

## *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*

**Last night SBS TV screened the first part of a three-part documentary by Adam Curtis titled *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*. When broadcast in Britain earlier this year it attracted intense debate. Here Clive Hamilton provides an analysis.**

Sitting in front of *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* it is easy to let the brilliance of the style wash over you. Illustrated with dazzling imagery—one reviewer wrote that “I kept thinking the dog was sitting on the remote”—one big idea morphs seamlessly into another while Curtis’s hypnotic narration smoothes away any cognitive bumps.

Like attending a lecture by Slavoj Žižek, after the relentless pace and mesmerising variety of ideas one comes away feeling overwhelmed and inspired. Yet there remains a niggling feeling that maybe you have just been bamboozled, that if you stopped and thought about the big themes they would collapse into a pile of contradictions or dissolve into banality. You begin to wonder whether Curtis is some kind of post-modern intellectual conjurer.

The message of *All Watched Over* is that we have come to believe that we live in a world created by machines, where we are all connected and where we are all free. Yet in this machine-world we are all components in a system. We dreamed that systems could stabilise themselves through feedbacks and create a perfect balance in human society, in the markets system and in nature’s ecosystems, a network without politics and the old hierarchies of power. But, Curtis tells us, power hasn’t gone away; it never does.

One of Curtis’s prime targets is internet utopianism, the belief that “technology could turn everyone into heroic individuals, completely free to follow their own ideas”. But this is an illusion that serves to conceal the continuing reality of power under capitalism. The blogger, the hacker and the sock puppet are all manifestations of this kind of utopianism. Computers give each one a feeling of power—expressing a view, raiding a data bank, sending an abusive email—but the real powers just get on with ruling the world.

It’s not so much a difference of view about the centres of power but a different understanding of what power is. We used to believe that control of capital was the principal source of power but now we are told that information is power.

How often have we heard young people eulogising the internet for making so much information available and that access to this information is empowering, making our societies more democratic? When I hear such claims I remember a childhood episode of *My Favorite Martian* in which the stranded Martian, who masquerades as an Earthling, is caught reprogramming his extraterrestrial brain to eliminate superfluous information, like the garrulous Mrs Brown’s recipe for brownies.

The extraterrestrial interloper recognised that bad information drives out good, but did not go so far as to suggest that good information can drive out knowledge. It was, after all, an American sit-com. Today’s internet utopians seem wholly

undiscriminating and fetishise information by attributing to it magical powers it does not possess.

Which is why the twitter revolutions are likely to decline from euphoria into chaos leading to a new despotism. Those who are drawn into an episode of solidarity through their iPhones may be powerful enough to topple a despot, but if there is no political hinterland other than a yearning for Western freedoms (freedoms air-brushed by American television), if there is no established and coherent organisation expressing an ideology, then there is no basis for a new order.

Wikileaks is not mentioned in *All Watched Over*, but it somehow keeps intruding. Julian Assange wanted to topple the powerful, but he built his campaign on such a distorted conception of the sources of power that his spectacular success has changed virtually nothing. Not even the sickening video titled *Collateral Murder* changed the war in Iraq. From somewhere—perhaps his early years in which his hippie mother moved house 30 times before Julian was 14—he formed the idea that rulers are powerful because they have secrets, and that liberty can be had by exposing those secrets.

If the powerful put their secrets on databases clever hackers can find them, and from this fact gave birth to the contemporary hero of the lone hacker sitting before a flickering screen munching pizza in a darkened room, like Lisbeth Salander's cyber-friend in the Millennium Trilogy.

For Adam Curtis computers are not the vehicle of liberation but the agents of oppression and he is at his best contrasting the fantasies of internet warriors with the actual dispensation of power. He reminds us why hippie communes fell apart so quickly. The romantic myth of decentered and unstructured systems that can liberate us to be our true selves crashed up against the real world of personal politics and ego-tripping. *All Watched Over* was produced a little too early for the parallel to be drawn, but the stories that have now emerged about Assange's tyrannical rule over the Wikileaks collective, so contrary to the spirit of anarchistic collaboration of internet utopianism, is a more modern version of the commune disease.

Yet there is something oddly concordant in the worlds of Curtis and Assange. Perhaps it is the strobing style that undermines the solidity of the real, as in the machine-created simulated reality of *The Matrix*. Growing from the sense that reality cannot be trusted the two share a kind of post-modern paranoia. They are the type of person who, faced with choosing between a cock-up and a conspiracy, will always choose the conspiracy. The difference is that Curtis understands how power works so his conspiracies are more believable.

