

***Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen:
Myths and Allegories in the Digital Age,*
by Aleks Wansbrough. Bloomsbury, 2021,
pp. 207.**

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Mark Zuckerberg’s recent rebranding of Facebook as Meta was accompanied by the announcement of the Metaverse project—a so-far unrealised vision of interconnected augmented and virtual reality spaces accessible through digital devices like VR headsets and augmented reality glasses. Zuckerberg introduces the Metaverse in a glib promotional video on YouTube: we are shown how the Metaverse can transform our home and work environments into hybrid virtual spaces that will apparently lift us out of everyday banality. One only needs to put on a pair of augmented reality glasses to see, according to Zuckerberg, “an incredibly inspiring view of whatever you find most beautiful” (Meta). Metaverse participants can live vicariously through personalised avatars, and buy and sell virtual merchandise, property and NFTs. The video is a disturbing and saccharine articulation of the myth that technological innovations will improve lives and produce a digital utopia—a myth typically pushed by Big Tech CEOs such as Zuckerberg.

Such myths are the focus of Aleks Wansbrough’s *Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen: Myths and Allegories in the Digital Age*, a polemic against the mystification of our digital screens that is cleverly maintained by Big Tech to promote capitalist and neoliberal ideology. As Wansbrough succinctly puts it, “the market masks itself behind the notion of happiness” (44). Wansbrough’s painstaking analysis of how the market creates and maintains its masks is an important corrective against any naïve engagement with digital technologies. *Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen* is a pertinent critique of internet culture that demystifies digital technologies and explains how the pervasive influence of digital screens in everyday life relies on the power of capital. One of the strengths of Wansbrough’s polemic is that he does not disparage users of social media or pathologise them. Instead, he takes a nuanced approach, showing the diverse ways that individuals use digital technologies. Human actors are shown engaging, resisting or alternatively assisting the machine of digital capitalism to a greater or lesser extent.

Taking a cue from Karl Marx, who drew on philosophy, myth, history and literature to interpret and demystify capitalist production, Wansbrough takes an interdisciplinary approach, building his argument in a series of case studies encompassing film criticism, philosophy and popular culture. A Marxist analysis is employed to reveal how capitalist ideology is not only embodied in digital technologies, but also uses them to extend its tentacle-like reach into every aspect of our lives. Central to Wansbrough’s argument is the notion that the “myths commonly

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invoked” in discussions and critique of social media—such as that of Narcissus and Pandora’s Box—hide the workings of the capitalist system behind the scenes (vii). According to Wansbrough, these myths enchant digital technologies, clouding their status as commodities, but at the same times, an analysis of these myths provides important insights into how capitalism pulls the strings, and shapes our interaction with digital media.

Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen is unequivocal that the power of digital media to captivate, entertain, and become habit-forming has been carefully designed to make profits. Blaming ourselves or each other for being addicted to Facebook, YouTube or Instagram is misguided; instead, we need to understand the underlying structural causes of these phenomena. Big Tech is working behind the scenes, Wansbrough argues, creating the conditions of addiction to these platforms, but also providing oxygen to vulnerable and volatile individuals alike, particularly those on the far-right, because this is profitable (Karr; Horowitz and Purnell).

Mythologies

The Ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, the beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection and was turned into a flower, is often referenced in discussions about selfies and social media. Social media is regularly critiqued, particularly in mainstream media, for promoting the so-called narcissism that drives selfie culture, and selfie-takers are usually portrayed as narcissists—in the sense of the character trait of narcissism, not the pathological disorder. But within the vast scientific and psychological literature linking selfies to narcissism, scant attention is given to class, or economics and the market, and there is little analysis of the neoliberal forces at play in social networking sites (Diefenbach and Christoforakos). *Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen* successfully addresses this gap. Wansbrough refutes the oft-repeated idea that humans are inherently narcissistic, and that social media merely plays upon this trait. Instead, he astutely reveals how capitalist and neo-liberal logic encourages the very character traits criticised in selfie takers such as individualism, self-advertisement, self-interest, and insecurity—because these traits drive consumption and profit.

Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave, frequently interpreted as analogous to the cinema in academic and popular discourse, has more recently been used to interpret social media on public forums like Reddit, Quora and Medium, and by popular psychologists like Linda Escobar Olszewki, whose writings Wansbrough cites as exemplary of this thinking. Olszewki understands the Internet as a Platonic cave that traps individuals in a virtual world where they become obsessed with their projections and shadows. Wansbrough rightly points out the limitations with this analogy. Unlike the captive protagonists of Plato’s allegory who passively watch shadows flicker on the cave wall, social-media users are given the illusion of freedom: actively producing, consuming and circulating content via “sharing” and “liking”, and often on portable devices. However, like Plato’s prisoners for whom shadows constitute reality, the flickering virtual images on our screens have undue power and influence over subjects in the material world. Content circulated on the web is not incorporeal but becomes embodied once interpolated into broader social life: in attitudes, actions and relationships.

Wansbrough invokes the profeminist figure of Antigone in his own interpretation of the cave-like aspects of social media. In Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone* the eponymous protagonist is entombed alive in a cave as punishment for defying the law of the ruler, Creon. While Antigone is

an important figure for psychoanalysis, after Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Antigone's subversive actions as an exemplar of "pure desire" (Miller), Wansbrough's focus is on the tomb itself. Wansbrough argues that Antigone's tomb has a contemporary analogue in digital platforms, where marginalised and minoritised individuals and groups nominally have the freedom to express themselves politically, but beyond the "walls" of the Internet/tomb they are powerless in the face of larger power structures. Moreover, online agitation often becomes a dead-end unless it is supplemented by real-world organising.

Progressive, left, organising does occur successfully online; however, Wansbrough notes that the tomb-like, claustrophobic characteristics of the Internet are more conducive to reactionary voices, rather than progressive ones, because the former thrives in an environment that fosters anonymity and conspiratorial discourse. Feelings of grief, rage, powerlessness and political and sexual impotence thrive in this environment. Far-right and reactionary voices, including those promoting white supremacy, violence and gore, as well as the perspectives of incels and neo-fascists, can be aired with impunity on online forums like 4-Chan and 8-Chan, whereas in the real world (and even on liberal media) these ideas are usually censured, at least nominally. The algorithms used by online platforms actively promote inflammatory content, because it increases user-engagement and therefore profits (Lauer). This point was driven home last year when former Facebook employer Frances Haugen told the United States Senate that Facebook was aware that Instagram (owned by Facebook, now Meta) was exacerbating teenage body image issues but did not act, because profits might decline (Parker; Horowitz et al.).

The broader class and political reasons for the success of the far-right on the net is a point that warrants further examination by Wansbrough. Likewise, an investigation of other extreme behaviours and emotions that are inflamed by digital cultures would have been a valuable addition to the book. For example, social media is used to stir up public frenzy and foment around war and other crises. The current situation after Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a case in point, with Meta allowing its users to make posts inciting violence against Russian soldiers, likely at the behest of US capital interests. Although Wansbrough's book was published before Russia invaded Ukraine, the point remains as earlier conflicts (notably Syria) triggered similarly incendiary exchanges online. Considering the relationship to Ancient Greek narratives and mythologies already set up in Wansbrough's argument, Ancient Greek historian Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* could be an important reference point here. Throughout this history, Thucydides uses the Ancient Greek term "*thumos*" to describe the emotional and psychological impulse to go to war. *Thumos*—or spiritedness—fuels the ability to take up arms, but at the same time, Thucydides warns, excessive *thumos* often results in military catastrophe (6–24). At the risk of being anachronistic, social media stirs up *thumos*.

