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The web as exception: The rise of new media publishing cultures

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2. Mondo 2000's new media cool, 1989–1993

To understand how it was possible for the web to be articulated as an exceptional medium when it surfaced in the 1990s - that is, as a medium that would displace its mass and mainstream predecessors while producing web-native culture - one must see the historical and conceptual ties between web exceptionalism and cyberculture. Normally defined as the culture of cyberspace, cyberculture is better understood as a utopian discourse surrounding new media and grounded in the computational metaphor, or the broad notion that social, psychological, biological and cultural phenomena are essentially systems of information exchange and feedback. In chapter 1, I discussed how an influential group of New Communalist hippies, journalists, technologists and entrepreneurs that Fred Turner calls the Whole Earth network appropriated these ideas from cybernetics, and helped shape the perception that computers were intimate, personal tools and a source of positive social, cultural, political and economic change. The New communalists' neo-tribalism and the computational metaphor coalesced in the notion of cyberspace, a space of pure information that would enable the return to more organic forms of government, enterprise, community and identity.

In this chapter, however, my aim is to show that a complete understanding of cyberculture must also account for the specific media form that characterized its most prominent expressions. As David Silver has noted, the “primary pulpit” for cybercultural thinkers in the early 1990s “was a new line of technozines -- glossy, visually-impairing magazines with names like Mondo 2000, boING boING, and Wired.”¹ Each of these was an independent tech-culture publication based in California, although ‘independent’ could range from boING boING’s (1988-1995) DIY aesthetic and peak circulation of 17,500 to Wired’s (1993-present) polished look and high-profile funding from the publisher Condé Nast.² Each was, as Silver suggests, a source of cybercultural utopianism, although there was clearly also a difference here: boING boING took delight in showcasing the weird and fantastic (one tagline was “brain candy for happy mutants”), with topics like futurism, science fiction and smart drugs; Mondo combined similar interests with pop-culture and cultural criticism; Wired, meanwhile, profiled the technologists, artists and entrepreneurs who were leading what it saw as a digital revolution in culture, economics and politics. Perhaps where these magazines overlapped most was a self-conscious “cool” that stood in stark contrast to conventional

¹ Silver, 2000.

² Walker, Rob. 2010. “Inside the Wild, Wacky, Profitable World of Boing Boing.” *Fast Company*. November 30. <http://www.fastcompany.com/1702167/inside-wild-wacky-profitable-world-boing-boing>; Wolf, 2003.

technology reporting. Even if they ranged from underground to mainstream in terms of audience and reporting, each magazine was marked by a subcultural attitude, an irreverence that mirrored the inherent subversiveness they ascribed to technology. Pushing boundaries in terms of their contrarianism, irony, self-deprecation and various other editorial and stylistic qualities, the magazines seemed to mark a relatively (if not entirely) cohesive media form.

How should cyberculture's cool be interpreted? One approach may be to understand the cybercultural magazines' play with formal conventions in line with that of other independent publications from the period - e.g. the *Spy*, *Might and Adbusters* - that, in various ways, satirized and critiqued the medium and media culture they operated in.³ While I think there is a case to be made for this, here I focus on the internal relations between cybercultural rupture-talk and this cool mode of delivery. How did cyberculture's radical futures relate to its formal features? To answer this question, I turn to *Mondo 2000* (1989-1998), which arguably marked the emergence of a popular cyberculture. With a peak circulation of 100,000 in 1993, it never reached the level of success *Wired* would have soon after it debuted that year.⁴ Still, with the national press attention it received, its best-selling 1992 compilation *A User's Guide to the New Edge* (hereafter *A User's Guide*), and the high-profile advertisers it began attracting after the first few issues, *Mondo* represented (what was portrayed as) the exposure of a subversive computing underground.⁵ But it also represented the transition from utopian techno-subculture to a more general excitement around newly prominent technologies like virtual reality and the internet. As science fiction writer William Gibson would later recollect, a February, 1993 *Time* magazine feature on *Mondo 2000* and cyberpunk seemed to mark a turning point. "Winding up on the cover of *Time* – what does that do? How alternative is something that makes the cover of *Time*?"⁶

Focusing on the period between *Mondo*'s first issue in 1989 to its peak in 1993, as well as drawing on a range of interviews and other secondary sources, in this chapter I argue that the magazine's cybercultural rupture-talk, its unique position (and self-positioning) as not-quite-

³ See for example Mark Dery's discussion of DIY media as culture jamming. Dery, Mark. 1993. "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs." *Shovelware*. http://www.markdery.com/archives/books/culture_jamming/#000005#more.

⁴ Boulware, Jack. 1995. "Mondo 1995: Up and Down With the Next Millennium's First Magazine." *San Francisco Weekly*, October 11. <http://news.sfweekly.com/1995-10-11/news/mondo-1995/1>; *Wired*'s circulation at the end of 1993 was estimated at 100,000, the same number as *Mondo 2000*'s peak circulation that year. *Wired*'s subscription numbers would reach 300,000 by 1996. Wolf, 2003: 79, 205.

⁵ Elmer-Dewitt, Philip. 1993. "Cyberpunk!" *Time Magazine*, February 8. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,977654,00.html>.

⁶ Quoted in Lackerbauer, Simone, and R.U. Sirius. 2012. "William Gibson on MONDO 2000 & 90s Cyberculture (MONDO 2000 History Project Entry #16)." *ACCELER8OR*, May 20. <http://www.acceler8or.com/2012/05/william-gibson-on-mondo-2000-90s-cyberculture-mondo-2000-history-project-entry-16/>.

underground and not-quite-mainstream, and its cool style (ranging from irony to unconventional practices it called “irresponsible journalism”) must be seen together, and that assumptions underlying Mondo’s vision of the future were expressed in its formal and stylistic identity. The aim is to revisit Mondo in order to discover the links between its futurism, which scholars such as Tiziana Terranova and Mark Dery have described in terms of technology-enabled transcendence, and David Bell’s observation that, despite its talk of disembodiment and posthuman mutation, one can “read the Mondo 2000 New Edge subculture as primarily one of *aesthetic* modification, of adopting a cyberpunk *style*.”⁷ To do so, I first introduce Mondo’s rupture-talk, or the fast-arriving digitally-powered future it called “the New Edge,” and discuss how this has been critiqued and studied so far, focusing on early criticism from Vivian Sobchack and more recent work by anthropologist Dorien Zandbergen. Where Sobchack and Zandbergen primarily treat New Edge style in terms of its relation to Mondo’s politics and spiritualism, respectively, I build on the work of Alan Liu to argue that Mondo’s ironic, self-deprecating character was grounded in central New Edge assumptions about the changing conditions for (sub)cultural production. Liu’s analysis of “information cool” as an ethos or cultural sensibility native to post-industrial knowledge work provides a theoretical background against which I analyze the relationship between Mondo’s rupture-talk and its self-conscious style, or what I call its ‘new media cool.’ In connecting cybercultural discourse with a specific media form, I add to existing understandings of cyberculture while foreshadowing a similar dynamic in cases of web-related rupture-talk and web-native culture as discussed in the following chapters.

2.1 Techno-transcendence or Bad Attitude? Understanding Mondo’s cyberculture

From its first editorial, Mondo 2000 cultivated a split-personality: the magazine was at once futuristic and nostalgic, utopian and cynical, earnest and cool. Editor-publishers R.U. Sirius (the pseudonym for Ken Goffman) and Queen Mu (Allison Kennedy) set the tone with their first editorial, a somewhat farcical manifesto proclaiming an impending cybercultural utopia:

This magazine is about what to do until the *millenium* comes. We’re talking about Total Possibilities. Radical assaults on the limits of biology, gravity and time. The end of Artificial Scarcity. The dawn of a new humanism. High-jacking technology for personal empowerment, fun and games. Flexing those synapses! Stoking those neuropeptides! Making Bliss States our normal waking consciousness.

⁷ Bell, David. 2001. *An Introduction to Cybercultures*. London, Routledge: 178; Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. “Posthuman Unbounded: Artificial Evolution and High-Tech Subcultures.” In David Bell and Barbara M Kennedy, eds. *The Cybercultures Reader*. London, Routledge: 268-278; Dery, 1996.

*Becoming the Bionic Angel.*⁸

With this strange mix of spirituality and technology, the editorial both embraced and departed from cultural ancestors like New Age and the counterculture. Portraying Mondo as an instructive intermediary (a “Cyber-Chautauqua”), they argued the spirit of the 1960s was set to be revived by the fast-arriving technological revolution and a generation raised on MTV. Although the Woodstock crowds had long dispersed, “their mutated nucleotides have given us a whole new generation of sharpies, mutants and superbrights and in them we must put our faith - and power.”⁹ They went on, “The cybernet is in place. If fusion *is* real, we’ll find out about it fast. The old information elites are crumbling. The kids are at the controls.”¹⁰ Mondo’s rupture-talk would continue to follow this format, foretelling a future in which cyberpunks, hackers and other technologically-empowered cybercultural figures were shaping radical social and cultural change that somehow echoed countercultural and New Age values - a future the editors soon started calling the New Edge.

Where the knowingly over-the-top editorial established an outline for Mondo’s rupture-talk, the content of the New Edge would be fleshed out over the next few issues. There, Sirius and Mu brought together coverage of new technologies like hypertext software and commercial virtual reality technology with articles and interviews featuring cyberpunk science fiction writers, hackers, artists, musicians, fringe scientists, philosophers and smart drug experts, as well as countercultural icons like Timothy Leary and (cult) literary figures like Robert Anton Wilson and William S. Burroughs. The editors would formalize the range of topics with the 1992 compilation *A User’s Guide* (see figure 1).¹¹

Figure 1: New Edge ontology: Topics from A User’s Guide to the New Edge.

Aphrodisiacs	Appropriation	Artificial Life
Brain Implants	Chaos	Computer Graphics
Computer Industry	Crackers	Cyberpunk
Cyberpunk Science Fiction	Cyberspace	Deconstruction

⁸ Mu, Queen, and R.U. Sirius. 1989. “Editorial.” *Mondo 2000*, 1: 11.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Sirius described the process of selecting the topics as follows: “We went through past issues of *Mondo 2000* and picked out some gems [...] We listed the themes that emerged, from A to Z - Aphrodisiacs to Zines. Then we asked ourselves if we’d covered all the categories that obsess the denizens of the New Edge - that is to say, our hip friends. Where we found something missing, we wrote a few paragraphs that would *naïl* the concept.” Sirius, 1992: 16.

