

## Manifest™ v1.0 README: reframing false consciousness<sup>i</sup>

Geoff Cox & Tim Brennan

‘Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real condition of life, and his relations with his kind.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.’ (Marx & Engels, 1985: 83)

Thus, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (in *The Communist Manifesto*) expressed the transition to the industrial mode of production. Undoubtedly, the mode of production has evolved since 1848, but it has not simply transformed into something else; the present phase of production still remains predicated on the speed and frequency of communications technologies as well as its organisation on a global scale.<sup>ii</sup> Clearly then and now, these forces are not immutable nor their products simply dematerialised. This (false) logic might readily assume the apocalyptic end of history or nature rather than a mere workable alternative to the capitalist mode of production. In contrast, the solid core of modernity remains in what Marshall Berman described as dialectical conflict with a ‘melting vision’ (1999). To Slavoj Žižek (1997), liberal capitalism manifests as the ‘real’ and remains solid despite the fact that everything around it is described in terms of fundamental technological change or scientific paradigm shifts. For Žižek, the ‘spectre of ideology’ remains a ‘generative matrix’ regulating what appears ‘old’ or ‘new’, visible or hidden, possible or impossible, distant or close, as the case may be. In this way, contemporary communications technologies do not simply render things closer in a ‘global embrace’ but simultaneously make us distant from human experience, even at a local level.<sup>iii</sup> The supreme example of this paradox is that the majority of new media commentators generally fail to recognise that virtual reality merely makes manifest the underlying structure of the real.<sup>iv</sup> Reality is not simply the thing itself.



[figure 1: Alert]

There is a commonplace assumption that material structures of production have been all but swept away (into a mode of information for instance). Clearly material concerns remain, yet are obscured in the rhetorical language of global and technological networks. Sean Cubitt explains:

'[...] universal language operates, like universal space and time, by exclusion.... Ironically, it is the very people whose labour is so carefully hidden inside the hygienic white boxes on the desks on the wired world... who will be left outside in the world their work creates. In this way, the production of the material infrastructure for the internet is itself erased under the sign of the universality of its language, its claim to speak for all and with every voice.... representation, in both the democratic and the semiotic senses, is in question in cybernetic technologies of communication.' (1999:6)

Ironically new media commentators tend to think old materialist critical frameworks that embrace a concept of ideology must be rejected as they do not take sufficient account of the ways in which subjectivity is being produced as multiple and 'decentred'. The problem for Mark Poster is that the idea of emancipatory politics is based on the idea that autonomous subject-agents can free themselves from externally imposed constraints, as if subjectivity itself was not the result of its own set of social and historical conditions, and subsequently as decentred is as the structures of the internet itself (1995). He argues that critical frameworks need to be upgraded and dismisses the critical tools inherited from the industrial age, rejecting Marx for concentrating too heavily on action and institutions, and neglecting language. Yet, in a way this claim in itself is subject to the same critique it proposes. In other words, the most obvious case of ideology at work is evident in the '... privileged place, somehow exempted from the turmoils of social life, which enables some subject-agent to perceive the very hidden mechanism that regulates social visibility and non-visibility' (Zizek, 1997:3). So too, with this paper of course.

