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Regressive Futuring: Zuckerberg's Rebranding Against Techlash's "Crisis"

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By 2018, techlash had opened a possible crisis for Silicon Valley's technology industry, otherwise resolutely committed to selling imagined technofutures. No company or celebrified founder has borne the brunt of public opinion's pendulum swings as much as Facebook, Inc. and Mark Zuckerberg. Zuckerberg's rebranding of Facebook, Inc. to Meta in 2021 is a case study for how Silicon Valley's industry and elite recuperatively make and remake their ideology—the industry's defining feature—against a critical broader public and techlash discourse through regressive futuring. With textual analysis of Zuckerberg's rebranding keynote, I map the limited, familiar repertoire of storylines and stages in selective response to techlash critique with (1) (attempted) recuperative humor of geek masculinity, (2) perfunctory acknowledgements of governance made visible through infrastructure, and (3) intra-industry power struggles. Regressive futuring—familiar dramaturgical regimes and recycled charisma—foregrounds how failures to perform become a failure of Silicon Valley's meaning-making, as these repeated performances are the industry's active, attempted sutures against substantive reckoning with Big Tech's illogics.

Keywords: regressive futuring, branding, techlash, crisis, Big Tech, Facebook, Zuckerberg

In October 2021, Facebook, Inc. announced its rebranding to Meta, a move that founder-CEO Mark Zuckerberg explained as defining the next era of the "embodied Internet" with the "metaverse" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 15).[2] In the 77-minute-long keynote video address, detailed mockups of imagined scenes depict gaming, exercise, work, and shopping (Meta, 2021), reinscribing Silicon Valley's technoutopianism into yet another imagined future. Appended to Zuckerberg's curated presentation is a brief, prerecorded message: a manifesto-style love letter to technology, to its unquestionable benefits, and to those who also

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[2] For clarity, I use the company name at the time the documents or data under analysis were published. Facebook, Inc. refers to the corporation rather than individual platform. I refer to the rebranded company as simply Meta rather than the more unwieldy Meta Platforms, Inc.

share in this imaginary of unending progress and innovation. Zuckerberg's manifesto makes clear at the outset that he and his rebranded company-as-technological future remain committed to the established, contradictory tenets of the "Californian Ideology" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996): the convergence of a pseudo-religious technodeterminism and its always revolutionary futures with economic libertarianism.

Zuckerberg and the metaverse's optimism sit in sharp relief to ongoing critical attention against "Big Tech." This critique has been dubbed "techlash" (e.g., Foroohar, 2018; Jensen, 2023; Wooldridge, 2013), marking a popular consensus of suspicion for Big Tech's democratic promises, fantastical technological "futuring" (Oomen et al., 2022, pp. 252–253), and sweeping "social mission[s]" (Zuckerberg, 2012, para. 1) as the industry and its platforms have matured. Understanding crisis as "moments of potential change" (Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 57), by 2018, techlash had accumulated into a (potential) crisis for an industry that otherwise remains committed to peddling novel imagined futures—shiny, new, digital iterations of capitalistic accumulation—that repeat similar promises in variable technological "packaging."

The rebranding of Facebook, Inc. to Meta frames and confronts techlash's crisis through an intra- and inter-industry "negotiation" and defense of Zuckerberg's, his company's, and the industry's technofutures. As an elite performance of industrial reflexivity—an industry's "self-theorizing talk" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 15)—from a "new patriarch of digital capitalism" (Little & Winch, 2021, p. i), Zuckerberg's pitch for the metaverse is a preeminent example of *how* Silicon Valley's industry and elite recursively fortify their ideology—their defining feature—against a broader public and ongoing techlash discourse. Through textual analysis of Zuckerberg's October 2021 presentation (Meta, 2021; Zimmer, n.d.; Zuckerberg, 2021a) and Founder's Letter (Zimmer, n.d.; Zuckerberg, 2021b), my analysis traces rebranding's selective engagement with techlash alongside how Zuckerberg "*present[s] and perform[s]* visions of the future" (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 259; emphasis in original).

How Zuckerberg verbally and visually stages his imagined future, intra-industry roles, and passing references to outstanding techlash criticism are together an elite, celebrified patriarch's (attempted) ideological defense of Silicon Valley. This ideological defense, realized through what I call "regressive futuring," reinforces Silicon Valley's and corporate branding's meaning-making as a fundamentally conservative, recuperative, and reactionary project. Regressive futuring is enacted through limited, established dramaturgical stages and storylines to project a familiar ideological past into new-yet-repeated technofutures in response to a potential ideological threat. With Silicon Valley and a broader public both reckoning with techlash, regressive futuring by elites hamstrings the potential for agentic claims within the work of futuring (Oomen et al., 2022). Instead, it draws from fundamentally limited ideological possibility spaces for action. Yet, as an action (e.g., to future), regressive futuring is also an active project of industrial boundary-work, foregrounding the work of ideology in continuously defining an industry.

Arguably the most visible harbingers of social media's early "democratic" promises, Zuckerberg and Facebook, Inc.'s "social mission" (Zuckerberg, 2012, para. 1) have been a consistent target of popular reckoning with the failures and illogics of digital worldbuilding; no company nor claimed genius founder figure has borne the brunt of public opinion's pendulum swings as much as Facebook, Inc. and Zuckerberg. Together, they offer a highly visible key case study for discursive naturalization by and negotiations within Silicon Valley's tech industry (e.g., Haupt, 2021; Hoffmann et al., 2018; Lischka, 2019; Little & Winch,

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2021). Situating this case study within techlash as a broader conjunctural lens (e.g., Grossberg, 2019; Littler, 2016), I briefly identify inflection points that have accumulated over the course of two decades to define techlash and shape it as a potential threat to "Big Tech" and its patriarchs. My analysis draws together the fundamental conservatism of technological charisma (Ames, 2019) and dramaturgical performances of futuring (Hajer & Pelzer, 2018; Oomen et al., 2022) alongside branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Billard & Moran, 2020) and industrial reflexivity (Caldwell, 2008) as industrial sensemaking. Together as regressive futuring, this case study maps strategies employed by an elite industry actor in a highly visible performance of yet another technofuture amid a contested moment.

