and productivity. As Bryan and Rafferty (2014, 892) usefully summarize, derivatives "involve deconstructing a 'thing' (and we use a bland term intentionally) into a set of constituent elements or attributes, and configuring those attributes in a way consistent with quantification." In the case of TikTok, the assemblage of algorithm, creator, brand, and data is, also like all derivative markets, oriented toward the future. As Amoore (2011, 28) puts it, inadvertently describing how an algorithmic logic like TikTok's only cares about an individual user as part of a cluster, this derivative futurity is about "what can be imagined and inferred based on our past proclivities." As such, the imagined future that comes to be articulated in this space is one where social relations break down, or rather, they are *broken up* and

circulated, “put in relation to each other by comparing proclivities implicit in their implied future trajectories,” (Arvidsson, 8).

Hence, then, TikTok’s Creator Marketplace, a space designed to let brands find the authentic creator, and their social and reputational capital, that perfectly suits the needs of their campaign, and where the creator positions themselves to be as available as possible to this form of valuation. This marketplace of intimacy is a “materialization of the social logic of the derivative,” (Arvidsson, 4) which Arvidsson applies to Facebook in 2016, at which time this logic seemed “unclear and emerging,” but seems to have been fully codified, if reworked, on TikTok, a platform which, generally speaking, performs as a social infrastructure that enables the “lived intangibles” of all users to be assigned value, just when the economy demanded a solution to the problem of value following the 2008 financial crash (not unlike Kean Birch’s [2022] convincing lamentation over the “assetization of social life”). As Renyi Hong (2022, 16, 17) captured in his analysis of the relationship between commodified labour power and social reproduction, “what is happening with the social factory is more an intensification than the emergence of something new,” which remains a useful reminder of historical contexts and trajectories. Moreover, in this era of precarity and disorientation, this relationality “threatens to appropriate the futures that disappointment opens.”

On TikTok, then, the social self is fragmented, just as a derivative, again reflecting Tran’s notion of creators dividing up their bodies within this intimate marketplace. The theoretical foundation of this social and economic logic will be further explored in the following chapter on Twitch and livestreaming practices among creators. For now, suffice it to say that the temporal paternalism at play in these logics ripple far beyond the confines of the TikTok app and its recommendations. It represents a financialization of the self that is operationalized by so-called

social platforms as a corporate strategy for having a say in the expectations of *future users, future consumers, future returns*.

Altogether, these various reports and marketing materials, Congressional testimonies, Creator Portal/Academy recommendations, and other corporate materials, alongside more affective experiences of the platform and the transactional communities it proffers, can begin to tell us much about TikTok's relationship to time, power, and capital. One similar way into understanding how an app or platform operates is to make one's way through a document that everyone agrees to but rarely reads: the terms of service. Like many others, TikTok's varies somewhat depending on one's residence, with a version for US residents, one for the European Economic Area, the UK, and Switzerland, and one for other regions (which signals, among other things, how different states have decided to apply regulations, or not). In the US and Other Regions versions (but not the European one), we are reminded that TikTok "may generate revenues, increase goodwill or otherwise increase our value from your use of the Services," including through ads and usage data, and that "you will have no right to share in any such revenue, goodwill or value whatsoever." In the context of the above marketing reports, it is important to remember that any ability by creators to monetize their content is an *exception* to the rule, based on addendum contracts or terms, and that the baseline is an appeal to brands that regular users have a much harder time generating "value" from their content, value that the platform itself is easily able to extract. Moreover, all this discursive work serves to emphasize the (economic) benefits of TikTok's disorienting and fragmentary nature, exchanging an awareness that it's more difficult to find trustworthy content for a vague feeling of benevolent opportunity: "people are looking less and less for information and more and more for inspiration," as the Creative Renaissance report puts it. Of course, this means nothing on its

surface, but it does signal a belief at the platform level that it no longer matters if anything is true, it only matters *how it feels*, that it feels authentic in some way, and, more importantly, can “inspire” the co-creation of iterative content, on and on into the abstracted future, an experience of the refresh as organizing principle.

This is the formation of TikTok’s social infrastructure of delusional comfort, whereby value is generated according to a deliberately fragmentary logic that seeks to blur the distinction between user and brand, creator and platform, once and for all, a temporal regime of socioeconomic relations bound to the future-oriented market.

Chapter Three

Twitch and its Labour Futures

Introduction: All Play and No Work

The so-called creator economy has rapidly come to dominate discussion about platform-based work, with a growing emphasis on “the centrality of community development and maintenance as the core work in creator culture,” as Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2021, 9) put it. As platforms like Twitch, Onlyfans, Patreon, and Substack have attracted millions, creators — those who produce original content for these platforms — have found themselves in apparent control of a multiplatform existence that is, for most, defined by precarity, harassment, and exhaustion. I argue that these platforms are developing, narrativizing, and enacting a vision of the future where the mode of production is dictated by these firms and their parent companies, where platform workers like streamers, camgirls, artists, and content creators are all exploited in the name of entrepreneurial self-management. As Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy (2022, 85) write, “platforms simultaneously open up new opportunities for cultural producers, while also minutely controlling how these complementors can create, distribute, market, and monetize content and services.” This balance of opportunity and control is specific to each platform, but this structure inevitably defines what is created and how it is seen and interpreted, and too often these distinctive rules, regulations, and norms are conflated. Moreover, patron or subscriber-focused platforms challenge us to critically engage with parameters set on creators and how they work within them, or push them to their limits.

In keeping with the methodological approach used in previous chapters, drawing from critical future studies and discourse analysis to capture the “full rhetorical situation” (David 2001, 218) of the model of futurity put forward by these creator-fueled platforms, this chapter on the workers within the creator economy offers an engagement with interface, design, governance, and usage in parallel with the stories of work crafted by the companies themselves, the industry, and the press. In my analysis here, I focus on Twitch via close reading of the company’s press releases, marketing, patents, “Creator Camp” material for new streamers (which trains people to stream successfully), and more to help make sense of the platform’s temporal mode of technopolitics, where we can see how a creator economy within these limits is being carefully manifested through a corporate political economy of cultural production. For example, my analysis of sleepstreaming, the practice of livestreaming one’s own sleep with the expectation of donations and payments, from its aesthetics to its economic aspects, puts into sharp relief how a platform’s ambition for setting the terms of its perception inevitably has its limitations. I choose this and related material due to their popularity as streaming styles. These materials allow us to read out discourses on the future of work that this chapter dwells on. I draw on these secondary sources, language from the Twitch website and public material, and other discursive media to develop the form of work, or rather mode of work, that Twitch materializes, via a move away from “what is labour” to “when is labour” — I am concerned with the temporality of money within a platform economy, which will allow me to argue that *work happens when you are paid*. Amid debates over the future of work and questions of what work even is in digital media studies, I adopt this pragmatic formulation of work in order to understand when work on platforms happens. These modes of work are demonstrated through later sections on *sleep*,

intimacy, and *grinding*, key forms of Twitch's temporality which emphasize its interest and impact on futurity on both ideological and material planes.

These futures are narrativized and disseminated with the purpose of foreclosing on alternatives that could challenge the status quo of the platform economy, such as creator-led collectives on non-corporate cooperative platforms, and thereby creators have become the discursive nexus of this project. This is significant because, amid discourses on the "future of work," we must interpret and analyze how these futures are being introduced in the present.

Recalling Brian Massumi's (2017, 14) concept of ontopower, and how "capital seeps down to the affective level of felt potential," I argue in this chapter that it is the platformized labour economy which wields this temporal power over the "felt potential" of digital labour futures. My objective here, then, is to meaningfully contribute to the scholarship on the political economy and affects of digital platforms and cultural production. More to the point, this chapter aims to reframe these discourses toward an analysis of how these platforms, and Twitch in particular, enforce and maintain temporal regimes of labour futurity, which must be understood if there is any hope of reconfiguration. I choose to focus on Twitch here as a representative example of the creator economy's relation to platform-based economic ecosystems, specifically in accordance with Adrian Athique's (2019, 68) notion of the platform's key component being its transactions: "internet-enabled platforms are perhaps best understood as attempts to constitute a transactional layer over and above existing markets and social relations."

This transactional layer of the platform, which determines the logic of said platform, takes on significant meaning in the context of regular user livelihoods, and Twitch's livestreaming empire, however tenuous, offers a way for me to argue what could be a contentious point in this chapter, that the platform affordances of Twitch allow us to define work as *that for*

which one is remunerated, largely via Twitch Bits and other *in-platform media*. Not only is work reconfigured; “money” or that which counts as money is reconfigured too. Recalling, too, Lana Swartz’s (2020) basic point of money as media, Twitch is an object of analysis whereby the temporal technopolitics being wielded over futurity are undertaken through transactions, through money media. Or, put slightly differently, in this chapter I seek to answer this question: *how does the temporality of money inform the temporal politics of futurity under platform capitalism?*

I describe this phenomenon and Twitch’s role and instantiation of it as the pursuit of the total monetization of the self, a situation in which all users are also creators and all creators seek to monetize every bit of their experience, identity, and everyday life. To clarify, it is not necessarily that every aspect of the self *is* monetized, it is the notion that the platform’s incentives, structures, and narratives of use inculcate a process whereby creators and streamers embody this project of the total monetization of the self in alignment with the platform. In other words, every aspect of the self is theoretically available for monetization, to be the object of a transaction. Notably, this is deeply tied to how scholars such as Randy Martin (2002), building from cultural studies traditions from Gramsci to de Certeau, about the financialization of daily life. My goal here, then, is similar to that of Lisa Adkins in *The Time of Money* (2018, 10), “to understand how, through everyday money, the productivity of populations in regard to a mode of accumulation centered on the generation of surplus via the movements and flows of money is harnessed and maximized.” In this chapter, I will describe what shape this pursuit of total monetization takes for workers on these platforms, using Twitch as a case study in the narrativization of this phenomenon as the future of labour the company envisions and seeks to sell, harness, enact, and maximize.

As we will see through examples like the livestreamers hoping to monetize their sleep, under this regime, one's selfhood becomes inextricable from its commodification, in familiar but distinct ways. I argue that we must better understand how this has come to dominate discourse of the experience of labour and its future, particularly if we hope to challenge it and develop alternative ideas about how to work within and, perhaps, transcend digital capitalism.