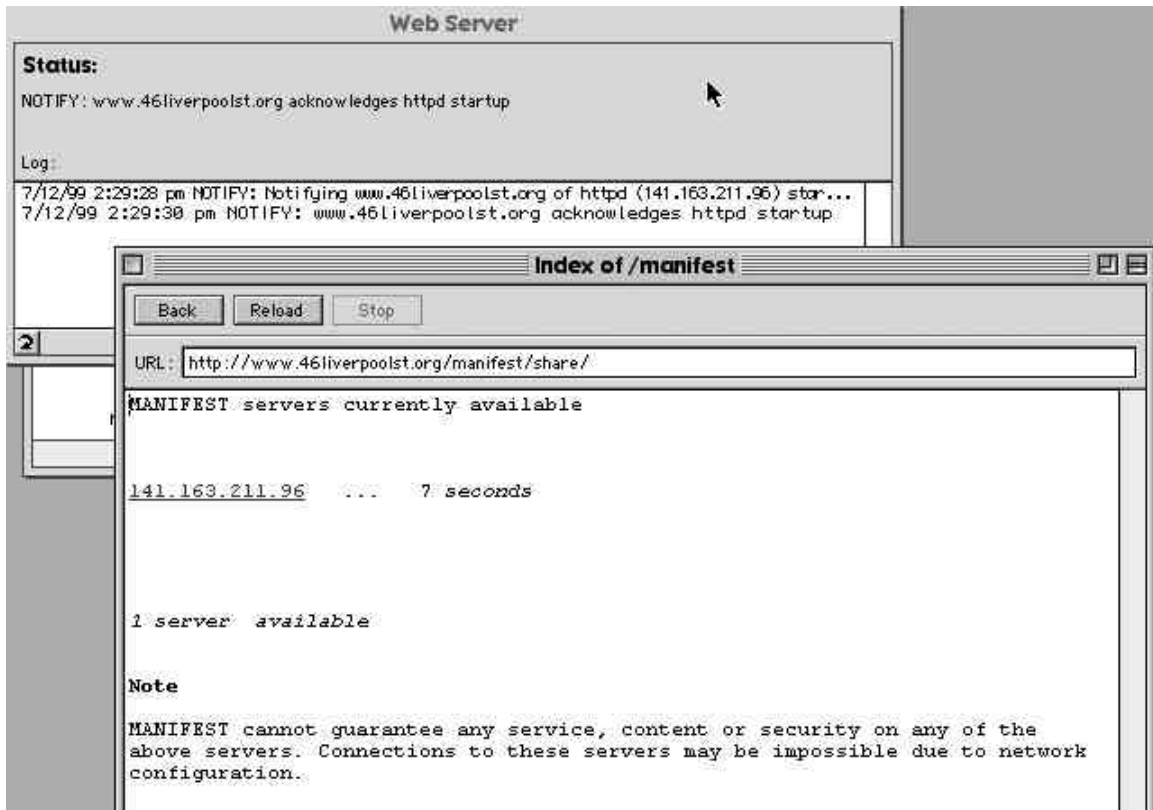
There have been numerous attempts to unlock deterministic interpretations of Marx's work on ideology. For example, Louis Althusser set about examining the possibility that ideology possesses degrees of autonomy and internal logic – in this context, what might be best described as a 'generative matrix'. He traced the concept of 'false consciousness' back to classical theories of empiricism and its attempts to understand the 'real'.<sup>v</sup> In this conventional mode, the concept of ideology is predicated on Cartesian philosophy in which there is the conscious agent-subject, and those that don't have access to this consciousness remain in a state of 'false consciousness'. There are many problems with this position but not least that agency is merely expressed through conscious actions and disregards unconscious activities. Similarly, ideology is not simply a description or reflection of reality which is either true or false, nor is it created in order to present reality, therefore ideology is not false consciousness as such. In this way, in addition to viewing the State as the overt 'machine of repression' (what Althusser calls the 'repressive state apparatuses'), there are also more subtle and less-violent articulations of social institutions (the 'ideological state apparatuses'), that discipline us into the kind of subjectivity most suitable for the continuation of the existing relations of production - this is what he calls a process of 'interpellation'. Interpellated subjects consider themselves as being free to 'choose' and liberated from social control when in actuality the ideological matrix holds them

firmly in place. This offers a neat analogy for the spurious choices that much interactivity offers the user, better described for the most part by 'interpassivity' (Zizek, 1999b: 104).

Arguably, much recent academic attention has been centred on the issue of subjectivity, attempting to supplement the limited definition through idealist philosophies which would simply identify the thinking subject with the site of consciousness; by pointing to the power of language and social structure in the shaping of its varying levels. Moreover, notions of consciousness in whatever context, whether it be those prefixed by: un-, self-, false-, collective-, cyber- or for that matter any possible artificial forms, cannot be entertained without an understanding of that most unfashionable of terms - 'ideology'.

'General ideologies, in their full depth and elaboration, have indeed to be seen as among the most remarkable forms of collective cultural production. But then it is precisely because all significant ideologies are indeed this deep and elaborated that the concept cannot be abstracted as some kind of "informing spirit", at the roots of all cultural production. To say that all cultural practice is "ideological" need mean no more than that (as in some other current uses) all practice is signifying. For all the difficulties of overlap with other more common uses, this sense is acceptable. But it is very different from describing all cultural production as "ideology", or "directed by ideology", because what is then omitted, as in the idealist uses of "culture" is the set of complex real processes by which a "culture" or an "ideology" is itself produced.' (Williams, 1981: 29)