If the crisis—techlash—opens up possible cracks in hegemonic authority (Hall, 1987, p. 20), Zuckerberg's defense is insightful precisely in how and why he engages techlash. First, restaging the established storyline of heroic, geek, masculine visionary in leading the metaverse, Zuckerberg's use of humor is a selective "recuperation" for his beleaguered individual celebrity while simultaneously projecting a defense of Silicon Valley's patriarchal foundations. Second, responding to techlash's regulatory proposals, Zuckerberg stages governance alongside infrastructure as known referents and proposed constraints on the metaverse's future; this nods toward techlash's critiques with limitations on the possibility spaces for action, while leaving invisible how infrastructural building blocks further entrench industrial-corporate power. Finally, Zuckerberg co-opts techlash's authority through intra-industry critique as industrial boundary-work alongside, again, a reinscription of familiar storylines of "democratic" and innovative economic futures. Together, Zuckerberg's rebranding of Facebook, Inc. is performed as a public "negotiation"—a superficial recuperation and defense—of his, Meta's, and the industry's power through regressive futuring alongside techlash as (potential) crisis.

The cyclical hype around new technologies continues, for example, with generative AI against the pronounced death of the metaverse's imagined future (Zitron, 2023; Klee, 2024). Returning to 2021, the recurrence of hyped technofutures—viewed through the lens of regressive futuring—reveals performative mechanisms through which the future is invoked by reinscribing ideological stages and storylines. Rather than a framing that centers technological products themselves and the timing of technological feasibility for hyped technologies, regressive futuring foregrounds the "how" for the ideological work of Silicon Valley's futuring. Failure to perform is a failure for Silicon Valley and its meaning-making, as these repeated performances are the active, attempted sutures against substantive reckoning with Big Tech's illogics.

Theoretical Framework

Imagining & Performing Silicon Valley's Futures

Techlash is filtered through Zuckerberg's rebranding: a publicly dramatized, elite performance from a now-mature Big Tech actor that solidifies ideological throughlines to Silicon Valley's foundational commitments to technological determinism and economic libertarianism, always underwritten by patriarchal, gendered norms. The Californian Ideology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996) is predicated on repeatedly imagined, revolutionary futures that, critically, never seem to arrive (Karpf, 2018). In other words, these futures envisioned by heroic vanguards (Hilgartner, 2015), staged through charismatic technologies (Ames, 2019), and scripted through (gendered) cultural discourses (Little & Winch, 2021),

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continually make and remake Silicon Valley's ideological identity. While I expand on these discourses in the next section through branding's cultural logics, here I overview these futures and futuring techniques (Hajer & Pelzer, 2018; Oomen et al., 2022) as performative acts of power that coproduce a particular ideological project.

The Californian Ideology's technological determinism is predicated on futures envisioned through technological products, which imagine and shape narratives of progress and innovation. Silicon Valley's companies and patriarchs ideologically and economically capitalize on futuring, or agentic acts of imaginative meaning-making, and the (attempted) legitimation of possible futures (Oomen et al., 2022). Futuring, in short, uses performative practices to legitimate a future in the present, drawing from familiar and creatively imagined norms, ideals, and structures. Together, these dramaturgical regimes—encompassing cultural narratives, staged sequences of events, and structural conventions (Oomen et al., 2022, pp. 261–264)—inform how "techniques of futuring" (Hajer & Pelzer, 2018, p. 225) are, potentially, enacted.

Zuckerberg's rebranding keynote—with its defined cast of actors, mocked-up scenes on the metaverse's charismatic stage, scripted storylines, and targeted audience of industry stakeholders—is one such dramaturgical example of technological futuring. For Big Tech, charismatic technologies—and the individuals and institutions who proselytize them—are largely the stage for envisioning and performing futures. Critically, the metaverse as a technological stage is charismatic regardless of its resultant effects or lack thereof as charisma's performed magical allure papers over its contradictions or failures (Ames, 2019). Thus, technological charisma is "ideologically conservative" (Ames, 2019, p. 11), reinscribing and naturalizing familiar and often nostalgic ideals. This sits in productive tension with futuring by fundamentally circumscribing the "possibility space for action" (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 253).

For Zuckerberg and Silicon Valley's technology industry, empowered by largely unregulated political, economic, and technological agency, this ideological conservatism sediments a continuous referent to the Californian Ideology's tenets despite techlash's suspicions. Yet, the industry continues to perform, continuously setting technological stages for its celebrified tech figures and technofutures. In short, Silicon Valley's charisma-as-magical allure must be continually performed to be sustained. Enabled by repeated dramaturgical regimes, vast material, and political power, the performativity of Silicon Valley sustains itself for itself. While, optimistically, the "politics of the future revolve[s] around who can make their imagined futures authoritative in the scenes and stages that matter" (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 266), Silicon Valley's ability to imagine and perform technological futures continues with repeated scripts, largely untied to meaningful, ideological buy-in from collective, popular audiences.