Cultural Production and Passionate Work

First, though, consider how cultural production has long been theorized in the context of limitation and constraint. Fundamentally, the inquiry begins: how is art created within a commercialized marketplace, and the parameters it enforces? Fredric Jameson (1979), of course, insisted we understand how images function as fetishized commodities, abstracted forms of meaning and value. There are also more recent understandings of creative workers from within the field of production studies. Indeed, in their book *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, authors Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (2009, 2) point out the “now staid phrase for explaining media production as ‘creativity within constraints,’” whereby media workers are described as “the creators of popular culture and as functionaries in the service of capitalism.” Even before the gig and creator economies overtook narratives of modern work, they noted: “Production studies need to conceptualize practices within the political economy of labor, markets, and policy.” “The convergence of media” they continue, referring to a moment where multiple media forms were seen to intersect, “might open productive potentials for users, but they also introduce anxiety and uncertainty into the work worlds of those charged with making those interactive and ‘empowering’ media” (3-4).

Earlier research on exploitation of creative workers took place within media production studies, and it is useful to recognize how the creator economy, as dictated and shaped by platform companies, has seemingly studied or learned the history of film and television production in the United States (minus those regional industries' history of unionization, and with outsourcing as a more attractive model) and has been keen to repeat it, or indeed optimize it. My analysis will highlight some of these historical similarities, as well as some significant differences, including the concept of *worker pleasure as compromise*.

A leader in the creator economy, Twitch is a livestreaming platform launched in 2011 which is primarily used for gaming livestreams, but over time has increasingly become a home for all kinds of streamers. This includes talk shows, game shows, cooking, sports commentary, vlogs, hot tub streamers, live music, and much more — indeed, the “Just Chatting” category, a general interest catch-all, has become the most popular. My analysis here is less about the content of Twitch’s streams than it is about how these streams are monetized and the relationship these streamers have to discourses of the future of work as shaped by these platforms. According to some estimates, Twitch at its height in the early 2020s had between 67% and 73% of the market for live-streaming (StreamLabs; Stream Scheme). The average Twitch user tended to be between the ages of 16 and 24 (41%) or 25 and 34 (32%), and as of 2019, 65% of users identified as male (Kavanaugh), though Statista (2023) suggests that by 2022 the figure of male users was at 80%. The platform boasts over 7 million active streamers, though the vast majority do not make any meaningful income. For instance, as of September 2022, only 52,000 streamers were signed up as “Twitch Partners,” creators who are granted: a verified badge, priority customer service with Twitch, payout fees covered by Twitch (regular streamers and Twitch

affiliates pay these fees themselves), interface priority, greater opportunities for monetization, and other benefits (Stream Scheme).

According to Variety VIP+ (Bridge et al. 2023), an industry barometer, “Amazon’s Twitch livestreaming service dominates the creator economy, where streamers make bank on showing merchandise and devoting entire streams to new products,” further noting that Twitch has the highest average cost per paid social post in 2022 (meaning how much a streamer is paid by advertisers to hawk their wares) as compared to Instagram, TikTok, and other social platforms. The Variety report also highlights how many platforms are “starting to take [a] greater share of revenue splits from creators.”

With this focus on platform monetization in mind, Twitch and livestreaming *as labor* remains under-theorized. Even T.L. Taylor, in her landmark book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (2018), doesn’t fully capture the platform’s relationship to work and how this work is being narrativized by the streamers, viewers, press, and by Twitch itself. Taylor emphasizes Twitch streaming as a form of *labor as play*, concluding her book by arguing against “simple work/play dichotomies,” because “the work of play is often deeply transformative, filled with difficult pleasures, enjoyable instrumentality, and complex negotiations between system, self, and others” (261-262). In other words, Taylor chooses to emphasize the blurring of work and play on the platform, cautioning against simple distinctions between how we think of these concepts in this context.

While there is certainly truth to this analysis, it remains a troubling and incomplete conclusion for me. I would argue that this idea of avoiding simple work/play dichotomies actually plays into the economic and cultural interests of the platform rather than the streamers.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ This recalls how Tarleton Gillespie, in his landmark article “The Politics of Platforms” (2010), already noted how YouTube defining itself as a “platform” benefits them, not anyone else. As he put it, YouTube is “offering up a trope

As Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell (4) argued (about the non-platform era): “The paradox of the media worker is that the promise of autonomy, creativity, fame, or wealth still oversupplies the labor market, allowing media industries to control the *mise-en-scène* (setting and action) of production narratives.” This resonates strongly with what seems to be occurring within the platform economy today. Taylor’s model of avoiding simple work/play dichotomies has become a common stance among scholars of Twitch and livestreaming — thereby playing into platform company interests. For instance, Nicholas-Brie Guarriello (2019, 1762) developed the concept of *personalized media economies* to describe how livestreamers “are building the intimate space that allows them to capitalize on their labor and life events, while still working within the corporate social media economy.” Although this would seem to be an economic understanding of the work of livestreamers, Guarriello then concludes that though “this pleasurable and personalized space might fall within the realm of exploitation under neoliberalism, it is imperative to move beyond a dichotomy of pleasure and exploitation for game live streaming” (1765). As with Taylor, I think we ought to ask why it is so imperative that we move beyond this distinction of pleasure and exploitation specifically, it seems, in the case of livestreaming.

In other words: what would keeping the tension between pleasure and exploitation alive and in opposition offer us analytically?

Of course, intimate forms of work that draw on personal experiences, as livestreaming does, are particularly vulnerable to romanticized notions of “loving what you do,” being your own boss, and other promises made by neoliberal proponents of *passionate work*, as theorized by Renyi Hong (2022). Hong argues that this affective narrative results in workers accepting greater precarities and underemployment. Aligning with Lauren Berlant’s influential concept of cruel

by which others will come to understand and judge them...And, ‘platform’ is a claim that arguably misrepresents the way YouTube and other intermediaries really shape public discourse online” (348-9).

optimism, Hong (9, emphasis added) writes, “the affective structure of passionate work is contextualized within this particular milieu as a form of *repair and reassurance*.” Hong goes on to note that, “[a]ddressed to the postrecessionary realities of joblessness, class anxiety, and precarity, passionate work nonetheless maintains that work can lead to some kind of a good life.” In other words, the decision to avoid simple work/play dichotomies in these models of platform labor makes workers inherently vulnerable to a story (or, we might say, myth) of repair and reassurance, for workers to compromise on job security and other benefits in favour of what gets called passionate work. The streamers who take on this work do not lack agency under these conditions, and there is a wide range of attitudes among them about the nature of what they do, as documented by scholars such as Mark R. Johnson (2021). Some demand to be recognized as workers, while others maintain that they would be doing what they do even if they weren’t being paid for it.

The point is that they nevertheless exist within this affective structure, as Hong argued, that engenders insecure compromises in their labour. Moreover, and crucially for my overall analysis throughout this inquiry, there is the temporal register this labour exists within — as Ingrid Erickson and Melissa Mazmanian (2017, 154) argue, the dominant temporal order “informs and animates the values and norms that comprise modern forms of work.”

If the dominant temporal order of platform capitalism is understood as one of a stagnated futurity as manipulated by technology corporations, as I have been arguing, we can think on Marxist labor value theory and the long history of social reproduction analysis to, as Julie Yujie Chen and Ping Sun (2020) remind us in their examination of the labour politics of time in the platform economy, see how the social domination of capitalism is achieved through the structuring of labour time. We must think and hold onto, for instance, about how platforms like

Twitch structure labour time for streamers through affordances, incentives, and mandates, and that this has an affective structure alongside its systematization of labour.

This emerges amid a struggle against the *temporal paternalism of the platform*. As explained in the introduction, John Cheney-Lippold's (2024) concept of temporal paternalism is useful when applied, in this dissertation and more specifically in this chapter, as a way of clearly describing the ideological framework of temporal supremacy over the future imagined and exerted by the platform as the paternal (and indeed only) figure capable of guiding the rest of us into their version of utopia, defined by potential-work and playful money.⁴¹ As we can already see, these social, temporal, and economic relations are inherently bound up with each other, reaching out to Massumi's felt potentialities. The following sections will draw out how this operates, and its implications on how we think about work, time, and money in the platform era.

Play is Money

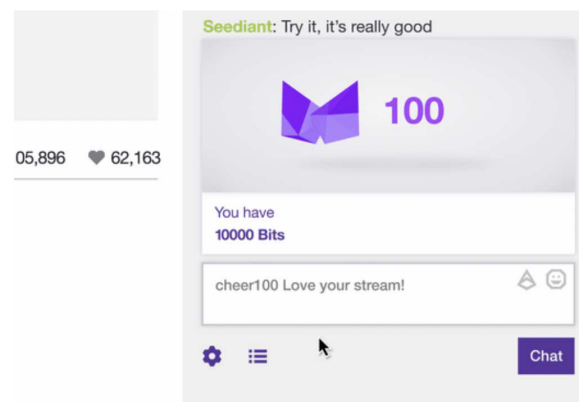
What's in a Transaction?

In 2018, then-Twitch CEO Emmett Shear likened the donation model of the platform, by which viewers show their appreciation through donations to their favorite streamers, to PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service in the United States. "I think streamers are their own mini-public broadcasting station where you've got this public service that you're doing by bringing this

⁴¹ More on this in the next section, but it is worth briefly pointing to Foucault's (1977-8) conception of pastoral power and care, whereby power is exercised over people quite paternalistically, a religious belief in power over others as being for the care and benefit of the people, ideally leading to a self-governing populace (all of which, of course, relates to his notions of biopower and governmentality more broadly). Many, including Christopher Mayes (2010, 112), have further highlighted the violence inherent to this form of power, revealing a further tension therein: "to make live and let die." This, as with the chapter on Disney, also recalls long debates over "corporate social responsibility" and the consequences of handing over public and social problems to private companies to build solutions for (for more on this aspect, see Williams 2024).

community together. Twitch has brought a scale to that” (Pei 2018). A few years after being bought by Amazon, it’s important to take note of Twitch’s rhetoric in this growth period, reflecting an increasing awareness of how the company’s continued success will inevitably mean greater scrutiny for how broadcasters, and what it is they do, are perceived by viewers, investors, the press, and others. Of course, by specifically and deliberately aligning Twitch streamers with PBS, Shear describes a model that is famously supported by the donations of *viewers like you*, a community-based public service that the platform simply gives users the tools to make use of.

Cheering



Cheering makes Twitch chat more engaging for the entire community. Cheering elevates your voice in Chat with animated emotes, and expresses your enthusiasm in the moment through interactive leaderboards and extensions. Also, Twitch rewards streamers for Cheers in a channel typically at the rate of 1 cent per Bit.