DNA Music	Drugs	Electronic Freedom
Electronic Music	Evolutionary Mutations	Fashion
Fiber Optics	Fringe Science	Geek Humor
Hackers	Hip-Hop	House Music
Hyperreality	Hypertext	Industrial & Postindustrial Music & Art
Longevity	Marshall McLuhan	Me
The Meat	Media Pranks	Multimedia
Nanotechnology	The Net	Nomadness
Personal Computing	Politics	Psychedelic Drugs
Rants	Robots	Smart Drugs
Street Tech	Synaesthesia	Temporary Autonomous Zone
Transrealism	Virtual Reality	Virtual Sex
Virus	Wetware	Zines

Although eclectic, the list largely consists of technology and media-themed topics. Another organizing principle is that of transcending physical, psychological and socio-cultural limits through technology, broadly understood: from topics like smart drugs and evolutionary mutations to artificial life and transrealism (a concept coined by Rudy Rucker to denote a near-future capacity to perfectly record one's entire life to computer memory), the focus is on transgressions of what Mondo subjects liked to call "consensus reality."¹² As the term New Edge implies, Mondo's vision of the future was one in which the outer limits and fringes of science, technology and culture became central. The "edges" celebrated by Mondo included the liminal technologies of brain implants and virtual reality, the experimentation of drug culture and New Age forms of consciousness-expansion, underground cultures such as house music and 'zines, as well as a number of concepts that theorized such practice. Because they roughly outline the nature of change Mondo envisioned, this mix of technology, transcendence, media and subculture are indicators of what could be called, following Gabrielle Hecht, the ontology of Mondo's rupture-talk.

In addition to the themes of techno-transcendence and subversive technology and media,

¹² See for example Barlow, John Perry. 1990a. "Being in Nothingness." *Mondo 2000*, 2: 34-43.

Mondo 2000 was notable for its decadent, ironic style. Like its first editorial, the magazine's visuals and overall tone oscillated between sincere enthusiasm and playful hyperbole, intellectualism and clownishness. The logo included an image of the earth as seen from outer space, echoing the magazine's "respectable older cousin" the Whole Earth Catalog, but also lettering lifted from an arcade game.¹³ Likewise, its art direction would veer from polished to camp. The contrast can be seen in the difference between, say, a cover depicting "21st Century Girl" Deborah Harry with a sublime Trifid Nebula background (issue 3), and another featuring the buxom astrophysicist-musician Fiorella Terenzi awkwardly holding up a satellite dish (while being positioned in the frame by the photography team's stylist - issue 5). The Terenzi cover also featured the tag line "Guaranteed Read Proof!" - one of many quotes taken from negative reviews of Mondo and ironically repurposed by the editors.¹⁴ Mondo countered the idealism of its countercultural and New Age roots with a cynicism that appeared in a variety of forms: from self-deprecation and a half-jesting commitment to consumerism to more serious, dystopian counterparts to the imagined technological future of a global village (the magazine's favorite theorist, other than Marshall McLuhan, was Jean Baudrillard, whose concept of hyperreality the editors argued "says as much about the New Edge worldview as anything else").¹⁵ Above all, Mondo's style was defined by a subversion of its own positions and commitments, often in a single move: the name R.U. Sirius, for example, pokes fun at the Sirius star system, an important symbol in New Age spiritualism.¹⁶ Likewise, the choice of the name Mondo 2000 was both an actual attempt to improve sales (it had been decided that the name of its predecessor, Reality Hackers, lacked crossover appeal) and an ironic gesture meant to distance the magazine from pure commercialism. Sirius and Mu decided first to parrot the marketing trope of adding "2000" to a product, and afterwards gave it the pre-fix Mondo because "the lettering would look great on the masthead, and [...] it had a delightfully fashionable yet decadent sound."¹⁷ As the cultural critic Mark Dery noted, Mondo's "rebel cool" was a product of "running up the Jolly Roger of political incorrectness, 'social irresponsibility' (Sirius's catchphrase), adolescent fun, and shameless sellout."¹⁸ All of this

¹³ Sirius, 1992: 16.

¹⁴ The quote was taken from a review in the Village Voice. See Boulware, 1995.

¹⁵ Rucker, Rudy, R. U. Sirius, and Queen Mu, ed. 1992. *Mondo 2000: A User's Guide to the New Edge*. New York, Harper Perennial: 144.

¹⁶ Zandbergen, Dorien. 2011. "New Edge: Technology and Spirituality in the San Francisco Bay Area." Leiden, Leiden University: 154.

¹⁷ Boulware, 1995.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

contributed to what Dery saw as the magazine's frustrating overall effect: "By turns illuminating and infuriating, the magazine is an in-crowd status symbol, a career vehicle for would-be Warhols, a beacon of utopian hope, and a source of dystopian anxiety."¹⁹

Where Dery suggests that Mondo's erratic character resists interpretation, this chapter argues that the magazine's split-personality is key to understanding the New Edge and cyberculture more generally. In the following subsection, I review existing accounts of Mondo's "techno-transcendentalism." In particular, I discuss how these incorporate Mondo's "rebel cool" in their analysis, namely as a device that glosses over the magazine's flawed politics or enables the seemingly opposite worlds of spirituality and technology to co-exist. In section 2.1.3, I describe an alternative framework that would seek to historicize Mondo's style, one that builds on Alan Liu's analysis of "cool" in relation to a new, post-industrial mode of knowledge work. These frameworks provide a basis for a close reading of New Edge discourse in section 3.

2.1.1 Techno-transcendentalism and its discontents

As images of bionic angels and technological rapture in Mondo's first editorial suggest, spirituality was an important element of its cybercultural rupture-talk. Anthropologist Dorien Zandbergen defines Mondo's New Edge as "celebrations of new 'edgy' technoscientific concepts, gadgets and future visions with a very 'New Agey' discourse of self-spirituality and spiritual evolution."²⁰ This conflation meant that technology was "imbued with the capacity to offer immediate knowledge and experience of 'reality at large,'" a belief Erik Davis called "techgnosis."²¹ In this way, a product like Cellular Automata software could be advertised as a "mind-expanding aid to your imagination" and it made sense to say that "[m]ultimedia isn't new, it's our natural state of being."²² Throughout Mondo's first few issues, one can find similar references to the connection between new technology and themes of transcendence, 'consciousness-expansion' and access to a fundamental, 'extra-sensory' reality. As Zandbergen notes, this New Edge conflation of New Age spirituality and hi-tech is somewhat surprising, because it upsets the modernist distinction between spirituality and the 'secular' realm of science and technology.²³ At issue is not simply the persistence of the sacred *in spite* of a high-tech environment, but through it: the idea, say, that cyberspace could offer a

¹⁹ Dery, 1996: 33.

²⁰ Zandbergen, 2011: 8.

²¹ *ibid*: 28.

²² Autodesk. 1989. "The Rudy Rucker CA Lab." Advertisement. *Mondo 2000*, 1: 1; Sugarman, Peter. n.d. "Multimedia. Eat it while it's Hot." *Mondo 2000*, 5: 106-107.

²³ Zandbergen, 2011: 9.

definitive deliverance from the social and psychological pressures of everyday, “real” life. This conflation is the crux of what Zandbergen calls New Edge culture.

Manifestations of the New Edge in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the pages of *Mondo*, in the underground rave scene, at the infamous arts and culture festival Burning Man, and elsewhere are less surprising when considering the cultural and historical conditions surrounding the emergence of the New Edge. Zandbergen argues that the New Edge represents how the Bay Area institutions of information technology and New Age spiritualism are made relevant to one another, noting that both the computer industry and the counterculture that New Age grew out of were established in the area in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁴ Citing Fred Turner, she also notes how these histories are crossed. As discussed in chapter 1, Stewart Brand and others traversed the Bay Area’s technological and countercultural milieus, creating “network forums” such as the Whole Earth Catalog where technology entrepreneurs and engineers could see their efforts aligned with the holism and “neo-tribalism” of communalists, and hippies could see in information technology a means for creating a self-sustaining alternative to mainstream society (see my discussion of Turner’s work in chapter 1). Similarly, Zandbergen describes how the subjects of her ethnography - computer and media professionals that identify with New Edge culture - enact spaces that align gnosticism with technology, from feelings of spiritual connection at raves to the construction of utopian “temporary autonomous zones” at Burning Man and in virtual worlds.²⁵

Zandbergen’s account may be seen as both an extension of and corrective to a series of critiques of *Mondo* and “techno-transcendentalism” that appeared in the early- to mid-1990s, most notably those of Mark Dery and Vivian Sobchack. Sobchack, expanding on an essay she originally wrote in 1991, took *Mondo* to task for its “consistent vacationing in the datascape.”²⁶ She recognizes the New Age and countercultural influences in *Mondo*’s vision of techno-transcendence, but argues that its celebrations of virtuality are ultimately a misguided form of escapism:

At best, the encounters in virtual reality and cyberspace promoted by *M2* are video games that one can lose without real loss. At worst, they falsely promise a new Eden for cyborg Adams and Eves - enthusiastic participants in some computerized and simulated (in)version of the Back to the Earth movement.²⁷

The problem with such “techno-transcendentalism,” Dery would later add, is that it actually

²⁴ Zandbergen, 2011: 12-14.

²⁵ *ibid*: 173-187.

²⁶ Sobchack, 1994: 20.

²⁷ *ibid*: 19.

subverts the potential in cyberculture to engage with the politics of technology.²⁸ Where real debates might be had about, say, access to information technology, Mondo addressed this only “in a vacuum and never relates it to economics or race or gender.”²⁹ The underlying problem, for both critics, was that Mondo’s commitment to issues of social justice came in a distant second to its celebratory enthusiasm. Despite its utopian rhetoric of global community in virtual worlds, Sobchack argued, the subculture represented by Mondo had “no real idea of how to achieve it,” instead offering only the rugged individualism of subjects like hackers, rogue entrepreneurs and the “console cowboys” of cyberpunk science fiction.³⁰ The pretense of social consciousness and populism, in other words, covered up a steadfast promotion of a “libertarianism [that] is neither progressive nor democratic.”³¹ Indeed, as Rudy Rucker wrote in his introduction to *A User’s Guide*, New Edge culture is uniquely Californian because it maintains “the naive belief that (a) There is a Better Way, and (b) I Can Do It Myself.”³² For Sobchack, this is an outlook that is willfully “blind to the historical structures that go beyond individual motivation and ‘do-it-yourself’ entrepreneurship in determining ‘winners’ and ‘losers.’”³³

For those studying Mondo as techno-transcendentalism, the style of the New Edge plays an important role in revealing its content and function. Not only does a rebellious attitude match the magazine’s libertarian outlook, its critics argue, but its self-deprecation, contrarianism, shifts in tone and other forms of “fancy footwork” are necessary for glossing over the essential flaws in its futurism and politics.³⁴ Mondo’s style, Sobchack argues, is marked by a cynical optimism that “resolves New Edge high-technophilia with New Age and “whole earth” naturalism, spiritualism, and hedonism. And it implicitly resolves the sixties’ countercultural “guerrilla” political action and social consciousness with a particularly privileged, selfish, consumer-oriented, and technologically dependent libertarianism.”³⁵ Its rebel cool, in other words, is a veneer that allows Mondo to have it both ways. For Zandbergen, however, New Edge style does not reveal ambivalence or necessarily stand opposite its countercultural and New Age values. Rather, irony, self-deprecation and other

²⁸ Dery, 1996: 17.

