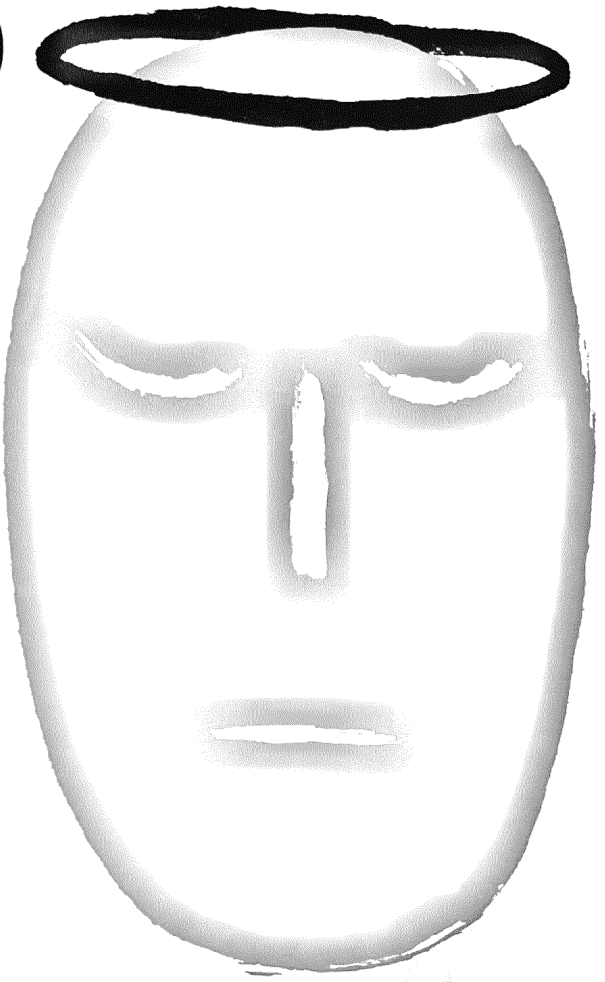
REAL REVIEW 10



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REAL REVIEW
What it means to live today

Issue for Autumn 2020
RRP £9
ISBN 978-1-9164068-8-9

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First there was panic. Then our stress gave way to boredom (and even a placid enjoyment). Now we feel a confusing mix of frustration, optimism, exhaustion, vitality, disbelief, acceptance, and sadness. We are mourning our lost futures, struggling to locate personal grief within the universal trauma of our species. We are adrift, unsure how to navigate a fluid landscape that seems ad hoc, disordered and dangerous. The unpredictability of our daily lives is also distracting us from deeper structural changes taking place. Even as we bear witness to the greatest civil rights struggle of a generation, the public sphere is imploding. We are floating in a civic vacuum. Democracies generate political agency through debate, protest, discussion and freedoms (of movement and association). These are all being suppressed. Often for good reasons, we are acclimatising to unprecedented levels of surveillance, control and precarity.

The pandemic is only a reminder that our societies were already unsustainable: plagued by disequilibria, inequalities and injustices. We can't go back, but we don't want to. Nor can we go on like this much longer. What will emerge from such a transitional phase, when the civic body is so lacking in health (physical, moral, political and economic)? There is much talk of combatting the novel virus with other forms of newness: new beginnings, new deals, new normals, clean slates, rebirths and fresh starts. Yet many of these visions do not account for the violence of fragile power, or the sheer magnitude of change required. Meaningful renewal certainly entails several centuries of pain, imagination, sacrifice, and dedication.

The Renaissance was just such a period. From the 14th to 17th centuries, cultural figures (more than scientists, politicians or economists) consciously tried to redirect history. They were not trying to invent a new future, but recover one perceived as accidentally lost. The Renaissance acknowledged wrong turns, restored forgotten knowledge, and reconstructed alternatives. It put the past to work in service of the future. The Renaissance was not its own end, but a bridge from feudalism to modernity.

We do not need newness to cut short capitalist realism, to restore a degraded nature, to achieve greater equality. We only need to remember what it means to be radical: to act, speak and think as if we are ready to die with our next breath.

This issue is dedicated to the New Renaissance.