Figure 7 — <https://www.twitch.tv/bits> (accessed September 2024)

The primary means by which Twitch both acknowledges its reliance on viewers and producers transacting via money media is their in-platform currency: Bits, digital tokens which viewers buy at a markup to make donations to their favourite streamers. As seen in figure 7, they appear on the platform as purple geometric shapes, or in grey, blue, red, or other colours, depending on denomination. As of late 2024, 100 Bits cost \$1.90 CAD (\$1.40 USD), and Twitch

keeps around 30% of each transaction, as they claim one Bit is equal to one (USD) cent (users get small discounts if they buy more; see Robinson 2023 for more details on Bits and their economics). Users “Cheer” for streamers they like through Bits, and streamers keep these donations “typically at the rate of 1 cent per Bit” (see figure 7). These Cheers can be further transformed into “Cheermotes,” animated versions of the Bits shapes, or practically any other emote available on the platform (a heart, a unicorn, etc); Twitch Partners can also create custom Cheermotes for viewers to make use of, such as animated versions of their own faces, or inside jokes for longtime fans. Collectively, Twitch refers to Bits, Cheers, and Cheermotes as “power-ups,” which are generally spent and expressed in-chat during a livestream, for other viewers and the streamer to see (some streamers incorporate a leaderboard to display top tippers, further gamifying their economization).

As Rachel O’Dwyer (2023, 7) persuasively puts it, this donation-based model, through the use of Bits, is a canny way to obfuscate the market at work on the platform: “With tokens, someone is ‘not really’ a vendor or an employer, just as someone else is ‘not really’ working...A streamer in a hot tub on Twitch is ‘just chatting’, and if other users choose to send her a token, then it’s all good. But it isn’t money.” To be clear, this is how the system operates: users spend actual dollars to purchase Bits, which can then be expressed to streamers as Cheers, which the streamer collects and then cashes out back into actual dollars, while Twitch takes its cut along the way.⁴²

It is easy enough to see the double layer of abstraction here, as money becomes Bits becomes Cheers, and finally back into money on the other end of the cycle. Bits are in-platform money media which must be translated into fiat currency, and, make no mistake, this layering is

⁴² Bits, as well as subscriptions, purchased and spent on mobile devices are subject to a further fee, as Apple or Google take their own 30% cut, so Twitch raises the price to compensate — users tend to make purchases on desktop as a result.

an ideological move. As Twitch itself puts it within their Bits Acceptable Use Policy (2018), “Bits are not a money instrument” and “do not serve as currency,” and “Bits cannot be directly exchanged for items or services of value.” This is taken as corporate gospel, regardless of how these ‘tokens’ are actually used and understood by creators and viewers on the platform, or how nonsensical it may seem for money to become something else (another version of or substitute for money) before becoming money once more. The obfuscation is, of course, intentional, as it helps Twitch to distance itself from being seen as facilitating anything resembling labour.⁴³

Yet, like PBS, Twitch assumes viewers pay streamers for certain actions or reactions or content, and users and streamers clearly see it in these transactional terms, as well. We’ll return in a moment to further discuss Twitch’s Creator Camp, but for now consider how it explains Bits and cheering with them to streamers: “Remember, viewers Cheer and subscribe because they enjoy watching you! Think about your content first, and monetization second. The more entertaining and engaged you are with viewers, the more naturally your revenue will increase,” (Twitch, “Bits and Subscriptions”). At once, then, consider your revenue second to content, but also, remember that you will make more money depending on how they react to your content, and depending on how good your content is — got that? Moreover, they add, “Provide some kind of ‘return’ for support. Twitch offers sub emotes, badges, and other benefits, but you can get creative and offer things like a dedicated day to play games with subs on stream.” The quotation marks around “return” signify something of a wink, as streamers are instructed to conduct themselves and the nature of their content as a way to provide a “return” on the money viewers have spent on them. What is this if not a transaction?

⁴³ To clarify, this is not merely about the typical Marxist conceptions of money-commodity-money (MCM) or commodity-money-commodity (CMC). This version might be closer to money-money substitute-(less) money, in the sense that the streamer/creator is “gifted” with Bits, the money substitute, which is turned back into money, though 30% of it is for the platform. Even if Bits, like similar tokens, are imagined as somehow more expressive than money, they are nevertheless intended to be turned back into money.

Twitch is known for accommodating endless niches, with each streamer hoping to find what makes them stand out enough to be able to earn a living “doing what they love.” This classic framing, as demonstrated by Duffy (2017) and others, is clearly something of a misdirect, but nevertheless holds sway as a discursive narrative. Most mainstream press coverage is content to focus on the winners, usually with a sentence or two granted to the precarity of most streamers. For instance, in a 2021 article from *The Globe and Mail* called “Dream job 2.0: Seeking an alternative to the nine-to-five, Twitch streamers game for a living,” the writer Stacey McLachlan refers briefly to the precarity of this work, and the risk of being beholden to the whims of the platform, yet then concludes: “But while there may be no floor to catch you, there isn’t a ceiling holding you back either.” Again, this is on Twitch’s terms, where the focus is almost invariably on the major streamers who have hit it big because still, even in the 2020s, it’s covered as a trend piece rather than critically looking at the business of the platform.

More work has been done in recent years on the labor of livestreaming from a variety of perspectives, as scholars such as Mark R. Johnson, Jamie Woodcock, Christine Tran, and others have documented the monetization and professionalization of this labor as Twitch has rapidly expanded into the mainstream. Beyond them, though, the creator economy has often been theorized through, for example, the portmanteau of ‘playbour,’ which was first introduced by Julian Kücklich in 2005 to describe “play that is highly profitable for the entertainment industries, yet is seldom remunerated” (Goggin 358). As Goggin explains in her article on play and work, it was the Autonomist Marxists who began to argue to deconstruct the binary opposition between these two concepts, to bring together theories of convergence culture with the fears of the Italian autonomists like Maurizio Lazzarato (1996, 146), who warned about how “creativity, communication, emotion, cooperation, and values” are being “put to work.”

I argue that framing labour in the creator economy within this notion of playbour has the (perhaps unintended) added effect of trivializing and even undermining the actual labour involved, both in front of and behind the live camera. As Arwid Lund (2015, 64, 68) writes in his critique of playbour, it is “a highly ideological concept,” one that is “erroneous.” Moreover, whereas game studies emphasizes that game companies invisibly profit from players’ activities (hence playbour), with Twitch the transactional element is at the forefront, with regular reminders to streamers to monetize their content, from Creator Camp lessons to email and notification blasts (even if they only make pennies, it is very often remunerated in some form, unlike in Kücklich’s original conception). Likewise, there are constant reminders to viewers to tip streamers for their efforts, visually onscreen and verbally from streamers, with an established social architecture that has built in various strategies and networks for making and spending money as an *expectation*. Most simply, there is this element of risk for all creative labour that makes it intrinsically precarious, and platforms like Twitch tend to exacerbate these precarities by selling itself as a space of individual possibility, and on a structural level there are very few pathways to longevity or material support from the company (recall the small number of Twitch Partners as compared to the huge number of streamers). We also know, largely due to data leaks, that the top 1% of streamers have made more than half of the revenue on Twitch (Bentley & Kim). All the same, Twitch takes their cut of each transaction, from users big and small, and the 99% of streamers that make the rest of the money are led to believe that if they just keep streaming, they’ll join the 1%.

As of 2024, Twitch also takes 30% of a streamer’s subscription revenue (it was previously an astounding 50% once a streamer reached \$100,000 in annual revenue; see Twitch, “An Update to Several Streamer Payout Programs,” 2024), and around 45% of each streamer’s

ad revenue (Twitch, “Bigger ad payouts to more Creators: The Ad Revenue Upgrade,” 2022). By comparison, YouTube takes around the same levels of subscription and ad revenue; it also introduced, somewhat belatedly in 2021 (ostensibly due to the influence of Twitch and other platforms), its own tipping function, called Super Thanks, which it actually refers to directly as “money,” and decidedly *not* as a “donation tool,” which would be Twitch’s preferred language (see YouTube Help, “Super Thanks eligibility, availability, and policies”). YouTube, of course, has a much longer history of catering to content creators seeking to monetize, with a keen understanding, however imperfect and similarly extractive, of what creators do being a way to potentially make a living. Even the *Financial Times*, the paper of and for the markets, seems unable to ignore the reality of Twitch’s donation-based platform economy, as Elaine Moore wrote in 2021 (emphasis added): “For social media companies, tipping is not just a way for users to show their appreciation, it is a way to *outsource payment altogether*.”

As noted above, many streamers view their activities on the platform as work. Some scholars have done crucial ethnographic work on how streamers are paid and how they think about their labour and what it is that they do. First, it is no surprise that streamers have developed many strategies within the affordances of the platform to effectively monetize their streams. Max Sjöblom, Maria Törhönen, Juho Hamari, and Joseph Macey (2019a, 23-24) introduce the term *revenue affordances* to describe “the practices that afford direct revenue in relation to specific behaviours and interactions within the stream,” such as celebrating “subscribers and donors, in order to encourage further purchasing behaviour in the community through social pressure, togetherness or even competition.” Elsewhere, Sjöblom, Törhönen, and Hamari, with Lobna Hassan (2019b, 2562), found that streamers who specifically think of what they do *as work* tend to spend the most time on content creation and tend to earn the most income. On the other hand,

“it is the group that considers the activity equally as work and play, or playbour, who gains the least amount of income from their activities” (2563) — this group tends to earn even *less* than the “hobbyists” who consider what they do to simply be play. Interestingly, the authors suggest that it could be argued “we are trying to workify play, where this type of leisure activity is taking on characteristics of work, but not altering the way the activity itself is perceived or the gratifications derived from it” (2564). First, one may ask: who is “we” in this conception? Is it the streamers, the platform, both? Further, I’d argue that it is the platforms, like Twitch, that are trying to *playify work*.⁴⁴

My claim, then, is that this distinction matters. To suggest that “we” are trying to workify play still accepts the fundamental premise that, at its base, this is play which is somehow being redressed as work, when in fact the platform has organized *a space to work* under the guise of play — as the playfulness of the work involved obscures the mechanics of this platformized economy, so the platform is de facto granted power over what is considered justifiable treatment of these creators. Twitch, we could say, is Microsoft Teams for the streamers (a space to work); and Netflix for viewers (a space to pay for entertainment). Put simply: while playbour is limited to an understanding of play taking on characteristics of work, to playify work, as Twitch and similar platforms seek to do, is to set the conditions by which money is made through play.

Above I have outlined two positions about labour and play. The first is to emphasize the blurred boundaries between them; theorists like Taylor and Guarriello writing on playbour are examples of this. The second is the ethnographic approach to how streamers on platforms like Twitch experience what they do as work; theorists like Johnson and Sjöblom et al. embody this perspective, which I align more closely with. In this chapter, though, I want to introduce and

⁴⁴ Even putting it this way, to playify work, is not quite ideal either, as it risks upholding the false binary I am critiquing, though I employ it here briefly as an intentional reversal that is, I hope, further articulated and expounded upon in the sections to come.

foreground a third position: labour and play must be understood specifically through *money* (here in the form of Bits and other monetization features), which helps to show how all interactions are *potentially transactional*, and many actually are. Moreover, as I consider that which is remunerated as work, this could leave out many streamers who don't make money, but I will also relay a concept of streaming as "potential-work," whereby streaming temporality is always one of "maybe-work" or "could-be work," if and when someone pays, sooner or later on the timeline. This likewise recalls the concept from the previous chapter of how every user on TikTok is essentially a proto-influencer. This not only shifts attention away from previous conceptions of playbour to describe what happens on platforms like Twitch, but it seeks to address how money is play-ified, or better yet, how streaming is pay-ified — *payment supersedes play*, returning us to the temporality of money on the platform and its role in framing futurity for users and workers alike.

