

Aesthetic Capitalism

by Yorick Josua Berta

I/1

Sit down in a comfortable position. Make sure that you sit upright, spine and head aligned. Take a deep breath. Breathe in. Hold your breath. Now exhale slowly. Breathe in again, longer and deeper this time. If you like, you can exhale loudly. Let it all go. Repeat this a couple of times, until you feel your mind calming down, your muscles relax and all the stress accumulated during your day ebb away.

Let your breath become lighter, thinner, effortless. Just breathe in, and breathe out when you need to. You can start to move your attention from your breathing to your body. Become aware of all its different parts, from the top of the head to the tip of your toe. Feel the tickling of your hair on your scalp, the pressure on your forehead, the slight headache in your temples. Just notice it and let it go. Move down to your eyes, the position of the eyeballs in their sockets and the flutter of your eyelids. Feel the air flowing through your nose while breathing. The cool sensation of air entering your nostrils and the warm sensation of air exiting your nostrils. Move down to your lips, feel their wetness or dryness, then your jaw, your throat, and down to your torso.

Try to notice any sensations that arise, just notice them and let them go. Feel the slight tickling of your shirt on your chest. The pressure of the chair or the floor against your bones. The vibrations of the stock market fluctuations on your back. Feel the world economy change every second, the subtle throbbing of investors buying shares and the sudden, strong vibrations of a crashing stock. Just notice it and let it go.

I/2

On the two-hour drive from Vienna to Linz I spoke with the blablacar-driver about trading. As a tech savvy multitasker, he let his Tesla drive on its own to talk to me about stock market trading. All the while, he was actually trading on the car touchscreen. His 'portfolio' contained livestock, grains, and steel. He told me about the effects of trading on his life. He would get up in the morning and have breakfast while checking his stocks. His wife wouldn't like it. Sometimes, he would notice unusual fluctuations on the stock market, turn on the TV and learn about a catastrophic event taking place somewhere in the world. He told me about the Brexit referendum. On the day of the vote, he called in sick to watch his shares. He stayed up all night. On the following morning – when Brexit was announced – he held on to some shares despite the crashing prices, sold others and eventually turned a profit. For him, Brexit really was the beginning of a time of new prosperity.

His trading established a direct link between his own life – his financial situation, the way

he spent his time, his relationship with friends and family – and the global economic system. This link was voluntary, financially mostly beneficial and somewhat gamified.¹ For most people, this link to the global economic system is not at all voluntary, beneficial and gamified. For some others, like me, this link is hardly existent, as part of the privilege of living in a peaceful bubble, like Thomas Gray's boys at Eton:

[...]

Yet ah! why should they know their fate?

Since sorrow never comes too late,

And happiness too swiftly flies.

Thought would destroy their paradise.

No more; where ignorance is bliss,

'Tis folly to be wise.²

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In his book *Aesthetic Capitalism*, Gernot Böhme attempts to sketch out our current capitalist condition and suggests ways of self-liberation within this condition. For Böhme, the capitalist system in its aesthetic stage transforms needs into desires, which can by definition not be fulfilled. It therefore establishes endless consumer demand and facilitates constant economic growth.³ By succumbing to this imperative of constant consumption and surrounding oneself with personally chosen 'luxury' goods, the consumer subject is promised to realise itself as an aesthetic individual. This aesthetic individualism governs social distinction, in the palpable differences of taste. For Böhme, the most suitable form of resistance against this aesthetic paradigm of capitalism is consumer asceticism.⁴

Here, I want to supplement Böhme's notion of aesthetic capitalism by exploring its various meanings. For 'aesthetic' not only denotes the quasi-artistic self-stylisation through luxury goods, as Böhme has put it, but the faculty of affective sensory perception, the *aisthesis*. Aesthetic capitalism thus points towards the systemic facilitation and manipulation of the sensory apparatus as a source of pleasure and discomfort. This does not only allude to the manipulation of affect and emotion by the cultural industry or the daily flood of images produced by platform-enabled entrepreneurs, influencing us through their authenticist branding. Aesthetic capitalism goes beyond the images and the ever-new dodges of the distance of vision. It goes beyond pictorial incursion to establish multisensory immersion. It penetrates the sensory modalities, the corporeal basis of aesthetic perception. The keyword for this endeavor is called sensory augmentation – the attempt to technologically modify the aesthetic faculties. To fathom this kind of aesthetic capitalism, I want to introduce a wearable technology which is being developed in the sun-drenched laboratories of the Silicon Valley.