Digital Desires and Hauntings

In a chapter titled "Pygmalion and Virtual Selves", Wansbrough cogently links the phenomenon of virtual selves, or avatars, to the Ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who creates a statue of his ideal woman and falls in love with it. Here, Wansbrough builds on Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, which describes the breakdown of the distinction between simulacrum and reality in postmodern, contemporary society (166–84). Drawing from Baudrillard, Wansbrough analyses Pygmalion with the aim of explaining how capitalism circulates virtual images of desire and desirability which have a minimal relationship to real bodies. Wansbrough

argues that in contemporary iterations of Pygmalion, individuals mould their bodies to fit artificially generated aesthetic ideals, fuelling a pervasive desire for physical transformation and improvement, through dieting and body modification. At the extreme end of this spectrum are “hybrid bodies”—bodies that are enhanced through digital and medical technologies. Platforms like Instagram provide a space for the display and dissemination of these hybrid bodies, and ultimately an individual’s image is transformed into a digital artefact—a commodity that is often sexualised. Wansbrough is clear that these desires are not spontaneously produced via interactions between users on the platform, but are instead created and perpetuated by capitalism for profit. Disturbingly, Wansbrough writes, the process of self-modification is seemingly unending because an individual can never live up to the supposed perfection of inhuman standards. Wansbrough argues that in this process “the modified human is led to believe they can regain agency and status by becoming commodities” (108). Individuals are manipulated by “virtual and artificial desires,” he states, and the new “virtuality of human relations [...] often hides exploitation” (107).

Based on the Marxist critique that all labour is exploited by and under capitalism, Wansbrough contends that all virtual labour (and by extension AI) is similarly exploited. Eerily, this extends beyond the realm of the living. Wansbrough explains how digital technology means that online projections of ourselves can remain “live” after we die, a phenomenon described by social commentators and theorists as the “digital afterlife” (Carroll and Romano; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie; Sisto). This phenomenon has been accompanied by real-life accounts of so-called digital hauntings (Phillips and Milner). Such narratives are not limited to science fiction but are also recounted by ordinary people claiming that their devices or video games are haunted. Wansbrough demonstrates that the artefacts of the digital afterlife—such as email accounts or social network profiles—are subsequently exploited under capitalism. For Wansbrough, this brings up connotations with the ghosts and vampires of mythology and literature—and links back to Marx and Engels who frequently use the figure of the vampire as an analogy for capitalist exploitation.

Cancel Culture

“Cancel culture”, free speech, and internet shaming are vexed and oft-debated subjects that Wansbrough tackles through an analogy with the Tower of Babel, a narrative with several iterations in myth, the Old Testament, the Torah and in art—see Bruegel the Elder’s *Tower of Babel* of 1560. Wansbrough argues persuasively that:

Babel has a special relevance for an age when the dichotomy between speech and silence has been challenged. Paradoxically, we have become ever more aware of how speech can silence, where “free speech” can be equated with censorship and exclusion. Calls for trigger warnings and attempts at no-platforming are often founded on the assumption that certain forms of expression discourage minorities and inflict harm. (131–32)

Wansbrough applies a dialectical logic to this situation, arguing that “underlying the disputed claims about speech, there remains a unity, namely an understanding of speech in relation to the market competition” (133). This recalls the recent set of controversies over who or what entities social media platforms will ban during times of crisis. For example, hate speech is ostensibly banned, but still occurs along race, class and gender lines. Inciting violence is also ostensibly

banned (especially after the January 6 insurrection). But this rule is also repeatedly broken for political reasons.

Invisible Threads

The anonymity of digital space is discussed through analogy with the invisibility cloaks and rings of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* respectively. Anonymity on the web means people can inhabit avatars and use false names, and allows for the flourishing of cryptocurrencies, pornography, catfishing and stolen identities. However, as Wansbrough points out, invisibility is an illusion: “one feels hidden when one searches online”, Wansbrough says, “but ultimately one’s data is logged, saved, and sold [...] Google, for all its claims to be a service, is also effectively a surveillance system” (146). Surveillance, of course, undercuts any anonymity, and is highly profitable. Shoshana Zuboff coined the term surveillance capitalism to describe this phenomenon, defining it as a “parasitic” process that “unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data”, which is subsequently traded in “a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions” (14). Wansbrough augments Zuboff’s analysis by showing us how the market not only obscures this process, but also perpetuates the myth of invisibility.