This is, in a sense, an intensified version of how Lisa Adkins (2018, 26) describes the always-on, precariously- and under-employed labour market characteristic of the platform economy: "Workers are therefore in a state of constant expectation, or in stand-by mode, not knowing exactly when or if they may be required but nonetheless existing in a continuous state of restless availability." There is an added dimension to this for the livestreamer, who is not only restlessly available, but often enough already on-air, so to speak. To illustrate this, I put the transactional layer at the center of the Twitch ecosystem.

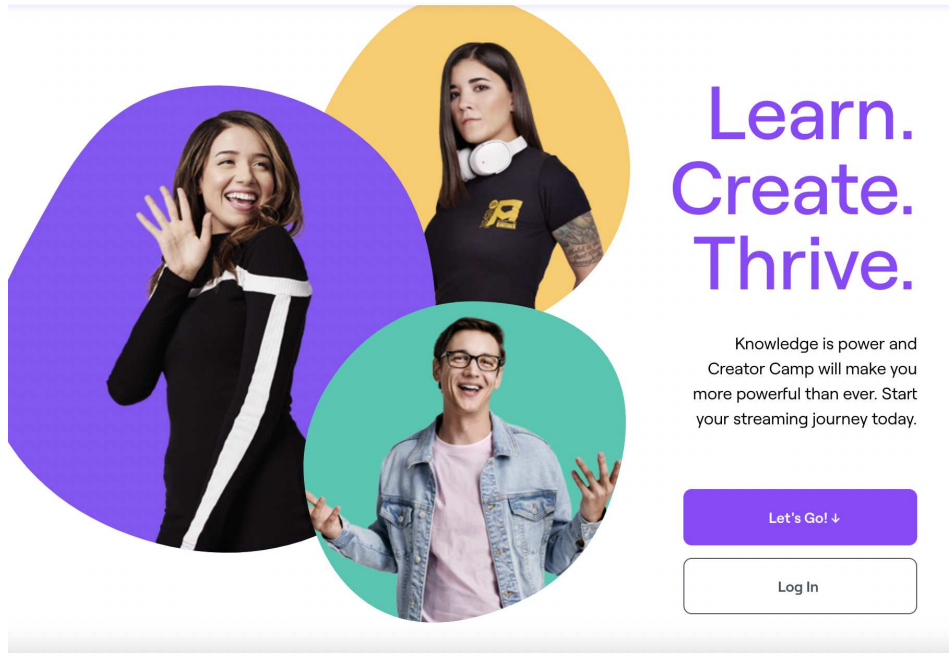


Figure 8 — The Creator Camp home page, accessed September 2024
[\(https://www.twitch.tv/creatorcamp/en/\)](https://www.twitch.tv/creatorcamp/en/)

Off to Creator Camp (On the Grind)

As an instructive example of how the platform articulates the basic function of what service it provides, consider Twitch’s Creator Camp, which is designed to help aspirational streamers learn the basics of being a successful creator. Found on the Twitch website, the Camp features a number of “Paths” for new streamers to follow, guided walkthroughs of various topics, organized into chapters, each with an explainer video followed by a text description and, often, an FAQ. Topics range from copyright law to “growing your community” to establishing your brand. The videos are hosted by existing, recognizable, and successful streamers, offering insights into how to build audiences or create more entertaining content. The text and FAQ are more direct descriptions of tools available to streamers, and common challenges. As the landing

page (figure 8) tells us, “Knowledge is power and Creator Camp will make you more powerful than ever” — typical self-entrepreneurship corporate language.

The most interesting section is, of course, on how to monetize your content. Even the simple wording of the Camp’s address helps to reveal the platform’s ideology: “Earning on Twitch is the *icing on the cake*” — in other words, it’s a bonus, a perk, and certainly not what thousands of people do to sustain themselves. Moreover, the creation of Bits, the in-platform currency that viewers buy at a markup in order to donate to streamers they enjoy, was a specific response to the initial use of third-parties such as PayPal for these donations, since at that point Twitch wouldn’t get a cut! The creation of Bits, as discussed in the previous section, is a clear example of platform enclosure, and they say as much within the Creator Camp, arguing that “Bits are also more reliable than third party donation methods because as a streamer, you’re protected against chargebacks or any other potential payment issues. It’s all handled within Twitch, so you can rest easy and focus on entertaining your community.”

The Creator Camp also includes a handy list of Dos and Don'ts, which includes a point about viewers feeling “disengaged if the primary focus of your content is generating revenue,” which may seem disingenuous to wannabe streamers aware of how much revenue is generated for the platform based on what they create and how they perform. Moreover, as with any social platform, its rules and community guidelines are always shifting, and broadcasters must also work ceaselessly to keep up, lest their account be suspended for engaging in a practice that was previously allowed, not to mention the extremely nuanced and ever changing regulations for streaming copyright-protected content like music or television shows. Twitch refers to its own community guidelines as a “living document” that is constantly updated, so the onus is on

streamers to be up to date on the latest changes that will determine the shape of their content and the ever-shifting limits on its monetization.

As full-time Twitch streamer Karvey (2023) explained, “I don’t get paid a salary, or even paid hourly by Twitch. You get paid through ad revenue, or through subscribers who can choose to pay \$10 a month. You also can get paid through tips and donations and custom emotes. I get paid based on if people liked me, or if they enjoyed the content. The harder I work and the more I make people happy, the more I’ll get paid.” Therefore, if she isn’t feeling up to it, she won’t stream because “I don’t like to project negativity” — a classic example of emotional labour. She then details her typical day, which includes “editing for a few hours,” streaming for “five to six hours,” and another couple hours of editing. This long day, it should be noted, seems better than what many other streamers have reported. Twitch streamer Jamie Brausen told *The Wall Street Journal* in 2021 (Needleman) about brutal 12-hour-plus streams: “I woke up the next day with no voice, puffy eyes and my whole body was sore. I wouldn’t want to do anything else, but there’s more work that goes into it than people might know or see.” Many popular streamers also employ editors and others to assist in their content creation, though, as reported by *PC Gamer* in 2022 (Colp), they “have little individual power to negotiate their rates, whether it's because the streamer doesn't make much on their own or because they're so successful that it feels like they could find anyone to make videos for them.”

Significantly, all of these aspects of monetization — subscriptions, Bits, stream length, editing, ads — are ultimately controlled by Twitch, from how much revenue streamers receive from each subscription to how many ads are expected within a stream. Recall here how Mayer et al. spoke of non-platform media workers as buoyed by the promise of autonomy and wealth, only to be constrained by the *mise-en-scène* of industrial actors and forces and the narratives

they craft, and we can see clearly how the platform companies have learned from existing labour structures and practices. As Mark R. Johnson and Jamie Woodcock (2019) have argued, Twitch streaming relies on a “neoliberal subjectivity” which equates success through hard, grinding work with the number of hours streamed, regardless of the physical and/or emotional toll. Still, Twitch seeks to playify, or rather mask, this labor, with monetization as icing on an ever-shrinking or cruelly evasive cake — neoliberal, yes, but also something beyond.

The push of the platform to effectively redefine work is an ideological project built on an empty reservoir of technocapitalist value, and the promises made through in-platform money media like Bits, and the obfuscations around currency and labour, come into even clearer focus when placed alongside the invitations and expectations to spend more and more time creating content — grinding, putting in endless hours of effort, which becomes key to monetization.

These forces emerge in a platform’s guidelines or advice, for instance, and these are not trivial in how they seek to set the conditions for time spent on the platform and what is to be gained through that sustained effort. In the Camp’s “Introduction to Monetization” video, streamer Jericho (over 1.2 million followers at the time of writing) states:

Twitch has a really unique and beneficial culture where everybody is [sic] kind of accepted the idea of tipping to get your message out there, subscribing to support your content creator, or watching ads in exchange for Bits...It’s a lot better than other websites...I think that monetization-wise, subscribers are the guaranteed best, most ‘steady’ way to gauge your month-to-month revenue.

Leaving aside Jericho’s own air quotes around the word “steady” (which, I would argue, implicitly acknowledges how unsteady even this aspect is), we can see why Twitch would include this as a signal that this giving, donation-based culture has already been cultivated by the platform. As streamer Xmiramira (just over 50,000 followers) adds, “What I like is that it’s built

in. Other sites don't have it built in like Twitch has it built in... You can get paid a multitude of ways from Twitch through Twitch." These messages, all of which reinforce the idea that Twitch contains everything you need to make money as a livestreamer, are also deliberately delivered not simply from a disembodied corporate voice or CEO, but through the avatars of successful streamers, recruited to guide wannabe broadcasters through the challenging but rewarding process that will lead them to success — as streamer LobosJR advises in the video accompanying the "Bits and Subscriptions" Camp page, "Subscribers do tend to be a more reliable income, but you have to remember that you will always be fluctuating, numbers going down, numbers going up. Take every little win as a huge victory, and don't fret the low number drops." What this seems to suggest to aspiring streamers is to not give up the grind, even if your numbers are down — keep pushing through and you will come out on top.

This is part of a larger rhetorical framework pushed by Twitch, whereby the elision of seeing what streamers do as work is complemented by an offloading of streamer perceptions of success as entirely dependent on themselves. Twitch provides; you succeed (or fail). As Panneton (2023, 284) argues, "streamers internalize success as being a result of adequate self-regulation, work and investment in their activity. The same standards construe failure as a lack of self-regulation and an insufficient sense of enterprise." The only answer is to *grind*, "a symptom of, and a response to, precarity on Twitch," (281) — put in the hours and keep on streaming until it works out.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Chen and Sun (2020, 1576) introduce the concept of *temporal arbitrage* to help illustrate the logic of the dominant temporal form under platform capitalism, which "encloses and disenfranchises workers' time for the development of on-demand economy. It also normalizes the unequal power structure, which includes the class distinctions between the workers and the consumers and the information asymmetry between workers and platforms." This mode of temporal arbitrage, while not central to my analysis, does help to understand how platforms like Twitch structure labour time in meaningful ways, and in ways that relate the on-demand nature of platformized gig work with a similarly on-demand, always-on approach to livestreaming, which all likewise highlight the power differentials between streamers, consumers, and platforms.

