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A Hacker Manifesto by McKenzie Wark (2004, Harvard University Press)

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Intellectual property may become the defining question of our times for those who work in and between the media and the academy. McKenzie Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto* is a major intervention in this arena, one that suggests new ways of asking (and answering) "the property question." And as any good manifesto must be, the book is both provocative and likely to be polarising.

The book builds its argument upon powerful concepts Wark has been articulating for over a decade: the vector (the means of communication of information); telesthesia (perception at a distance); and third nature ("an ecology of images which may yet become an image of a new ecology"). Applying these useful concepts, Wark maps out the coordinates of this third nature, through sections exploring education, history, nature and representation among other topics. At the centre of this map is the figure of the hacker.

The term "hacker" is used throughout in a sense derived from its early use, as popularised by Steven Levy in his 1984 journalistic history *Hackers*. Levy applied the term to the innovators and designers of the early computer industry. In this original usage, a hack was an elegant solution to a technological problem. Hacking was about improving systems rather than crashing them, about sharing information rather than stealing or changing it. The early hackers made computer breakthroughs, not break-ins.

Obviously, the word "hacker" itself has since been distorted and debased through moral panic. Yet the hacker world-view was pivotal in the development of both the personal computer and the Internet, and remains central to important projects such as open source software (Linux) and open publishing (Indymedia). Along with the figure of the cyborg, the hacker is one of the key tropes in the ongoing mythmaking of the new media environment, and Wark draws on this skilfully. Wark's most important move in this book is to extend the concept beyond computing. Hackers, for Wark, are all those who work with ideas, with the creation of new concepts from raw information. So not just programmers, but poets, mathematicians, musicians and biologists as well:

"We are the hackers of abstraction. We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colourings, we are the abstracters of new worlds" (thesis 002).

Wark's hackers (authors and artists, researchers and geeks) create concepts. Yet those concepts' means of distribution (vectors), their patenting and copyrighting, are increasingly in the name of, and on the terms of, others — whom Wark labels the vectoralist class. From here he explores the emerging intellectual property extremism (or fundamentalism) which can be seen as the class warfare battlefield of the twenty-first century. The manifesto aims, then, to illuminate common interests among otherwise disconnected hacker cultures and to develop nothing less than a hacker class consciousness: "to make manifest our origins, our purpose and our interests" (thesis 003).

The book can be usefully read against the work of Lawrence Lessig, the preeminent figure in the intellectual property arena at present. Wark is generous in his account of Lessig here, but argues that Lessig's faith in policy and law is mocked by their increased co-option by "vectoralist interests." Instead, Wark suggests a need for hackers to develop "forms of organising free collective expression" (thesis 23), to hack the concept of property itself, and to do this within a gift economy. The hacker class must hack new strategies in order to safeguard its long term interest in access to information.

This reviewer is not entirely confident that the original sense of the term “hacker” can be reclaimed in the way Wark proposes (I have argued elsewhere that proponents of electronic civil disobedience made a strategic error in accepting the rebranding of their work by others as “hacktivism”, as the baggage of “hacking” is now perhaps terminally laden with connotations of criminality). But the attempt to reclaim the language in its early, finer sense is itself a good illustration of the generosity which characterises Wark’s aims and approach.

A Hacker Manifesto is identifiably a work of media theory, yet in one important sense it has little to say *directly* about the media — which is to say that Wark is careful to avoid making his argument hostage to ephemeral examples from popular culture: examples which quickly date, and in so doing appear to date the concepts as well (a trap which haunts much media scholarship). In this way the book is very much of its time, but not bound to it.

A Hacker Manifesto is beautifully written in spare, elegant prose of rare economy. The book is structured in short numbered theses, borrowing from Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, and these are often built around irresistible aphorisms — “education is slavery”, “invention is the mother of necessity”, “information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains.” Other versions of this text exist online, but this is the one to get: the notes alone (exclusive to this version) are stimulating reading, and the book is handsomely designed. It is a work which deserves to be widely read, used, discussed, taught, argued with — and hacked.

Links:

Creative Commons <http://creativecommons.org>

Free Software Foundation <http://www.gnu.org/fsf/fsf.html>

Critical Art Ensemble <http://www.critical-art.net>

CircleID: <http://www.circleid.com>

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