CAPTURE ALL
Peer Illner

In his latest novel, *The Topeka School*, Ben Lerner's protagonist, Adam Gordon, masters the art of the spread. Spreading, an amalgamation of "speed" and "reading", is a speaking technique developed during the 1980s in American high school debating societies. Replacing the traditional debating style of the postwar era – in which carefully-weighted arguments were thoughtfully pitched against each other for maximum rhetoric effect – spreading involves bombarding your opponent with the greatest possible number of claims in a limited space of time. Every argument not addressed by your opponent's retort is chalked up as your point, making quantity prevail over quality. A spreader's speech easily hits 300 words per minute. The conversational average is about 60 words. For Lerner, the spread is a general cultural style of late capitalist societies, visible in everything from TV commercials for prescription drugs, in which a monotonous voice rattles off possible risks and side-effects, to the "fine print" of banks and insurance companies. "The last thing one was supposed to do with those thousands of words", Lerner writes, "was to comprehend them."

If the seeds of the spread were sown in the 1980s and 1990s with the invention of the 24-hour news cycle and the bureaucratic inflation of the banking and insurance sectors, the smartphone has surely perfected it. Chief spreader among smartphone applications is WhatsApp, the Facebook-owned instant messaging app that has colonised our phone use and attention spans like no other. Indeed, WhatsApp is so entwined with the smartphone's core features, such as push notifications, that the two technologies have become virtually inseparable. As of this year, WhatsApp has over 2 billion users worldwide, making up a staggering 20 per cent of all smartphone use. As reported by internal statistics, WhatsApp processes a total of 65 billion messages per day, amounting to 29 million messages per minute. After Facebook and Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp is the third most downloaded app of the last decade.

Further compounding this communicative bloat, research shows that WhatsApp use triggers strong compulsive behaviour. The app is engineered to make its user lose track of time; customers often report using their device for longer than originally intended, getting lost in the jungle of messages, notifications and forwards. Almost half of all smartphone owners use their phone both in the last five minutes before going to sleep, and within the first five minutes of waking up. It is not uncommon for people to awake to 80+ unread messages in various group chats, written at all times of the day in different timezones worldwide. Psychologists have long linked smartphone overuse to the same addictive patterns observed in substance abuse. Rather than neurotic millennials bringing their obsessions to a new medium, however, WhatsApp is compulsive by design.

It's *raison d'être* is the spread; that is, as much communication, as fast as possible.

Media theory teaches us there is a compulsive element pertaining to all modern communication technologies. Writing on the history of the Prussian postal service, the most advanced messaging system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cultural theorist Berhard Siegert remarks that:

> The post was dispatched twice a week and, since it also moved by night, it attained speeds that had been unknown until that time. Absolutism made words available to the people, and a medium available to the words, in order to make the people speak about themselves, to control their speech, and to finance the state's expenditures for such control with the postage charged for that speech [...] Institutionally, this meant that the postal system fell under police jurisdiction.

Early modern communication technology was firmly in the hands of the state, inciting the population to speak in order to gain knowledge of its activities. This intimate relation between communication and surveillance persists, except that today's media channels have moved into private hands. Like the postal service, WhatsApp feeds on data, and if Prussian civil servants opened customers' mail in the eighteenth century, today's data flows are read by states and corporations alike. While not exactly absolutism, WhatsApp has been at the forefront of what media theorist Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism". Central to this latest capitalist mutation is the relentless collection of user data; Facebook, Google, WhatsApp, etc, are free of charge in exchange for the large-scale tracking of their users. Part of this data is sold off to clients for targeted ads, while most of it is now used by Silicon Valley companies to predict future population behaviour; highly priced raw materials for which Facebook's patrons, whether corporations or governments, are willing to pay a steep fee.

Moving beyond the capture of merely text-based data, on which the postal system still depended, Facebook extends its operations to the entire semantics of human emotion, mining gestures and facial expressions for their predictive value. This is the company's interest in encouraging photo sharing on its platform and on its subsidiaries Instagram and WhatsApp. Today, Facebook is working together with affective computing companies, such as Realeyes, that algorithmically aggregate huge datasets of expressions, gestures, and behaviours to predict users' future moods and structures of feeling. These often unconscious signs that elude the control of language are seen as sure-fire indicators of everything from consumer taste to voting patterns. We are giving away our state of mind, opinions and emotions without even being aware of it.