Grinding may seem to have negative connotations, but Twitch (like other gig platforms) is able to translate this, often through these streamer representatives within the Creator Camp and at sponsored panels at TwitchCon, the annual celebration hosted by the platform, into something not only entrepreneurial in spirit but aspirational in affect. To grind and be seen grinding is like a badge of honour (which can be rewarded via Bits). This move is intended to obfuscate the exploitative, precarious, and brutally competitive nature of streaming with a “grindset” (grind mindset) that gets performed and narrativized as not only autonomous but *fun*. As Panneton (275) convincingly argues, this reflects Twitch’s overall approach to telling the story of what streamers actually do on their platform:

This grind reflects how streaming activity is transformed in the advent of platform-mediated cultural production, as measures of success on Twitch become aligned with the platform’s operational premise and metrics. What results is the integration of grind into Twitch’s larger narrative of self-actualization and aspirational entrepreneurialism, in a way that dually obscures the tendency toward overwork and self-exploitation as streamers ‘grind for views.’

Moreover, as if to emphasize the temporal power at play in this rhetorical address, “the grind is always construed as productive and *future-oriented*.” (283) Of course it is — if you keep streaming, creating content, and pushing yourself to your limit, success is surely around the corner, just deferred ever-so-slightly out of reach, out of time. As Libby Watson wrote after covering TwitchCon 2023 (emphasis added), “Most streamers I spoke to expressed two equally true opinions that can be hard to reconcile: They’re doing it for the love of their communities, and they’re also doing it for the money—not necessarily the money they currently earn, but *the money they hope they could earn doing it, one day*.”

In the meantime, Twitch’s own metrics and revenue streams keep juicing all they can from both streamers and viewers, without taking notice of whether it actually pays off for anyone

else. I argue that this logic structures the platform's intermediary influence and control, obliterating the idea that it is sufficient to make visible the tensions between platformized streaming's liberatory potential and its exploitative nature. To be clear, this does not mean ignoring the fun that streamers do have, but we do not speak in the same way about other jobs, which employees may have fun at, too. In an extremely rare case of Twitch-adjacent admission, within Twitch's Creator Camp section on "Engaging Viewers," streamer Harris Heller (166,000 followers) says that streamers should always be creating, and "that's what this *job title* is," emphasis added. Twitch may occasionally recognize that streamers "make a living" on their platform, as then-CEO Shear did in a 2016 keynote address at the PromaxBDA conference ("If you want people to be able to make a living on your platform creating content, you better find a way to get them money"), but they will never call it a *job*. As explicitly explained in Twitch's "Monetized Streamer Agreement":

You and we are, and will remain at all times, independent contractors, and nothing in this Agreement will be construed to create an agency, employment, fiduciary, representative, or any other relationship between you and us. You will not represent yourself to be an employee, representative, or agent of us.

Granted, Heller's statement is notably rendered as a streamer saying this as an individual speaking from experience, not Twitch itself, though it is a part of their Camp for new creators, and is one of the only times in all my research that anything connected to the official Twitch brand refers to what streamers do as a job.

After, in a section called "Curb Your Financial Expectations" (figure 9), what first appears to be a surprising admission of streamer precarity turns out to be another aspirational opportunity *for the individual*, as Heller states, "Be patient with yourself. Livestreaming is a dream job. It takes some time. Think about how much time it takes to become a doctor." Streaming, like all jobs then, must be understood first and foremost as labour that is ultimately

future-oriented and productive *for the employer* under the extractive apparatus of digital capitalism.



Figure 9 — Twitch Creator Camp, “Engaging Viewers”

In many ways, Twitch streamers, beholden to the daily grind (and it often is daily, six or seven days a week, for streamers hoping to build an audience), recall what Karen Gregory and Jathan Sadowski (2021, 663) have described as platformized subjects at the whim of “customer demand, algorithmic dispatch, and metric surveillance,” whereby “workers must negotiate a temporality that is not of their choosing, yet fundamentally determines their potential earnings.” The platform is where this new subjectified temporality takes hold over the streamer’s value, and the idea of investing one’s time into one’s work for future returns takes on a uniquely precarious character under such an administrative regime. I extend this, however, and argue that Twitch’s political economy results in labour that is defined by the total monetization of the self – assuming the self as human capital, through a system of platformized administration. Consider Twitch’s Partner program, which opens up new monetization tools and features for popular streamers — you can apply only after streaming for 25 hours on 12 different days over a 30-day period and averaging 75 viewers, and even then, your application may or may not be approved,

according to undefined, absent criteria: “Please note that applying does not guarantee Partnership,” as the Twitch Help Desk puts it.

Under such a system of platformized administration, which of course extends far beyond streaming platforms, a creator — a worker — is asked to invest in themselves, to never stop grinding, to imagine their own future growth and betterment, despite pervasive precarity, as they feed the insatiable platform.

Time is Money (Modalities of Work)

While You Were Sleeping

In his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), Jonathan Crary argues that we live in a non-social 24/7 always-on environment, defined by continuous functioning, making it possible to work without pause or limit on a global scale. “As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige of what used to be everyday life beyond the reach of corporate intrusion” (75). For Crary, *sleep* is the only thing that escapes this intrusion, the only time we can step outside of networked privatized patterns of living — it’s the only source of hope we have. In 2013, Twitch was only just emerging as a platform, and Crary couldn’t have known that our everyday sleep would become monetized as well, as many streamers host “subathons,” especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, where they will stream for days or weeks on end, through sleep and other minor absences, that viewers can watch, too, all to attract attention until a certain target of new subscribers is met (think of it, in a way, as the ultimate streaming grind session, or even beyond

the grind, a purely durational feat). As streamers struggle to get noticed and build a community on Twitch, many of them typically broadcasting to dozens or fewer at a time, this becomes a useful strategy to make a name for yourself or otherwise simply attract viewer eyeballs (remember that you must average at least 75 viewers per stream to even hope of qualifying for the Partner program). Twitch's precursor, Justin.tv, was created by Justin Kan in 2007, and he began his livestreaming experiment by streaming himself sleeping, so Twitch's ability to privatise and monetise Crary's last remaining shred of hope, our sleep, has been baked into the platform from the very beginning.⁴⁶

Sleepstreaming, then, is part of this playification of work. In preliminary research undertaken with Karen Gregory (Pitre & Gregory 2024), which I draw from and expand on here, we examined the phenomenon of sleepstreaming, watching old broadcasts, monitoring the chats, and perusing the press coverage. Sleep streaming more generally has a media history, not only to Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1964), which depicted his lover John Giorno asleep for over five hours in a deliberate attempt to be dull, or to the early reality television era experimental performance art of internet pioneer Josh Harris' "Quiet: We Live In Public," which featured regular people livestreaming their every move inside a "human terrarium." This history also extends well beyond artistic experiments to websites like YouNow, an American livestreaming platform which grew to feature #sleepingsquads where groups of people, often teenagers, broadcast themselves sleeping or lounging around their bedrooms. It likewise would recur on camming websites such as Omegle and Chatroulette, as well as others with more robust payment mechanisms. If nothing else, this signals the association that sleepstreaming has with cam work, the concept of performing, often in an erotic manner, before a webcam, typically in exchange for money. Like

⁴⁶ This led the venture capitalist Paul Graham to comment on his investment in Justin.tv, "My first thought was that he spent an awful lot of time sleeping."

cam work, sleepstreaming sells *intimacy*. Or, indeed, *intimacy + time = money*. As we documented in our research, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns provided an opportunity for Twitch as a platform and for the streamers already there and those interested in trying something new in uncertain times stuck in their homes. To illustrate the height of this phenomenon, the popular streamer Amouranth claimed in 2023 she could make up to \$15,000 USD from a single sleep stream (Dodgson). Every other streamer would likely only ever dream of those numbers – in their own sleep, perhaps – but it represents the drive to employ it as a strategy to attract viewers and subscribers.

These streams generally begin as an event, whereby a streamer announces they will be streaming for days at a time, with breaks for sleeping, and it is intended as a way to build interest in their content and their account, hopefully gaining new subscribers and tips along the way. For some, the more viewers tip, the longer they stream. A community has built around streamers who do the activity more often, however, as they tend to make use of the “I’m Just Sleeping” channel, originally intended for streamers of a video game by that name, commandeered by #sleepingsquads and their enthusiasts. These streams are often associated with ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) communities, to help viewers fall asleep, and they can also take on an inevitable sexual register in some cases. It is also, of course, a temporal phenomenon, representative of how the platform’s affordances and cultures reward the coalescence of time, intimacy, and money. Value is created through the elongated co-presence of the streamer, pushing notions of when work happens, and challenging us to consider why work may be working differently on Twitch.

In one sense, this represents a furthering of Crary’s notion of what we might plainly call the hustle economy, the idea that one must grind endlessly as an entrepreneurial subject to

succeed and stand out. While sleeping on stream does present as something else, offering a form of intimacy, a rather striking example of not-quite-work, or potential-work, that the creator economy in general traffics in, and which grants the platforms further leeway over determining what it is that we all do using their services. It is easy enough to consider sleep streaming as a continuation of this “grindset,” whereby creators are ostensibly rewarded for their hard work and the many hours they put into their content. However, “while the livestreamers’ call to ‘always be casting’ seems to epitomise the narrative of actively mining the self for content and potentially burning out,” we argue instead that “sleep streaming represents a move towards generating passive income” (Pitre & Gregory 2024). We relate this back to Randy Martin’s concept of the social logic of the derivative, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the relations of passive income in finance capital.

To reiterate briefly, in financial trading, a derivative is an investment vehicle based on an asset, though is not the asset itself — they are pieces of the asset, broken up and made available to be bought and sold. For us, the sleep streamer likewise “breaks up” the asset that is their body, their self, which can be consumed, bought, and sold in this social derivative logic. “The platform’s design allows viewers to continually make value out of the sleeper’s co-presence: to subscribe to the sleep channel, gift in-app purchases to the sleeper, or even allow viewers to attempt to control or disturb the sleeping body” (Pitre & Gregory). For a certain donated amount, the streamer may write a viewer’s name on a part of their body, visible throughout their sleep; for another amount, the viewer can sound a horn to move the sleeping body; and there are countless other variations. This is reminiscent of NewNew, a proposed “human stock market” where viewers would pay to control what livestreamers do in their life, from decisions over what they should wear or eat to where they should go to anything else you can imagine. While the app did

not take off, the founder, Courtne Smith, said incredible things to New York Times reporter Taylor Lorenz in 2021: “We’re building an economy of attention where you purchase moments in other people’s lives, and we take it a step further by allowing and enabling people to control those moments.”