In an unexpected move, *All Watched Over* links Ayn Rand's toxic ideology with the 1960s counter-culture, and does so at a level higher than the 1990s phenomenon of bourgeois bohemians. Curtis tracks the path of clever counter-cultural drop-outs who fetched up in Silicon Valley where they created the corporations that now rule the world. These are the people who now promote that peculiar brand of virtual capitalism in which the machines they make empower everyone at the expense of the state. It was American individualism reborn without a suit and tie, best represented by Steve Jobs who managed to get away with being cool and ruthless at the same time, a man could make billions from brand-obsessed customers while refusing to put the

fortune to any good purpose. The culture of Silicon Valley reveals capitalism at its co-opting best.

One of the themes of *All Watched Over* is that capitalism has reached a point where computers do the work of the market. So most trading decisions in stock market are made by pre-programmed machines, just as computers control manufacturers' inventories, just-in-time production processes, retailers ordering systems and banks' investment strategies.

I was reminded of the vigorous debate in the 1950s over whether a socialist state such as the Soviet Union could use computers to emulate the vast allocative task of the capitalist market while still pursuing socialist goals. The machines would do the millions of calculations needed to match supply with demand across thousands of inter-dependent markets in the way the price mechanism does under capitalism.

Those who see something sinister in this cybernetic organisation of power were vindicated by the financial crash of 2008, when the feedbacks flipped from stabilisers to destabilisers. The system went hay-wire leaving Alan Greenspan, who features prominently in the documentary as the avatar of free markets who as a young man drank deeply at the Ayn Rand well, reeling and speechless.

You don't need to have read *Das Capital* to know that the crash was inevitable. Capitalism is inherently unstable. After demonising the state, the neoliberal revolution set out to shift power from government to the market, which was said to be neutral and efficient. Except that anyone with half a brain knew that the market expressed and entrenched deep inequalities of power, so that the neoliberal power shift was from government to the rich. And the rich are always looking to manipulate the market to gain an edge. It's what they do.

Curtis makes some implausibly leaps in order to reach a plausible argument—that the idea of machines benevolently ruling an ordered world in which individuals can be free has become a smokescreen that hides the unchanging truth that power remains in the hands of the powerful.

*All Watched Over* is onto a big truth, that of how power works today, one that resonates with Foucault's notion of governmentality, the process in which modern society is rendered governable by governments that create the kind of citizen that will identify its interests with that of the system. Curtis broadens it out so that it is not governments alone that pacify citizens in this way but the system ruled by machines and the "machine thinking" that now substitutes for political ideologies.

An essential element of "neoliberal governmentality", in which the punters end up governing themselves through their participation in the market, is the narcotising effect of modern media. There is a certain irony, therefore, in the style of *All Watched Over*. Curtis himself has said that he had wanted to "fuse high seriousness with popular culture, and cut out the middle bits". The drawback is that by rendering high ideas so entertaining the sensory overload stops the brain in its tracks. You have to talk about it afterwards to understand what you just watched, and only then decide how much of it makes sense.

One jarring note in Curtis's beguiling story lies in his treatment of ecology. He tells a messy story in which the engineering concepts of networks, feedbacks and complex systems were projected onto nature by some early thinkers. Nature was then imagined to be a self-organising system that, although shown by other ecologists to be wrong, nevertheless gave us "epic visions of connectivity such as the Gaia theory and utopian ideas about the world wide web".

Anyone who knows a little about the development of ecology and holism will wonder how Curtis could read into it such a sinister story. I half expected him to mention that Hitler was a vegetarian.

If we remember some of the seminal works of environmentalism—*Silent Spring*, *Sand County Almanac*, *Deep Ecology*—there is none of the technocratic conception of control mechanisms and robust harmony. Quite the reverse: they talk of complexity beyond systematising and an internal integrity that eludes scientific understanding. They warn of the dangers of radical interventions and attempts to control, the opposite of Curtis's attribution of natural equilibrium.

Yet Curtis inadvertently exposes a deeper truth about ecology. As it evolved into a scientific discipline taught in universities and deployed in environmental impact statements, it perpetuated that which it was meant to destroy, mechanistic science. The term "ecosystem" gives the game away for it captures the essential idea of imposing on nature a systems structure of thinking that remains essentially Newtonian. It is true that systems rule the world, but those systems are not neutral and self-regulating; they are the systems of control. This is the deepest insight of *All Watched Over*.

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