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Arcades, Mall Rats, and Tumblr Thugs

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(http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/arcades-mallrats-tumblr-thugs/blissmall/)

If you want to know about the halcyon years of the World Wide Web, ask one of the elders and they'll tell you that the wild frontier once consisted of a few scrappy settlements, pitched in rickety code, on a seemingly infinite prairie of possibility. "Not like now," they'll tell you, sadly, and shake their heads at what became of it all: the great digital dream of libertarian net-autonomy replaced by a monopoly of mall-like social-media platforms, where the kids all hang out in their outlandish avatars, talking to one another in a broken argot of phonetics and hieroglyphs. A generation of *users*, whose addiction mutates and proliferates each day anew. Seeking novel strains of viral data with which to feed its own sickness, it chews on itself for days before regurgitating its own guts in a feedback loop of 24-bit RGB rainbows. Nowadays, it's simply safer to stay on eBay.

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image by author

In a recent article for the *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/the-death-of-the-cyberflâneur.html?pagewanted=all>), Evgeny Morozov delivered a speculative eulogy for the “*cyberflâneur*” — who died, or perhaps failed to materialize, in the face of Facebook and Groupon and the totalizing influence of the “app paradigm.” Morozov even waxes lyrical about the golden days of the dial-up connection, as though remembering the swathe of the plough in the field. Where this all once was grass, he laments, the information superhighway now runs through the middle; pity the snotty Tumblr thug who will never know the wholesome pleasure of strolling endless dreaming fields of Euclidean space with his own handmade code as map and compass. There will be no strolling or loitering — either with or without intent — on Morozov’s Web. It’s a bleak place with no boardwalk, where wall-to-wall ads, targeted to our needs and desires, map the perimeter of task-based playbor zones, homogenous and intractable. Worst of all, “the tyranny of the social” will prevent us from enjoying seven-hour Bela Tarr flicks with our friends. The good times are gone.

This discourse of virtual antiquity is notable, since so much internet theory has been defined in part by a sense of newness and speculation. Old-school source texts even include several works of fiction (Gibson, Stephenson et al.). “Much of the excitement about the internet and virtual reality is generated by a sense of what it will become,” Nicholas Mirzoeff wrote in 2008, going on to describe Gibson’s hyperurban hyperrealities as “quintessentially modernist.” But 2008 was, like, *years* ago.

Like Gibson’s dystopias, Morozov’s lament — ironically enough — echoes the malaise of the very moderns to whom he refers, fretting as they did that the new urbanopolis would signal an end to slow pleasures and community spirit. Despite all that Cartesian stuff, the Moderns’ understanding of the self was essentially corporeal, and the spatial anxiety of modern urbanism appears as a crisis of embodiment, or personhood, in the flux of big-city time-space. Even Freud, who should have known better, drew out Sherlock Holmes sketches of Little Hans’s neighborhood as though to demonstrate that his patient’s neurosis was present precisely where his body had walked. Bridge and door, porch, and *platz*. Even the machines were bodies, big bleeding greasy *Übermenschen* puffing out steam like smokers and guzzling up coal as though it were potatoes. “In short,” wrote De Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, “space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.” The phallic flâneur, in perambulating his body promiscuously around the city, was engaging in a kind of territorial pissing against the stream, which was in essence the zoning of all decent working life, and of labor itself as experienced among

“Such a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments that the individualist notion of personality can... scarcely maintain itself in the face of it.” (Georg Simmel, 1903; *The Metropolis and Mental Life*)

the working classes. Like most radicals recognized by modernity, the flâneur remains ever a bourgeois male figure, since there are no reports of workers or women practicing the fine art of flânerie.