This is a framework of labour that is being funded by venture capital in specific and direct ways, and Twitch, with its focus on building communities around individual streamer personalities, is a centrepiece of this project. At a time of increased income inequality, of double-shifts and juggling multiple different jobs to simply get by, it is not particularly surprising that regular people and Twitch streamers would dream of a way to similarly accrue passive income in an economic environment where the relation between extreme wealth and work seem to be at odds. “It is a dream of accessing the circulation of value through the design of the platform,” and so to find innovative ways to circulate within the market, obscure the work involved, and benefit through, in this case, *complete bodily passivity* (Pitre & Gregory).

The breakdown of the binary between labour’s passivity and activity in the case of sleep streaming resonates in the context of a platform that, as we know, emphasises the blurred lines of work and play, especially as I have argued that the act of payment helps us understand what is and is not work. When you are sleeping, but also making money, is it work? How are those unconscious hours, normally thought of as part of social reproduction — the essential work of reproducing labour power — related to the preparatory work that goes into streaming? These questions recall O’Dwyer’s analysis of where value originates in the stream: arising from tokenizing the shared live moment, the transactional intimacy that emerges from that immediacy and co-presence, and the monetization built into these systems inevitably comes to blur the lines between social value and exchange value. As O’Dwyer further points out, this in-between

(social/exchange, work/play, passive/active) hardly matters when the platform itself is so clear about what this is and what it is not: that *there is no monetary value* here, and that they are, in truth, “extracting a cut from a whole range of otherwise invisible work.”

The platform provides no analytical abstraction in its rhetoric and self-description, as it is clear that this is not work at all, and so the blurred lines taken up by external analysis is a way of ceding the argument to the platform, or at least of accepting their terms as given. The affordances and incentives of the platform influence the forms that cultural production takes, and forces us to reconsider the social and economic relations that shape our digital lives from Twitch and far beyond. I argue that the willingness of scholars, critics, the press, and others to abide by this in-between is an act of rhetorical slippage, a failure to properly analyse the nature of value on these platforms from the get-go by normalising the invisibility of the work that takes place, and working backwards from there. Even more significantly, though, is how the transactional intimacy and temporal paternalism of the platform together overrule rhetoric through the material and social relations of monetary exchange.

The Labour of Intimacy, the Intimacy of Labour

The broad consequence of this rhetorical slippage, then, returns us to the realm of the temporal, and this is an expressly intimate setting. As Sun-ha Hong (2022, 272) has recognized, technofutures are

maintained not by producing literally accurate predictions of future events but through ritualized demonstrations of predictive time. The glorious transition from past to future is reenacted again and again in these rituals, reaffirming the arrow of history. Yet when the ceremony ends and the incense clears, we find that the promised future remains much the same as before.

Put differently, this reflects the power of the ritualistic aspect of technofutures, which has significant consequences for digital work, as it relates to the belief that you can be the one to earn money from your content or streams, the drive to create and stream is in part caused by these rituals of promised futures. Streamers on Twitch perform various forms of ‘complementary labor,’ a term from platform studies taken up by Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy in their book *Platforms and Cultural Production* (2021) as a way to understand what social media creators do in general, which is to support a platform’s growth in users and advertisers through the labour they do to build their own position on the platform — this work is truly complementary. On Twitch, then, streamers build their own career and livelihood at the same time that they symbiotically ensure the continued growth of the platform. This labour is invisibilized by the platform at every turn, as we have already seen, as are determinations about which kind of content is rewarded by the platform, as streamer labour that is most complementary to Twitch’s growth will tend to have an easier time circulating within the marketplace of the platform.

It is this invisibilization of complementary labour and circulatory value that comes to be Twitch’s methodology for “ritualised demonstrations of predictive time,” as Hong put it — this is temporal paternalism, and this invisible labour relates to rituals of predictive time in ways that I explain in the rest of this section. The focus of most Twitch press material, marketing, and creator training material is on the tight-knit communities nursed on the platform, and that your loyal fans will return day in and day out to your stream. In a sense, they belong to you, and you belong to them (and you all belong to Twitch, natch).

In 2019, for example, Twitch launched its first brand campaign, called “You’re Already One of Us,” a title which already cleanly signals a desire to bring the future into the present — you’re already on Twitch, even if you don’t know it; potential-streamers, potential-work. The

campaign featured one billboard ad (figure 10), for instance, with the streamer Fuslie alongside the words, “She’ll outsmart you, outplay you, and you may end up best friends for life,” explicitly motioning to the strong parasocial communities that develop around popular streaming personalities, and the idea that they will hold over long periods of time. This brand “refresh” was promoted in the *New York Times*, *Creative Review*, *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and elsewhere in the press, a concerted corporate effort by Twitch to signal to non-Twitch users that it’s not only a platform for gamers to game, but it is an intensely social space across media industries, the new and future frontier of digital community. As Byron Philipson, Twitch’s executive creative director, told *The Verge* (Stephen 2019), this was quite plainly conceived as a campaign about the future: “The monster that we set out to fight in our mission was the fear of irrelevance.” Or, as he told *The Hollywood Reporter* (Shanley 2019, emphasis added):

We’re not leaving behind what Twitch is or was, we’re simply evolving how it’s perceived. This is our moment of arrival in the world. We want to go out and make a big bang and look to the future... We’ve always been deeply rooted in our community and we’re looking to mine as much value for them *and a future with us going forward as possible*.

The careful wording of “we’re looking to mine as much value for them” stands out, as perhaps a more honest phrasing would have been “mine as much value *from* them.” That aside, it is instructive not only how focused on the future this brand redesign’s strategy is, but also how it is articulated to the press almost in the throes of desperation, to change the narrative, the perception, of what it is this brand offers. Phillipson and other Twitch spokespeople describe this fear of irrelevance, and a seemingly related fear that their community will seek a future without them going forward, particularly at a moment pre-COVID when YouTube and other competitors were beginning to offer major streamers lucrative deals to leave Twitch.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ As when I analyzed TikTok’s attempt to control the public narrative at a moment of intense scrutiny, it is always instructive to consider how a company responds in these moments.



Figure 10 — 2019 ad for Twitch’s first branded campaign, featuring Twitch streamer Fuslie

The pandemic was, for a time, an easy win for Twitch, with many folks stuck inside their homes and desperate to be entertained — a somewhat morbid event of fortuitous timing for a platform that was beginning to face difficult questions about growth. By January 2021, almost 10 million people were streaming, versus just 3.9 million one year earlier, and viewers spent over one trillion minutes watching streams in 2020, 70% more than in 2019 (Safe Betting Sites 2021). This growth, like all growth, likewise was not endless, and fissures between streamers and the platform continued to crop up, particularly as competing platforms, mostly YouTube, began to regain ground.

Nevertheless, for streamers, you always have the opportunity to translate the devotion and loyalty of your viewers — “*you may end up best friends for life*” — into various monetized mechanisms on the platform, all of which are controlled by Twitch, always taking its cut. Streamers are expected to cash in on that intimacy, though there are tensions. Recall the backlash when Twitch announced it planned to limit streamers’ ability to work with sponsors (Shaukat 2023), or the high quota its Partner Plus program demands in order to gain access to 70% of one’s own subscription revenue versus the typical 50% (a streamer “must maintain a sub count of at least 350 recurring paid subscriptions for three consecutive months,” not including gifted subscriptions [Minton & Lee, 2023]). What always goes unsaid is that this fan loyalty and time

spent on the platform is essential for Twitch's own survival through increased ad revenue and brand sponsorships.

Moreover, even with a discount on its use of Amazon Web Services, it is extremely expensive to maintain a non-stop livestreaming platform at this scale, and so this streamer-dependent ad revenue becomes evermore important for the platform's longevity. As documented by Brandon C. Harris (2022, 136), ad revenue is "one of Twitch's most consistent logics, and...Twitch's professional relationship with a streamer [is] largely dependent on the streamer's ability to successfully complement brands and advertisers." At the same time, "streamers who fail to fall in line by resisting or critiquing Twitch's policies are denied the ability to do complementary labor, especially those who openly discuss the company's failure to keep streamers safe from targeted harassment" (137). Put differently, as Susanne Kopf (2020) has argued about YouTube in similar circumstances, Twitch likewise "represents itself as legislator, judge, and executive authority" on streamer labour and practice, despite taking advantage of the playbour mantra that allows the company to separate their service from typical labour constraints and oversight.

This is an exertion of temporal paternalism precisely because it is structured to maintain the promise of future growth for the platform, even if the messaging and rhetoric to streamers includes them in this evolution, just in very particular ways. As William Clyde Partin (2020, 3) has put it, "platform capture, as a modality of platform evolution, creates 'new' technical features by exploiting power asymmetries between platforms and their dependents." The evolution — the very future of the platform — depends on this exploitative power, a ritual of broken promises that can take the form of compromised technical "fixes," rhetorical moves in

the press, or any number of other avenues that sustain a political economy of cultural production abstracted away from material or temporal dimensionality.

This tension on Twitch for streamers, between autonomy and exploitation, is key to understanding why I am arguing in this chapter for a reframing of labour in the platform economy. In their introduction to the excellent collection *Real Life in Real Time*, editors Bo Ruberg, Johanna Brewer, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Christopher J. Persaud (2023) argue “there is no resolution to this contradiction; the answer lies in making the contradiction visible.” This seems inadequate. It is one thing to point out the potential intractability of these coexistent sensibilities, but it is quite another to conclude that all we can offer through our analysis is visibility. To put it differently, our analytical approach to the invisibilization of labour and circulatory value on these platforms should not end at the point of making it visible; likewise, the analytical use of a concept like playbour so often ends at holding these two aspects *in tension*, rather than, say, visibilizing labour.

Ruberg (2023), for instance, opens the collection with a chapter chronicling livestreaming’s emergence from webcam modelling and sex work, and Twitch specifically has “historical connections to webcam modeling,” and “Twitch as a company has worked the hardest to distance itself from associations with sex work,” (28-9). As Ruberg points out, the history of game livestreaming is really a history of “self-broadcasting from the bedroom,” (36) emerging from early erotic camming practices that bring the public into the private, intimate space of one’s bedroom. Moreover, the choices made by early erotic cammers line up with streamers today, holding the major platform’s conveniences on the one hand (whether Twitch or a camming platform like iFriends) but also how Twitch “controls its streamers, limiting what content they can show, what they can say, and how their content is made visible,” (37). Telling this alternative

history of livestreaming, then, ends up matching Twitch's own assertion that "you're already one of us," though perhaps in unforeseen ways, as this challenges "the expectation that sex workers (and, by extension, women, queer people, transgender people, and people of color) do not belong on platforms like Twitch. In reality, they have been here all along," (37). In one sense, this argument is indeed one of making visible what has been invisibilized, but on closer inspection, it simultaneously reframes the very conception of an enterprise like Twitch as emerging *not* within play but within work — despite Twitch's own 'About' page or other storytelling in the press and elsewhere focused on founder Justin Kan's playful experiment to broadcast his every waking (and sleeping) moment, these self-broadcasting logics were already well-established among sex workers and erotic cammers, making a living on the early social internet.

