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Citation:

Till, C (2017) Book Review Finding Humanity in a Digital World. *Cultural Politics*, 13 (3). pp. 391-393. ISSN 1743-2197 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-4211388>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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Chris Till

## Finding Humanity in a Digital World

David W. Hill, *The Pathology of Communicative Capitalism*, London, Palgrave Pivot, 2016, 74 pages, \$67.50 (hardcover), \$49.99 (ebook). ISBN: 978-1-137-39477-4, 978-1-137-39478-1

Communication and the ability to share meaning, thoughts and feelings is essential to living a fully human life and today more information is shared than at any time in history, often in the form of a "digital exhaust" of which we may only be dimly aware. Might this communication be damaging to our physical, mental and social lives? David Hill, a social and cultural theorist, presents a highly focused analytical reading of the present state of communicative activity to demonstrate how human interactions are increasingly subject to the logic of capital accumulation and a neoliberal political economy. The book draws on a densely-interconnected corpus of authors, with whom Hill has engaged in his previous theoretical investigations into the intersections of work ethics and technology. A constructively pessimistic tone is struck through most of the book in the assessment of the alienating effects of "communicative capitalism" but there are suggestions of where the potential for resistance might lie. However, a self-reflexive stance is taken with the problems of "left melancholy", and the perverse pleasures taken in it by intellectuals, presented as an ultimately conservative force which has "given up on the present" (64) by mistaking the tools of exploitation (digital networks) for those of radical change (63).

Central to Hill's thesis are the two theoretical principles which underpin an increasing amount of leftist social theory. Firstly, the purported shift from Foucauldian disciplinary societies to Deleuzian societies of control. Secondly, the Italian autonomist proposition that work has moved outside the factory walls and encompassed the "soul" of the worker. These two suggestions are combined to demonstrate how controls now modulate around us and work through our freedom and creativity while value is generated directly from (usually unpaid) cultural production. In the process Hill shows the many ways in which the merging of strategies of capital accumulation and political control with methods of communication produce pathological states.

The book is a short polemical interjection of four chapters (plus an introduction) which grapples with the precarity which is spreading to all social classes through the expansion of "cognitive labour". This work producing and managing information underpins the rest of the discussion by looking at its role in creating stress and over-worked attention and social anxiety. The themes are brought together through an assertion that it is the servicing of debt which binds us to the anxious treadmill of efficiency and (over)production.

The complete colonisation of digital communication by corporate interests is, Hill claims, reshaping our interactions such that every utterance must be productive which creates a kind of "disenchantment" and indifference towards the other. We are pushed into "[n]on-stop interactivity" (48) through the application of capitalist logic to social interactions but despite this constant communication there is little room for genuine expression. Instead we get an "operative culture" (60) in which we are required to transmit information (whether by reading a script in a call centre or retweeting a meme) rather than intersubjectively producing meaning. This stimulates a desire in us to be constantly connected but to keep others at a distance as we develop a distaste for the messiness and potential confusion of real human connection. "The other" becomes reconstituted as an "interface simulacrum" (45) who is much less of a burden than a real human being. We thus become something resembling a "terminal man" (43) who "remote controls" his "contacts" from a distance. According to Hill the demand to be constantly engaged with this sanitised, productive communication both inside and outside of work (although the distinction between the two is ever more difficult to identify) causes a multitude of social, psychological and emotional problems.

It is in the identification of the broad pathological impact that the power and significant contribution of the text lies. Human subjectivity and sociality are the productive forces on which "semicapitalism" depends and are central to the struggle against its ravages. Moreover, he asserts that the keys to resistance lie in raising awareness that precariousness affects us all and in discovering a means of mobilizing a "conscience explosion" (66). What this might look like Hill leaves an open question but for this to be something more than simply "consciousness raising" we also must identify who might be the revolutionary subject of resistance to communicative capitalism. For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri this is "the multitude" or the "socialized worker" who are the "irreducible productive singularities engaged in immaterial labour" (Marshall 2006, 4) but the constitution of any such subject is built on some form solidarity. This is a problem because the very problems at the heart of Hill's thesis; "[t]he virtualization of communication [and] the precarization of work [...] have disconnected our capacity to feel empathy towards each other" (2012, 213). As communication and cooperation are now central to work we might assume natural alliances would be created and a revolutionary subject would emerge out of the everyday practices of capital accumulation. But as Hill shows an indifferent attitude towards the other has stymied any revolutionary potential and the problem lies in the "inhuman" style of communication which is in danger of dominating us. This is a system in which the "performative demands of functionality and efficient transmission" (59) take over. What must be prioritised are the "fragmental utterances" (58) from which we must interpret the meaning of our fellows. Whether this is possible through the digitally saturated communication networks in which so many of us are now entangled is still undecided.

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Word count 948

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