²⁹ Sobchack, 1994: 24.

³⁰ *ibid*: 23.

³¹ *ibid*: 24.

³² Rucker, Rudy. 1992. “On the Edge of the Pacific.” In *Mondo 2000: A User’s Guide to the New Edge*, ed. Rudy Rucker, R. U. Sirius, and Queen Mu. New York, HarperCollins: 10.

³³ Sobchack, 1994: 24.

³⁴ *ibid*: 15.

³⁵ *ibid*: 18.

stylistic elements make these commitments possible in New Edge culture: in one instance, she describes how “Ken,” a computer programmer, explains that the use of irony in the New Age settings he inhabits is what makes him feel comfortable in them.³⁶ In this way, New Edge style is what “enables the simultaneous existence of seeming oppositional epistemological strategies,” i.e. the gnostic sense of divine unity and a postmodern sensibility.³⁷ More generally, she argues that Sobchack’s argument is based on the faulty assumption that counterculture and New Age have historically stood opposite technophilia. For Zandbergen, New Edge discourse was prefigured by countercultural activity (including the neo-tribalism of the Whole Earth Catalog as described by Fred Turner), and earlier forms of gnosticism were characterized by a similar relationship to science and technology, where the latter was both a means to spirituality (consciousness expansion and visualizing interconnectedness) and a source of spiritual or psychological disruption.³⁸

In addition to different historical foundations, one can see in Zandbergen’s and Sobchack’s accounts two distinct and generalizable historiographical approaches to rupture-talk. On the one hand, rupture-talk is often criticized, or de-bunked, by revealing underlying interests and historical continuities. Richard Barbrook, for example, argues that a technology’s “imaginary future” may function as technological fetish, masking the material conditions of its production and its actual uses.³⁹ At the 1964 World’s Fair, for instance, nuclear energy and computer technology were advertised to the public as the twin futures of energy “too cheap to meter” and leisurely lifestyles enabled by automation and artificial intelligence.⁴⁰ Similarly, in 1996, Barbrook and Andy Cameron criticized the cybercultural utopias offered by *Wired* and others as these narratives ultimately served a wealthy “virtual class,” an argument that is closely aligned with Sobchack’s criticism of *Mondo*. On the other hand, as Gabrielle Hecht has argued, one may also approach rupture-talk as an agent of both historical change and continuity. The linguistic metaphor she uses for this paradoxical effect is “conjugate,” meaning to retain a root while changing tense or subject - that is, an action that both preserves and alters the meaning of a sentence.⁴¹ This metaphor may easily be applied to

³⁶ Zandbergen describes attending an ordainment service at the Gnostic Church with Ken, which ends with the priest saying “there is this superstition, it is very superstitious, that on the first day of a priests’ ordination, she has extraordinary power. It is just superstitious magic, but it doesn’t hurt to believe in it.” Zandbergen writes that this generates “loud laughter in the crowd. The service ends with a dancing session” (Zandbergen, 2011: 88-89).

³⁷ *ibid*: 159.

³⁸ *ibid*: 65-81

³⁹ Barbrook, 2007.

⁴⁰ *ibid*: 32-51.

⁴¹ Hecht, 2002.

Zandbergen's own anthropological approach, where she understands New Edge as a culture that maintains a relationship with the sacred at the same time that it alters that relationship according to a logic of technology and postmodernity.

Overall, Sobchack's and Zandbergen's accounts of Mondo as techno-transcendentalism have treated the magazine's "rebel cool" as a formal device serving a specific function in relation to its content - covering up its flawed politics or conjugating New Age spirituality. In the following, I reverse this analysis and approach New Edge style less in terms of its function and more as a starting point for an alternative (but not necessarily incompatible) understanding of Mondo 2000 its New Edge discourse.

2.1.2 The ethos of cool and Mondo as "insider outside"

Where Sobchack and Zandbergen treat Mondo's cool in terms of its function, another approach would be to historicize cybercultural cool more generally. Rather than think of the cool in cyberculture as a property of new technologies or those who created them, a gloss projected onto the web or some floating distinction one gains by association (e.g. by reading cool magazines like Mondo or Wired, or surfing the recommended "cool sites of the day" from the ubiquitous lists and aggregators of the early web), Alan Liu argues that this cool is an attitude, style and feeling closely related to the changing conditions of (post-)industrial work, and the ethos of today's knowledge worker.⁴² Here, I summarize Liu's argument and describe Mondo as a counterpart to the cool knowledge worker in terms of a subject that is neither entirely 'inside' nor fully 'outside' - that is, as a subcultural actor that does operate fully within mainstream, professional society nor as an underground figure explicitly opposed to the mainstream. This understanding of Mondo as an "insider outside" provides the basis for a close reading of the relationship between this positioning, the magazine's rupture-talk and its cool style.

At the basis of Liu's argument is a genealogy of political economy that roughly moves from automated industrial work to post-industrial, networked enterprise. He focuses on how these changes have collapsed the divide between work and private life, transforming not only the specific relations between worker, labor, product and corporation but also the conditions for expressions of the antagonisms that arise from those specific relations.⁴³ His question is thus not only about changing modes of production but also the changing modes of "emotional release" that accompany them. In the 1950s and 1960s, emotion at work was either simply outlawed (giving rise to the

⁴² Liu, 2004.

⁴³ *ibid*: 86-87.

affectless “Fordized face”) or, among the professional class of managers and technical workers, discouraged and ultimately constrained through self-control, resulting in a friendly but impersonal disposition.⁴⁴ The form of release that accompanied this was “the basic engine of cultural cool: the consumption by middle-class workers of forms of entertainment, journalism, and dress influenced by that part of culture excluded by definition from normal work - *subculture*.”⁴⁵ By consuming the “outsider” scenes depicted in, say, noir, Westerns and other Hollywood genre films, the “insiders” of white-collar work “displaced the very experience of alienation onto outsiders who could do the heavy lifting of being alienated for them.”⁴⁶ In the current paradigm, however, the form of emotional release has been adapted to the context of a networked mode of production, which has at its organizational core a dialectic of decentralization (where autonomy is granted at the same time work becomes integrated with that of the other departments, firms, customers, etc. in one’s “network”) and uniformity (the establishment of standards and protocols necessary to make such coordination possible).⁴⁷ Liu calls this mix of autonomy and constraint “user-friendliness,” after the Graphical User Interface, the latter a material and metaphorical representation how workers are simultaneously confronted with increasing standardization at the same time they are granted new freedoms of self-expression (customizing their on- and off-screen desktops). In the user-friendly corporation, the opposition between a corporate inside and a (sub)cultural outside has been disrupted: materially, say, by the multiple windows that allow knowledge workers to chat and surf the web at the same time they input figures into a spreadsheet, but also in the sense that corporate culture increasingly attempts to fully enfold leisure. Liu’s description of the user-friendly “workstyle” seems appropriate for the “coolest” workplaces today (like the Googleplex or Facebook’s One Hacker Way), which spatially and logistically facilitate flexible, project- and team-based work as well as the many forms of leisure and recreation (in Google’s case, these range from roller-hockey gear to relaxation “pods”) that are central to corporate culture in new media industry.⁴⁸ This new situation - which oscillates between new kinds of openness and flexibility on

⁴⁴ *ibid*: 93-94.

⁴⁵ *ibid*: 100.

⁴⁶ *ibid*.

⁴⁷ Liu, 2004: Liu calls this “global automation.” There are similarities to be drawn here with Alexander Galloway’s analysis of internet protocols as both radically inclusive and universalizing, a dialectic he argues characterizes the operation of power in post-disciplinary control societies. See Galloway, 2006.

⁴⁸ See for example Time magazine’s descriptions of Google’s “slightly goofy, self-indulgent culture.” Ignatius, Adi. 2006. “In Search Of The Real Google.” *Time*, February 20. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1158961,00.html>; see also the appropriately titled accompanying photo essay, “Life in the Google-plex,” available at http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1947844_2013323,00.html.

the one hand and stricter controls on the other, and where the divide between “inside” (work, the corporation) and “outside” (private life, subculture) is unsettled - becomes the grounds for a new kind of emotional release that is equally a mix of expression and restraint. It emerges from the paradox that knowledge workers face when negotiating between a need to imagine their lives as more deeply meaningful than their professions, and the fact that this kind of socializing “work” is increasingly seen as central to the mission of the companies that employ them.⁴⁹ Put more simply, cool emerges as the constrained attempt to create separation between work and spirit, a move Liu summarizes in the voice of the knowledge worker: “I work here, but I’m cool.”⁵⁰

This mix of freedom and constraint appears in the style, feeling and politics of cool, and is found both in highly visible products of cyberculture (such as Mondo and Wired) and in the relatively unassuming expressions and activities of knowledge work. Cool style, which Liu diagnoses from (among other sources) best practices in web design and information visualization, oscillates between the modernist goal of clarity and the subversion of that goal (or “antidesign”). It often strives to achieve an ideal of communicative efficiency (in the metaphor borrowed from information theory, a high signal-to-noise ratio), but just as often it subverts that ideal by “resisting” information, a strategy Liu notes in the loud colors and layout of early Wired. As both design and “antidesign,” cool style applies to aesthetically-pleasing code (which uses no more lines than required) and clean web-pages as well as the information breakdowns of net.art and a seemingly endless supply of ironic memes that repurpose and subvert the genres of information work (from flow charts to the databases underlying web generators). As feeling, meanwhile, Liu argues that cool should be seen as an update on the emotionless “Fordized face.” Now personality and expressiveness are valued as correlates to the autonomy and creativity required for knowledge work, a leeway implied when Google describes its culture as being “not serious about anything but search.”⁵¹ However, Liu writes, this is “designer emotion,” and similar to cool style as a restrained expressiveness.⁵² Cool feeling is reflected in the rhetoric of many “cool website of the day” projects of the early web (roughly 1994-1999), where cool websites were those that appeared to be effortlessly so, colorful and fun but not loud or obnoxious (attributes that were definitely

⁴⁹ Liu suggests that as ethos, cool is not cultural identity, but “a way or manner of living in information. Too fundamental and inchoate itself to be called an identity, it is nevertheless the formative material of imagined identities promising knowledge workers some hope of alternative lives of knowledge” (Liu, 2004: 184).

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Google removed this sentence from its “corporate philosophy” web page in September 2009, but it can be found via the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine. See Google Inc. “Corporate Information - Our Philosophy.” *Google.com*. <http://web.archive.org/web/20090801191943/http://www.google.com/corporate/tenthings.html>.

