DESERTED DEVICES AND WASTED FENCES

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in extreme
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Introduction

In the mid-2000s, just after the mobile phone boom had happened, I spent two years living in Ramallah, Palestine. While the conflict between the newly elected Hamas government and the State of Israel played out, I noticed how the role of mobile technologies in everyday life in these tense circumstances often differed from their common use and representation in the Northern European context I was used to. Mobile phones were a crucial way to warn of military incursions, while they were also treated with suspicion because of their potential appropriation as bomb triggers. The phone model I owned was colloquially named after Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, and thus became politically charged.

Since that time, I have been interested in the ways in which everyday technologies are used and appropriated under circumstances that their designers and manufacturers did not envisage and in ways that do not correspond with their usual representation in advertising and other media. In these situations, the taken-for-granted understandings of technology that prevail in the 'ordinary everyday' of consumer culture in the so-called Global North are often disturbed or contradicted and consumer devices no longer appear as the unambiguous signifiers of innovation and progress they are often taken to be. I like to look at these ruptures as opportunities to imagine alternative techno-cultures, in which technologies are developed, used and appropriated in diverse ways that are

rooted in people's personal, local and regional lifeworlds, rather than act as extensions of a globalized standardization process.

As such, my approach bears a certain kinship with Henri Lefebvre's call to study occasions of 'festival' ('la fête') in society to look for remnants of medieval elements that are 'other' to the everyday of consumer capitalism. These festive elements can be a source to help us imagine and initiate a revolutionized everyday life that breaks free from a culture of passivity, both with regard to its alienating labour processes and the endless consumption of standardized goods. However, instead of looking for moments of disruption at instances of festival that take place at the heart of consumerism, I suggest that we look at the opposite end of the spectrum, namely at the fringes of consumer culture, places that are on the 'frontiers of capitalism', as Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore have called the geographical and cultural areas in which the mechanisms of capitalist production and consumption are not yet – or no longer – fully established. Examining the ways in which technologies that were designed, produced and marketed for use in everyday consumer culture start to (mal)function, gain new meanings and are appropriated in these liminal spaces can give us hints at what alternative techno-cultures could look like.

Over the years, I have traveled through Europe, Africa and Asia to examine such situations of technological rupture and create artwork in response to this. I have visited e-waste dump sites in Lagos, Nigeria, second-hand markets and mobile phone shops across Kenya, Pashtun migrant areas on the outskirts of Karachi, the frontline of the Donbass War in East Ukraine, the Polish-German border during the Covid-19 crisis, an e-waste recycling plant in Hong Kong, the anti-immigration 'smart fence' on the Hungarian border, sex shops in London's Soho, a consumer technology trade fair in Berlin and many other sites

of technological turmoil, disruption and surprising convergences.

These journeys have formed the basis for my artistic practice around consumer devices in relation to waste, conflict and intimacy, but they have also led to a series of short texts that reflect on everyday technologies, their uses and imaginaries, most of which have thus far remained unpublished. This collection brings together a selection of these texts. The persistence of diverse experiences of materiality – despite efforts for technological immediacy – is a recurring theme throughout them, as are the examined technologies' implication in the dissemination of ideologies of progress, growth and conquest. My motivation to share these texts is not to offer a handbook for cultural change based on conclusive analyses – most of the essays are open-ended reflections – but rather to offer some provocations, which I hope might stimulate alternative perspectives on the technologies we often overlook or take for granted in everyday life. I hope that my guided tour along the dusty insides of computers, sharp edges of razor wire technology, large-yet-not-uncanny strap-on dildos and other technological curiosities and banalities might trigger some doubts about the techno-cultural status quo and evoke a desire for more inclusive technologized lifeworlds.

Nairobi, November 2020

Techno-Mythology on the Border:

The Pandemic Risk Society

Slubice border crossing, Poland, March 2020

A person entirely covered in a white suit blocks the way of a man wearing a face mask. The latter slightly bows his head, after which a white device is aimed at his forehead by the person in the protective outfit. A few seconds later he walks on and the next person presents themselves to the device operator. At a placid pace, this process repeats itself, while a seemingly endless stream of people passes by.

This could well be a scene in a dystopian sci-fi movie where enslaved workers are registered upon entry into a factory. Or might it be a model for a futuristic religious ritual, where the believer bows their head to an electronic relic that funnels the Holy Spirit? At the same time, the seemingly disinterested, yet focused way in which the operator aims the device at people's foreheads is somewhat reminiscent of the use of cattle guns in slaughterhouses (plapurdue 2008).

Of course, the reality of the procedure described here is much more mundane, albeit nonetheless troubling. The device is an infrared thermometer operated by a border guard on the Polish-German border between Słubice and Frankfurt Oder, where I say goodbye to a friend on a Monday evening in the spring of 2020. The suit worn by the border guard is complemented by a facial mask, plastic gloves and transparent eye cover so their body seems all but sealed off from the outside world. The thermometer enables the guard to accurately determine a person's body temperature by aiming a laser beam at their forehead, without touching them. When the registered temperature is above 37.7 degrees Celsius, the person is considered likely to be infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, one of the symptoms of which is fever. In this case, the person will immediately be taken to a mobile medical station that has been erected next to the border crossing, subjected to medical tests and subsequently put into quarantine. In a situation of feelings of insecurity and unknown threats, the operator appears as a beacon of reassurance and safety. While their protective suit gives the impression of a near absolute barrier from infection, their digital instrument produces empirical data on the basis of which a clear decision process is managed.