Branding and Industrial Reflexivity as Industrial Sensemaking

A key to Big Tech's dramaturgical regime is branding. Beyond economic instruments for individual commodities, branding within the current conjuncture invokes promises that project and shape meaning-making about ourselves, our positionality, and the world (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Billard & Moran, 2020; Hearn, 2017; Marwick, 2015). In doing so, branding always invokes and attempts to secure particular futures. These cultural inflections have been realized through attempted performances of (perceived) "authenticity" in leadership (Liu et al., 2017), gender (Duffy & Hund, 2019), and stylistic choices of political

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and class identity (Peck, 2018). In short, branding is an ideological project, foundationally predicated on the packaging of "feelings and affects, personalities and values—rather than actual goods" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 7; see also Billard & Moran, 2020, pp. 590–593).

As a logic, branding is neither top-down nor monolithic, but negotiated and networked among various actors: companies, their leadership (often inextricable from their companies), consumers, and other stakeholders (Billard & Moran, 2020; Lury, 2009). In short, brands—culture—are constantly performed, made, and remade within discourse and among various stakeholders. Performances by celebrity CEOs are exceptionally visible and powerful markers of brands and branded logics, merging tabloid culture's publicity and heroism discourses alongside meritocratic ideals of "progressive democratic possibility" as soft capitalist power (Littler, 2007, p. 238). Alongside the visibility of celebrified CEOs in shaping brand identities, rebranding is framed as a top-down "signal to shareholders and society to retrieve trust that was forfeited due to harmful managerial practices and unethical standards" (Kraus et al., 2022, p. 68). In other words, rebranding looks to (re)claim authority through acknowledged failure of affective, moral, and/or identity work, and, thus, signals an attempted culturally recuperative act.

Zuckerberg's performance of rebranding thus makes a cultural argument of industrial sensemaking contextualized against techlash by, for example, repeating storylines that frame the future through cultural discourses (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 261–262). Loacker and Sullivan (2016) have identified four cultural discourses—creativity, discovery, business, and morality—that variably shape the norms and practices of branding work. As Zuckerberg's performance shows, gender is an inescapable cultural discourse. In short, rebranding's cultural-economic logic coheres as a recuperative technique of futuring (Hajer & Pelzer, 2018), making and remaking cultural discourses alongside imagined subjects, positionalities, and futures. Understood within regressive futuring, branding is the stage through which a familiar ideological past is repackaged into an imagined future.

While branding describes a public-facing facet of industrial sensemaking, Caldwell's (2008) industrial reflexivity supplements branding's external logics by describing a process by which various industrial stakeholders negotiate their insider roles, responsibilities, and industrial identities. Industrial reflexivity is a distributed process of boundary-work that shapes and sustains an industry through "human agency" and a "discursive process establishing power at the broader social level" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 34). While Zuckerberg, as a singular actor, cannot monolithically define the industry, his symbolic and material power garners his performance as an act of industrial reflexivity outsized visibility in negotiating the industry to the industry, industrial stakeholders, and the broader public.[3] Together, branding and industrial reflexivity define industrial sensemaking as a pseudo-negotiation for position: to maintain Zuckerberg and his company's (largely unregulated) power against a broader (potential) crisis of techlash.

[3] Setting the direction for his company, Zuckerberg owns 56.9% of "total voting power" (Meta Platforms, Inc., 2022, p. 62); Zuckerberg's control is framed as signaling "significant investment" in "concerted efforts to improve the privacy, safety, and security of our global community" (Meta Platforms, Inc., 2022, p. 66).

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Techlash as Crisis?: Questioning the Californian Ideology Overtime

Silicon Valley's technology industry is predicated on selling fantastical imaginaries that claim to realize an idealized future; this future-oriented imagination and its supportive mythologies congeal and define the industry itself. As its portmanteau implies, techlash questions these claims, raising an existential threat to the industry. Jensen (2023) defines techlash as the popular and policy shift in response to "a new category of critical infrastructure" (p. 415) through which the industry aims to "construct a public identity for themselves as servants of the people" (p. 417). Here, "infrastructure" capaciously encompasses platforms, devices, connectivity, and data, implying the industry's penchant for expansive self-mythologization in its imagined digital frontier. Here, I briefly identify techlash as an inflection point built over time, marking it as a potential crisis of Big Tech's authority.

Early Silicon Valley's technological innovation transposed U.S. mythologies of (individual) exceptionalism and manifest destiny to an imagined digital frontier. Despite the "tech-induced foolishness" (Gabriel, 2001, para. 2) of the 2001 dot-com bubble, the popularization of social media solidified optimism around Silicon Valley's imaginary and its heroic figures into a claimed new frontier, periodized to Web 2.0 (e.g., Marwick, 2015). For example, Zuckerberg was the 2010 TIME person of the year (Grossman, 2010); his profile regurgitated Silicon Valley's imaginary, emphasizing how Zuckerberg and Facebook, Inc. were the "realization of a dream" (Grossman, 2010, para. 24). In short, the popular aura around early social media largely celebrated the industry and its "democratizing" imagined futures led by celebrified tech bro stewards.

