Commentary

Witches as glitches: A response to Leszczynski and Elwood

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Abstract
This commentary critically engages with Leszczynski and Elwood's conception of the glitch, which is put forth as a way to grapple with digitally mediated spatialities that appear to be mistaken. By doing so, they reframe the glitch as a disruptive 'signal' of systemic oppression and as productive divergences. We argue for historicizing the glitch/glitch by engaging with feminist marxism, making possible the connection to previous forms of disruption and generative frictions. In response, we apply this approach by connecting the glitch to both witches and the industrial revolution in the home. We suggest epistemological clarity by connecting glitches to the capitalist orientations. We remain positively receptive toward Leszczynski and Elwood's work on the glitch/glitch as a vital endeavor to identify and exploit the spaces of rupture.

It is hard to imagine a social and material world that is not always already digitally mediated, or at least shaped by computation. Over time, what we loosely call 'the digital' has gained growing integration into everyday life. Alongside this integration comes the language and lexicons of the digital – tweet, uber, venmo, google, stream, 'save' as a floppy disk, etc – which prefigure social relations and material realities toward being compatible with, and legible to, platforms and systems of digital computation. This prefiguring acts as a feedback mechanism that concretizes the reliance of everyday life on digital platforms and systems, and the companies behind them. That is, digital corporations 'subrept' everyday life in an attempt to establish programmatic hegemony. Here, we borrow a term from institutional economics (see Dugger, 1980) to describe the process in which

digital corporations seep and slither into our life such that the motives of everyday life transform and become aligned with the motives and logics of digital capitalism.

Leszczynski and Elwood (2022) respond to Mattern's (2017) call for new languages and frameworks for understanding, engaging with, and working against and/or adjacent to digital systems of capture. Building from Russell (2012) and Benjamin (2019), Leszczynski and Elwood propose reappropriating the glitch/glitch as a method to describe (1) instances of flaws that

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superficially seem like minor occurrences but actually reveal systemic inequalities and orderings and (2) divergences that transgress normative value systems. Disruptions, chaos, and failure are recast to reveal digital systems of relational difference-making and to make new possibilities outside the bounds of digital legibility and capture. In doing so, they see the opportunity to open a multitude of vectors for the disruption of these systems.

By closely reading for the glitch through illustrative examples in US cityscapes, Leszczynski and Elwood demonstrate how their proposed epistemology might be enacted. They read an image of an e-bike parked on a pathway near a tent encampment, the purposeful appearance of dilapidation in a high-rent housing market, and a mural out of place in an otherwise 'Instagrammable' neighborhood. Materialities that appear to deviate from normative systems of value actually function as purposeful structures of spectacle, commodifying disruptive aesthetic regimes through social media and inflated Airbnb listings: '[T]he countersignal that appears to be a glitch, but is not' (10). These examples show how glitches can be both signals and interruptions of sociospatial orderings. The glitch/glitch duality which Leszczynski and Elwood seek to mobilize is drawn from the work of queer theorists paying attention to the complex relationalities and productive tensions which develop between norms and transgressions of these norms.

There remain urgent and important opportunities to strengthen the glitch/glitch concept in ways that do not foreclose on its fluidity or adoption. Leszczynski and Elwood carefully avoid reinscribing digital forms of capitalist exploitation and expropriation with their analysis and arguments. We support this motive and call for bringing this epistemological intervention into conversation with feminist marxist thought. A tighter coupling with feminist marxist thought, while attending to the tensions of reinscribing racial capitals, could lead to more concrete and tangible sites of intervention. We propose some potential orientations as points of departure for future work, not as a critique of the glitch/glitch as written.

We understand the glitch/glitch as a reappropriation of the language of digital. Yet, we believe the concept could use deeper engagement with the historicization of glitches. What are the technological and social genealogies that make the glitch/glitch a useful epistemological site for intervention? Do the authors see the glitch/glitch as being specific to *digital* capitalism or are there other regimes of technological development (digital, mechanical, and/or analog) and failure that may prove insightful? In what ways do past struggles over language or concepts connect to the glitch/glitch and how might we build from history to gain insights? How have other technological developments produced, or made visible, normative (and capitalist) aesthetic logics while allowing (or activating) new lines of flight?

For example, the 'industrial revolution in the home' (Cowan, 1985; see also Wajcman, 1991) might provide ample connection to build with. Alongside the decline of domestic and household staff during the middle of the twentieth century, household appliances – such as laundry machines, dryers, dishwashers, and vacuum cleaners – were introduced as tools for women to increase domestic efficiency. These commodities, household and kitchen tools, made sense only as part of an aesthetic of a clean, tidy, rational household. Yet, the result was not only zero net time savings, but an increase in the number of tasks performed inside the home (Vanek, 1974). Glitches in this framing present as simple appliance failures, the alternative uses of appliances (microwaves to disinfect, rice cooker to heat towels, stand mixer to shred meat), and as a failure to provide household efficiency. The glitches signaled the intensification of domestic expectations on women in the home, making more evident the patriarchal and capitalist power structures, and in doing so galvanized resistance in movements like wages for housework. The glitches, therefore, made detectable 'one of the most pervasive manipulations, most subtle and mystified forms of violence that capitalism has perpetrated against any section of the working class' (Federici, 1975: 76). How might we connect the forms of violence enacted through the technologies of digital capitalism to those enacted through technologies of the industrial revolution of the home? What signals or spaces for disruption might we detect if we

applied this to the concepts like the smart home or the smart city?