⁵² Liu, 2004: 238.

“uncool”).⁵³

Where the “rebel cool” in cyberculture is perhaps most often attributed to the outsider, individualist and anti-authoritarian tendencies of its politics, this too may be rethought in accordance with the restraint that characterizes cool style and feeling. In this way, what critics such as Sobchack and Dery call the flawed politics of cyberculture and techno-transcendentalism would instead be understood, according to Liu, as the “nonpolitics” or “antipolitics” of cool.⁵⁴ This broader category encompasses the grand gestures of cyberlibertarianism, but also the diffused, casual engagement with information politics in everyday knowledge work that does not so much resemble political activity as “bad attitude.”⁵⁵ It includes a range of subterranean acts of micro-resistance that are common place in information work - illegal file-sharing, surfing on the job and forwarded office jokes, and so on - “that official cyberlibertarian politics [...] rarely admits but that the unofficial hinterland of the movement glories in.”⁵⁶ The critical observation Liu makes is that in knowledge work, where an information politics would seem most necessary, expressions of this antagonism are reduced to cool politics.

So what was the source and quality of Mondo’s rebel cool, seen from this perspective? Perhaps it stemmed from Mondo’s relevance to the new topography in which cool culture circulated. At the height of its popularity, Mondo’s audience (according to Sirius) included a substantial proportion of professionals working in media and technology.⁵⁷ As Sobchack wrote, the magazine’s “romantic, swashbuckling, irresponsible individualism [...] fills the dream of ‘mondoids’ who, by day, sit at computer consoles working for (and becoming) corporate America.”⁵⁸ To those readers, Mondo presented a subculture that was both related to their work, in its focus on technology, but also made this work appear strange and fantastic, giving its audience something to aspire to. Answering the criticism that his vision of emancipation through technology involved purchasing expensive toys, Sirius argued that Mondo should not be treated to a higher standard than other forms of entertainment: “On one level, for whatever liberation Mondo offers, the price is \$5.95. It’s like going to a high-tech film that shows these people playing with neat toys.

⁵³ *ibid*: 234-238.

⁵⁴ *ibid*: 253. “Nonpolitics” and “antipolitics” should be distinguished from being apolitical, or showing no interest in politics. Instead, Liu uses these terms to denote a kind of stunted politics that presents a pose of politics (through its small acts of subversion).

⁵⁵ *ibid*: 253.

⁵⁶ *ibid*: 275.

⁵⁷ Sobchack, 1994: 23.

⁵⁸ *ibid*: 18.

Nobody says that it's necessary for them to acquire these things in order to get something from the film."⁵⁹ Sirius's argument is ostensibly about the forms of transcendence offered by technology and the cyberpunk subculture, but the format he implies is the same as what Liu called the "basic engine of cultural cool," where the worker residing inside mainstream society might have identified with the ambience of a subversive or unbound "outside" simply by owning a record or identifying with the character in a movie. The key difference, of course, is that the "outsides" Mondo offered (whether the technologies of technotranscendence they covered or the magazine itself) were intimately connected to the technologies and skills of knowledge work performed by its audience. This form of cool consumption is thus different to, say, that of most readers of *Rolling Stone* in the 1970s (where the separation between the inside of work life and the aspirational outside is discrete rather than continuous).

In addition to its suitability to the new dynamics of cool consumption, however, Mondo arguably also represented a corresponding change in the production of cool. As stated above, the focus of Liu's analysis is the "outsider inside," the knowledge worker whose cool makes him more, not less, attuned to the needs of post-industrial work, meanwhile short-circuiting expressions of contemporary alienation by defaulting to restrained modes such as designer emotion and bad attitude. The question now is whether and how to characterize a subcultural counterpart to the cool knowledge worker, or the "insider outside." On the one hand, a bird's eye view of Mondo and its history suggests some answers. Both chronologically and conceptually, Mondo 2000 sat somewhere between 'zine culture, theorized by Stephen Duncombe as an underground "voice" resistant to capitalism and mass media, and the much higher-profile *Wired* magazine.⁶⁰ Mondo descended from two 'zines Sirius and Mu published in the mid- to late-1980s, *High Frontiers* (1984-1987) and *Reality Hackers* (1988-1989). *High Frontiers* initially had a print run of 1500, and its content was largely "unedited interviews with acid veterans like Albert Hofmann, Timothy Leary, and Terence McKenna, the margins filled in with weird jokes and short items."⁶¹ With each new issue and iteration, though, they included more discussions of technology, fringe science and art to go alongside topics like New Age and psychedelics; the subhead for *Reality Hackers* was "Information Technologies & Entertainment for Those on the Brink." In 1989, after deciding the new name was holding back sales, Sirius and Mu relaunched again as Mondo 2000, and by 1992 they were gaining

⁵⁹ Quoted in Blair, Dike. 1993. "Leading Into the Light While Playing in the Dark: An Interview with Mondo 2000's Editor-in-Chief, R.U. Sirius." *Purple Prose*. <http://www.adaweb.com/~purple/mondo.html>.

⁶⁰ Duncombe, Stephen. 1997. *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. London: Verso.

⁶¹ Boulware, 1995.

subscribers, high-profile advertisers and national attention. If Mondo's popular appeal suggested a dissolution between 'zine culture and mainstream publication, its production similarly occurred in what contributor Gareth Branwyn called "an Interzone."⁶² The magazine operated out of Queen Mu's home in the Berkeley hills, where regular parties would bring together staff, writers, interview subjects and journalists from other publications, and often served as the impetus for new content. As another contributor put it: "The scene built the magazine, and the magazine built the scene."⁶³ Mondo was thus both the subculture's central node and the mediator that would translate it to a broader audience, as suggested by the title of its mainstream-friendly compilation, *A User's Guide to the New Edge*. Much as cool arises in knowledge work through the incorporation of a feeling, style and politics that are "edgy" but also restrained, Mondo's cool was that of a subcultural actor that had interiorized a restrained version of its professional, mainstream other. "I'm resisting," Mondo's style seemed to say, "but I'm cool."

2.2 Rupture-talk to rebel cool: the paradoxes of New Edge discourse

So far, I have argued that where previous accounts have approached Mondo's style as formal device, its "rebel cool" should itself be contextualized. Mondo's cool is one specific to the subject position it enacted, that of a subcultural figure adopting (restrained versions of) attitudes and behaviors from mainstream culture, performing a balancing act between underground and popular media. It may have served to cover up the magazine's contradictory politics or to update gnosticism for a hi-tech, postmodern cultural environment, but to understand its source one must account for how "cool" has been shaped by the wider context of information culture and knowledge work. This contemporary version of cool - information cool - emerges as restrained emotion, expression and attitude in the workplace at the same time that, for many knowledge workers, professional life has (under the euphemisms of flexibility and corporate culture) incorporated spaces of recreation and leisure. If the knowledge worker's cool is a response to these changing conditions - if it is a kind of proto-psychology of the post-industrial landscape - then is it possible to also understand Mondo as a response to a new environment? What is Mondo's "insider outside" position a solution to? In this section, I argue that beyond its techno-transcendentalism and libertarian politics, Mondo's rupture-talk - the New Edge - may be understood as a description of the shifting grounds for underground scenes, subcultural practice and organized resistance. The New Edge techno-cultural landscape, similar to the corporate settings described by Liu, is one of blurred boundaries between subcultural

⁶² Branwyn, quoted in Boulware, 1995.

⁶³ Zarkov, quoted in Boulware, 1995.

“outsides” and mainstream “insides,” as well as a mix of expanded affordances (from desktop publishing to the flattening of media hierarchies) and constraints (from commercialization to information overload) on the ability to establish or maintain an underground or subcultural identity. In the following sections I discuss the key concepts in Mondo’s notion of a subversive, computer-driven revolution in culture - cyberpunk, information politics and virtual reality - focusing on how these elements simultaneously reveal important paradoxes within the New Edge: cyberpunk’s underground cultural resistance is tempered by the fast pace of co-optation; a left-libertarian information politics is undermined by institutional forces; and the emancipatory potential of virtual reality is countered by the sense that it is simply an addition to a saturated, postmodern media culture. Mondo’s rupture-talk, in other words, may be read as a series of paradoxes that produce a contemporary underground or subcultural actor’s position: in section 2.2.4, I discuss how a New Edge ethos (informed by these paradoxes) is expressed in Mondo’s “new media cool,” focusing on its media pranks and what it called “irresponsible journalism.”

2.2.1 Cyberpunk and co-optation

When publishers Queen Mu and R.U. Sirius made the decision in 1989 to re-launch Reality Hackers under a new, consumer-friendlier name, part of their reasoning was that they had a scoop.⁶⁴ Cyberpunk had received national and international attention from science fiction magazines as well as from literary critics, but at that point had not been profiled in popular media. The genre did not lack popularity, however, and Mondo’s depiction was of a cultural “movement.” The feature included interviews with authors Sterling, John Shirley, Vernor Vinge and Rudy Rucker, as well as the transcript of a casual conversation (previewed as a “drunken business meeting”) between Timothy Leary and William Gibson. Mondo also expanded the focus to include other media (the TV show *Max Headroom*), and included columns on the roots of cyberpunk and personal computing. Although the conversations were loose-ended, and the editing intentionally confusing, the discussions hover around a small handful of topics, including the genre’s themes of techno-transcendence and hi-tech resistance but equally on the commodification and co-optation of the cyberpunk subculture.

Cyberpunk’s generic characteristics had been defined by iconic works such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and the short stories collected in *Mirrorshades*, the anthology edited by cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling and published in 1986. In his introduction to *Mirrorshades*, Sterling argues that the label cyberpunk “captures something crucial to the work of these writers,

⁶⁴ Boulware, 1995.

something crucial to the [1980s] as a whole: a new kind of integration. The overlapping of worlds that were formerly separate: the realm of high tech, and the modern pop underground."⁶⁵ Techno-transcendental themes of body modification, cyberspace and fundamental changes to "the nature of the self" played out on a grander scale the kinds of psychological and cultural upheaval technology was causing in the present.⁶⁶ The genre displayed an interest in the new levels of intimacy of technology - Sterling contrasts the previous technological icons of steam engines and skyscrapers with the "visceral" devices of the 1980s such as the personal computer and the walkman - but also how technology enabled underground scenes and activity:

The cyberpunks, being hybrids themselves, are fascinated by interzones: the areas where, in the words of William Gibson, "the street finds its own uses for things." Roiling, irrepressible street graffiti from that classic industrial artifact, the spray can. The subversive potential of the home printer and the photocopier. Scratch music, whose ghetto innovators turn the phonograph itself into an instrument, producing an archetypal Eighties music where funk meets the Burroughs cut-up method. "It's all in the mix" - this is true of much Eighties art and is as applicable to cyberpunk as it is to punk mix-and-match retro fashion and multitrack digital recording.⁶⁷

What Gibson and Sterling describe - repurposing the objects of (post-)industrial work for alternative use - is a near-exact reproduction of the classic definition of subcultural style: the appropriation of cultural artifacts and practices in ways that "go 'against nature,' interrupting the process of 'normalization.'"⁶⁸ Subcultural style, Dick Hebdige argued, is the inversion and subversion of objects and their cultural meanings, and the motor of its oppositional identity.⁶⁹

Cyberpunk takes this formula of semiotic resistance to extremes: in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the best example is the Panther Moderns, a media-terrorism group whose major contribution to the plot is a simulated attack that provides cover for the exploits of the main characters. The Panther Moderns were a more dangerous descendent of previous "sub-cults," Gibson's narration points out, but essentially the same: "It was the style that mattered [...] The Moderns were mercenaries, practical jokers, nihilistic technofetishists."⁷⁰ As Gibson tells Leary in the *Mondo* interview, the group was supposed to be "[c]ool to the point of inexplicability [...] They're sorta like Marshal McLuhan's revenge. Media monsters. It's as though the worst street gang you ever ran into were, at

⁶⁵ Sterling, Bruce. 1986. *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. New York, Ace Books: xi.

