

## Dazzled By The Sunshine Machines

Anna Wiener, *Uncanny Valley: A Memoir* (4<sup>th</sup> Estate, London, 2020)

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When, in the mid-1980s, Donna J Haraway wrote that the cyborg was the 'self feminists must code' (Haraway, 1991, p163) she was arguing for a feminist politics attuned to the changes in culture ushered in by the burgeoning digital revolution. The Cyborg Manifesto was, in many ways, a warning about the kind of future we now find ourselves in. At the same time, it was a rallying cry for women, in particular, to understand the power of our position as nimble labourers in the new industries of post-industrial capitalism. What Anna Wiener's memoir *Uncanny Valley* illustrates is that the exploitation of female labour and the casual sexism that pervaded the old media industries of the late twentieth century is still the everyday experience of women working in the new media start-ups of the twenty-first.

In the 1970s, when a computer with the processing power of a contemporary iPhone needed a whole air conditioned building and you could get a well-paid job as a 'computer operator', I worked in the advertising industry, first in the creative departments of several large agencies and later in commercial art studios. This was the decade when 'swinging' London was still the epitome of cool and the advertising industry doubly so. I never owned a business suit or even considered wearing one, the drink and drugs were free (courtesy of wealthy clients whose files contained invoices for things that were never clearly itemised) and doing daily battle with drunken, sweaty account managers who considered access to my body a perk of the job was an accepted hazard. What is remarkable about Wiener's memoir is that it recounts an experience, 40-odd years later, in a different industry and on the other side of the Atlantic, that is strikingly similar.

In 2013, Wiener moves from New York to San Francisco, and from publishing to the brave new world of dotcom start-ups. These are speculative enterprises, yet to make a profit and run by entrepreneurs barely out of their teens. Dismissive of traditional business models, these hustlers of the internet are convinced that they are making products, as one start-up CEO tells Wiener, "that can push the fold of mankind" (p. 93). Wiener, for her part, vacillates between desperately wanting to be part of the game and queasily asking herself if she is, actually, part of the problem. 'I understood my blind faith in ambitious, aggressive, arrogant young men from America's soft suburbs', she writes, 'as a personal pathology', but she realises, 'it wasn't personal at all. It had become a global affliction' (p154).

Wiener's wry humour exposes the effects of total immersion in a pathologically self-conscious culture. On a date with a software engineer, they go to a bar where '[p]hotographs are forbidden, which meant that the place was designed to be leaked on social media'. Her date seems 'like someone who would have opinions about fonts' and she muses about the stress of cultivating a public image. Managing a personal aesthetic, she suggests, requires 'the sort of mind-set that could lead a person to worry during sex about whether the lighting was sufficiently cinematic' (p78), a metaphor that, it seems to me, can be stretched to account for the Silicon Valley mind-set in general.

Public image is everything because the products that Silicon Valley sells are, as we now know and as Wiener comes to realise, ethically questionable and often exploitative and damaging. Furthermore, they are selling something intangible that accrues value only in its effects. The true value of most online platforms is in the data that they can harvest and sell for a profit for the purposes of everything from targeted advertising to 'predictive policing'. In an operation called 'redboxing', for instance, algorithms

which profile users on social media are employed to advise police forces where crime is likely to occur. As in Steven Spielberg's 2002 film *Minority Report*, this enables real life interventions to, supposedly, prevent crime before it can happen. But as Adam Greenfield points out, this can mean you are targeted as a suspicious person 'simply because you happen to occupy an area of interest' (Greenfield, 2018, p231). So, initially, Wiener doesn't think about how an unspecified 'home-sharing platform' which she makes use of before she can afford to rent an apartment 'might ... be driving up rents, displacing residents, or undermining the very authenticity that it purported to sell' (p37), or the fact that 'the veil between ad tech and state surveillance is very thin' (p127). Although she presents herself as a naïf or at least happy to suspend disbelief for the sake of being part of something new and innovative, there is a sense that she is waiting for the other shoe to drop.

### **Sunshine Machines**

When, in the early 1980s, I became a full time student and my income crashed to the level of a student grant, I took on hourly paid work at what would now be considered a tech start-up, hassling marketing companies for information and entering it on a rudimentary database which ran on a series of clunky Apple Two E's strung together to form a basic network. The company was run by a couple of old friends from my advertising days, neither of whom would have been out of place in the Uncanny Valley and both of whom, I have since realised, understood that data mining was the industry of the future and the relational database the systems architecture on which it would thrive. Like Wiener, I eventually did much of this work from home, my land-line receiver balanced on the rubbery pads of a giant prototype modem. That, and the IBM desktop that came with it, seemed, at the time, like a practice run for the home décor of the future. I had left the advertising industry out of what I said was disgust at my part in the perpetuation of consumer capitalism but in actual fact it was more because the work was, on many levels, deeply unsatisfying. I find Wiener's confusion about whether 'we were working as we partied or partying as we worked' utterly familiar, as well as her realisation that 'our job was so easy, anyone could do it. They could even do it drunk' (p123). My job at the data mining company was useful to supplement my study grant but the thought of doing it full time, even from home, brought feelings of existential despair.