Crisis is "not an immediate event but a process" (Hall, 1987, p. 20); for the tech industry, the 2010s complicated the optimistic veneer of its imagined futures through their offline realities, most visibly in the wake of the 2013 Snowden leaks and hashtag activism's complicated evidence for the democratic potentials promised by digital technologies (e.g., Jackson et al., 2020; Tufekci, 2017). Amid the U.S.'s Occupy movement in 2011 (Schneider, 2013) and the emergence of "left populisms" (Dyer-Witheford, 2020), the exceptional growth and democratic mythologizing typified by the tech industry sat in stark relief with these then more loudly voiced critiques around economic inequality. Two opinion pieces—both repeatedly cited by other popular news articles—captured this emerging sentiment. Drawing parallels to the Occupy movement, Wooldridge (2013) predicted a "peasants' revolt" (para. 2) against the "ruthless" (para. 4) capitalism of the tech industry and its "sovereigns of cyberspace" (para. 2). Focusing on the visibility and primacy of these individual (male) founder figures like Zuckerberg in pushing technoutopian futures, Manjoo (2013) critiqued Silicon Valley's "arrogance problem" and its "superiority complex" (para. 6). Compared with the unchecked power of Big Oil and Big Telco of the past (The Economist, 2017; San Diego Union-Tribune Editorial Board, 2017), news and opinion news discourse largely retreated from a sweeping, celebratory embrace of Silicon Valley. Furthermore, *WIRED*—the pseudo-bible of Silicon Valley, once preeminently focused on the "swaggering, optimistic stuff"—too emphasized more "critical, dystopian remarks" (Karpf, 2018, para. 35).

In the wake of Facebook's involvement with election meddling in the 2016 United States presidential elections (Smith, 2018), the Cambridge Analytica revelations (Confessore, 2018), and Facebook's use within human rights violations in Myanmar (Human Rights Council, 2018), 2018 popularly

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cemented this techlash as crisis that the industry had—or was forced—to confront.[4] Within the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was also enacted in 2018, decisively highlighting the lack of a comparable national policy in the United States. All together, techlash was dubbed the word of the year by the *Financial Times* (Foroohar, 2018) and shortlisted for the same by Oxford Languages (Oxford Languages, n.d.).

While Zuckerberg's 2010 TIME person of the year cover was an intimately framed portrait of a youthful Zuckerberg staring intensely at the reader, the 2018 March issue of *WIRED* depicted a portrait of Zuckerberg bruised and beaten, looking away from the reader as the article states that "Facebook has been hijacked, vilified, and besieged" (Thompson & Vogelstein, 2018, p. 46); this phrasing can easily be read as positioning Facebook, Inc. and Zuckerberg as a sympathetic fallen hero, "hijacked" from their otherwise worthy cause. Yet, from a magazine so foundational in heralding Silicon Valley, this cover is notable because it visually illustrates the acute attention focused on Zuckerberg and his company in their "two years of hell" (WIRED, 2018, p. 5). The juxtaposition of these two covers marks public opinion's shift, positioning techlash as a burgeoning crisis for the industry that had matured from unrealized-yet-imagined potentials to vast and suspicious sociopolitical, economic, and infrastructural power.

If understood as a crisis, techlash also marks the possibility of opening space for more radical attention against the industry's failed promises, while simultaneously prompting a reactionary defense to uphold now-hegemonic industrial power (Hall, 1987). A prominent industry stakeholder, Zuckerberg's rebranding of Facebook, Inc. as Meta constitutes a notable defense against this possibility, offered by arguably the tech industry's most visible harbinger of democratic worldbuilding in the imagined digital frontier. Thus, Zuckerberg's engagement with techlash's crisis—demarcated through a change in the company's public identity through branding—waffles between resolute commitments to the Californian Ideology's futuring and its mythologized geek masculinity against simultaneously obfuscating and acknowledging the industry's now established economic and pseudo-governmental power. Against the crisis's possible "moment of reconstruction" (Hall, 1987, p. 18), Facebook, Inc.'s rebranding regurgitates the early industry's established ideology. These (selective) utopian futures, wrought as democratic "emancipatory potential[s]" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 45) with mythic geek masculine heroes, are recast by Zuckerberg and Facebook, Inc. within the now-mature industry's vast power and dominant extractive modes of capitalist accumulation as regressive futuring.

Zuckerberg's Imagined Future: Reframing Scandals to Heroics

As in the 2012 Founder's letter (Zuckerberg, 2012), Zuckerberg's 2021 keynote unsurprisingly leans heavily into the normative Silicon Valley imaginary. He casts himself still as a "sociotechnical

[4] Per Factiva search results, before 2017, the phrase "techlash" and its iterations "tech lash" or "tech-lash" occurred infrequently (less than 10) in English-language news. There was a sharp uptick in 2018 with 326 occurrences. This relative frequency of use continued in 2019 with 406 occurrences, in 2020 with 395, and in 2021 with 275. Using Factiva's search analytics for frequency of mention by company, Meta or Facebook, Inc. was the most frequently mentioned in these search results in 2018–2021; Zuckerberg is always the most frequently mentioned executive, except in 2021.

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vanguard" with "superior knowledge of emerging technologies" and the aspiration to identify and "realize their more desirable potentials" (Hilgartner, 2015, p. 34). In contrast, a prerecorded segment appended to the keynote address sets this technoutopianism against a passing acknowledgement of Facebook Inc.'s many public failures, alongside a subsequent rejection of techlash criticism. It is worth quoting Zuckerberg at length here to illustrate this disingenuous back-and-forth:

> In a few minutes, we're going to share *our vision for the future, and with all the scrutiny and public debate, some of you might be wondering why we're doing this right now*. The answer is I believe we're put on this earth to create. I believe that technology can make our lives better, and I believe that the future won't be built on its own. It will be built by those who are willing to stand up and say, "This is the future we want, and I'm going to keep pushing and giving everything I've got to make this happen."
>
> *I know that some people will say that this isn't a time to focus on the future. I want to acknowledge that there are important issues to work on in the present. There always will be. So for many people, I'm just not sure there ever will be a good time to focus on the future*, but I also know that there are a lot of you who feel the same way that I do. We live for what we're building. And while we make mistakes, we keep learning and building and moving forward.
>
> For all of you who share these values, I dedicate today to you*. In my mind, you are the heroes in our society who push the world forward.* As long as I'm running this company, I will do my best to celebrate this spirit and absolutely go for it (Zuckerberg, 2021a, paras. 1–3; emphasis added).