⁶⁶ *ibid*: xiii.

⁶⁷ *ibid*: xiii-xiv.

⁶⁸ Hebdige, Dick. [1979]2002. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London, Routledge: 17.

⁶⁹ *ibid*.

⁷⁰ Gibson, 1984: 59.

the same time, intense conceptual artists.”⁷¹ According to Sterling, the same mix of technology, media and subcultural attitude was the essence of fascination with cyberpunk’s ambience: “Cyberpunk comes from the realm where the computer hacker and the rocker overlap, a cultural Petri dish where writhing gene lines splice. Some find the results bizarre, even monstrous; for others this integration is a powerful source of hope.”⁷² Beyond the imagined futures of techno-transcendental integrations, Sterling argued that cyberpunk represented a new form of hi-tech-enabled resistance: “an integration of technology and the Eighties counterculture. An un-holy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent - the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy.”⁷³

But if cyberpunk was aligned with the political semiotics of subcultural identity, this alignment was also self-conscious and pessimistic. In the *Mondo* interviews, the various authors - in particular Sterling and John Shirley - repeatedly discuss (and bemoan) cyberpunk’s development from a loosely-bound subculture and genre into a mass cultural product. On the one hand, this was a matter of personal anxieties about being pigeon-holed after achieving success. The conversation between Gibson and Leary, for instance, begins with a section called “Trapped,” where Gibson discusses avoiding being perceived as (merely) a cyberpunk author: “I’ve got to do a different kind of book now, because I’m already getting some reviews saying, ‘Well, this is good, but it’s more of the same stuff.’ I’m desperate to avoid that.”⁷⁴ On the other, it was an awareness and fatalism regarding the co-optation of cyberpunk and underground culture more generally. Describing the work of “third and fourth-generation cyberpunks,” Sterling argued that the rapid success of the movement had taken the edge out of cyberpunk: “People are just cannibalizing our imagery. Selling it. Did you see Nancy Reagan breakdancing? It’s the same: co-optation. No use putting any more of our energies into ‘Cyberpunk, Trademark.’”⁷⁵

The pessimism was not total, however, and Sterling and Shirley saw opportunity in assuming a third position, that of the outsider operating within mainstream culture. Asked whether cyberpunk’s “original vision” was alive in spite of co-optation, Sterling answered yes:

⁷¹ Gibson, William and Timothy Leary. 1989. “High Tech High Life: William Gibson and Timothy Leary in Conversation.” *Mondo* 2000, 1: 61.

⁷² Sterling, 1986: xiii.

⁷³ *ibid*: xiii.

⁷⁴ Gibson and Leary, 1989: 59.

⁷⁵ Milhon, Jude. 1989b. “Coming in Under the Radar: Bruce Sterling interviewed by Jude Milhon.” *Mondo* 2000, 1: 98.

[W]e're coming in under the radar in a much more efficient way now [...] we're hitting people who are literary - intellectuals, academics. Not just the sci-fi people. Our books are reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review*. Gibson's in Hollywood. We manage very well under our own names, unlabeled, although this isn't to say that our collective vision is no longer there [...] We just shut down the neon sign. Our only business is to unexpectedly fuck people up.

A similar dynamic is described by John Shirley, who also notes that this position is precarious:

Mass culture. Ideally, we're trying to tap into its brain, live off the body, and redirect it a bit too. Call it "revolutionary parasitism." [...] Of course, it's dangerous. People may sneer and say, you think you're redirecting it but it's eating you, buddy. Maybe - we'll see.⁷⁶

The actor position the authors describe here is clearly different from existing notions of underground culture and organized dissent, which Sterling saw in cyberpunk's roots. In the place of the classical understanding of subculture is a counterpart to Liu's cool knowledge worker, a cool subject found inside mass culture. Because the interviews are focused on this topic, for example by including "coming in under the radar" and "revolutionary parasitism" in the titles of Sterling's and Shirley's interviews, it is hard to imagine Mondo's editors did not understand this as akin to its own self-conscious mix of edginess and commercial appeal. This becomes more apparent when considering the profile of Marshall McLuhan as "Cyberpunk Godfather."⁷⁷ Reviewing a volume of the media theorist's letters, Terrence McKenna argues that the "central paradox" of McLuhan's life was his ability to appeal to the counterculture as well as to the insiders of business and government.⁷⁸ On the one hand, McLuhan would lecture prime ministers and CEOs, on the other he "seemed to be giving permission for youth culture, rock & roll, and post-print libidinal tactility to finally, mercifully dismantle linear stuffed-shirt Western civilization."⁷⁹ (In a related piece of lore, McKenna writes that McLuhan coached Timothy Leary "in marketing psychology and smilesanship."⁸⁰) In McLuhan and cyberpunk, then, Mondo not only had a theorist and subculture that focused its content, but analogs for its "insider outside" identity.

⁷⁶ Milhon, Jude. 1989a. "Call it... Revolutionary Parasitism: an interview with John Shirley." *Mondo* 2000, 1: 91. The titles for the Shirley and Sterling interviews suggest that Mondo's editors shared their interest in this focus on subversive voice within mass culture.

⁷⁷ McKenna, Terrence. 1989. "Psychopharmacognosticon: Marshall McLuhan the cognitive agent as Cyberpunk Godfather." *Mondo* 2000, 1: 48-49.

⁷⁸ *ibid*: 49.

⁷⁹ *ibid*: 48.

⁸⁰ *ibid*: 49.

2.2.2 Information politics and institutional power

The collapse of the divide between subversive underground and mass cultural mainstream continued to resonate in Mondo's depictions of new media as tools of political and cultural resistance. Features on hackers and virtual reality articulated new media as drivers of political and cultural freedom, but also argued that such promise was overblown or compromised by exacerbating problems of media manipulation and disinformation.

In the tradition of McLuhan, for Mondo the effects of new media were a matter of inherent capacities and external inevitabilities. Writing after German reunification, two of the most outspokenly libertarian contributors (Gracie and Zarkov, pseudonyms for an anonymous Bay Area couple who also worked in finance) described the information revolution as the apex of technology-driven political progress:

The Information Age continues the hard fought battle for freedom. Our weapons are mass market electronics. Freedom of communication makes freedom of the imagination practical for all. Freedom of the imagination has been opposed by every traditional culture and authoritarian creed.⁸¹

This narrative of cybercultural utopianism, which assumes that the free flow of information will topple authoritarian and undemocratic regimes, is a good example of Mondo's treatment of politics in a vacuum (as Sobchack put it). The idea that abstract information flows, presumably meaning Western news and entertainment, are themselves immune to social and economic forces as well as re-interpretation in new cultural contexts is of course naive. The same might be said of the magazine's coverage of Operation Sundevil, a series of raids of hackers' homes after AT&T's network crashed in January 1990.⁸² Sirius and George Gleason presented this as an archetypal story of freedom-loving rebels against clueless authorities, including this typical scene:

"What's this?" a Secret Service agent asked upon seeing the dread weapon of the youthful terrorist. "It's a phone machine," Acid Phreak replied. "What does it do?" the superstitious savage queried. "It answers phones," Acid Phreak confessed.⁸³

Such stories repeat the cyberlibertarian theme - most visible in the cybercultural manifestos discussed in chapter 1 - of the need for government and corporations to catch up with the tuned-in digital elite.

At the same time, though, Mondo also tended to deflate this mythology, specifically by challenging the premise of an opposition between a rebellious subculture and mainstream society.

⁸¹ Gracie and Zarkov. n.d. "Bruno Burns! Rushdie Recants!" *Mondo 2000*, 4: 158.

⁸² Sirius, R.U., and George Gleason. 1991. "Do G-Men Dream of Electric Sheep?" *Mondo 2000*, 3: 40-43.

⁸³ *ibid*: 42.

This included pointing out that one of the most notorious hacker groups - The Legion of Doom - was “really just a loose alliance of a very few young computer hackers,” and highlighting the relative innocence of activity that led to the crackdown of Operation Sundevil (such as sharing proprietary information that had already been made public).⁸⁴ And although Sirius and Gleason portrayed the hackers alongside artists and musicians as repressed for acts of “self-expression,” they also made it a point to show that the hackers were often the same computer industry types the government was supposedly protecting. Hackers depicted in the news as the enemies of computer companies “were actually CEOs in that industry. Many more were, at the very least, major stockholders and well-paid executives in mainline companies.”⁸⁵ The concept of a subversive-mainstream in computing was personified by Mitch Kapor, a hero of “digital capitalism” whose Lotus Development company sold the leading spreadsheet software for personal computers in the 1980s.⁸⁶ Having left Lotus in 1986, Kapor took up digital rights advocacy by founding the Electronic Frontier Foundation together with John Perry Barlow. Their friendship was built on a shared interest in the “dislocations of consciousness” being caused by digital media as well as “a common set of experiences in the 60’s involving what I - when I speak to straight business audiences - charitably refer to as recreational chemicals.”⁸⁷ When a group of young hackers - who Kapor calls “digital skateboarders” - were to be prosecuted for what Barlow and Kapor felt was relatively innocent behavior, the pair decided to provide legal help and set up the EFF.

In an interview with Kapor and Barlow, Mondo’s questions quickly veer toward the paradoxes of an ex-hippie at the head of a large corporation, and a “software millionaire” helping out digital skateboarders. To the latter, Kapor simply answers that “I’m the same digital skateboarder that they are, only I’m a little bit older and have more life experience.”⁸⁸ Similarly, Sirius and Gleason argued that the young hackers targeted in Operation Sundevil could be seen as the future employees and entrepreneurs of digital capitalism. They were “bush league, training for the Security Industry.”⁸⁹ Likewise, hacker and regular Mondo contributor Michael Synergy wrote, “people who are debating over the terms hacker and cracker oughtta just get a life. The only difference is that one

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*: 41.

