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### Technological aesthetics of imperfection in times of frictionlessness

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## Summary

# Technological Aesthetics of Imperfection in Times of Frictionlessness

This study opens with an anecdote, attributed to British radio presenter and disc jockey John Peel, that encapsulates its stakes. Peel, upon being confronted by a person who argued for the superiority of the Compact Disc (CD) over vinyl because the former medium lacks the latter's distinctive surface noise, purportedly remarked: "Listen mate, *life* has surface noise." Peel's affirmation of vinyl's ostensible flaws is indicative of a wider cultural appreciation of technological aesthetics of imperfection. As Peel's words underline, such appreciations are not necessarily driven by nostalgic or revisionist sentiments, but often result from how aesthetic imperfections reveal the finite and fragile conditions of existence. It is this latter quality of an aesthetic of imperfection from which my study departs.

This study is guided by two primary questions. First, I seek to unravel the links between imperfection as a *material, aesthetic category* and imperfection as an *existential condition*. Why, I ask, are aesthetic imperfections so frequently framed as emblematic of a wider logic of imperfection – a logic that thoroughly suffuses existence? Second, I question what the cultural significance of a technological aesthetic of imperfection might be in the contemporary era of what I define as *frictionlessness*, a technological design philosophy that aesthetically glorifies transparency and immaculacy while bringing a range of destructive effects. Concretely, I ask: if an aesthetic of imperfection can emotionally alert its beholder to the fragile conditions of existence, how might this (help to) challenge the more troubling ramifications of the current fetishization of technological perfectibility? In order to address these questions, I develop a framework for the theorization of imperfection (Chapter 1), outline the destructivity behind the aesthetic logic of today's ostensibly frictionless technologies (Chapter 2), and analyze three case studies that draw on a technological aesthetic of imperfection to stimulate an emotional involvement with technology (Chapters 3 to 5). The objects in question are Vlambeer's 2011 video game *GlitchHiker* (Chapter 3), Rosa Menkman's 2010 audiovisual performance *The Collapse of PAL* (Chapter 4) and the musical work of vaporwave producer Cat System Corp., particularly his 2018 album *Palm Mall Mars* (Chapter 5).

In Chapter 1, I develop a theoretical framework that enables me to conceptualize imperfection as both an aesthetic notion and as an existential condition. I do so by engaging the work of three philosophers: Jacques Derrida, Martin Hägglund and Bernard Stiegler. The first

part of the chapter introduces four concepts that are central to the entire study: *autoimmunity*, *the existential primacy of imperfection*, *chronolibido* and *spectrality*. Autoimmunity, a concept developed by Derrida and further explicated by Hägglund, marks the co-implication of time and space and discloses that all things must bear within themselves the germs of their own dissolution. This constitutive condition also reveals what I term the existential primacy of imperfection, or the (onto)logical impossibility of absolute perfection. I then move on to discuss Hägglund's concept of chronolibido. Chronolibido charts the co-implication of finitude and desire, revealing that desire is always linked to the possibility of loss, that the existential primacy of imperfection therefore forms the precondition for all forms of care, and that investments of care can be elicited through an aesthetic of imperfection. As another central concept, I introduce the Derrida-inspired notion of spectrality, which serves a twofold function. First, it demarcates how a logic of haunting pervades existence, further specifying the implications of the condition of imperfection. Second, it registers the materially specific ghostly effects that this spectral logic makes possible, allowing one to assess how past and future, absence and presence, life and death are materially active in a historically, technologically situated present. This latter dimension informs my reading of frictionlessness in Chapter 2.

The second part of Chapter 1 introduces the work of Bernard Stiegler, whose account of the technological foundation of human time-consciousness, described by him in terms of *tertiary retention*, discloses the inextricable convergence of technology and human consciousness. Stiegler shows how, in addition to chronolibidinal beings, we are also *pharmacological* beings: beings whose temporal consciousness is by default malleable by technology which, as a result, can always produce both curative and poisonous effects. I argue that one crucial pharmacological dimension that Stiegler does not sufficiently explicate is that an individual's ostensibly beneficial relation to technology can have a pernicious impact on the existence of others. This dimension should urge us, I propose, to also consider how technological aesthetics alert the user to all the other lives and matters that are at stake in technology's production. As my later case studies will show, imperfection, as an aesthetic category that emotionally binds users to existential conditions of finitude and fragility, offers one possible avenue for finding more sustainable, chronolibidinal relations to technology itself. I conclude the chapter by underlining why it is important that humans retain responsibility over the mobilization of technology: the ability to recognize finitude and imperfection is what distinguishes us from our machines and should thus be emphasized within the fold of human-technology interaction.