Yet, like Wiener, I was fascinated by the technology. As Haraway pointed out, '[o]ur best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile' (Haraway, 1991, p153). I remember first reading Haraway's essay with a profound sense of connection. I recognised in her evocative prose the same ambiguous feelings that I experienced in my encounter with the sunshine machines. On the one hand, I experienced a quasi-erotic thrill at the potential of bodies (and female bodies in particular) in close association with a powerful medium, the possibilities of which had not yet fully emerged. On the other, I had the uneasy premonition that time was running out to harness that potential for anything other than the perpetuation and intensification of the surveillance society that we already inhabited.

### **Vectors of Control**

Later, while researching for my PhD, I taught myself to code. What started as a distraction became something, I realised, that might be put to good use. I had an inkling that tech that was increasingly indispensable to people whose main interest was parting people from their money would also be invaluable to social movements needing to raise funds for political projects. I put my knowledge to work devising a database for a local authority department set up to administer services to the increasing

number of people in London affected by HIV/AIDS. I have no idea what happened to the archive I developed and I can't remember what kinds of data it contained but, equally, I don't remember data security being a major concern. Neither, it seems, was it of particular concern to Silicon Valley many years later. As Wiener points out, even when the extent of the US National Security Agency's electronic spying operation was revealed, she and her fellow workers at an analytics startup didn't once talk about 'the whistleblower' (Edward Snowden, who she doesn't name) and 'didn't think of ourselves as participating in the surveillance economy. We weren't thinking about our role in facilitating and normalizing the creation of unregulated, privately held databases on human behaviour' (p83).

Journalist Glenn Greenwald, who played a major part in exposing the Snowden revelations points to the power of rhetoric which assures citizens that 'invasive surveillance is confined only to a marginalized and deserving group of those "doing wrong" – the bad people' (Greenwald, 2014, p182). What emerges from Wiener's testimony is that this rhetoric not only served to assuage the consciences of those involved in data mining that amounted to an infringement of human rights. Equally it has formed a major part of the discourse that established the Silicon Valley mindset, coded as 'meritocracy', a word, as Wiener points out, 'that had originated in social satire and was adopted in sincerity by an industry that could be its own best caricature' (p182). In one chapter, she documents the culture of body optimisation which pervades the industry, not only as a means to sell tech designed to capture increasing quantities of data but as a measure of merit in those anxious to be demonstrably better, fitter and, it is implied, more deserving. 'An engineer', she writes, 'attended his daily stand-up meeting from an indoor climbing wall, gripping a plastic rock and wearing a harness' (p168), an open source startup that she worked for gave 'all employees a step-count wristband' and 'systems thinkers ... optimized their sleep cycles with red light and binaural beats' (p165). '[T]racking personal metrics offered a sense of progress and momentum', she concludes, 'measurable self-betterment. ... Quantification was a vector of control' (166). Flagging up an increase in abuse (particularly of women) on a micro-blogging platform that she is monitoring, Wiener is told they are '[j]ust a bunch of bad actors ... atypical for the platform – not worth any more time, not worth our engagement'. Bad actors are referred to as '[d]akimakura pillows' (p164), referencing the Japanese 'body pillows' often used by Japanese teenagers as security objects. The implication here is that they are lazy, dependent, *soft* and thus no kind of threat. The further implication is, of course, that any woman who feels threatened by them is equally unworthy of engagement.

### **Internalized Misogyny**

I encountered similar attitudes countless times in the advertising agencies and design studios I worked for in the 1970s. We celebrated account wins with elaborate parties but if any of the handful of female staff had complained about the one held, for instance, in a strip club, we would have been laughed at as out of touch, uptight, sexually repressed. It wouldn't have occurred to me to complain about the account manager who offered to pay me to spend time with a client who had expressed an interest in me (although he didn't put it that politely). The difference is that Wiener was working for tech start-ups that had self-consciously rejected the organisational culture of the twentieth century as representing an outdated hierarchical structure unsuited to the egalitarian ethos of the Uncanny Valley. In one company, '[e]mployees had named their own compensation, determined their own priorities, and come to decisions by consensus' (p157). They seem to have also decided the compensation included equal access to the bodies of female workers.