Wansbrough rightly points out that “one of the more serious duplicities of the online world is not only what is fake online, but that the actual structures that remain largely invisible and unaccountable, nevertheless parade accountability” (147). This is an example of Karl Marx’s “invisible threads”, a term Marx used to describe the accumulation and centralisation of capital in a capitalist system. Wansbrough makes a strong case that Marx’s “invisible threads” can be updated to the current moment. “With online media”, Wansbrough argues, “the circulation of money has never been less visible [...] online spaces being a way for those with power to cloak themselves and their exploitative practices” (159). Supporting this statement is the exploited labour behind Big Tech that is rendered invisible by companies like Amazon, Apple, Tesla and Google who try to keep the dismal, and often racist conditions experienced by workers well hidden (Miah). Another issue is the hidden environmental impact of digital technologies: mining for BitCoin, for example uses a considerable amount of electricity due to industrial-scale computing (Carter), which is also “hidden” in the digital realm. Here, a discussion of cryptocurrencies and NFTs, as examples exploitative practices, would have complemented the chapter. Cryptocurrencies, which are promoted by their advocates as a libertarian space free from the shackles of banks and state powers, are in fact run by a few “tech bros” making huge sums of money.

Pandora’s Box

The final chapter explores the myth of Pandora’s box, which is frequently invoked in popular culture to describe a fear of new technologies, for example in the films *Ringu* and *Videodrome*, as well as in liberal news media. But Wansbrough counters simplistic understandings of Pandora’s box, through a careful reading of Hesiod’s version (in which the box is a jar). In that version, hope remains in Pandora’s jar after it unleashes chaos and pestilence. For Wansbrough, this provides insight into the ambivalent attitudes circulating in digital media: on the one hand hope that digital technologies can improve our lives and have the potential to become a collective resource, and on the other hand the fear of destruction caused by digital technologies that are controlled by giant parasitic corporations. Wansbrough quotes journalist Daniel Lust who says

“Zuckerberg [...] set out to open Pandora’s box. Mythology has long told us that when the box is opened, a whole host of evils and miseries result” (163). Wansbrough criticises commentators like Lust, for whom, “social media is rendered out of control, capable of all sorts of immoralities and catastrophes [...] and has become a scapegoat for the crimes engineered by the capitalist system” (167). Developing this further, Wansbrough soberly argues that hopes for a truly collective, accessible and democratic digital space that improves lives will not be possible under capitalism.

Given that BigTech is dominated by Global North companies such as Meta, Alphabet, Apple and Amazon, it is perhaps unsurprising that the myths circulating these digital cultures are based on the Western mythic and literary traditions reaching back to Ancient Greece. But what about Chinese tech giants like Tencent, Huawei and ByteDance (the owner of TikTok)? Are the same myths applicable? What about Chinese myths like *Hua Mulan*, which, as Jing Li discusses, Disney controversially adapted as an animation in 1998 and a live action film in 2020? Wansbrough acknowledges this as a limitation to his book, saying the choice was made to stick to Western myths and narratives to avoid the problems associated with cultural appropriation: “I do not wish to create the illusion of a universalist insight or project an Orientalist vision onto cultural stories”, Wansbrough states (7). However, a decolonising lens might have been used to critique digital capitalism’s imperialism, and to examine to what extent digital colonisation is pervasive globally. This, however, is just a very minor criticism of what is a highly intelligent, rigorous and well-argued book.

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Suggested Citation

Panegyres, Markela. "Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen: Myths and Allegories in the Digital Age, by Aleks Wansbrough." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 24, 2022, pp. 194–201. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.17>.

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