Jonathan Beller, **The Message is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital**, London, UK: Pluto Press, 2018, 176 pp., $99.00 (hardcover), $28.00 (paperback).

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"The medium is the message," Marshall McLuhan claimed in his 1964 book, *Understanding Media*, challenging media theory to shift its focus from content to container. But what exactly is the message and how can we have forgotten it are the questions Jonathan Beller seeks to answer in his book, ***The Message is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital***. Taking McLuhan's famous dictum as a starting point, this short Marxist polemic criticizes the field of media studies for its failure to consider the historicity of computational media technologies and these technologies' direct relationship to social inequality under capitalism. Beller argues that computational technologies are so embedded in formations of inequality that these technologies themselves must be understood as racial and gender formations. Drawing upon Cedric Robinson's understanding of racial capitalism, Beller develops the term *computational capital* to denote a "digitally enabled program of accumulation and dispossession . . . and intensive development of algorithms of inequality" (p. 16): racial capitalism + informatics = computational capital.
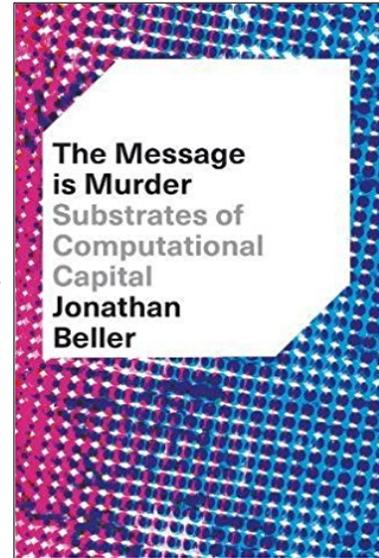
Beller's previous works include *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006), in which he provides an autonomist Marxist account of the attention economy, arguing that the act of looking, supported by the development and proliferation of the cinema, has been transformed into productive labor by capital. Threads of this argument can be seen in *The Message is Murder*, where Beller continues to argue that the automated organization of attention restructures social and psychic life in what he terms the "pathologistics of attention" (p. 134). These pathological restructurings of life occur at increasingly granular levels as computational capital speculates on and extracts value through the visual field.

Beller insists that media studies should take seriously the work of critical race theory through the understanding that media formations arise out of formations such as the plantation, the slave ship, the colony, and the factory, which were already saturated with violence and suffering. Arguing against media studies' techno-fetishism, Beller advocates for a "critical race media theory" (p. 9) that connects race, gender, and media as coconstitutive and coemergent historical formations.

This book is divided into two sections. The first is devoted to an exploration of the concept of information. Beller argues that social difference is transformed into information under already existing modes of racial and gender domination. Information is the logical continuation of the value-form's assignation of number to social relations and a product of alienated labor and should be understood within the framework of racial capitalism. Information emerges in the footprint of capitalism and information

theory's value-neutral rendering of the concept of information works to obfuscate the extreme violence it engenders. Beller considers the works of Gramsci and McLuhan, the narrative structures of Borges, the gender masquerades of Alan Turing, the racist premises of communication theory, and Marx's understanding of exchange value to trace the rise of information as a universal principle to be found anywhere and everywhere: "In a nutshell, information as a universal property of things means that the entire universe is posited as an interoperable site of financialization" (p. 109).

The second section considers the connection between visual culture and computational capital. Beller argues that the visual field is organized in terms of social difference and these formations of difference are now organized under the machinic gaze. In other words, computational machines are now the primary agents responsible for organizing the visual field. In this section, Beller considers the racial history of photography, critiquing Barthes' investigation of the photograph as a value-neutral medium. He turns to cinema's organization of attention through an analysis of the works of Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, and Alfred Hitchcock. Finally, Beller attempts to update Marx's labor theory of value for contemporary life, incorporating image and code into the equation to account for the distributed modes of production of post-Fordist capital.

The Message is Murder presents less the culmination of a long research project and more of a first attempt to gather disparate threads together to see where they might lead. As such, Beller's book is a bit fragmented in its approach, developing the beginnings of an investigation on a particular topic before quickly moving on to the next. In his effort to criticize media studies for its lack of engagement with race, he neglects to mention any examples that do, in fact, meet this criteria, such as the work of scholars like Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Lisa Nakamura. While he argues for a historical understanding of media formations, his arguments are rooted less in the historical record and more in the persuasive rhetoric of the polemic. He coins provocative terms like "fractal fascism" and "platform totalitarianism" without delving too deeply into how these terms might be concisely developed and employed. These terms, however, lend themselves well to the polemical argument that Beller develops.

The strengths of the book outweigh these limitations. Beller's taking to task of media studies techno-fetishism is a strong reminder that scholars should consider not only the formations of violence that support our systems of media but also the historicity of dominant concepts like information, which have rendered such violence as value-neutral and the cost of doing business. For Beller, the stakes of this conversation are high, since fascism seems to be on the rise. He argues that understanding the historicity of media formations is a matter of justice. Scholars should take seriously Beller's insistence that media theory needs critical race theory to thoroughly understand the relationship among media, race, suffering, and violence. Hopefully the message hasn't arrived too late.

References

Beller, J. (2006). *The cinematic mode of production: Attention economy and the society of the spectacle*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press.

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