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He referred to the part of his capital which he invested on the stock market as his "play money". I could see it in form of a tiny five-digit number fluctuating on the upper right corner of his screen. This dry representation of his capital was sharply contrasted by the Tesla we were driving in.

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Thomas Gray, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, 1747, URL: <https://www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?text=odec> (22.03.2020).

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Gernot Böhme, *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2016, p. 11.

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Böhme 2016, p. 24.

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This wearable technology is called „Versatory Extra-Sensory Transducer“ („VEST“). The VEST has been developed by the start-up *neosensory* under the direction of neuroscientist David Eagleman, promoted at TED and financed via kickstarter.⁵

The VEST is a wearable technology, which – unsurprisingly – can be worn as a vest. On its back is an array of vibratory motors, which are connected to a smartphone app interface. Thus, the VEST functions as a more flexible and portable version of the famous vibratory dentist chair from Paul Bach-y-Rita’s experiments with sensory augmentation.⁶ While Bach-y-Rita’s experiments were aimed at giving blind people a quasi-sense of vision, the VEST can go far beyond that: given the right interface, the VEST can digitalise any kind of information and transduce it into tactile sensations.

This flexible technology has quickly been utilised in less noble ways than helping blind people manoeuvre through ableist environments.⁷ In the very same TED-talk Eagleman is presenting the VEST to a wider audience for the first time, he moves away from the topic of sensory substitution to introduce an experiment in which participants are linked via the VEST to the fluctuations of the stock market.

In this experiment, the fluctuations of the stock market caused by shareholders buying and selling stocks are transduced into vibrations on the VEST. The aim of this experiment is to train the participants in recognising patterns in the stock market fluctuations, giving them an advantage in a trade which remunerates high-speed information transmission, from the stock exchange up to the human or artificial brain of the trader.⁸ Eagleman’s team hopes that the pattern recognition will eventually happen subconsciously, therefore saving the time a sensory stimulus needs to be perceived consciously.⁹ Thus, what legitimises this attempt to transduce the collective æffects of the market economy into the sensing body is the prospect of shortening the split second delay between sensation and perception.¹⁰

This way, the same device which enables blind people to independently and reliably perceive ableist environments in quasi-visual ways can be used to establish an immediate, affective sensory link between the individual and the capitalist system. This link promises profitable advantages in the swift game of stock market trading, providing the necessary tool for the fleeting prosperity of trading entrepreneurs.

More fundamentally, it is part of the post-industrial trend towards a wholesome, playful economy: the image of alienated workers ‘just doing their job’ is replaced by engaged Hans-in-Lucks who take the new responsibilities pressed on them by neoliberal imperatives with energy and joy. This neoliberal individual is formed not only aesthetically, in Böhme’s sense, or as think tanks such as the “House for Beautiful Business”¹¹ imagine it, but aesthetically, through sense-optimisation by awareness-techniques and sensory technologies. As part of this wholesome economy, the VEST embraces the fascination with mindfulness, awareness and pleasurable sensation, not to shield the individual and its immediate sensory experience against the wider horizon of systemic impositions, but to actively reconcile the two. This way, the VEST clearly defeats the purpose of a vest, namely to shield the individual against the environment.¹²

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<https://neosensory.com/>; <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/324375300/vest-a-sensory-substitution-neuroscience-project/description>; https://www.ted.com/talks/david_eagleman_can_we_create_new_senses_for_humans (22.3.2020).

6

Paul Bach-y-Rita, “Sensory Plasticity. Applications to a Vision Substitution System”, in: *Acta Neurologica Scandinavica* 43(4), 1967, pp. 417–426.

7

In the series *Westworld* (Season 2, Episode 7, “Les Écorchés”), the VEST celebrated its speculative debut in a military context.

8

As another hobby trader on the very same route from Vienna to Linz told me a couple of weeks later, the rents in parts of New York’s Manhattan district are highly affected by their proximity to the Wall Street. Companies renting apartments close to the Wall Street benefit from faster connections to the stock market. These monetary benefits in automated trading are worth the costs of renting a multi-million-dollar apartment just to set up a computer in it.

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See Helen Thomson, “Try my Extrasensory Jacket on for Size”, in: *New Scientist* 228, 2015, pp. 26–28. Where the stimulus lands on the spectrum of consciousness, and if we therefore want to call it affect, feeling, prehension, sensation, or perception, depends, to my limited knowledge, on the three factors duration, intensity, and adaptation.

