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by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

Cometh the iPhone

Or, how we learned to love iThings but break their spell

Published on October 1, 2012 by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D. in Greening the Media

The iPhone 5 is upon us, the latest in Apple's retinue of striking innovations. Like all Apple products, the phone's sleek, minimalist design appears to offer a world of wonder within, like the police box in the long-running TV series Dr Who that opens up to disclose a huge machine that can transport people across time and space. Before we get carried away on the metaphor, consider its more potent meaning: this bit of magic is precisely how corporations sell high-tech products—they promise transcendence from both our present world and technology's dirty industrial origins.

Macsters like us have reason to suspect such hype when we find that the iPhone denies information on abortion clinics via Siri, offers weather predictions based on astrology rather than science, and sends us walking onto a farm when we anticipated boarding an airplane. But the iPhone's troubles don't end with these faulty applications.

Apple has faced a series of labor and environmental scandals since it forced suppliers to speed up the production of gadgets with ever-shorter lifespans. The latest finds one of Apple's key suppliers, the Taiwanese-based Foxconn, confronting all-out rebellion and worker violence at one of its plants. To the consternation of many loyalists, supply chain realities have confounded Apple's just-in-time production system ever since the first iPad hit the market. So don't blame consumer frenzy if you're still waiting for a new phone.

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Richard Maxwell, Ph.D., is Professor and Chair of Media Studies at Queens College, City University of New York.

Toby Miller, Ph.D., is Distinguished Profes [more...](#)

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Meanwhile, The New York Times, so often a reliable booster of consumer technology, just published an investigative series on the environmental costs of cloud computing, one of Apple's favored means of cultivating loyalty; or is that dependency?

Despite this, many of us continue to admire that old Apple magic. The enchantment with everything Apple makes it hard to acknowledge the firm's material connection to labor exploitation and ecological decline. Consider those advertising campaigns that feature beautiful post-racial silhouettes funkifying iPads and iPods for our delectation as we sit idling in cars or look up from subway seats. The company certainly knows how to promote its style to a certain model of customer, notably elite cyberbarians and techno-bohemians working in the culture industries.

Many editors, bloggers, and artists love Apple gadgets. We know, with a kind of hipster self-awareness, that our particular brand loyalty can appear cultish, especially given the hagiographic treatment of Steve Jobs. And yet we are happy to spread innovation rumors cleverly

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orchestrated within the Cupertino publicity machine. Who cares that the new proprietary mapping software is the butt of jokes from Indonesia to Ireland??2

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Apple clearly exercises a special hold on much of the public imagination, but there is a wider question here about the belief that new and enduring freedoms and pleasures accompany digital gadgetry. That faith makes it especially difficult to find a secular view of technology, one that refutes the totemic, quasi-sacred power that industrial societies have all too frequently ascribed to modern machinery—an old, old story that ironically reappears, albeit with new actors, on a routine basis.

In the 19th century, people were supposedly governed by electrical impulses. Telegraphy was conceived of as a physical manifestation of intellect that associated the essence of humanity with communicative labor. In the early 20th century, radio waves were said to move across the ether, a mystical substance that could contact the dead and cure cancer. During the inter-war period, it was claimed that the human sensorium had been retrained by technology. By the 1950s and 1960s, machines were thought to embody and even control consciousness.

This mad mixture of science and magic continues into our own digital culture as cyber-enthusiasts fetishize each new “upgrade” as if it could reboot their identity into a perpetual now-ness. Two decades ago this frenzy was captured on video as people lined up to buy the Windows 95 operating system, amid Microsoft’s advertising futurism.⁴ Today, the excitement gathers around a different firm’s wizardry; tomorrow it will be yet another....

A critical view of this contrived newness might unsettle the prevailing idolatry of Macsters like us. We can shake off the magic if we treat innovation skeptically, questioning the planned obsolescence that confuses an abundance of i-Things with wellbeing and creativity. We would gain something in return: a connection to the present where we can comprehend the deplorable working conditions that bring these high-tech wonders into the world and the ecological impact of such cool stuff.

This is the kind of society we live in, here and now. The question, as always: Is it the kind of society we want?



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