⁸⁶ David Gans and R.U. Sirius. 1991. “Civilizing the Electronic Frontier: An interview with Mitch Kapor and John Barlow of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.” *Mondo 2000*, 3: 45-49.

⁸⁷ Mitch Kapor, quoted in Gans and Sirius, 1991: 46.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*: 48.

⁸⁹ Sirius and Gleason, 1991: 40.

is employed. Or owns the company.”⁹⁰ However, the marriage between subcultural outside and mainstream inside is not always so happy. In a section titled “An Acid Take on Digital Capitalism,” interviewers David Gans and R.U. Sirius pressed Kapor on how he resolved his countercultural values with his position as “one of the new heroes of digital capitalism.” The resulting exchange turns the revolutionary promise of “outsiders” directing industry from the inside on its head, and is worth quoting in full (note that Barlow often answers for Kapor):

Mitch Kapor: I didn’t set out to be Bill Gates [...] The little company turned into this enormous thing with thousands of employees making hundreds of millions of dollars a year. And it felt awful to me. So I left. I just walked away one day.

Mondo: Did it occur to you, when you walked away, that you were turning that large capitalist organism loose to do its will and...

John Perry Barlow: It was already a lot bigger than he was.

Mondo: But if your values were offended by it, wasn’t there some way to turn it around?

Barlow: You’re still stuck in the notion that people run these things and that they don’t run themselves. Companies become their market, not their maker. Lotus is a beautiful case in point. To say that Mitch could have somehow directed Lotus in some benign way is like assuming a coral polyp can run a reef. Large businesses are collective organisms.

Mondo: How are they driven?

Mitch Kapor: They’re not! That’s something that John and I both keyed in on. We have this assumption that because something exists and acts, it has some central controller, some little homunculus inside it that makes the thing go. But physics is dead as a model for organizations. Biology is in the ascendent. And if you study biology, things are very decentralized, very distributed. You get emergent behaviors coming out of the workings of a whole bunch of little pieces. Each piece is pretty dumb. Organizations are like that. Still and all, I agonized over my responsibilities toward Lotus before I left.

Barlow: Individuals who work in institutions are no longer individuals [...] It’s like slime mold.⁹¹

And a little further on:

Barlow: By the way, there’s also this lingering assumption that there’s some disjuncture between being a digital pioneer and being an acid head [...] this is actually quite a common phenomenon.

⁹⁰ Synergy, Michael. 1991. “Synergy Speaks: Goodbye Banks, Goodbye Telephones, Goodbye Welfare Checks.” *Mondo 2000*, 3: 53.

⁹¹ Quoted in Gans and Sirius, 1991: 47.

Mondo: In that case, is there a reaction of old corporate America against new corporate America?

Barlow: Well, the reaction is to meet it, to infect it with itself, and to create - through the use of itself as a market - a perfect replica of what was pre-existing.⁹²

Although this exchange can be critiqued for how the metaphor of biological complexity (which Kevin Kelly called “out of control”) glosses over complex issues of agency, power and political economy, what is of interest here is how it establishes a kind dystopian fatalism in the New Edge outlook. The hackers, cyberpunks and superbrights may be “at the controls,” as Mondo’s utopian manifesto had proclaimed, but they are also merely cogs within institutions that direct individuals as they sustain themselves at all costs. Moreover, any subversive influence the new digital generation of corporations have is corrupted as older institutions force them to become “a perfect replica of what was pre-existing.” The process is very similar to what Shirley described as cyberpunk’s “revolutionary parasitism,” except of course it turns what he called a “dangerous” possibility - that mass culture would feed off of subversive “outsiders inside” rather than vice versa - into an inevitability.

2.2.3 Virtual reality and media culture

The third concept in Mondo’s subversive computer culture is Virtual Reality. With VR, the kinds of paradoxes that inform the subject positions of cyberpunks and hackers - subversive culture and mainstream co-optation, individual freedom and institutional control - become central to Mondo’s cybercultural utopianism, or its articulation of VR (a term the magazine used interchangeably with “cyberspace”) as a source of unprecedented effects.

Mondo portrayed VR as a revolutionary new medium, despite the fact that it was not always clear what exactly the technology might be used for. As exciting as a 3-D virtual world may seem, the musician and software entrepreneur Todd Rundgren argued, virtual reality was an example of “too much fascination with computers, and not enough about what the hell are we going to do with them? Are we going to keep filling the world with junk? Will we just reamplify the noise?”⁹³ An article profiling AutoDesk’s early VR initiative Cyberia, meanwhile, could only offer the relatively mundane promise that “customers will visit Cyberian hubs much as people today attend health clubs, museums, art galleries, theaters, or pick-up bars.”⁹⁴ The last option, of course, does suggest

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ Morgan, Jas, Morgan Russell, and Steve Ananda. 1989. “Beyond Hacker Machismo: An Interview with Todd Rundgren.” *Mondo 2000*, 1: 103.

⁹⁴ Walser, Randal. 1989 “Is it Live... Or is it AutoDesk?” *Mondo 2000*, 1: 17.

the decidedly more exciting possibility of virtual sex, which was a standard reference point for describing how the virtual world might displace the real one. In another VR article, Howard Rheingold made the case that virtual sex would bring about “a whole new semiotics of mating.”⁹⁵ “Teledildonics,” to use the term he introduces, “is inevitable given the rate of progress in the enabling technologies,” as are “[q]uestions of morality, privacy, personal identity, and even the very definition of Eros.”⁹⁶ He continues:

If everybody can look as beautiful, sound as sexy, and feel as nubile and virile as everyone else, what then will have erotic meaning?

If you can experience sexual frissons or deep physical communion with another person with no possibility of pregnancy or VD, what then of conventional morality?

If you can map your hands to your puppet’s legs, and let your fingers do the walking through cyberspace, there is no reason to believe you won’t be able to map your genital effectors to your manual sensors and have direct genital contact by shaking hands.⁹⁷

Rheingold’s speculative design highlights the argument made more broadly in *Mondo*, that VR’s subversive potential lay deeper than the technology’s immersiveness and fidelity. VR was not exceptional because it represented an improvement on existing communications or entertainment media, but rather because it unsettled basic assumptions about social and cultural life. Upon entering VR, it was the fictional character of the real world that would become apparent.

Mondo’s understanding of VR in terms of new, subversive realities in cyberspace was built on an existing belief that “consensus reality” was already on thin ice. This tied in with comparisons of VR with the mind-altering effects of LSD. As John Perry Barlow writes in the feature article of *Mondo*’s second issue:

The closest analog to Virtual Reality in my experience is psychedelic [...] it is as challenging to describe to the uninitiated and it does force some of the same questions, most of them having to do with the fixity of reality itself

[...]

I have a feeling VR will further expose the conceit that ‘reality’ is a fact. It will provide another reminder of the seamless continuity between the world outside and the world within delivering another major hit to the old fraud of objectivity [...] And that’s just fine with me, since so much of what’s wrong in America is based on the pathological need for certainty and the idiotic delusion that such a condition

⁹⁵ Rheingold, Howard. 1990. “Teledildonics: Reach Out and Touch Someone.” *Mondo 2000*, 2: 54.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

can even exist.⁹⁸

Here, the significance of VR clearly derives from a set of cultural reference points (psychedelics, holism, consciousness-expansion, etc.) similar to those that were brought together in what Fred Turner calls the New Communalist faction of the counterculture (see chapter 1). Timothy Leary, in the interview with William Gibson, similarly connects cyberspace to the subversive potential of consciousness-expansion, suggesting that simply by reading cyberpunk one might enter the kind of “notional space” described by Gibson:

TL: Would you describe cyberspace as the matrix of all the hallucinations?

WG: Yeah, it's a *consensual* hallucination that these people have created. It's like, with this equipment, you can agree to share the same hallucinations. In effect, they're creating a world. It's not really a place, it's not really space. It's notional space.

TL: See, we live in that space. We that are hooked up to *Neuromancer* are living in that consensual hallucination.

WG: Yeah. In a sense.⁹⁹

Gibson's measured response (“in a sense”) was not the only example of skepticism about the more fantastic descriptions of VR and its effects. Although the magazine was known best for its celebrations of VR, there are examples in which key New Edge figures disavowed this techno-transcendence. R.U. Sirius, for example, was fond of saying “I'd rather watch Ren and Stimpy on caffeine than experience virtual reality on smart drugs.”¹⁰⁰ Bruce Sterling, meanwhile, dismissed technological mysticism: “The element of transcendence [in cyberpunk] is just a feature of the genre, like feedback in rock music. It's a move [...] People who take that stuff too seriously end up turning into trolls.”¹⁰¹

However, even those who winced at transcendentalism and were apprehensive about overstating the significance of VR, held onto the constructivist premise that underlies its subversive potential. Sterling again:

I'm not a mystic myself. This notion that there's some plug into God and you'll always be there... it doesn't work. Eventually you have to get up in the morning, look at the red of your eyeballs and think, ‘Where's a cup of coffee?’ Consensus reality is the cup-of-coffee level. But consensus reality is a fragile

⁹⁸ Barlow, 1990a: 41.

⁹⁹ Gibson and Leary, 1989: 61.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Lebkowsky, Jon. 1996. “The R.U. Sirius Interview: It's Better to Be Inspired Than Wired.” *CTheory.net*. <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=19..>

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Milhon, 1989b: 100.

thing, predicated on a lot of assumptions that aren't questioned. That's what I'd like to get at.¹⁰²

Like Sterling, Sirius argues one does not need to resort to transcendentalism to show how the principles underlying VR already affect everyday life:

The increased interaction of human-beings through information-transfer technologies is the dominant reality of our times. Mediated by commerce, it is known as hype or 'Business Art', and effects all of us. Rarely are we defined by who we are in person-to-person contact. We are defined by the information and images we send out, how we package ourselves, how we 'position' ourselves. Within virtual reality, your concept of yourself *is* you.¹⁰³

The constructivism underlying the most far-fetched visions of VR, then, remains in place.