Wiener describes providing support to software developers as 'like immersion therapy for internalized misogyny' and finding herself 'in a position of ceaseless, professionalized deference to the male ego'

(p113). 'I wanted', she writes, 'to avoid, at all costs, being the feminist killjoy'. Instead, she compromises; not wearing dresses 'to staunch a recruiter's stream of strange and unsettling comments about my legs' (p115), battling a co-worker's wandering hands during a late night cab ride (p121) and resentfully compiling a 'running list of casual hostilities toward women that added unsolicited texture to the workplace' (p138). One company employs a consultant to institute a diversity and inclusion initiative but Wiener's fellow workers decide that the focus is too narrow. 'What about diversity of experience?' they ask. 'What about diversity of thought?' 'The consultant listened patiently' she writes, 'as my colleagues microaggressed her' (p182).

## **Mad Men**

As a survivor of the young, aggressively masculine culture of the advertising industry at the peak of its arrogant, delusional power, captured so well in Matthew Weiner's TV series *Mad Men* (2007 – 2015), I recognise both the culture of the Uncanny Valley and Wiener's ambivalent relationship with it. *Mad Men* was based on Jerry Della Femina's *From Those Wonderful Folks That Gave You Pearl Harbor* (1970) which we in the industry adopted as a kind of handbook, giving us dispensation for any kind of excess, promoting a mindset of arrogant invulnerability. Similarly, Wiener describes '[t]he energy of being surrounded by people who so easily articulated, and satisfied, their desires. The feeling that everything was just within reach'. 'The tech industry', she concludes, 'was making me a perfect consumer of the world it was creating' (p196).

It is a sobering thought that this is the world we all created and that we now all inhabit. Zuckerberg's much lauded Metaverse might be a pipe dream but it is one that, if realised, is likely to simply magnify the sexism and delusional behaviour that pervades the Uncanny Valley, justified by the discourse of meritocracy, a nightmare that Wiener seems to be warning us about. In a section on the intellectual culture of Silicon Valley, she details the arguments of the 'rationality community' (p243) who promote a cybernetic paradigm for self-optimisation. Either ignorant of history or secure in the belief that tech has delivered us into a world where it can't be repeated, these people are happy to discuss things like 'designer babies optimized for attractiveness without once bringing up race or the history of eugenics' (p244).

In reality, Silicon Valley is an elaborate machine for the perpetuation of consumer capitalism. As Wiener describes it, '[w]e were helping marketing managers A/B test subject-line copy to increase click throughs from mass emails; helping developers at e-commerce platforms make it harder for users to abandon shopping carts; helping designers tighten the endorphin feedback loop' (p135). Hardly surprising then, that the culture of the Valley in the twenty-first century is almost indistinguishable from the culture of advertising in the late twentieth where the power of market research and the invention of niche identities was first realised. The difference, perhaps, is in the fact that the ironic self-awareness that pervades Della Femina's memoir of Madison Avenue and that characterised the best humour that I remember from my days in what we were happy to refer to as 'the bullshit business' seems to be dangerously absent from the Uncanny Valley. '[I]t was frowned upon', reports Wiener, 'to acknowledge that a tech job was a transaction rather than a noble mission or a seat on a rocket ship' (p196). This, together with the culture of body optimisation, the casual acceptance of 'rationalist' ideas and pervasive sexism suggests an industry hurtling towards the future mired in the ideology of a past the world has been too eager to forget.

What Wiener's book makes clear is that the Uncanny Valley is just the bullshit business with an extra layer of self-deception. In the 1970s, we were dazzled by the sunshine machines but the advertising

industry simply adjusted its mirror shades to deflect the glare and harnessed computing power to optimise consumer profiling. The intensification of this practice across diverse industries, government departments and social institutions is what Haraway calls 'the informatics of domination ... the translation of the world into a problem of coding' (Haraway, 1991, p164). This is now fully realised in the wearable devices and smartphone apps which have replaced the mirror as the technology which monitors our performance of self. Wiener admits she felt safer 'inside the machine. It was preferable to be on the side that did the watching than on the side being watched' (p272). What she understands with hindsight is that the distinction is an illusion. 'I couldn't imagine once again', she writes, 'being so complaisant, so consumed' (275).

Above all, what Wiener is recounting is the culture shift through which the feminism of the late twentieth century was appropriated by neoliberal capitalism. As 'women's work' was redefined by the tech industry it was also turning us *all* into perfect consumers of the world it was creating (McRobbie, 2020). The lesson here, I think, is that the cyborg is not a subject position that we can inhabit uncritically. Cyborg ontology may 'give us our politics' (Haraway, 1991, p150) but an active feminism for the twenty-first century needs a clear understanding of the cultures of work and social life that maintain our multiple oppressions. Personal testimonies like Wiener's are a necessary part of the work that we still need to do.

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