As an elite performance of industrial sensemaking through branding and industrial reflexivity, this beginning manifesto sets the rebrand's tone; Zuckerberg's attempt at reflexively acknowledging existing critique is the tech patriarch's version of the U.S. politician's "thoughts and prayers" in favor of peddling another fantastical future.

Foregrounded is a heroic, imagined future; dismissed in passing acknowledgement is techlash. In Zuckerberg's performance of regressive futuring that follows this manifesto, I look toward: (1) tropes of heroic masculinity as a familiar storyline of patriarchal cultural discourse alongside "recuperative" humor to justify Zuckerberg's authority as a heroic masculine figure presenting the metaverse future; (2) the reliance on "democratic" rhetoric through infrastructure as governance, which performs a superficial structural constraint in reaction to techlash's regulatory threat; and (3) co-optation of techlash through intra-industry critique as the repeated futuring of a "democratic" metaverse economy. Throughout, Zuckerberg's performance stages and attempts to secure the metaverse's and, more importantly, Silicon Valley's charismatic future through these repeated dramaturgical regimes as the ideological "glue" that secures and sutures his and the industry's power.

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Preempting Critique Through Humor: Zuckerberg, Memes, & Masculinity

In his prerecorded manifesto, Zuckerberg casts himself as one of the "heroes" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 3) responsible for "make[ing] our lives better" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 1). In the context of the metaverse's futuring, Zuckerberg draws on an established storyline from the early self-mythologizing of Silicon Valley, which casts heroic, leading (White, male) figures as the "conquering heroes, gladiators in the high stakes battle over the digital frontier" (Karpf, 2023, para. 22; Little & Winch, 2021). The "battle" here is against techlash's threat to this mythology and against Zuckerberg's popular mockery and memeification, which injure (white) geek masculinity. While Facebook, Inc.'s rebranding purports to focus on the corporation, it implicates both Zuckerberg-as-celebrity, who is culturally and structurally inextricable from the company, and Silicon Valley's foundational heroic geek masculine subject. Through (scripted) silliness and humor, Zuckerberg foregrounds his public celebrity to cast himself as in on the joke, aspiring to recuperate his—and an injured geek masculinity's—public "suffering" from techlash's critique. Again, in his role as a heroic visionary leading the metaverse, Zuckerberg positions his performance as heroic, geeky genius redeemed a la "suffering-revenge narrative" (Mendick et al., 2020, p. 1).

Toward the beginning of his keynote, Zuckerberg lays out the expansive digital options available in his imagined metaverse. Stating that he "just needs to find something to wear," he chooses the pseudo-uniform of the tech titan—a black t-shirt and dark pants—unemotively saying "all right, perfect" after picking the basic outfit (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 22). A nod to Steve Jobs' iconic wardrobe choice, Zuckerberg stages his performance in visual association with another of Silicon Valley's genius, celebrity figures. Wardrobe mimicry of Jobs is precedented; prescandal Elizabeth Holmes similarly used this physical callback to cement her inclusion in the insular networks of (male) tech elites (Grybos, 2023). For Holmes, this visual association primarily acted as a kind of "armor" against misogynistic backlash. For Zuckerberg, this dramaturgical choice, set against the touted unlimited metaverse options, acts as an ironic joke. Popular response to this choice was, unsurprisingly, mockery. Quoted in the *New York Times* article on fashion in the metaverse, one user posted on then-Twitter: "'Really, Zuck, you could have worn ANYTHING, and you chose this?'" (Friedman, 2022).

Yet, within a staged and rehearsed keynote performance projecting yet another technological future, Zuckerberg's ironic joke does significant work in the (attempted) undercut of this mockery. Zuckerberg creates distance from a beleaguered version of geek masculinity—the awkward, unfashionable nerd—by not choosing an outfit otherwise strongly associated with Zuckerberg's mocked celebrity: the hoodie-wearing boy genius, such as that dramatized in *The Social Network* (Fincher, 2010). Instead, in visual association with a mythologized Silicon Valley hero, this stylistic, dramaturgical choice both recalls and projects forward the foundational figure of the sociotechnical vanguard (Hilgartner, 2015). Reading Zuckerberg's choice as a scripted, ironic joke positions Zuckerberg's "revenge" as both playfully participating and preempting in his own mockery.

Immediately following this wardrobe choice, Zuckerberg joins a poker game in an imagined metaverse world. While Meta's CTO embodies a cartoonish robotic figure, Zuckerberg unemotively jokes that "[he] thought [he] was supposed to be the robot" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 34). Again, he draws attention to geek masculine tropes while performing an awareness of his frequently mocked celebrity. In

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both this quip and his ironic wardrobe choice, Zuckerberg is in on his popular mockery; yet, performed within the "armor" of iconic tech patriarch's wardrobe, Zuckerberg also reminds us that not only can he make fun of geekiness, but he also does so from the position of substantive material power. Like Zuckerberg's performances of paternal masculinity, humor in such a context works to "gloss his power" (Little & Winch, 2018, p. 417) as one of the wealthiest figures in the world.