Evgeny Morozov writes from Palo Alto, a Californian charter city established by the founding father of Stanford University, at which Morozov is a visiting fellow. Palo Alto, nestled in a dewy corner of Silicon Valley, has been at various times home to Google, Paypal, Sun Microsystems and Hewlett-Packard: a prime piece of sun-drenched, Nor-Cal sprawl. Social media is to the Read/Write Web (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4132752.stm>) what sprawl is to the metropolis of modernity: a homogenous, cancerous, rhizomatic junkspace that expands exponentially outward on a sludgy wave of strip malls and sponsored links, greed and induced demand. This ruthless modernization produces miles of “junkspace” — a term coined by the architect Rem Koolhaas, who wrote that “more and more, more is more. Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of seduction... Junkspace is like being condemned to a perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends ... Seemingly an apotheosis, spatially grandiose, the effect of its richness is a terminal hollowness, a vicious parody of ambition that systematically erodes the credibility of building, possibly forever.” Koolhaas was referring to the airport and the strip-mall and the single-zone sprawl, but he could have been talking about Facebook.

Kids who grow up on the suburban fringes of, say, Palo Alto (or Anywhere, Wisconsin, Washington, whatever; or, indeed, Birmingham, England), might spend their Saturdays, as we did, drinking lurid booze out of bike flasks on the mica-flecked floors of shopping malls until close of business at night. We didn’t have money to spend, but we drifted around the stores anyway, trying on high-heeled boots or shoplifting chocolate bars before drifting out again, and on to the next one, and so on, all over the mall, and as Morozov puts it “taking in its noises, its chaos, its heterogeneity, its cosmopolitanism.” There wasn’t anything else to do. Like the flâneur, we weren’t working, or doing anything decent or useful; we even recognized our uselessness as a kind of radical generationality, and wore it like a bad handle. The Arcade was the original iron-and-glass shopping mall, and the flâneur — affluent, indolent, and out for a good wasted time — was the original mall rat.

Full disclaimer: I’m not a digital native. By the time Yahoo bought GeoCities, I myself was a vagrant stad-rat without so much as a PC for tetrakis. By the time I could wrangle a personal computer, Web 2.0 was already in session, and the once-empty net was noisy with the chatter of a billion bots and teeming with the traffic of a million virtual bodies,

hurtling through timespace in the real time of a hundred different time zones. I was all agog, like a hick who moves to the city. Plus, I'd grown up girl in meatspace and was excited to imagine a mode of interaction that might mean I'd be able to say my piece without my tits getting in the way of the discourse. Indeed, the feminists were among the first to imagine the transgressive possibilities of postbodied technology — Donna Haraway in her hugely influential 1991 *Cyborg Manifesto*

(<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html>) imagines a post-Cartesian hybrid: “a creature in a postgender world.”

It took about 350 years, but finally, in virtuality, *cogito ergo sum* has come to mean something very concrete and actual. Now is a place, a co-ordinate; i am where “I” am not, and iThink (type, write, and right-click) therefore I am. If space is a practiced place, then collective navigation produces the commons. Like mall rats flipping tricks in a parking lot, users exhibit a feral fluency in the use (and transgression, as it is reimagined daily) of this common timespace: we tune out the ads and get on with the serious business of flirting, hustling, hanging out and talking shit. We *know* that this serious business is affective labor which produces capital for the custodians of netspace; indeed, meme culture (including but not limited to YouTube parody, stock photo art, cut-ups and image macros) can be seen as the user asserting a subjectivity that exists and thrives despite (and beyond) her status as targeted marketing demographic. Like the Occupy movement, these activities amount to a kind of politics of the public (virtual) body in (virtual) space. We may never own the means of production as such, but will continue to assert, pervert and subvert the commons anyway: a gesture of post-corporeal territorial pissing which necessitates neither phallus nor spray-can nor html.

“Compared with Facebook’s highly deterministic universe,” writes Morozov, even Microsoft’s unimaginative slogan from the 1990s — ‘Where do you want to go today?’ — sounds excitingly subversive.” There’s *nowhere* to “go” now that the green fields of the matrix all got built over by junkspace conglomerates. But so what? I’ll meet you on Twitter and let’s get fucked up. The flâneur, according to Morozov, is someone who doesn’t know what he cares about: If that’s what it takes, then surely flânerie is alive and well over on Yelp and YouTube and 4chan. But I guess Morozov hasn’t spent too much time on 4chan lately, and who can blame him. It’s not a great place to go alone after dark. Better stick to eBay, and reading through your ads on Facebook, persuading yourself not to click.

Previously by

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