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See Benjamin Libet, *Mind Time. The Temporal Factor in Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004, for a neuroscientific treatise on this cognitive delay. For historical accounts of its measurement see Jimena Canales, *A Tenth of a Second. A History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

11

The *House of Beautiful Business* is a “a global think tank to make humans more human and business more beautiful” (<https://houseofbeautifulbusiness.com/#home-about-2020>, 9.6.2020). It is part of *The Business Romantic Society* (“We make business more beautiful in the age of machines”, <https://thebusinessromanticsociety.com/>, 9.6.2020), which in turn is an enterprise by Tim Leberecht, author of the book *The Business Romantic* (Paris: Piatkus, 2015). Here, the notoriously inspiring TED-speaker and “curator of experiences” Leberecht answers the question: “How can work be delightful—perhaps even magical? [...] In the face of eroding trust in capitalism, pervasive technology, and the desire to quantify our behaviors, The Business Romantic reveals the power of business to transcend mere rationality and self-interest and move toward deep, passionate exchanges that honor our most complete selves. From corporate strategy to the workplace, from product innovation to branding, customer relationships, and sales, Leberecht presents ten ‘Rules of Enchantment’ that illustrate the value of choosing intimacy over transparency, mystery over clarity, devotion over data, vulnerability over control, delight over satisfaction, and love over liking” (backcover of *The Business Romantic*).

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Similarly, a playful economy defeats the purpose of a play, which is a voluntary, independent activity without material interest (see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London; Boston; Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949, p. 13).

So far, the VEST is just a prototype. The experiments with the stock market are not likely to yield any profitable results and wearables in general are voluntary and only temporary modifications. To interpret the VEST as a mindful reconciliation with capitalism thus might seem farfetched. However, it is a striking manifestation of the neoliberal economic culture and of the unabated significance of the figure of the cyborg, even though it has been largely scrapped from critical discourse.

In 1960, Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline proposed the term cyborg for “the exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously.”¹³ The VEST promises exactly this: unconscious homeostasis between individual and world system. A technocapitalist cyborg maintains its homeostasis by exchanging trader’s affects and market effects, indeed welding them together into a loop of affect. Seeing the VEST as a symbol of technocapitalist cyborgism reminds us of the fact that sensory augmentation does not have to function solely within the linearity of aesthetic object (stock market), medium (vest/skin) and subject. Augmentations might sense as they stimulate.¹⁴ This is also true for the possible development of wearables such as the VEST into permanent body-modifications. Subcutaneous vibratory motors do not add a throbbing second skin, but permeate the first. If the VEST helps “stitching together all the minds of the living”,¹⁵ body-modifications enable a stitch- and seamless flow of information, washing away trader and market in the “oceanic sentiment”¹⁶ of unity. Evidently, such an ocean of information will be tilled by data-mining companies.

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The VEST embodies a neoliberal imposition, de-alienating the individual by facilitating direct, aesthetic experiences of systemic dynamics and fostering the exploitable wish for community. Yet, it also represents the critique of these dynamics. In a twisted way, the VEST answers the call by critical scholars such as Fredric Jameson to develop “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping – a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system.”¹⁷ This call for an aesthetic representation of the global system and the subjective stand in it seems even more pressing in the age of seemingly unrepresentable systems of ubiquitous capture technologies generating gigantic data sets floating in intangible data clouds above hidden server farms. In its subconsciously working tactile setup, the VEST is, then, an aesthetic of the impossibility of cognitive mapping, an aesthetic of the difficulty to aesthetically represent the profound complexity of economic power relations as well as their deterritorialisation to a conscious, rational and visualising mind.

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Manfred E. Clynes & Nathan S. Kline, “Cyborgs and Space”, in: *Astronautics* Sept 1960, pp. 26-7 & 74-6, p. 26.

14

This is remindful of Luciana Parisi’s “technoecology of sensation”. Parisi, however, is eager to distinguish the ecological model from the cyborg: “Unlike the cyborg, bionic technologies highlight not the dematerialization of the body in information patterns, or the rematerialization of the biological in extrabiological context, but the biomathematical relatedness of distinct milieus of information, a nexus of felt relationality between inorganic and organic rates of sensing. [...] Here information is not transmitted between the environment, body, and machines, but an entire ecology of information sensing is at play in the movement of transmission between channels” (Luciana Parisi, “Technoecologies of Sensation”, in: Bernd Herzogenrath (ed.): *Deleuze/Guattari and Ecology*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 182-99, p. 188). See as well Erich Hörl, “Introduction to General Ecology. The Ecologization of Thinking”, in: Erich Hörl (ed.): *General Ecology*, London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2007, pp. 1-74, pp. 7-8.