With humor, Zuckerberg uses the "playful politics" through which the "shifting frontiers constructing 'us' and 'them' in the political" manifest themselves (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021, p. 2368); in short, humor shapes cultural inclusion and exclusion. Thus, performing humor in this context reinforces rebranding as a notable performance of cultural sensemaking beyond a corporate presentation to shareholders and industry stakeholders. Amid the keynote as a corporate performance of futuring, scripted humor aspires toward a humanizing recuperation of Zuckerberg's individual celebrity against the suffering of repeated memeification; if Zuckerberg is included within the "us" in on the joke, the audience is then inversely aligned with him in futuring the metaverse.

From the previously mentioned portraits of youthful genius to bruised and beaten, Zuckerberg's attempted recuperation justifies his aspired, continued authority as (again) a heroic vanguard instead of a meme. Just as Zuckerberg and his company are inextricable, the heroic geek masculine visionary is a foundational actor in mythologizing Silicon Valley; this figure remains inextricable for imagining these "next frontier[s]" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 295) as one of "the heroes in our society who push the world forward" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 3), despite injury of techlash's critical attention and mockery of tech's patriarchal celebrities. Through humor, Zuckerberg attempts to secure techlash's mockery through repeated performance of the heroic tech figure, staging a familiar past and its projected, authoritative future through the metaverse.

Posturing Through Critique: Infrastructure and Governance

While humor looks to defend and reinscribe the individual, geek masculine tech figure, another vein of acknowledged critique throughout the keynote more directly engages techlash's concrete regulatory concerns, initially dismissed as "important issues to work on in the present" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 2). Around the 50-minute mark in the presentation, one of Meta's vice presidents joins via a mocked-up metaverse video chat, discussing the lag time in the reactionary regulatory work against the industry's proclivity for innovation at speed, at any cost. Rebranding is framed as a proactive collaboration "at the very early stages of development" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 242), deferentially resolving tensions around regulation and governance without slowing innovation or poking too strongly at the capitalist impulse that structures this speed.

In response, as "one of the lessons that [Zuckerberg] internalized from the last five years," Zuckerberg repeatedly points toward "interoperability, open standards, privacy and safety" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 237; see also Meta, 2021, 00:08:04, 00:08:48, 00:10:22, 00:53:12; Zuckerberg, 2021a, paras. 59, 61, 239, 244) as foundational to his metaverse vision. These acknowledge techlash's policy critiques around, for example, privacy concerns, while also implying the ideals of openness, accessibility, and inclusivity. These ideals recall early promises of cyberspace and social media as harbingers of a more

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democratic future and of a "world more open and connected" (Zuckerberg, 2012, para. 1). As with the heroic geek masculine figure and humor, these ideals repeat a familiar, ideologically-inflected narrative for the metaverse alongside these past futures.

Techlash's regulatory threat in the United States and its reality in the European Union, however, push the metaverse's futuring to offer more substance than similar "extremely open and meritocratic" core values of the "Hacker Way" (Zuckerberg, 2012, para. 35). Gesturing toward the necessity of governance—vaguely defined as "responsib[ility]" and "privacy and safety" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 237)—appears to diverge from the cyberlibertarian bent of Silicon Valley's ideology (e.g., Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Turner, 2006). This alludes to Silicon Valley's historical caricature of governance as "villains and buffoons" that "[stood] in the way of righteous progress" (Karpf, 2023, para. 22); in other words, Zuckerberg's performed futuring and industrial reflexivity strategically nod toward a failure in a familiar narrative. Doing so awards techlash's critique limited authority in this performed corrective of past future's identified failures. To reinforce that Zuckerberg and his company have performatively learned this lesson, "ecosystem building, norm setting, and new forms of governance" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 60) are one of the few key points emphasized multiple times in written text during the presentation itself (e.g., Meta, 2021, 00:08:04, 00:08:48, 00:10:22, 00:53:12).

Responding to techlash's policy critiques, Zuckerberg concretizes these ideals through repeated focus on the in-development, high-level technical infrastructures—the standards, software development kits (SDKs), and application programming interfaces (APIs)—that technically structure the metaverse's potential for realizing interoperability and openness. Repeatedly calling attention to that which is often invisible, Zuckerberg connects these immaterial standards and protocols to how they shape and ". . . inform social and moral order . . ." (Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 5). Linking governance to infrastructure, Zuckerberg gestures to techlash without substantive effect on Silicon Valley's deregulatory bent or prioritization of innovation's speed. As a performative technique of futuring, linking infrastructure to governance as both familiar, established referents implies a structural constraint on the metaverse as future. Oomen et al. (2022) caution that these structural constraints limit a range of futures; Zuckerberg performatively leverages this constraint to vaguely pad against techlash's critique in performance of yet another technofuture.

Despite acknowledging techlash's criticism and the industry's ideological failure, these foundational protocols, standards, and infrastructural nuts and bolts invisibly support Meta's corporate enclosure (Blanke & Pybus, 2020; Pybus & Coté, 2024). Pybus and Coté (2024) empirically show how Google and Facebook, Inc.'s existing SDKs render these companies "indispensable . . . super conduits" for expanding "platform monopolization" (p. 1). In short, Big Tech's structural power is consolidated through infrastructure despite the appearance of choice to users. Infrastructure as governance for the metaverse, then, strategically positions Zuckerberg and Meta's projected next corporate "empire" (Pybus & Coté, 2024, p. 8). Pairing infrastructure—otherwise technical, often invisible, and essential building blocks—with governance gestures toward resolving techlash's regulatory concerns. Doing so performatively awards techlash a sense of authority in acknowledging the failure of prior "democratic" storylines. Within this keynote, understood as regressive futuring by an economically and politically empowered incumbent, Zuckerberg's performed

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deference to—and play with—authority seemingly offers a resolution to a crisis staged within "the 'theatre' of political and ideological struggle" (Hall, 1988, p. 4).

