



Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World

Jonathan Crary

London and New York, NY: Verso, 2022

ISBN: 9-781784-784447.

134 pp.

“If there is to be a livable and shared future on the planet, it will be a future offline, uncoupled from the world – destroying systems and operations of 24/7 capitalism (p.1).”

The penetration of the online world into every nook and cranny of our lives is so debilitating that the only hope for the future is for it to be eradicated in its entirety. That the online world is controlled by a small number of ‘sociocidal’ corporations means, inevitably, that all remaining aspects of social relations have been commodified, with our supposed leisure activities becoming work on behalf of the corporations and our presence a form of relentless competition to be liked and retweeted. The attack on the online world is not unusual – it was nicely done by, for example, Davies (2020) among others. However, most observers, while decrying the negative aspects of online activities, nevertheless assume that it must persist into the future with the hope that it could somehow be tamed and rehabilitated. It seems, after all, difficult to imagine moving towards a means of controlling the climate emergency without online meetings and communications, sharing of information to co-ordinate production and distribution and just generally living the lives to which we have rapidly become accustomed. Crary argues against this position: the Eurocentrism of the imposition of western technology not only intensifies the inequalities that are embedded within the logic of capitalism but also ensures that no one is permitted to escape the worldwide matrix of such unequal relations. Capitalism requires resources and, in a world of scarce resources that means that conflict is part of everyday life and must be presented as such. The neverendingness of the need for continued production and accumulation means a constant search and struggle for resources that results in the logical conclusion of scorched earth capitalism. To avoid the looming destruction of the Earth as a habitable planet, therefore,

it is necessary to dismantle every part of the networks and platforms that support the corporations fulfilling their devastating destinies.

While I am open to this argument, on the whole, without necessarily agreeing with it, I find there are some epistemological issues which prevent me from engaging with it fully. Fundamentally, the problem is one of evidence. It is possible to make an argument without a foundation of evidence (there are numerous examples of people doing just this using everyday media) but such arguments do not convince the sceptical mind and eventually will be dismissed. However, it is also possible to mount an argument based on evidence which is not visible to others and this can be just as unconvincing. When authors rely on a common core of agreed truths that do not need to be stated or even acknowledged – like Christian evangelists and the King James bible or Foucault’s relationship to Marx – then those who are not part of the same system of belief wonder how assertions can be supported. This is not what Crary has done but the result is in some ways similar. Assertions are made, many provocative and controversial, without either direct evidence to support them or, so far as I can tell from inspecting the references provided, citations from other works which would provide that evidence. Instead, the argument is supported by conceptual and perhaps aesthetic means. Consider, for example, the development of the argument on pages 101-4 about seeing and the eye. Crary begins by discussing the ways in which platform capitalism requires the movement of the eyes and, at the same time, subverts the traditional and historical forms of eye movements that play such an important part of the establishment of social relations. The various forms of eye contact are gone through and then we reach this passage:

“How often have we noticed of someone we know well that the colo[u]r of their eye shifts in different light? A wonder of the iris is that, for an observer, it is never identical to itself: its colo[u]rs are not static and thus unpossessable. Hegel, in his Lectures on Art, remarked on the singular brilliance of the iris and declared that it could never be authentically depicted in art (p.104).”

This concludes the paragraph and the next begins with an excursion into the work of the art historian Hanneke Grootemboer who, like Hegel, does not appear anywhere else in the text. This form of development of a theme is what I describe as ‘aesthetic,’ in that they seem to rub along together reasonably well but are based on reasoning rather than science. The relationship between the different authors is not philosophical (or at least is not laid out along those lines) or evidential but imaginative. I do not want to think of myself (and would not want others to do so either) as a small-minded Anglo-Saxon empiricist but I want arguments to help mobilise movements to bring about an end to inequalities, commodification and the climate emergency that can be used in conflict of discourse and these I would find difficult to deploy.

I note that the author is a professor of modern art and theory and that this book is described, on the book cover, as an ‘essay’ and a ‘polemic.’ Certainly it does not have any great length to it. It seems to me to have, in terms of structure and method, to have a similarity to Benedict Anderson’s (2006) *Imagined Communities*, which similarly skipped from one text or author to another, never to return, in order to construct a proposed model for understanding a previously little explored phenomenon. Anderson’s book is more successful in this regard.

Scorched Earth is a powerful read with some innovative and insightful thoughts about the nature of capitalism and its destructive impact on the world. It should inspire many readers to think again about the way their everyday lives are constructed.

References

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities*. London and New York, NY: Verso [originally 1983].

Davies, W. (2020). *This is not normal: The collapse of liberal Britain*. London and New York, NY: Verso.

John Walsh, Krirk University