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OPPONENT'S REPORT:
re "*Towards a new social media model: the redistribution of power in the subscription-based creator economy*"
by Snezhanna Markova (MA dissertation, 2023)

Addressing the ambiguous status of "art" and "creativity" within the profit-driven digital dystopia of the 21st century, Ms Markova's thesis adopts a set of critical paradigms articulated in the work of poststructuralist and postmodern theory in order to come to terms with the difficulties entailed within the socio-aesthetic critique of the phenomenon.

Ms Markova's point of departure is the diagnosis of the 21st-century "digital and social media environment" as "sombre, marked by pessimism and weariness," this due to the process whereby the internet under the dominion of the "big four" has evolved into using "individuals as profit-making cogs in the machine" (p. 5). The thesis as a whole is comprised of a series of theoretical and critical interventions into this long and gradual process in order to "present a new, better alternative to algorithmic information flow adopted by current social media networks" (p. 7), this in the form of three of the major subscription model platforms, Patreon, Substack, and Nebula. In other words, it seeks to evaluate the benefits of the possible turning of advertising-driven and attention-focused "data economy" into "creator economy".

The Introduction and Chapter Two lay out the stakes of the overall argument and its chief concern with "the distribution of power and agency in the dynamics of the players of the creator economy and the inherent inequality that these systems pre-suppose by placing the platform-advertiser relationship on top of the hierarchy" (p. 16). Of particular value is Ms Markova's competent account of the development, from the early 2000s onwards, of Web 2.0, a "user-generated web controlled by a handful of corporations" which today "has become an infinite stream of indistinguishable images, text, short-form videos, audio and ads" (28). Chapter Three introduces alternative models, mainly describing and analysing the three use cases (Patreon, Substack, and Nebula), outlining their business models, failures, successes and relationships with their creators. In Chapter Four, Ms Markova deals with "the new shifting power that these platforms represent," detailing their "benefits for both creator and consumer, as well as delineating the possible pitfalls that subscriptions will be met with, namely the financial imbalance criticism of this theory" (p. 17). In her conclusion, Ms Markova graciously summarises the previous argument and suggests further directions for research, and keeps an honest self-criticism with which she stakes out the limitations of the current work.

Even if bypassing a clearly articulated thesis and eschewing unambiguous conclusions, the work's 80+ pages and four main chapters manage to cover a lot of ground. Ms Markova's thesis is broad in its theoretical engagement as apart from such canonical authors as Adorno, Baudrillard, Debord, Horkheimer, and most prominently Stiegler (to name but a few), the thesis presents forays into more up-to-date media theory such as Shoshana Zuboff's account of "surveillance capitalism", Eran Fisher on "the spirit of networks" in the digital age, while subjecting Henry Jenkins' and Kevin Kelly's optimistic accounts of "convergence culture" in the digital age to a deservedly scathing critique.

The thesis argumentation is lucid and sticks to the point, and Ms Markova is apt at synthesizing or drawing parallels between concepts from widely divergent theoretical discourses. The reading of the thesis has been an informative exercise for the opponent who has gleaned a lot of fresh insight into its chief topics of concern. The thesis is written in lucid and cogent language, of which the author displays a decent level of competence. However, there are some formal flaws to the execution of Ms Markova's thesis. Since the supervisor's report eschews any detailed addressing of these, let me attempt at least a one-paragraph summary here.

Formatting-wise, why footnotes needed to be in font different from that of the main text, and why Ms Markova chose not to restart their numbering within every individual chapter, the opponent really cannot tell, but the thesis would certainly look more elegant without having to reach footnote no. 141. Then there is the occasional typo or spelling inconsistency. The "Internet" is spelled alternatively as the "internet" throughout the thesis (from p. 6 onwards). I cannot think of a good reason for why Ms Markova deemed it necessary to furnish every single mention of "data economy" or "creator economy" (from p. 7 onwards) with the definite article—it still functions as a noun abstract enough to do perfectly well without one. On a case-by-case basis: "translate to" should read "into" (p. 11); there is a missing "what" at the beginning of the sentence, "Twentieth-century philosophers could not predict was" (p. 34); newspaper titles such as *The New Yorker* are missing italicisation (p. 38); in "amounted to in 6 figure sums", "in" should be deleted (p. 42); "Salmon Rushdie" should read "Salman" (!), "as we as" should read "as well as" (p. 43); "a creator rooster" should read "roster" (p. 47); "informational bubble" should read "information bubble" (p. 67), etc. These and possibly others mar the otherwise favourable general impression created by Ms Markova's thesis.

Additionally, there a few methodological shortcomings and argumentative blind spots that need to be addressed as well, which the opponent hopes to shine a light on with his following issues and questions to be addressed at the defence:

1) Ms Markova's descriptions of especially Patreon sounded very much like my own YouTube Premium membership experience, and the level of content doubling and interlinkage between the two platforms is no secret. In terms of overall argument, and given the limitations of subscriber platforms detailed in her Chapter Four, could she clearly state how exactly a subscription platform membership differs from a (paid-for) ad-free customised social-media account?

2) Could Ms Markova attempt to refine her notion of algorithm throughout the thesis? While fully aware of the pitfalls of living in an age of Cambridge Analytica etc. I cannot fully embrace the clear-cut binary drawn-out by Stiegler and quoted (supportively) by Ms Markova to the effect that in content industry, "psychic and collective protentions are replaced by purely computational automatic protentions – eliminating the unhoped-

for, essentially destroying every expectation of the unexpected, and thereby attenuating every form of desire" (p. 19). As anyone who has shopped on Amazon and found use in its "if you like A, you will also like B", or anyone who has followed Netflix suggestions will attest, as long as human behaviour *is* algorithmic, then so are our "prosumer" habits...

3) This ties in with the question of technology, introduced only in Chapter Four in connection with a Marxist utilitarian connection to the "organisation of power" (p. 52). But given that the subtitle of Stiegler's *The Age of Disruption* reads *Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, I would like to invite Ms Markova's further thoughts on the subject. As McLuhan, Ong, Stiegler et al. (our departmental colleague Louis Armand being a rather conspicuous omission from Ms Markova's bibliography) have shown, humans are "prosthetic animals." (How) does the technology of algorithm-driven data economy present an extension of / departure from this general tendency?

4) What role does the discourse of "humanism" play in Ms Markova's argument? In particular, I refer to her description of the word "content" as "dehumanising and meaningless" (p. 28). Even if, later on in the thesis, the "artists" active on subscription-based alternatives are all too happy to be monetising their "content" (e.g. Ms Markova's account re Nebula on p. 46 contains the word "content" no fewer than four times). The sort of suspect human/technological, natural/artificial binarism that underwrites some of Ms Markova's rendering of complex questions of algorithmic technology is on full display when she proposes the highly-charged term "art" (e.g. on p. 40 when the topic of "monetis[ing] art on the internet" is broached; or when the question of "the type of art" people "wish to create/consume" is raised on p. 72) as a "human" replacement for the "dehumanising" term "content".

5) Finally, if I may invite a speculation on the candidate's part : how does Ms Markova envisage the binary of "data" vs. "creator" economy holding a workable meaning after the advent of AI prosumers on the scene?

Still, despite some of its inadequacies and inconclusiveness in argument, Ms Markova's thesis presents a well-researched, original contribution to critical discourse on the still evolving, dynamic field of twenty-first century modernity and media studies. As such, it deserves **a grade between excellent and very good**, depending upon the candidate's ability to address the issues raised in this report at her defence.

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31 January 2024