These dismissals of techno-transcendence, however, also point to a more fundamental skepticism regarding whether the mind-bending worlds of VR truly represent a departure from the simulations and distractions of mass media. In negative form, the same constructivist outlook says, "The enemy [...] is Mediated Information," as Barlow argues in an article about the roles played by computer simulation and mass media during the Gulf War.¹⁰⁴ It is no coincidence that Barlow, the most outspoken VR visionary, is also an advocate of Jean Baudrillard's pessimistic postmodern theory. His strange mix of McLuhan-esque techno-transcendentalism with Baudrillard's dystopian outlook results in his curious claim that the simulated realities of VR would offer a return to authentic "experience." On the one hand, this is the key move in cybercultural utopianism discussed in chapter one, which sees in information technology a paradoxical return to more natural, organic modes of being and community. But it also points to a deeply cynical worldview. What passes for reality now, Barlow writes, is really the "DataCloud," or a "global supply of words, numbers, statistics, projections, analyses, and gossip."¹⁰⁵ None of these representations can be considered real, a quality he locates only in "experience," and the problem is one that computers aggravate "with thermonuclear vigor."¹⁰⁶ "We pass our measuring grids over pulsating reality, shovel the results into our machines, thrash them with micro-circuits, and pretend that what floats up to the screen is 'real'" when, actually, it's "horseshit."¹⁰⁷ Here, again, is the argument made by Sirius that virtuality - in the sense of information and images being privileged over experience - is an existing

¹⁰² Bruce Sterling, quoted in Milhon, 1989b: 100.

¹⁰³ Sirius, R.U. 1989. "On the Importance of Being Andy." *Mondo 2000*, 1: 85.

¹⁰⁴ Barlow, John Perry. n.d. "Virtual Nintendo." *Mondo 2000*, 5: 46.

¹⁰⁵ Barlow, 1990a: 43.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

cultural condition rather than one that will arrive with VR. And here again is a contradiction at the heart of the New Edge that trumpets a growing subversive computer culture at the same time that it expresses pessimism about its revolutionary potential.

As Barlow's description of the "DataCloud" suggests, the major source of virtuality in Mondo's descriptions is invariably corporate, mass media. Mass media is imagined as a simulacrum, a circulation of news and entertainment that refers only back to more information. Mass media produce a 'reality' that never lives up to experience, but nonetheless replaces it. Nowhere is this as clearly spelled out as in an interview with the experimental, sound collage band Negativland, in the magazine's second issue on Cyberspace (though, unhappily, not in that issue's feature on VR). The interview centers on the band's album *Helter Stupid*, which mixes newscasts and other found material to recount the band's 'Christianity is Stupid' controversy. With a fake press release in 1988, the band had suggested that their song had inspired 16-year-old David Brom to murder his family with an ax (a closely followed news story at the time).¹⁰⁸ Called a hoax that got out of hand, "Negativland chose to exploit the media's appetite for particularly sensational stories by becoming a subject they couldn't resist – the latest version of a ridiculous media cliché which proposes that rock song lyrics instigate murder."¹⁰⁹

The subsequent events quite remarkably enacted the critique of mass media as virtuality, even if this was in large part a product of Negativland's actions and the assumptions behind them. The press release was treated seriously - the band sees this as part of a widespread failure of fact-checking within contemporary journalism, neglecting how strange it might seem for a band to wrongfully implicate itself in such a story - and the scandal quickly evolved. This consisted of a series of escalations (in terms of media attention and, in the band's words, "sensationalism"), some a result of the band's unwillingness to talk to journalists, others further consequences of inadequate fact-checking. When they did speak to the press, the band would coyly comment on the scandal (i.e. as observers) without implicating themselves any further. In the liner notes to *Helter Stupid* (reproduced in Mondo) the band refers to the attention the scandal received as media "cannibalization." "It's now abundantly clear that the major source for news is other news."¹¹⁰ Their critique of mass media closely reproduces Barlow's description of the DataCloud:

We all swim in an ocean of mass media that fills our minds with people and events with which we have

¹⁰⁸ The band claimed to have used the fake press release as an excuse for canceling a tour they could not afford.

¹⁰⁹ Negativland, quoted in Ronan, Stephen. 1990. "Is there Any Escape from Stupid? An Interview with Don Joyce and Mark Hosler of Negativland." *Mondo 2000*, 2: 90-100.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

no actual contact at all. We commonly absorb these media presences as part of our own ‘reality,’ even though any media experience consists only of one-way, edited representations of reality. Negativland uses this electronic environment of factual fictions as both source and subject for much of our work, keeping in mind that to experience a picture of a thing is not to experience the thing.¹¹¹

As the interview shifts from salacious link between media and violence (infamous episodes of backward masking are ridiculed, while band member Mark Hosler admits, “I’ve been threatened at gun point by kids whose body language tells me they’ve picked it up from TV shows”) to the band’s methods and influences, one gets a sense that the interviewers (R.U. Sirius and Steven Ronan) and the band members understand *Helter Stupid* as a ‘next step’ in the lineage of appropriation-as-art.¹¹² The album is one of the first where, musically, the band itself ‘disappears,’ instead remixing news media and other material to depict the controversy. As Ronan explains, “You don’t do a parody of the news guy, you *use* the news guy.”¹¹³ The album, meanwhile, is itself subsumed by the larger ‘product,’ a network spanning the first news of the murder, the fake press release and subsequent reports.¹¹⁴ That is, the album is not a commentary on the scandal, but one part of a larger narrative that extends endlessly outward from the original press release, and thus propagates the fiction rather than putting it to rest.

The number of people who’ve heard about our connection with this story greatly outnumbers the number of people that will hear the record. The number of people that hear the record are going to outnumber the people who actually buy the record. The number of people who read the liner notes and really get what we’re saying and think about it will be outnumbered by those who don’t. So – in fact – what’s going to happen is we’re going to end up perpetuating this hoax and this myth about ourselves to a large number of people.

I mean 20 years from now, I’m going to run into someone who’s going to say, ‘Oh yeah, you killed that kid in Minnesota’.¹¹⁵

While the scale of the episode seems to suggest a new frontier for subcultural practice and alternative expression, just as with cyberpunk newfound freedom is immediately closed by co-optation and mass culture. The band’s orchestrated infiltration of mass culture and subsequent disappearance (in the sense that its “music” only consists of existing media) cannot but be

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *ibid.*: 97.

¹¹³ *ibid.*: 100.

¹¹⁴ This network excludes the actual murder. In the chronology presented in the album’s liner notes, David Brom is introduced as the subject of news reports (Ronan, 1990: 90).

¹¹⁵ Mark Hosler, quoted in Ronan, 1990: 100.

understood alongside what the band sees as a stylistic dead-end.¹¹⁶ With regard to remixing becoming standard practice in music, Mark Hosler says:

It's no longer clear to me if we're really out on the edge any more with the work we're doing. It feels to me now like we're inside the fence, you know? [...] It's really hard to see any totally new direction. It's all appropriation.¹¹⁷

The contemporary cultural environment described here is one in which edge and mainstream conflate, and any outside or alternative position has disappeared (try as we might, “we’re inside the fence, you know?”). Collapsing the metaphorical spaces of mainstream inside and alternative outside, what is being described here is the cultural plane flattened by technology, information and commercialism that Mondo calls the New Edge. Along with the paradoxes analyzed above - cyberpunk’s resistance vs. the force of co-optation, and a libertarian information politics vs. increased corporate and institutional control - this contrast between new media’s promise and its implication in a saturated media culture

2.2.4 New media cool as New Edge ethos

As the discussions of cyberpunk, information politics and VR show, Mondo’s utopianism and techno-transcendentalism were accompanied by, if not secondary to, a more ambivalent rhetoric about the feasibility of underground culture and alternative politics within the context of increasing co-optation, institutional control and media saturation. At times hopeful (such as John Shirley’s notion of “revolutionary parasitism”) but often cynical (as in Negativland’s sense that there were no more new, edgy artistic directions), the central theme in these narratives is that of new (or at least accelerated) adverse conditions for subcultural practice and production. With this in mind, it is possible to rethink the source and significance of Mondo’s “rebel cool.” Rather than a means to gloss over contradictions in its politics, as Sobchack suggested, or to mediate between New Edge culture and New Age spirituality, as Zandbergen argues, Mondo’s style might be seen in light of the paradoxes in the New Edge outlook and as an enactment of the “insider outside” position that was native to the new environment. In Liu’s argument, information cool both distances the worker from the techniques and technologies that constitute knowledge work (through bad attitude) and binds them more strongly together (if for no other reason than that bad attitude sublimates resentment that arises in response to the work environment), producing the cool knowledge worker or “outsider inside.” Similarly, new media cool serves to distance Mondo and its New Edge counterparts (such

¹¹⁶ *ibid*: 99.

¹¹⁷ *ibid*: 99.

as cyberpunk) from the New Edge constraints it perceives - co-optation, institutional control and mass culture - at the same time that it reinforces their attachment to them.

In Mondo, rebel cool and the New Edge ethos were perhaps best expressed by its practice of “irresponsible journalism,” one of Sirius’s catch-phrases. It consisted of what Gareth Branwyn called the “interzone” of Mondo’s production: “There was that sense that we had thrown out all of the rules. So when I would go to interview a rock band or a multimedia producer, you could do just whatever you damn well please. When we [...] It celebrated that you were being irresponsible.”¹¹⁸ Irresponsible journalism was cool journalism, it seemed, because it ignored the rules. It also helped give the impression that - in the recollection of international distributor Luc Steels - Mondo “never really was run as a business. It was a hobby; a social engineering venture by people with not so much interest or ability in the competitive world of publishing.”¹¹⁹ But as R.U. Sirius points out, Steels’s impressions were “just that - impressions. Some aspects were slightly more conventional than he perceived.”¹²⁰ What is missing from Branwyn’s assessment, meanwhile, is a recognition that many irresponsible acts were in fact closely aligned with the excesses of mainstream media. For one thing, much of what was labeled irresponsible and irreverent would deconstruct and critique mass media at the same time that it served to attract publicity - for example the quotable, almost infectious writing style that Sobchack called “prose bites.”¹²¹ Other supposedly irresponsible acts would re-articulate existing tendencies in commercial media, such as blurring the divide between advertising and content: Mondo had no problem, for example, interviewing regular advertisers Durk and Sandy Shaw (who sold ‘Designer Foods’ and were smart drugs experts) or even letting them write columns.

Most of all, however, Mondo’s irresponsible journalism served to dramatize the New Edge ethos that said “I’m resisting, but I’m cool.” One notable case was Mondo Vanilli, Sirius’s band that was both one of Mondo’s “media pranks” and an actual attempt to sell records. The band was promoted on multiple occasions in the magazine, including an interview with themselves under the pseudonym George C. MIDI. As the reference to Milli Vanilli suggests, this was to be “authentic inauthenticity [...] Whatever we can suck out of the media maelstrom into our corporate logos

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Boulware, 1995.

¹¹⁹ Steels, Luc. 2012. “New Edge & Mondo: A Personal Perspective – Part 2 (Mondo 2000 History Project Entry #8).” *ACCELER8OR*. <http://www.acceler8or.com/2012/03/new-edge-mondo-a-personal-perspective-part-2-mondo-2000-history-project-entry-8/>.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ Sobchack, 1994: 12.

becomes [Mondo Vanilli].”¹²² Sirius describes it further by invoking Baudrillard:

[B]y being reactive, we get away with a bunch of stuff. One thing we get away with is flirting with the mainstream. We may actually do a genuine Milli Vanilli-style sappy love song as part of [the next album] for instance.