In the early 1990s, sociologist Ulrich Beck suggested that, since the start of industrialization, threats to human existence like "famines, epidemics and natural catastrophes have been

continually reduced" (Beck 1992, p. 97) to a point where these no longer form a significant hazard in people's everyday lives in post-industrial society. In their place, 'new risks' have emerged, which are the offspring of technological development, such as nuclear power, chemical and bio-technology. While the chances of occurrence may be smaller than with earlier, natural threats, the magnitude and longevity of destruction from hazards associated with these technologies is far greater; humankind has created technologies that are powerful enough to destroy its entire habitat.

For Beck, 'risks' are a distinctive subset of hazards that are based on "decisions that focus on techno-economic advantages" (p. 98). In pre-industrial eras, hazards appeared as a 'stroke of fate' (ibid.) that came to society from outside. These hazards were perceived as apolitical and often associated with religious beliefs, e.g. a famine might have been considered a divine punishment. Since industrialization, however, the most prominent hazards have become those that are rooted in decision-making processes connected with responsibility and accountability. These risks are dealt with through a combination of observations and calculations on the basis of which precautions are taken and responsibility is attributed. For example, the hazards posed by a nuclear power plant are the offspring of human technology and are approached on the basis of calculations of probability, rather than merely accepted as 'the dark side of progress' (ibid.) as would have been customary in a pre-industrial approach. Likewise, the risk of traffic accidents is determined on the basis of statistical data on past road accidents and vehicle and infrastructure design. In contemporary 'risk society', decisions on acceptable risks are then made based on a cost-benefit analysis, often expressed in monetary value. Beck argues that this principle becomes problematic in the case of risks where the hazard is total

ecological destruction, as may be the case with a nuclear accident, because in such event there is no possible 'benefit' that could compensate for the 'cost.'

When we look at the hazards posed by the coronavirus pandemic, a different realm of complications emerges though. The virus doesn't quite seem to fit within the division Beck draws. Its global spread, and thus its transformation into a serious threat, is facilitated by a technological infrastructure: aeroplanes and other means of transport that allow people to move easily far beyond their immediate surroundings. Thus, it seems to sit in the category of risk, decisions and precautions. However, the virus itself more closely resembles Beck's accounts of pre-industrial hazards posed by natural disaster, the kind of hazard that until recently appeared obsolete in the Global North. At the time of writing, little is known about how the virus spreads exactly, how contagious it is, what environments it thrives in, how many people have been infected and to what percentage of people it is dangerous. Also, in terms of its biological characteristics, the virus is - as far as we know - not the offspring of human technological development, and as such appears to be the kind of 'outside' threat, disconnected from the direct responsibility of specific people or organizations, which Beck associates with pre-industrial hazards.

This ambivalent characteristic is also reflected in the rather uncanny realm of political manoeuvring in connection with the corona pandemic. On one hand, the virus is framed within the paradigm of risk, at times with a determination that seems on the edge of desperation. Vast amounts of data, calculations and probabilities are published uninterruptedly, while expert interpretations and prognoses saturate media outlets. On the other hand, due to the vast amount of unknown parameters, the pandemic often also appears as a natural disaster that is beyond

politics or even reason. In day-to-day life, these two characteristics operate hand in hand. Government counter measures are introduced as careful decisions based on empirical data and calculation of probabilities, seemingly offering a considered balance between public health care and civil liberties. However, as soon as any doubt emerges about the basis of the calculated risk or the proportionality of measures introduced, the sentiment is shifted into the domain of the pre-industrial natural disaster, where regulations and restrictions are presented as commandments disconnected from politics that should be observed in a near-religious fashion (e.g. hikers on 'non-essential' solitary nature walks are sin shamed by UK police drones; Metro 2020). Thus, a worrying web of justification and accountability emerges where pretty much any decree that is associated with the pandemic can be introduced as simultaneously a carefully considered political decision *and* an inevitable and unquestionable threat response.

In this context, the wrapped-up border guard with infrared thermometer becomes a significant figure. The protective suit suggests an impenetrable precautionary measure where the chance of infection is all but eradicated. The thermometer collects empirical data, represented as a single number on its display, on the basis of which it is determined whether a subject poses an immediate threat: a near perfect instantiation of hazard management in the risk society. However, at the same time, the thermometer operator appears like a surreal being, an embodiment of hazard as mythological creature. It is this latter aspect that gives us some hints at what the realm of power and threat operating just beneath the narrative of calculation and control might encompass.