Intra-Industry Critique: Innovation & Speculative Economic Futures

Zuckerberg's twinning of governance to software infrastructures offers perhaps the most direct response to techlash's critiques against Facebook, Inc. However, ongoing intra-industry, vaguely-veiled squabbles offer another thread of industrial reflexivity alongside the metaverse's futuring. The keynote scripts Facebook, Inc.'s ongoing critiques of Apple's explicitly proprietary and top-down policies (Nicas & Isaac, 2020) as raising techlash's key question: the tech industry's roles and responsibilities. Co-opting techlash's critique, Zuckerberg polices other Big Tech actors such that the metaverse's futuring becomes industrial boundary-work. Co-optation again performatively awards an oblique authority to techlash only as it supports Zuckerberg's regressive futuring around the expectations and boundaries of the industry's "democratic" economic futures.

Skirting acknowledgement of techlash as "humbling for me in our company," Zuckerberg identifies Facebook, Inc. as building "ecosystems" rather than "products" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, paras. 176–177). This implies Facebook, Inc.'s cultural work beyond individual technologies or infrastructures. At the same time, this reinforces the larger industry's capaciousness for naturalizing "ecological" norms, or the hegemonic logics and cultural meaning-making about ourselves, our positionality, and the world. Framed against this expansive understanding of his company and the industry, Zuckerberg immediately lodges his own (economic) complaints against Big Tech:

> . . . we've also learned *what it is like to build for other platforms, and living under their rules has profoundly shaped my views on the tech industry*. Most of all, I've come to believe that the lack of choice and high fees are stifling innovation, stopping people from building new things, and *holding back the entire Internet economy*. (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 177; emphasis added)

Zuckerberg's intra-industry critique alongside the metaverse's futuring is staged as an intervention in Zuckerberg's claimed (economic) failures of the present. Doing so selectively awards and, critically, captures techlash's authority in performed alignment with the metaverse's future. Implicit is a familiar, yet revised storyline: other Big Tech actors are akin to early Silicon Valley's "villains and buffoons" (Karpf, 2023, para. 22), a role previously held by the overbearing regulatory state, which (attempts to) restrain the industry's present. Combining these techniques of futuring—selective authority through the co-optation of techlash for intra-industry critique alongside familiar storylines that stage past narratives from the present into the future—constructs a "possibility space for action" (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 253) for the metaverse and the industry more broadly, while securing Zuckerberg's "ecological" authority alongside a co-opted techlash in doing so.

On the metaverse as an (attempted) charismatic technological stage, Zuckerberg's policing is framed with and against Silicon Valley's ideology as a "democratic" one, situating Facebook, Inc.'s envisioned "community" alongside "the creator economy and the developer ecosystem" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 181). In short, a technologically enabled, "democratic" ideoscape is convergent with and confined to

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economic terms despite an acknowledged "ecological" authority. Zuckerberg's intra-industry critique is thus wrapped within a conscribed depiction of a confoundedly "democratic" economic present: of stifled choice, stopped innovation, and frustrated economic growth. Within the keynote, the industry's present is righted through the metaverse's speculative economic futures. Yet, the metaverse's charisma can only reinscribe a familiar ecological terrain (e.g., Ames, 2019); creativity and innovation are again a "new" terrain of authority for global economic growth (Irani, 2018).

First, against other industry players, Zuckerberg is repeatedly situated as an (injured) authority—harmed and constrained by the broader industry's present failures—to narrate his metaverse future and his understanding of the tech industry's role as that which (again) claims to realize the more "democratic" world always, already promised by Silicon Valley's ideology. Deftly pairing a "humbling" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 177) acknowledgment of techlash critique of Facebook, Inc. alongside a rebuke of another Big Tech industry actor, Zuckerberg's performed industrial reflexivity is a technique of futuring for the industry's roles and responsibilities: remobilizing the Californian Ideology through techlash's co-opted critique spun against other Big Tech actors. If futuring is indeed a site of agency (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 254), Zuckerberg's performance uses this authority as a selective intervention against techlash. Alongside techlash's (potential) crisis, Zuckerberg's co-optive futuring proposes solutions only to the problems—intra-industry squabbles that threaten Meta's business model and Zuckerberg's boundary-making for the larger industry—that Zuckerberg is interested in resolving.

Second, this co-opted authority through selective intervention is leveraged through innovation repetition. Innovation as a proxy for economic value is reiterated through Silicon Valley's established fantastical ideological terms: "commerce" is a "butterfly effect [that] transports us to someplace magical" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 202). Adopting a performance of "democratic" inclusivity, these "magical" (economic) futures are staged through allusion to #BlackGirlMagic (Hobson, 2016), transforming the objectification of a racialized subject into an imagined agentic economic actor. Jackie Aina, a Black "professional makeup artist turned YouTube superstar" who focuses on "teach[ing], inspir[ing], and giv[ing] confidence to women of color" (Aina, n.d., para. 1), is the singular example of these "magical" economic futures, largely explained by the head of Metaverse products rather than Aina herself. This dramaturgical choice reinscribes Silicon Valley's "democratic" vision through a particular understanding of how Black political subjects are shaped: performatively agentic to fulfill the "democratic" rhetoric of 2021's inclusivity, yet unempowered to themselves envision, stage, and voice one's own future in the bounded constraints of the metaverse's unimaginatively transactional economic reality.