My argument may seem simple and even polemical, but it is significant in the face of livestreaming's intimate relations and the vast sums of money being exchanged minute-by-minute that if one is getting paid, one is labouring. If one is paid for erotic camming, we consider it to be sex work; by the same token (pun intended), if one is paid for gaming, sleeping, chatting, or simply being present, that, too, must be work.

The mental health impacts on streamers during COVID and beyond are also worth noting, not only from burnout, but specifically from "financial instability, loss of income opportunities, the deaths of community members, perceived increases in demands on their time and emotional resources, more emotionally charged community interactions, and a sense of needing to 'be there' or 'put on a strong face,' often at the expense of their own well-being," (Dunlap et al., 67-8). This encompasses the logics of emotional labour, but also highlights the laborious nature of the intimacy these streams facilitate, and the monetary exchange that takes place according to the streamer's ability to be present, reliably and dependably, over long

stretches of time, day in and day out, like a new form of care work. Moreover, as Partin (2023) outlines, streamers routinely shift what they do according to economic incentives that may or may not take form through audience demands but nevertheless have everything to do with how they will make their money. This includes modulating their personas “based on their revenue streams...fashioning themselves as cultural producers worthy of viewer-patrons’ financial support,” and making “strategic choices about their branding based on their audience and sponsors,” (267-8). Most streamers need to be broadcasting for an astounding 60 hours per week to sustain an audience, and any time not streaming is “lost revenue in the form of unmade donations, unwatched ads, and lapsed subscriptions,” (270). This is significant in the context of Twitch’s role as a temporal paternalist — based on the platformized experience the platform provides, *any time not streaming is money lost*.

Any investment on the platform’s part on an individual streamer, like making them a part of an ad campaign or offering them an exclusivity contract, is ultimately simply a self-serving act, as it “lays claim to a future body of work that will, ideally, support future advertisements, donations, and subscriptions,” (271) all of which, of course, add up to Twitch’s primary revenue source by taking their cut of each.

Does Twitch pay its streamers a wage? Generally speaking, no.

Does Twitch host *people who work*? The answer is, unequivocally, yes.

What is sought here, then, is an understanding of time-on-platform as potential-work, a reformulation of labour relations under platform capitalism. At this stage, I ask you, take a step back for a moment. My contention is that when we hold “Twitch’s current of entrepreneurial and aspirational rhetoric,” as Charlotte Panneton (2023, 282) puts it, in tension with the lived realities and affordances of the platform and its streamers, what emerges is not a need for mere visibility

of this friction, but for deeper understanding of the *ideological forces setting the terms and shifting the playing field for us*. It is as if, without looking, the boundaries of critique have been granted to the temporal paternalism of the platform and its dictates, assuaging exploitative practices and other offenses through tweaks or incremental changes, or alternatively through analytical nuance that gives the platform corporation an “out,” which helps to limit the very idea of an alternative form.

Conclusion

Livestreaming on Twitch is work. In this chapter, I have shown how dominant scholarly shibboleths such as playbour are insufficient to meet this moment of digital labour. Through the temporal registers within various modes of work (grinding, sleeping, intimacy), I have demonstrated how these are interlocked with platform affordances and in-platform money media, namely Bits, which clarifies the role Twitch plays as a non-employer. The political economy of this labour is narrativized by the platform in the context of future returns, as the streamer is led to see all presence as potential for remuneration (potential-work) while simultaneously being asked to, put bluntly, forget everything they think they already know about what work looks and feels like. Something akin, again, to the total monetization of the self, an ideological sleight of hand that reinforces an impulse to ask “what is labour” (sleeping? that doesn’t feel like work) to elide asking “*when is labour*” — which is what I have sought to orient us to ask instead.

Let’s put this slightly differently to further draw out why this distinction between *the worker* and *the player*, and its ideological weight, matters. If we want to understand how a platform like Twitch narrativizes itself through a strategy of temporal paternalism, particularly

how it manages when payment happens (meaning *when it counts*), the most crucial story here is that of work and its future. By the time you are reading this, Twitch may be on its way out as the leader in the streaming space, or perhaps it has been shuttered by Amazon, as throughout 2023 and 2024, news reports chronicled the company's loss in workforce, in top creators, in market share, and stopped operating in the premier esports region in the world, South Korea, because "operating costs in Korea are significantly higher than they are in other countries," (Clancy 2023) sending those streamers to their main competitor, YouTube. In January 2024, Clancy confirmed that Twitch was still not a profitable business, assuring those watching his livestream about layoffs that Amazon nevertheless has been "extremely supportive of Twitch," but as Ryan Broderick (2024) has pointed out in an article called "How Twitch lost its way" regarding Twitch's struggled growth post-pandemic, "it has been much easier for YouTube to emulate Twitch than it has been for Twitch to emulate YouTube" (recall, for instance, YouTube's introduction of a Super Thanks tipping feature). This relatively uneasy position for Twitch as a company (they are still leading the market as a livestreaming platform, after all) may suggest that its power is waning.

This presents an opportunity to underline a larger point I have been trying to make throughout this dissertation, which is that the ongoing future success of the companies I have chosen to consider is irrelevant, and indeed the precarious market positions of each — Disney, TikTok, and Twitch, for various reasons and to varying degrees — affirms the flimsiness that I am arguing is inherent to the attempted articulation and exertion of this temporal paternalism. In other words, what is significant here is less the individual companies themselves and more the forms and logics of their rhetoric and corporate storytelling as a collective mode of temporal technopolitics that permeates the far-reaching culture of "Big Tech." Twitch may or may not

have “lost its way,” but the narratives it has woven are representative and indicative of an industrial and infrastructural turn toward *platform time* as described in the introduction, a patterned approach that wields power over the “felt potential” (Massumi) of futures of work, in this case, but other futures, as well.

In 2022, Twitch then-CEO Emmett Shear acknowledged labour problems with the platform, but called on the US government to take care of it. Streaming, he said, is “not quite a W-2 job and it’s not quite a contracting job. I think we could really use legislation that created a third option that was appropriate for the gig economy and the creator economy. One of the fundamental dynamics of the creator economy is that tech companies aren’t used to the level at which creators rely on them for their business. A rapid change to how a product works isn’t just a matter of, ‘This person didn’t get as many views on their video,’ but rather, ‘This person can’t make rent this month’” (D’Anastasio). Here, Shear (who would be replaced by Clancy) directly points to how changes on the platform can impact the livelihood of streamers, and yet he conveniently passes responsibility onto the government.

The same year, in an interview with *Harvard Business Review* (Ignatius 2022), Shear was asked about the nature and future of the creator economy, and he drew a convenient line between it and the gig economy: “The gig economy is commodified labour, you’re working for the API [application programming interface], your job is reactive to the computerized dispatch, which is similar to working for a creator economy company like Twitch, but where creators are differentiated and uncommodified labour — people care *which* creator they connect to, you can’t just substitute one creator for another.” The bitter irony, of course, is that streamers are likewise working for the API, they are reactive to the platform and its everchanging guidelines and benchmarks, and unless they are the top streamers in the world, they, too, are disposable and

easily substituted for other content. They are something like a reserve army of the semi-employed who may fall into the underemployed or unemployed - at any time. At some point, one may still be working for the platform - grinding the stream - but no longer be paid for one's work. And here is when the twist of the knife is sharpest: one is now "playing" when one thinks one is "working."

Keeping in mind some basic fundamentals covered in this chapter — the authority of the platform and the information it holds outside the reach of its users, the disjunction between revenue generation for the platform and its workers, the rhetorical influence of playbour and the focus even among scholars on avoiding or transcending the binary of play and labour in a way that ultimately benefits the platform's obfuscatory rhetoric — suggests that the platform's framework of labour is increasingly dominant as a model or *the* model of platformized work. At the very least, we certainly cannot continue to choose to play by the rules set by commercialized platforms, because it's not play at all — it's work.

Conclusion

“If we listen carefully to the good word of tech evangelists, we can hear the groans of those buried under the rubble of progress.”

— Ruha Benjamin, “The New Artificial Intelligentsia,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2024)

“Another world is possible, where society is collective and humans have agency over their digital futures. But to get there we need to create a past with living value.”

— Lizzie O’Shea, *Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine, and the Paris Commune Can Teach Us about Digital Technology* (2019), pg. 8

Predicting the future is a political act. Turning to earlier periods in history, from Babylonian astrologers to Egyptian diviners, we find that predictive capacities are more often than not associated with those in power – the state, the sovereign, and later, the corporations extending their reach over the globe. Through the twentieth century, for instance, with the rapid development of new technologies following the Industrial Revolution, a class of futurists would come to be seen as bearers of a utopian vision for our collective well-being in the years ahead, forecasters with the expertise, divine intuition, or both, necessary to persuade investors, journalists, and the general public that they saw it all, clearly, on the horizon. The future has always been contested, material, guided, and ultimately, despite all attempts to control it, up for grabs.

With this in mind, one of Jathan Sadowski’s (2020, 66) ten theses on technology stands out, namely his claim that “the most insidious product of Silicon Valley is not a technology but rather an ideology.” This is evidenced through how these companies and their platforms build their modality of the future into the architecture of their systems, and their general approach to corporate and cultural rhetoric. This is not just a story about clever branding, or even about

corporate deception and self-preservation. As I have argued, it is about the codification of ideologies and imaginaries that place us within unwanted utopias, as fewer futures, it seems, remain in our reach.

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to examine and provide some clarity for how tech companies, and specifically video-based platforms, have over the past decade made rhetorical and material moves to pre-shape and pre-form the future. I have followed Michael Godhe and Luke Goode's (2018, 153) call for a critical future studies that intersects with cultural studies, choosing to face the following questions that they pose through the course of my inquiry:

Who can speak with authority and legitimacy about the future? Whose imagined futures are deemed possible or plausible, and whose are silenced or dismissed as unrealistic and impractical? Who benefits from promoting particular visions of the future? And where do these ideas and visions of the future come from (for they all have histories and genealogies that often go unacknowledged)?

In a sense, then, I have focused on the corporate framing of technological solutionism — the idea that new technologies, and the companies that innovate them into existence, hold the only way forward — and how three different companies have operationalized this storytelling as a way to court the public's imagination about their secured position in the market and in the future, a position which fundamentally holds both *value* and *virtue*. By looking at Disney, TikTok and Twitch as distinct storytellers, this dissertation has offered insights into how temporality and futurity in particular are wielded in similar but unique ways within the platform economy, especially as a techno-moral imperative.