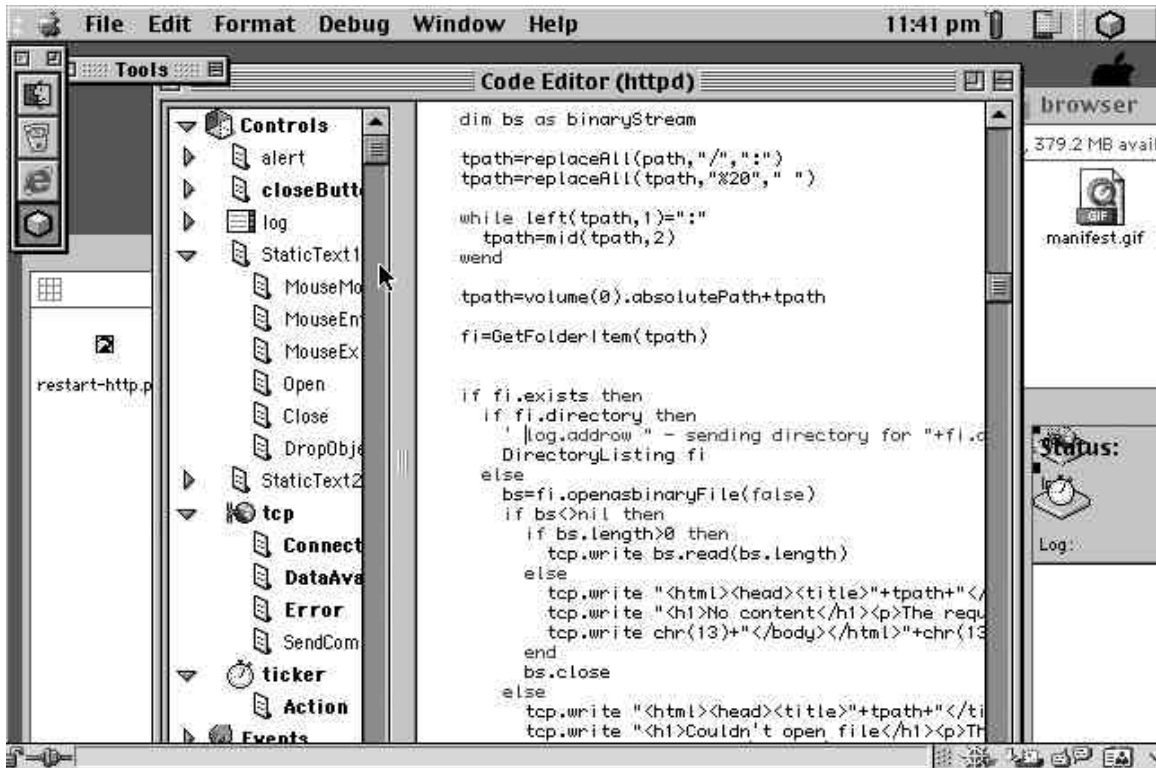
Similarly Pierre Bourdieu would stress that the social world doesn't operate through levels of consciousness but through practices, mechanisms, and so on (1997). His concepts of 'cultural reproduction'<sup>vi</sup> and 'symbolic violence' presents an alternative to the misunderstandings and misuse of the concept ideology, yet serve to throw further emphasis on cultural production and social processes. In the field of art practice and under the conditions of the dematerialised artwork, it is more like the process of making an artwork that has become 'material'. Perhaps, more than simply seeking a model of consciousness as 'cognitive or miscognitive', it can be seen to be *performative* (Eagleton, 1997:179). In the context of software development (increasingly the site of artistic activity) this might apply to the production of code, and doubts have been expressed in a wide range of practices that demonstrate issues around the material infrastructure for the Internet.<sup>vii</sup> *Manifest* is a case in point.



[figure 2: *Manifest* browser in operation]

*Manifest* software runs as an alternative to a usual web browser. Once activated, the software not only enables the user to browse but simultaneously distributes information by running as a web server. In this way visitors to the user's machine are able to browse through the (text-only) contents of their hard disk.<sup>viii</sup>

Most arts practice symptomatically fails to exploit the potential of new technology to undermine the dead-end commodity form of art. The radical potential of the technology lies in rising to the challenge of reproduction to undermine established models of cultural production. This is particularly important when, 'it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines that resolve into coding practices' (Haraway 1990). By employing the analogy of ideology and programming (or subjectivity and code), *Manifest* attempts to place emphasis on the socio-economic and material conditions of the production of code. Clearly, code is produced through a series of intricate processes and rules, through institutional and discursive structures and the like, but this is notoriously difficult to see - like a spectre.