15

“Technology is stitching together all the minds of the living, *wrapping the planet in a vibrating cloak of electronic nerves*, entire continents of machines conversing with one another, the whole aggregation watching itself through a million cameras posted daily. How can this not stir that organ in us that is sensitive to something larger than ourselves?” (Kevin Kelley, *What Technology Wants*, New York: Viking, 2010, p. 358; emphasis mine).

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Romain Rolland, “Letter to Sigmund Freud, December 5, 1927”, in: Francis Doré & Marie-Laure Prevost (eds.), *Selected Letters of Romain Rolland*, Delhi: Oxford UP, 1990, pp. 86-8, p. 88.

17

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991, p. 54. Cf. Rosi Braidotti’s “cartographies of the present” (Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory. The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, New York: Columbia UP, 2011, p. 271).

Pondering on global relations and one's place in them, critical scholars have often turned towards the concept of the sublime.¹⁸ The sublime aptly symbolises the impossibility of cognitive mapping, hindering critical lucidity as well as political action. However, in all its variants, the concept of the sublime confines critique to the colonising activity of an individual mind. Within the image of the sublime, the critical scholar becomes the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, sometimes humbled, sometimes megalomaniac.

This Wanderer might wear not a vest, but a VEST under his coat. If business can be beautiful, cyborgs can be Romantics, too. The Wanderer might stand on the cliff, glancing over the sea of fog, either in awe, or in tune. Yet, if the wind turns and the clouds thin out, all we see is dull matter, supporting our desire to be transcended.¹⁹

IV

Turning away from the foggy sea of grand concepts, I become aware of my sensory relation to the world. I begin to smell the rain from the street, hear the washing machine rumbling in the next room, I feel the laptop keys softly giving way to my fingertips, the bright light radiating from the display in front of my face. I feel the shiver when thinking about crashing stock prices and panicking herds, the imaginary throbbing of a vest I never wore, and the excitement of a Tesla car accelerating so fast that, for a split second, my intestines are floating in space. And I realise how hard it is to just notice it and let it go, because desires are sticky and my relation to the world is neither voluntary nor peaceful.

18

For the postmodern sublime, see Jameson 1991; Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime. Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1994, for the data sublime, see Julian Stallabrass, "What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography", in: *October* 122(1), 2007, pp. 71-90; Anthony McCosker & Rowan Wilken, "Rethinking 'Big Data' as Visual Knowledge: The Sublime and the Diagrammatic in Data Visualisation", *Visual Studies* 29(2), 2014, pp. 155–164, for the digital sublime see Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime. Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004, for the technological sublime see Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind. Innis, McLuhan, Grant*, Quebec: New World Perspectives, 1984; David Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, Boston: The MIT Press, 1996; Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, New York: Allworth, 1990; Eugénie Shinkle, "Video Games and the Technological Sublime", *Tate Papers* 14, 2010, URL: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/14/video-games-and-the-technological-sublime> (22.3.2020), for the ideological sublime see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso, 1989, for the sweatshop sublime see Bruce Robbins, "The Sweatshop Sublime", *PMLA* 117(1), 2002, pp. 84–97, for the psychiatric sublime see Nicholas Tromans, "The Psychiatric Sublime. The Sublime Object", *Tate Papers* 13, 2010, URL: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/13/the-psychiatric-sublime> (22.3.2020), for the capitalist sublime see Philip Ursprung, "Capitalist Sublime", in: Sarah Morris & Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds.), *An Open System Meets an Open System. Sarah Morris and Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation*, Wien: Springer, 2013, pp. 11-5; Eugénie Shinkle, "A Capitalist Sublime. Richard Serra", ASX, URL: <https://americansuburbx.com/2015/09/a-capitalist-sublime-richard-serra.html> (22.03.2020), for the capitalist, the ecological, the sexual, and the cinematic sublime see Luke White & Claire Pajaczkowska (eds.), *The Sublime Now*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2019, for the ridiculous sublime see Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. The latest attempt is, admittedly, my own, published in *Debates in Aesthetics* 15(1).

19

John Gerrard, *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma) 2015: afternoon*, video simulation of a Google server farm, 26 min, URL: https://youtu.be/_W3PYXb1ofk (15.5.2020).