If futuring for Zuckerberg works to foreclose the possibility space for action, the "magical" new digital frontier conservatively sustains and conscribes the Californian Ideology's "democratic" imaginary to economic terms. Ignoring techlash's emphasis on the failures of economic flexibility (Ticona, 2022), Zuckerberg stages Aina's example to repackage claims of the immaterial possibility of economic success and security. In Zuckerberg's futuring, metaverse's economic "ecosystems" "have the freedom" to realize different "business model[s] . . . , whether that's custom work, tipping, subscriptions, ads, or other monetization tools" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 207). Again, ecosystems—the metaverse-as-futuring's cultural logics—are conscribed to an economic frame under a repeated rhetoric of freedom (Chun, 2006). Futuring's performativity is agentic for Zuckerberg in imagining his company, speculative yet repeated

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economic models, and larger industrial boundaries, but this agency extends only to others, such as Aina, as scripted actors within the bounds of the metaverse's stage and its extractive economic logics.

Akin to the magical, yet hollow performativity of the *Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), the ideological and its magical futurity selectively engage and override the substance of techlash's structural critiques. Zuckerberg's co-optation of techlash's crisis on a charismatic technological stage cannot, nor aspires to, capaciously reimagine that which structures cultural-economic realities and futures. Instead, metaverse repeatedly invokes tired ideological storylines—of technoutopianism and of performative handwaving toward an always more "democratic" future—and captures techlash's authority through selective engagement with its critique. As Zuckerberg concludes, his futuring as the inevitable next technological frontier is wrapped in a universalizing and obfuscatorily optimistic veneer:

> It's a future that is *beyond any one company* that will be made by all of us. We've built things that have brought people together in new ways. We've learned a lot from *struggling with social issues* and *living under closed platforms*.
>
> Now, it's time to take everything that we have learned, and help *build the next chapter*. . . . And if this is the future that you want to see, then I hope that you will join us, because the *future is going to be beyond anything we can imagine* (Zuckerberg, 2021a, paras. 303–304; emphasis added).

Thus, in futuring, techlash's crisis is positioned as irrelevant; to draw from the invoked, repeated storyline, techlash is akin to a defeated enemy in "battle" (Karpf, 2023, para. 22). Indeed, industrial reflexivity's reference to both the "social issues" of techlash's substance and "closed platforms" (Zuckerberg, 2021a, para. 303) of intra-industry boundaries concludes in the past tense. Rebranding—a culturally recuperative act—coheres as a technique of futuring, making and remaking cultural discourses alongside imagined subjects, projected governance, and speculative economic futures. Zuckerberg's regressive futuring conservatively shapes a possibility space that is only informed by these familiar discourses—of heroic, masculine celebrity-visionaries in "battle" against "villains and buffoons" (Karpf, 2023, para. 22)—as sites of hegemonic authority alongside a selective interpolation of techlash's authority for the metaverse's governance and speculative economic futures.

Discussion & Conclusion: Big Tech's Constrained Imagination & Crisis

Once a harbinger of Silicon Valley's promise, Zuckerberg's 2021 rebranding of Facebook, Inc. to Meta is fundamentally shaped by a conjuncture with techlash as a potential crisis. Rebranding—a culturally recuperative act of corporate sensemaking—looks to (re)claim and shore up Zuckerberg's celebrity and his company's authority in the "'theatre' of political and ideological struggle" (Hall, 1988, p. 4). While techlash challenges the ideological foundations of Silicon Valley, Zuckerberg's regressive futuring can only respond with repeatedly staged cultural discourses in familiar, past narratives. In short, Zuckerberg's regressive futuring is a contradictory act of power, responsive to techlash's emergent authority alongside a renewed commitment to projecting the authority of yet another technofuture and vanguardship.

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Like many of Silicon Valley's past technofutures, Zuckerberg's rebranded metaverse has failed to materialize the extent of his fantastical vision presented in this 2021 performance (Klee, 2024). Yet, as another hype cycle reverberates around AI, Silicon Valley's futuring and its performativity remain both suspicious, set against the established public reckoning through techlash, and powerful, as an aspired site of ideological renewal. Indeed, rather than futuring as a productive site of agency for realizing futures (Oomen et al., 2022, p. 254), the identified death of the metaverse (Zitron, 2023) and subsequent industry-wide fixation on generative AI point toward this larger throughline; the technological realization may change, but the hype cycles on. Regressive futuring—its performative mechanisms, dramaturgical regimes, and recycled charisma—foregrounds how hype is performed by Silicon Valley as a cultural industry with continuously mobilized storylines and stages. Empowered incumbents like Zuckerberg and other Big Tech actors are conscribed to these continual performances as conservative, reactionary acts of maintenance. Through brands of individual celebrities, companies, and Silicon Valley more broadly—as cultural-economic logic and "ecological" technology—this impulse to perform is made and remade to foreclose alternatives. Failure to perform is a failure of ideological meaning-making.

Repeated performances are the active, attempted sutures against substantive reckoning with Big Tech's familiar illogics: where democratic cavorts as authoritarian (Blanke & Pybus, 2020; Little & Winch, 2021), freedom masquerades as control (Chun, 2006), and so on. Failure to perform is for Big Tech to concede authority to these illogics, failed hype, and techlash's crisis. Through regressive futuring as ideological reinscription and an active project of industrial boundary-work, techlash—as technological backlash—is not just public suspicion, but makes visible the active work of making and maintaining industry as an ideological project. Never secured, techlash's (potential) crisis is, in part, pointing toward the potential brittleness of Silicon Valley's ideological claims as they are repackaged. While materially empowered to continuously shape technofutures that reinforce the selective allocation of agency to tech's elite, continued popular reckoning with this brittleness through the ongoing, nonlinear work of techlash can chip against regressive futuring, which only sustains established actors and tired ideological norms and scripts.

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