One key aspect of the glitch/glitch is determining *who* is legible in dominant modes of computing and how illegibility opens space for generative friction. We again see important historical parallels between the glitch/glitch as presented and historical forms of belonging. Some women gained degrees of independence from the social and material wealth generated during the industrial revolution, allowing them to break prior forms of oppression and challenge the emerging structures of patriarchal capitalism (Federici, 2004). The anxious patriarchal order of the emerging capitalist society coded some independent women and midwives as witches because they did not compete with either historical forms of social organization or the new material mode of capitalist production. In their everyday lives, these women violated the acceptable rules, codes, and ways of being, which then rendered the knowledge and independence of women incompatible/incompatible with dominant forms of 'rational' knowledge. The glitch/glitch might be seen as playing an important role in the 'construction, deconstruction, and re-presentation of the female-identifying corpus' (Russell, 2012). That is, the transition into capitalism brought new understandings of what it meant to be female-identifying, and with it new understandings of spatial organization.

We seek representative cases alongside the 'illustrative' examples that Leszczynski and Elwood bring to the fore. The development of diverse examples – both illustrative and representative – might be instrumental to the expansion of this epistemology's application as a tool for resisting the sociospatial structures of technocapitalism. This suggests the need for more empirical work, perhaps, as we have proposed applying the glitch epistemology to historical examples from feminist marxist scholarship. We applaud the desire to avoid reinscribing capitalist exploitation, but it is (digital) capitalism to which we seek to find alternatives and that the friction rubs with. This requires directly engaging with and holding in tension insights from political economy. Leszczynski and Elwood apply language and concepts which are certainly informed by political economy; however, this body of scholarship remains absent and unnamed in this particular work.

The work of Collard and Dempsey (2017) provides a useful typology and stratification of value

that may also be applied to the glitch/glitch as a way to intentionally identify ruptures as sites of potential intervention. Collard and Dempsey stratify orientations of value across capitalist natures. If we were to loosely apply their five orientations, we would see that, for example, the work of domestic labor is underground labor: useful, a potential market for commodities, but otherwise unvalued in traditional formal labor patterns. A house with large emojis painted across it acting as both a short-term rental and an instagrammable spectacle would be considered officially valued by capitalism. Witches present a direct threat to capitalism: their way of being and communal tendencies endanger capitalist futures. What appears to be surplus or underground (like social reproductive labor) are in fact necessary components of capitalism, whereas some might be direct threats. Situating the glitch in Collard and Dempsey's orientations is one way to understand the work of a particular glitch and how it relates to circuits of value. After all, Leszczynski and Elwood point out that the emoji house serves 'not as glaring idiosyncrasies on the cityscapes, but rather as a *systemic design feature of technocapitalist urbanism in which iconoclastic aesthetics help drive circuits of value* that rely on replicating simulacra of the Instagrammable city' (10, emphasis added). Stronger integration of the glitch/glitch with feminist marxist thought might help better identify its various capitalist orientations as an important intervention to detect signals and disruptions in ways that reveal points of intervention.

In this response, we have proposed historicizing the glitch/glitch through engaging with feminist marxism in order to relate the glitch to previous forms of disruption and generative frictions. We have applied this approach by connecting the glitch to both witches and the industrial revolution in the home. We note that technology gains a stronger valence as it is adopted and commodified in networks of digital capitalism, subrepting seemingly non-capitalist activities with a profit motive. We ask what makes the *digital* aspect of the glitch different, unique, or otherwise important? We ask how different capitalist orientations might better reveal the work of the glitch? We highlight the glitch/glitch within the broader political economy while careful

not to read the glitch through any number of 'well-rehearsed theoretical heuristics' (11).

To parse through the entanglements of the glitch, we propose that engagement with feminist marxist scholarship on the genealogies and orientations of historic political technologies—with a focus on the ways in which these technologies produce hierarchies of difference and subrept everyday life—can offer insight into the ways in which these hierarchies operate and how they might be interrupted. Better epistemological clarity on the glitch/glitch is a vital endeavor. In order to realize more of the potentialities which Leszczynski and Elwood's epistemology might offer as a tool for networked scholarly and grassroot mobilizations against the technocapital, it may be generative to develop not only more illustrative examples but also more representative ones.

We remain positively receptive toward Leszczynski and Elwood's work on the glitch/glitch. We propose that situating the glitch/glitch within the genealogy of technology and within feminist marxist political economy as one of many important future directions for this epistemology: where are the spaces of rupture and intervention?

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