[figure 3: *Manifest* software under construction in 'Real Basic']

Subsequently, the quote at the beginning of this paper might seem an unlikely source for a paper on consciousness, but Zizek's recent parody of the manifesto (in *The Ticklish Subject*, 1999) lends currency and persuasively demands a 'recentering' of political consciousness. He begins:

'A spectre is haunting western academia, the spectre of the Cartesian subject. All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: the New Age obscurantist... and the postmodern deconstructionist... the Habermasian theorist of communication... and the Heideggerian proponent of the thought of Being... the cognitive scientist... and the Deep Ecologist... the critical (post-) Marxist... and the feminist. Where is the academic orientation which has not been accused by its opponents of not yet properly disowning the Cartesian heritage?

[...] The point, of course, is not to return to the *cogito* in the guise in which this notion has dominated modern thought (the self-transparent thinking subject), but to bring to light its forgotten obverse, the excessive, unacknowledged kernel of the cogito, which is far from the pacifying image of the transparent self.' (1999:1-2)

(note: 'cogito' from the latin for I think, made famous by Descartes 'Cogito, ergo sim' – 'I think therefore I am') Zizek is concerned to address this 'absent centre' in the context of what he calls the 'post-political' stance, and is keen to address the apparent failure of 'identity politics' with its multiple forms of subjectivity that tends to obscure socio-economic forces. The problem for Zizek is: 'how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multi-culturalism.' (1999: 4) Finally, we say:

The authors disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions (whether hard or soft). Let the Multi-nationals and Multi-culturalists alike tremble. Multi-media users have nothing to lose but their chains (or the wires that bind them). They have real/virtual worlds to win.

Users of all paradigms, ignite!

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### **Biographies:**

Geoff Cox is an artist and presently Senior Lecturer in Media (Lab) Arts working across the Schools of Humanities and Cultural Interpretation, and Computing, University of Plymouth, where he is also part of the CAiiA-STAR research group.

Tim Brennan is an artist and presently Artistic Director of Arthouse Multimedia Centre, Dublin, Eire.

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### **Notes:**

<sup>i</sup> This paper reflects upon a recent project *Manifest* (installation at Bishopsgate Goodsyrd, London; book published by Working Press; and software release developed in collaboration with Adrian Ward - available from <http://www.46liverpoolst.org>

<sup>ii</sup> People's lives are no less at stake now than they were in 1848, the key difference being that the digitally web-wise first world countries are (a) at sufficient geographic and virtual distance from the industrial complex for them not to see the effect of Capital's aggressive motor, and (b) they choose to view their own 'no income' classes within the ever renewable terms of Social Darwinism.

<sup>iii</sup> This position is exemplified by Walter Benjamin's concept of aura as a 'unique phenomena of a distance however close it may be... Distance is the opposite of closeness', from the Notes (1992), 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, Fontana, p.236.

<sup>iv</sup> For instance, according to Zizek (1997), applying Lacan would firstly question the myth of 'real' experience as already inherently phantasmic, leaving virtual reality an extension of this process.

<sup>v</sup> Althusser's emphasis on the idea of overdeterminism, or the idea that one effect can arise from a number of related causes as opposed to one cause acting alone, undercuts the notion of a one-to-one relationship between the base and the superstructure, or economics and art, or subject and object.

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<http://courses.lib.odu.edu/engl/cbrooke/aacra/althusser.htm> Also see, Lamm, Z. 1984. 'Ideologies in a Hierarchical Order'. In *Science and Public Policy*, February.

<http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Classroom/3735/ic/ic061402.txt>

<sup>vi</sup> This refers to Bourdieu's use of the term 'Reproduction' that connects cultural phenomena firmly to the structural characteristics of a society, and shows how the culture produced by this structure in turn helps to maintain it. In Bourdieu, P., et al. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.

<sup>vii</sup> Moreover, it is significant to note that the (1999) Ars Electronica Golden Nica award (for net.art) was awarded to the *Linux* operating system; predicated on principles of 'open source', multiple authorship and the will to protect free distribution.

<sup>viii</sup> *Manifest* software is distributed as freeware, and is released under the GNU General Public License agreement which stipulates that the software source code must remain freely available, and that anyone may take a copy and modify it as they wish, subject to certain terms and conditions. <http://www.fsf.org/>