As with all statistical operations, quantity determines quality, since the algorithms' predictive accuracy

increases with larger datasets. For Zuboff, this logic explains Facebook's aggressive monopoly tendencies:

> Facebook's Zuckerberg [paid] "astronomical" prices for a "fast and furious" parade of typically unprofitable startups like virtual reality firm Oculus ($2 billion) and the messaging application WhatsApp ($19 billion), thus ensuring Facebook's ownership of the gargantuan flows of human behaviour that would pour through these pipes. Consistent with the extraction imperative, Zuckerberg told investors that he would not consider driving revenue until the service reaches "billions" of users."

While the merger between Facebook and WhatsApp caused widespread outrage with security-conscious users, as well as the European Commission, for fears that it would increase the data-driven control of its populace, the constant wiretap is mandated by surveillance capitalism's very business model. Although in the wake of the takeover, the company initially insisted it would be impossible to link WhatsApp profiles to their Facebook counterparts, its 2016 service and privacy update included the combination of the two profiles, provoking a 110 million dollar fine from the European Commission for misinformation and the violation of the EU's Merger Regulations. What is surprising, however, is not that Facebook aggregates information from its various services but that the European Commission ever believed that it wouldn't.

From the Prussian postal service to WhatsApp, one large accumulation of data. Media theory insists on the continuous nature of this development, in which communication channels become evermore differentiated, moving from a multi-purpose network to transport troops and commodities to a fine-grained messaging service to surveil the population. In the words of media theorist Friedrich Kittler:

> Until the parallel development of railways and telegraphy, Europe's state postal systems – which functioned more or less regularly after the Thirty Years' War – transported people, letters or printed matter, and goods in the same carriage [...] Modernity, in contrast, began with a process of differentiation that relieved the postal system of goods and persons, making them relatively mobile on tracks or roads.

Rather than endorsing this story of continuous growth, we should insist on the contingent nature of technological advances, which are often discovered in response to socioeconomic crises. Zuboff shows how, as with countless capitalist innovations before it, Silicon Valley discovered data surveillance in response to its market collapse. After the dotcom crash, in which the hope that had been invested in venture-backed internet firms went up in smoke, online companies were scrambling for a new business model to generate revenue. In a crisis-born epiphany, Google discovered the profitability of their enormous cache of user data, which was initially just a by-product of their search engine function. As Zuboff specifies:

> The raw materials that had been solely used to improve the quality of search results would now also be put to use in the service of targeting advertising to individual users. Some data would continue to be applied to service improvement, but the growing stores of collateral signals would be repurposed to improve the profitability of ads for both Google and its advertisers. These behavioural data available for uses beyond service improvement constituted a surplus, and it was on the strength of this behavioural surplus that the young company would find its way to the "sustained and exponential profits" that would be necessary for survival.

Zooming out further, we can argue that the strategy of aggregating an enormous mass of user data originated in the economic crash of the 1970s that ended decades of capitalist expansion in the West. After a steep drop in industrial profits, capital sought to cushion the blow to its revenue through financialisation: the growth of financial tools and instruments, sold as bets on future gains. The financial fix shifted the economy from productive industries, based on labour, to "fictitious capitals" based on credit. The difference between productive and credit assets is that, while productive industries depend on growth rates to flourish, financial industries such as real estate, banking and data collection, can survive on minimal growth through aggregate mass alone. If there is enough concentrated mass, even low-growth rates can yield sufficient profits.

When growth rates stagnated after the 1970s, it became clear that capital-intensive firms had to increase their asset mass if they wanted to survive. Observing our low-growth economic environment, the Marxist geographer David Harvey has recently commented on the apparent paradox that at a certain point of capitalist development "the rate of profit may be falling but the mass of profit may be rising." This insight makes sense of Silicon Valley's shift to data accumulation post-dotcom crash, allowing us to see surveillance as capitalism's get-out-of-jail-free card for low-growth times. In the years following the market collapse, Google was able to bounce back through the sheer mass of data. Facebook turned the behavioural surplus into its business model, perfected in relentless imperial expansion and tireless user tracking. For now, Facebook's growth rates are buoyant. Given its monopolistic market dominance, there is no reason to think it should fear rainy days ahead. At least, as long as we keep the spread up.