Chapter 2 presents a pharmacological reading of the pervasive technological design philosophy of *frictionlessness*, focusing primarily on the toxic ramifications of its aesthetic logic. The philosophy of frictionlessness combines the values of user-friendliness, connectivity and optimization. It maintains that the perfectibility of consumer technology lies in designing appliances that function so smoothly and that are woven so seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life that technology progressively recedes from perception while it mediates an increasing degree of human activity. I argue that the aesthetic logic behind this philosophy can best be characterized as shaping a thoroughly ghostly culture that is defined by three specific forms of spectrality: *technological spectrality*, an intensification of processes of *spectralization* and the delimitation of *hauntological aesthetics*. Through increasingly hiding its operations from the user, frictionlessness further exploits but also obscures the finite conditions of its production and discourages the aesthetic conception of any alternate future. As a possible counterweight to the ghostly logic of frictionlessness, I conceive of a technological aesthetic of imperfection as a source of *friction* that potentially activates its audience into more sustainable modes of engagement, illuminated by a sensitivity to conditions of finitude and fragility. The chapter concludes that, in the destructive time of frictionlessness, the human capacity to intervene on the basis of a recognition of the existential primacy of imperfection should be pharmacologically accentuated rather than further negated, and suggests that imperfection provides one aesthetic category through which to reconstrue perception in a more pharmacologically sustainable fashion.

Chapter 3 comprises the first of my three case studies: Vlambeer's video game *GlitchHiker* (2011). *GlitchHiker* was a game that was programmed to die and a playable version of the game thus no longer exists. It was created as part of the 2011 Dutch game jam and, after a player wasted its last remaining life, erased all of its own code. *GlitchHiker* communicated its mortal state to the player through a *glitch*-based aesthetic of imperfection that became more pronounced as its end approached. Glitch is a concept that describes a notable flaw in a technological operation and that is often labeled as both an imperfection and as a ghost in the machine. The chapter demonstrates that this ghostly essence derives from three central qualities: glitch's capacity to highlight the unseen, glitch's capacity to indicate an unassailable technological agency and glitch's capacity to spell technological death. It is primarily this last capacity that helped to make *GlitchHiker* such a unique event: its creators quickly found that the game elicited feelings of empathy in its users. As the game edged towards its demise, players began to care for and feel guilt over the game's moribund state in a way that diverges from routine modes of engaging technology. I analyze this phenomenon through the lenses of Martin

Hägglund's notion of chronolibido and Steven Jackson's studies of repair and maintenance. *GlitchHiker*, I demonstrate, reveals the pertinence of chronolibido to technology, bolstering visions of a technological culture that restores rather than replaces and that mends rather than rejects.

Chapter 4 focuses on glitch artist/theorist Rosa Menkman's audiovisual performance *The Collapse of PAL* (2010). This performance laments the fate of a terminated technology, the PAL (Phase Alternating Line) signal, that was replaced by a digital, more frictionless alternative. Through an aesthetic of imperfection and a narrative that summons Walter Benjamin's canonical Angel of History (a figure that Benjamin invoked to condemn the destructive underside of progress), *The Collapse of PAL* urges its audience to care for its dead, even if these dead are technological in nature. Through a close reading of Menkman's performance, I develop three central arguments. One: the figure of the ghost, when measured against the oft-used concept of zombie media, offers a more productive lens through which to understand the afterlives of media, with their complex diffusion of environmental effects. Two: *The Collapse of PAL*, in its reimagining of Benjamin's Angel of History, exemplifies a historico-aesthetic practice of seeking in technological aesthetics of imperfection traces of the destructivity of frictionlessness. Three: through a disinterring of the disused, Menkman helps us to think through new modalities of caring for the realm of technology. Such modalities are necessary, I demonstrate, if we are to cultivate more sustainable forms of technological interdependency.

Chapter 5 probes the musical genre of *vaporwave*, and particularly the work of Dutch vaporwave producer Cat System Corp. I first analyze vaporwave as an audio(visual) genre of electronic music that is aesthetically premised on imperfection, spectrality and the signs and sounds of consumer capitalism. This genre, characterized by a heavy use of loops, reverb and the deceleration of pop songs, enacts a rhythm of what Simon Reynolds calls *hyper-stasis*: a paradoxical amalgamation of technological acceleration and cultural stasis. I further develop this argument through a close reading of Cat System Corp.'s work, particularly of his album *Palm Mall Mars* (2018). Cat System Corp.'s work, I demonstrate, speaks to Bernard Stiegler's notion of *tertiary retention* and reveals how, within consumerist societies, the human mind has become emotionally tied up with technological signs of consumption. Vaporwave, more exactly, dramatizes a mind that is thoroughly haunted by its own consumerist past. By relating vaporwave to two of the forms of spectrality I discussed in Chapter 2, I argue that this musical genre is indicative of the dominant relation to consumption that defines societies marked by the designs of frictionlessness. I conclude the chapter by meditating on the profound quality of

vaporwave to reappropriate technological objects and to stimulate different engagements with technology, but also signal that there are limits to its critical potential.

In the Coda, I introduce the notion of technological melancholia as a temperament that befits the pharmacological effects of frictionlessness that I have analyzed throughout this thesis. Melancholia describes a sentiment that refuses to lay its specters to rest and thus appears pertinent in a technological time that produces so many marginal ghosts. The Coda offers a reflection on the capacity of a technological aesthetic of imperfection to elicit feelings of melancholia, and on the implications of such a sensibility in relation to the poisonous drives of frictionlessness. I conclude that the path to a more technologically sustainable future can be found only by making room for the vulnerable, the liminal and the dead. The Coda brings together the findings of my framework and case studies, and accentuates the profound capacity of an aesthetic of imperfection to spark care and concern for the existentially universal – but also always materially specific – unfolding of finitude and fragility.