Bringing future studies and platform studies together allows me to foreground how technology companies have become the regulators and engineers of our expectations. I have argued that *the future* is the primary ideological understructure of the

platform economy, and have demonstrated how temporal politics are wielded as a form of power by corporate platforms, often through the core strategy of seeking to set the terms for the collective imaginary. These attempts to pre-shape the future, then, make it more difficult to reset terms, though by making use of future studies and platform studies, I have sought a way toward precisely such a reset via this critical understanding of the present.

As Alex Gourevitch (2024) put it, referring to these so-called tech innovators, “They don’t just invent something, they see deeper and further into the desires of the masses than those future consumers see in themselves. The entrepreneur doesn’t just respond, he creates the need, then invents the product to satisfy it. He plays both sides of the demand and supply curves. He is capital personified.” Moreover, he adds, unlike governments, they exert their economic power on the rest of us quite directly and without accountability (beyond, perhaps, to their investors or creditors), as “they really do end up deciding what will be available for us to consume and produce, what our forms of enjoyment are and what our social interactions will be like.” This, then, is the anti-democratic power of the entrepreneurial elite, whom he calls “the Machiavellis of the Market.”

What is perhaps more astonishing, and less tenable, is how this is asserted as both valuable and *virtuous*, bountiful and *benevolent*. And how, at different points of time, we, as users, buy into these assertions, believe them, are subjectified by them. As if capital dominance were not enough, and it became imperative to capture the imaginary of the future itself to ensure their ongoing ambassadorship of its shaping. This was evident to Fredric Jameson in 2003 (704), writing about financialized stock market futures and the

way “these ‘futures’ come to be deeply intertwined with the way we live our own individual and collective futures generally.”

It is these versions of futurity that I have concerned myself with, these attempts made by specific platform companies to exert corporate power over time, which reflects a larger move by tech firms under platform capitalism to weaponize existing conditions (firstly, of course, labour’s long history of fighting for control over its own time) to their benefit. In other words, recalling Jonathan Crary’s (2022, 54) assessment from the introduction, these companies are the self-proclaimed (and culturally elevated) futurologists of our time, thereby making them “the regulators of our expectations.” Yet, at the same time, I have sought to point out, wherever possible, the limitations of these visions, both in their social influence and in their material impact.

This is a tricky balance to strike, as I have sought to, at once, emphasize the great power these companies have been able to wield over how we imagine the future, while at the same time acknowledging how often these efforts are simply stories that they tell, stories that are vulnerable to co-optation or sheer collapse. While it may be easier to point to industry-wide examples like web3 or the metaverse, largely flash-in-the-pan investment trends which fizzled almost as soon as they arose in the 2020s as these companies sought new growth engines, my approach has been to focus on specific, distinct, platform companies to home in on corporate strategy, rhetoric, and storytelling in this bumpy period of future-oriented temporal technopolitics. In other words, while they thus far represent an industrial and economic project of temporal control (exerted, as I have argued, according to specific characteristics in each case), we should consider,

particularly holding potential future research in mind, the fallibility of corporate mythmaking and the risks of temporal paternalism.

In the first chapter, by examining Disney+ as representative of legacy media's answer to the digital streaming era, I argued that its model of future-oriented temporality is based on a strategy I call brand futurity, a moral-economic framework for (re-)positioning the platform brand as guiding principle for the future of media and social responsibility alike. By aligning legacy and futurity, Disney+ is imagined as the uniquely-qualified arbiter of a better future (whether it ever arrives or not), the manufacturing of happiness brought to bear on the global media marketplace. The corollary of this strategy, of course, is the suggestion that alternative media futures are not only less reliable but *undesirable*. My analysis largely focused on how this outlook is operationalized through the company's original documentary series on the platform, which very often take this approach specifically in the spirit of "training" future Disney workers (as an ideal, if not literally), grounded in brand loyalty as the story of one's life. Countless employees, from top executives like Marvel's Kevin Feige to below-the-line seamstresses like Lupe de Santiago, are presented through a centring of the Disney brand as the defining presence in their lives — as Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) would put it, the total art work is Disney. This is their bet for adapting to the platform economy, shaping a media future that continues to hold the Disney brand, its values and its lore, as the preferred gateway to a supposedly utopic time when, as imagined in the novel *Cloud Atlas*, all movies are simply called "disneys" (Mitchell 2004).

In the second chapter, I looked at TikTok's model of futurity as a representative and extreme example of platform sociality as organized by content ties rather than social

ties, reformulating social relations as a result. Counter to Wendy Chun's (2018) theory of homophily, which relied on social ties to understand networked relations, TikTok's algorithmic feed of recommendations and inferences prioritizes the circulatory logic of content over all else, a homophily of content perhaps, and highlights this logic of "discoverability" as its specific and powerful contribution to the platform economy. As TikTok came under greater scrutiny in certain markets through the 2020s, especially in the United States, it became instructive to follow the company's attempts to narrativize themselves and what they should mean to different actors (content creators, policymakers, advertisers). What we have seen is the cultivation of marketplaces of intimacies, a social architecture where the self is not only completely commodified and algorithmized, but rendered *antisocial* from its fragmentation and perpetual iterative circulation, a "social logic of the derivative" (Arvidsson 2016; Martin 2013) that gathers these selves into an algorithmic funnel for future consumption and future returns for the platform. In laying this out, I argued that the platform achieved this by engaging in the cultivation of a habitual "refreshed present," a future that remains stuck in place despite attempts made to set the expectations for future users and future profits.

In the third chapter, by focusing on how Twitch narrativizes the work livestreamers do on their platform (by carefully obfuscating its nature as work, while simultaneously emphasizing how money is to be made), I argued for a move from "what is labour" to "when is labour," offering a pragmatic understanding that *work happens on platforms when you are paid* as a way of articulating the temporal paternalism this platform, among others, seeks to push onto its users. In other words, while money has always been media (Swartz 2020), money and work both are reconfigured here, as the

temporal politics of platform capitalism necessitate seeing payment itself, and more importantly when it occurs, as the key factor in how platforms like Twitch operate. Building on the previous chapter's conception of the social logic of the derivative, here I introduce the form it takes on Twitch as the total monetization of the self, whereby, through the durational form of the livestream, the platform's incentives, structures, and narratives of use determine a streamer's ability to mine every bit of their experience, identity, and everyday life as potentially monetizable. These transactional intimacies belie the idea of "playbour" suggested by other scholars, which cedes ideological ground to the platforms and the attempt to blur social and exchange value to their benefit and, in some sense, the plausible deniability of their role in labour futures — an unnecessary "out." For Twitch, then, time spent on their platform ought to be figured as potential-work, as I showed through various temporal registers of the platform (grinding, sleeping), a model of futurity that threatens to rupture how work is and ought to be imagined.

Altogether, then, this dissertation has placed these platforms into the context of inequitable temporal relations where we have seen how users, consumers, and creators on these platforms experience time according to "where they are positioned within a larger economy of temporal worth" — as Sarah Sharma (2014, 8) writes in a different context. To think of this as a form of economization, then, returns us to Lisa Adkins (2018, 6, 49), who argues that, in a platform era where "the creation of surplus" arises "from the flows and movements of money," we encounter a "reworking of time...in which presents and futures do not stand in an external relation to financial objects but in which such objects have their own time." For Adkins, this circulatory, speculative time finds value in this

money-in-motion process, but I have tried to argue in this dissertation that platforms need not deviate from existing tenets of capitalist accumulation at all.

In this way, through both discursive and political economic analysis, combining methods of cultural studies and critical future studies, I have demonstrated how corporate narratives are being imposed as a strategy to produce their futurist project. Furthermore, this future-making is a matter of power that is not and cannot be exclusive to these visions, regardless of how unevenly it is felt and experienced. Indeed, as thinkers like Anna Kornbluh (2023) and Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2019) have proposed, the future has been closed off. Adkins (26) summarizes the scene:

It is these long-term shifts in capital accumulation, especially an intensification of the capacities of capital to assemble and mobilize labor in time, that, for Berardi, account for the closing down of the temporal form of the future—indeed, that have opened out an eternal present in which the future cannot be known or sensed and is beyond the grasp of human intervention. The future has, in short, closed down because capital requires workers to exist in a never-ending present.

For Berardi and other “postfuturist” theorists, this is the “generalized condition” of our time, reflecting Kornbluh’s argument about a “crisis of futurity” as discussed in the introduction.⁴⁸ This dissertation, though, has sought to articulate not only how these tech companies have admittedly weaponized this condition of the closed-down-future, but also, building from Adkins and others, that this is an insufficient explanation of how futurity exists in our lives, or how it can be used or re-formed. If we think through and with futurity as John Urry (2011, 189) does, with an understanding that “power should be

⁴⁸ It’s worth noting that Adkins’ critique, of course, extends beyond this gesture, as the rationality of the “logic of speculation” that her book explores has much more to say about how these temporal and social politics are manifested by putting money into motion, as discussed in chapters two and three of this dissertation.

viewed as significantly a matter of uneven future-making,” we realize that this is not so much a crisis as an opportunity.

These platforms have sought to close off the future, but future-making is not so easily monopolized.

Critical future research, by myself and other scholars, must continue to critique and question corporate narratives of temporal power, charting the tactics and strategies that are imposed so that other actors, networks, organizations, and groups can learn from them to pre-shape other futures. If we accept that we exist in a time with unprecedented claims about the future, with endless futures seemingly taking shape all at once, we must de-trivialize this work, hold this uneven future-making to account where we can, and take very seriously existing projects and experiments that reject these futures in favour of something else — what else is being created already, and what else could be? For my own purposes, I intend to carry this forward through research in labour futures and, to incorporate an element that informs my thinking but remained beyond the scope of this particular project, the promises and productive contradictions of queer futurities as one method not only to imagine otherwise, as we often say, but to help reframe the very processes and practices of future-making. There are many other avenues critical future studies and cultural studies scholars can take to address these significant questions and problems of futurity, and this dissertation has sought to suggest just a few.

As Orson Welles reminded us in the 1972 documentary *Future Shock*, “the future need not be blindly accepted.” In other words, this move to the closed-off future, this temporal impotence, is quite explicitly, as I have intended to demonstrate, narrativized with specific paternalistic intention, and we can learn from where they succeed and also

from where they fall short. These stories, even those structured by a moral-economic power (however self-imposed), reveal much about how the future is imagined and how it can be reimagined. We can remove or clarify their obfuscations and challenge or refuse their deferrals. To do so, as Gilles Deleuze (1992, 4) argued, we need “only to look for new weapons.” This is a commitment to being clear-eyed about what currently actually exists, and envisioning what has not yet occurred — and struggling to get there.

We can imagine alternative futures, yes, *if* we remove the future of the self from the future of the platform. These futures look very different, if only we reclaim them.

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