In the dystopian sci-fi movie scenario which the setup recalls, the hazard is oftentimes posed by autonomous technologies that have transformed from utilitarian support

systems into a threat to humankind (The Terminator is a classic example). The technological aspect of the current pandemic threat follows a similar path: in a dialectical shift, global mobility seems to have transformed from a universal ideal of freedom to a technological threat that is beyond control. At the same time, the ritual-like gesture of the procedure brings to the fore the thermometer's double role as a quasi-religious object. In the current state of affairs that is dominated by uncertainty and the unknown, measuring technologies - especially those that provide one-dimensional, digital information - become objects of hope, the scientific appearance of which suggests a lot more certainty than they actually offer. But what might the thermometer's close aim at the foreheads of the passing testing subjects and its eerie reminiscence of cattle gun slaughter suggest? Maybe we should read this as a warning for another disquieting potential: in our desperation to find ways to control the virus amidst widespread uncertainty we can easily slip into the role of a complacent herd moving along the pathway of unquestioned state control.

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Camera Surveillance and Barbed Wire

> The Concertina razor Wire design to provided with
> highly resistant blades, has a great capacity of penetration,
> while producing a deterrent to potential intruders. (sic)
>
> European Security Fencing[11]

CCTV cameras and barbed wire. Two technologies to control space, albeit in different ways. The camera allows for the monitoring of activities at a distance, and at the same time compels people to adjust their behaviour by giving them a sense of being observed[12]. Instead, barbed wire limits the movements of humans and animals in a direct, physical sense, while the imagination of physical pain evoked by the appearance of the material – an aspect frequently highlighted in product descriptions – gives it an element of deterrence. Whereas CCTV is a visual technology, barbed wire operates primarily in the realm of the haptic.

In Western-European everyday life, barbed wire is omnipresent and frequently used to fence off spaces from unwanted visitors. However, it is most commonly used in

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[11]European Security Fencing (ESF) is the main supplier of concertina razor wire for border protection in Europe. <http://bit.ly/Ploeger29>

[12]See Michel Foucault's writing on the behavioural impact of the principle of the panopticon prison design in *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

agriculture and landscaping to limit the movement of animals. Notably, for both applications, traditional twisted barbed wire is used almost exclusively. Historically, this type of wire has predominantly been used for agricultural purposes[13], unlike so-called NATO razor wire which has been developed specifically for use against humans. Thus, also when installed for the seemingly violent prevention of human movement, twisted barbed wire can still be read as a benign technology of everyday civilian life.

Another aspect of interest in this context is the relatively inconspicuous use of barbed wire in many security endeavours. It is not uncommon to find green barbed wire on a fence, to let it blend in with the environment and make its visual presence less prominent. The use of barbed wire in civilian spaces seems primarily focused on creating a practical physical barrier, rather than deterring through imagined injury.

For deterrence, camera surveillance has become the technology of preference. The prospect of being filmed while performing unwanted behaviour and having the footage used against you in legal action or social disciplining often works as an effective deterrent. However, the deterrence aspect loses its effectivity in spaces of crisis, where the prospect of legal charges or social disciplining becomes futile: if one is considered an 'illegal person' the realm of the legal loses its relevance; in a condition of chaos, social discipline is impossible or insignificant. Once the element of deterrence disappears, the technology's utility for direct action is unveiled. As such, the borders of the Schengen zone expose the practical ineffectiveness of the CCTV camera to provide physical

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[13]Notwithstanding this, it was also applied on a large-scale in WW1 trench warfare and WW2 concentration camps.

intervention. Even if you are detected immediately, this doesn't prevent you from moving quickly and disappearing before counter-action is possible.

This is where barbed wire returns as a primary technology for spatial demarcation and separation. The promises of high-tech security – the holy grail of the post-Cold War Global North – collapse, and a seemingly archaic, low-tech approach is implemented in its full brutality: Endless stretches of 'concertina NATO razor wire' have been installed along the borders of Hungary, Slovenia, and Spain, among others. Razor wire threatens the observer with its display of perceptibly sharp blades. It won't just poke a little hole in you. It will entangle you and slash you open. Moreover, its association with the realm of the military, its specific design to hurt humans, removes the sense of positive ambiguity of the agricultural wire that is used in everyday security fencing.

Foregrounding the realm of the haptic, the domain of bodily pain, either in fearful imagination or in actual, physical experience, razor wire pushes the human subject toward its base faculties. The reflective experience of self-awareness and observation evoked by the CCTV camera is replaced by the immediacy of bodily fear and pain. Here, the words of Elaine Scarry are useful: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human makes before language is learned." (*The Body in Pain*, 1985)

Civilization ends at the razor wire fence.

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About the author

Dani Ploeger is an artist and cultural critic who explores situations of conflict and crisis on the fringes of the world of high-tech consumerism. His artwork is exhibited in museums, galleries and festivals worldwide, including ZKM Karlsruhe, Venice Architecture Biennale, transmediale, WRO Media Art Biennale, Museum of Fine Arts Leipzig and The New Institute in Rotterdam. He holds a PhD in media studies and performance art from the University of Sussex, UK, and is currently a Research Fellow at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London and a Fellow at V2_Lab for the unstable media in Rotterdam. His work is represented by Art Claims Impulse in Berlin.

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