So Mondo Vanilli is taking the implications of a lot of stuff that's been happening in music and performance over the last few years, sort of synthesizing it down to an accessible and funny semiotic representation and then hopefully selling it all like pancakes. It's both a critique and a celebration of life in the simulacrum.... like cyberpunk, of course.¹²³

Mondo's most infamous media prank also showed how New Edge style enacts the collapsing divide between resistant subculture and conventional mainstream. In 1993, Mondo had members of Negativland interview U2 guitarist The Edge at a time when U2's label was suing Negativland for violating U2's trademark (the band's latest E.P. was called U2, giving the appearance that it was by the rock group rather than Negativland, and one track sampled "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For"). Negativland had lost the case and was forced to pull the record and pay \$90,000. Since members Mark Hosler and Don Joyce were already Mondo contributors, R.U. Sirius sensed opportunity when a publicist for U2's guitarist, the Edge, suggested an interview in the magazine to promote the upcoming Zoo TV tour, which famously ditched the band's stripped-down stage presence for multimedia spectacle. The resulting interview was a Trojan horse, with interviewers Hosler and Joyce leading the Edge through a discussion of the necessity of appropriation in art before revealing themselves as Negativland.¹²⁴

The prank was rich with New Edge symbolism, beginning with the irony of the supposed avant-garde band and magazine communicating with a millionaire rock musician named The Edge. The guitarist begins by saying he identifies with Mondo's style, and the discussion seems to put Negativland and U2 on common ground:

Edge: We're more relaxed with the idea of being a big band, turning it into a part of our creative process [...] now we're using our position in a way that amuses us. It was *so* different when we started. It was '76 – the whole punk ethic of 'Start again, wipe the slate clean'

Mark Hosler: And now *you're* the next big thing kids want to tear down.

¹²² R.U. Sirius, quoted in MIDI, G. Gordon. 1992. "Mondo Vanilli." *Mondo 2000*, 7: 77.

¹²³ Branwyn, Gareth. n.d. "I Am The Walrus (Interview with Mondo Vanilli's R.U. Sirius)." *Street Tech*. <http://www.streettech.com/bcp/BCPgraf/CyberCulture/walrus.html>.

¹²⁴ Hosler, Mark, Don Joyce and R.U. Sirius. 1993. "U2 Can Sue a Simple Simon." *Mondo 2000*, 8: 54-59.

Edge: That's part of the whole regenerative process of rock 'n' roll, and I think it's important. And now that we *are* big, we want to do something interesting, imaginative, and... irreverent. So we're not taking our position seriously in that sense. We're actually being kind of subversive... just manipulating it.¹²⁵

After *Negativland*'s members reveal themselves and The Edge expresses remorse for how the record label acted, Hosler defends the *Negativland* E.P. by arguing that U2 was part of the media saturated "environment" (the same environment that U2's Zoo TV tour commented on).

On one level U2 is just a bunch of guys making music, but on another level, U2 is part of the media environment. I hear your songs playing in the shopping mall, whether I want to or not [...] So for us to ask permission to do something in response to our environment [...] we feel that... *no*, we don't have to ask. This is just the world we're in.¹²⁶

As inescapable as U2's sound and image was the institutional logic and media hype that accompanied it, a fact made clear both by the outsized lawsuit and level of attention the case received:

We thought [*Negativland*'s limited success] was so obvious that they would've just dropped [the lawsuit]. But *they* thought we were so tiny and infinitesimal that no one would even care.

We would just sort of drop off the face of the earth once it was over.¹²⁷

Fittingly, the interview ends with an irreverence that suits all involved, as Hosler matter-of-factly requests a loan from an amused The Edge, putting one more hole in the wall between an avant-garde band caught up in legal battles and a mainstream band that doesn't take its position seriously, that is "actually being kind of subversive... just manipulating it."¹²⁸

2.3 Conclusion: new media cool and web exceptionalism

*Mondo 2000 was the coolest thing in the world for six months.*¹²⁹

On its face, the future imagined by *Mondo 2000* over 20 years ago bears little resemblance to new media culture today. Mixing counterculture and New Age influences with a focus on technology

¹²⁵ Quoted in Hosler et al, 1993: 56.

¹²⁶ *ibid*: 58.

¹²⁷ *ibid*: 59.

¹²⁸ *ibid*: 56.

¹²⁹ Attributed to Neil Gaiman. See Sirius, R.U. 2012. "Mutant Glory: The MONDO Moment (MONDO 2000 History Project Entry #33)." *ACCELER8OR*. <http://www.acceler8or.com/2012/10/mutant-glory-the-mondo-moment-mondo-2000-history-project-entry-33/>.

and technological (sub)culture, *Mondo 2000* had helped define cyberculture in the early- to mid-1990s in terms of techno-transcendence. Rapture-like visions of the Singularity may have been in jest, but the magazine was serious in its assessment of the significance of VR and its celebrations of the disembodied existence it made possible. In doing so, *Mondo* helped shape a key framework within which new media - and eventually the web as cyberspace - were understood and debated. The virtual, however, is arguably no longer central to understandings of the web, while *Mondo's* future “now seems very last-century.”¹³⁰

As I have argued in this chapter, however, neither celebrations of techno-transcendence nor later dismissals of the virtual fully capture the character and significance of cyberculture. Underlying *Mondo's* rupture-talk, as Vivian Sobchack pointed out, was its treatment of politics in a vacuum, since its vision of a world improved by “access” to information technology ignored the significance of, for example, class, race and gender in determining who stood to gain. But where Sobchack argues that *Mondo's* cyberlibertarianism was at odds with (and even co-opted) a countercultural emphasis on social consciousness and New Age spiritualism, Dorien Zandbergen has shown that this seemingly surprising mix in fact represented historical and cultural continuity. *Mondo*, as well as the raves and festivals that Zandbergen includes in her definition of New Edge culture, enacted the material and conceptual connections that have been made over the years between two key Bay Area institutions - the computing industry and New Age. Both Sobchack and Zandbergen highlight the significance of *Mondo's* style for understanding the New Edge. For Sobchack, it served to neutralize the contradictions in *Mondo's* outlook. The distancing mechanism of irony acted as a kind of false-consciousness, allowing *Mondo* to express a commitment to social issues while simultaneously supporting libertarian policy - that is, to allow a nostalgic attachment to the past to exist alongside technophilia “in a peculiarly oxymoronic cosmology of the future.”¹³¹ For Zandbergen, *Mondo's* use of irony and multiplicity is an example of how these devices enable (rather than constrain or oppose) an attachment to New Age spiritualism within the technological, postmodern worldview of New Edge culture.

Although the account presented here is sympathetic to Sobchack's argument that New Edge style is related to New Edge ambivalence, and to Zandbergen's emphasis on its productive role in New Edge culture, I have argued that a more complete analysis of *Mondo's* rupture-talk would include more attention to its the media form that accompanied it. Where Liu historicizes information cool by tying its emergence to the conditions of post-industrial knowledge work, here I

¹³⁰ William Gibson, quoted in Lackerbauer and Sirius, 2012.

¹³¹ Sobchack, 1994: 18.

have argued that Mondo's "new media cool" must be seen in relation to what it perceived *and enacted* as the altered conditions for underground or alternative culture. The New Edge was less a vision of a utopian future than it was an account of the paradoxes of a new media driven cultural environment. In the New Edge, the opportunities for acts of subversion through technology and media multiplied at the same time that those tools expanded the forces of co-optation, institutional control and media saturation. These assumptions guided Mondo's formal composition (an important part of which was "irresponsible journalism") and in turn produced the magazine's "insider outside" identity.

Mondo's independent, irreverent personality seemed destined for more mainstream success in 1993, after *A User's Guide* and the Time cover story. However, the magazine's fortunes soon changed. When Wired began publishing across the Bay in San Francisco, the Mondo group simply laughed and compared it to The Monkees.¹³² Together with growing personal and editorial differences between Sirius and Queen Mu, however, the arrival of Louis Rossetto's magazine spelled the beginning of the end for Mondo. Sirius stepped down from his position as editor-in-chief later that year. The magazine, which had finally begun to appear on schedule, once again published erratically, finishing its run unceremoniously with issue 17 in 1998. Its demise at the height of the dot.com bubble reinforces the notion that Mondo and the techno-transcendental future it imagined have little in common with what came after.

Seen from the perspective of new media cool, however, Mondo's legacy might be re-assessed. This would include the similarities with Wired, which would later be called "the coolest magazine on the planet" and the first "to make the computer world seem hip."¹³³ On various occasions, Sirius has argued that Wired represented the corporate, right-wing co-optation of the New Edge.¹³⁴ While it is true that Mondo would probably never have put Newt Gingrich on its cover (as Wired did in 1995), and Rossetto would have identified sooner with the term New Economy than Sirius's New Edge, the contention ignores the remarkable continuity between the two magazines. As Jack Boulware notes, Wired drew heavily from the networks of writers and sources that had provided the bulk of Mondo's content. Likewise, both magazines had benefited from the work of the Whole

¹³² Boulware, 1995.

¹³³ Carr, David. 2003. "'Wired': The Coolest Magazine on the Planet." *The New York Times*, July 27, sec. Books / Sunday Book Review. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/27/books/review/27CARRLT.html?ex=1216872000&en=46d66a6828a69cb8&ei=5070>.

¹³⁴ Lebkowski, 1995; Sirius, R.U. 1995. "Mondo 2000 Vs. Wired." *Scrappi.com* (accessed via the Internet Archive). <http://web.archive.org/web/19990224141146/http://www.scrappi.com/deceit/nrlydeep/mndvswir.html>.

Earth Review.¹³⁵ Relatedly, Wired's appropriation of Mondo's style (sometimes quite literally - the design of Wired's spines were clearly inspired by Mondo) was not disingenuous, as co-optation would suggest. As I argue in the next chapter, the cool that defined Wired's style and editorial decision-making, much like Mondo's, originated with and produced its identity as an outsider within the publishing mainstream, a position that was closely aligned with its vision of a digital revolution in the media industry.

In chapter 1, I argued that the computational metaphor was central not only to the exceptionalism of cyberculture but also to that of later web exceptionalisms. The same can be said of the basic outline of new media cool. In each case studied in the following chapters - Wired's vision of a new publishing paradigm, the promise of open news symbolized by Slashdot, and web-native culture as imagined by early bloggers - a cool sensibility mediates between the belief that the web opens up the potential for alternatives to mass media and mainstream culture, and the sense that such alternatives are necessarily undermined by economic, institutional and cultural constraints. Like Mondo, web exceptionalism finds its voice through this contradiction: it is out on the edge, but it's cool.

¹³⁵ Turner, 2006; see also chapter 3.