Weaponizing Against Control

While work itself may be undesirable in most cases, if it must be done, it has been advised that one should obey the maxim, “work smart, not hard”. One such method of “working smart” is to get someone else to do it instead. While sovereign societies allowed the King to benefit at the expense of his subject’s servitude, disciplinary societies realized that more can be reaped from less when the subject (worker) is offered brief respite, or even the illusion of independence from the body in power, while doing work in place of the owner. As such, control societies epitomize this maxim, leaving the lowly “work” to impoverished third-world countries, while offering to consumers an illusion of complete independence, of no visible control. Instead, “what it seeks to sell is services, and what it seeks to buy, activities” (DeLeuze, 181), taking on a far more sly role in the assessment and exploitation of the masses. Technology has advanced to the point where any and all data can be captured and stored indefinitely, readily available for ingestion, consideration, and ultimately, implementation. The information collected is used to further the means of the empowered body, allowing it to more accurately assess the needs, wants, and dislikes of the people in order to further its own revenue and growth. DeLeuze does not shirk in the face of such a daunting system, but urges the individual to remain hopeful, saying,“It’s not a question of worrying or of hoping for the best, but finding new weapons” (181). As technological evolution has fostered the profiteering of businesses in controlled societies, these very developments are now being used to subvert said power dynamics, empowering the individual with new modes of defiance.

The brilliance of control is that it is unseen, seemingly non-existent in comparison to the overt methods of exploitation that define sovereign and disciplined societies. While it was well known that the King ruled over every aspect of one’s life, the contemporary giants of Comcast, AT&T, and Mastercard assess a similar level of dominance, though they do not want the individual to realize this. The power of these entities comes from their immense wealth and technological reach, allowing them to incessantly monitor or modulate the actions of their markets. A top-down approach is taken, with each person’s unique habits or actions being fed through strings of algorithms to analyze and determine general trends of the population; the individual does not matter in and of itself, but as a mere piece of the whole, a fraction of a point of data. DeNora explains how music, like any form of cultural expression, has fallen prey to a similar perception. Fairly easy to integrate and manipulate in a physical space, music “is aimed at the creation of scenic specificity, at rendering places and spaces hospitable to some types of action, inhospitable of others.” (DeNora 111). One example of such an attempted cultivation is the use of ‘Muzak’ (whose slogan is “Drive your company, drive customer loyalty, drive sales.”), which aims to increase customer receptivity to advertising while gently maintaining worker productivity through a technique dubbed “stimulus progression”. Faster paced music is altered with silence in fifteen minute blocks, creating contrast, allowing for the prevention of ear fatigue and the increased “stimulation” of the music when it *is* playing. Such control does not need to refer to the music itself; methods of distributing music are equally vulnerable. “Markets are won… by transforming products rather than by specializing production” (DeLeuze, 181) and for this reason, data that is free-flowing about user activity allows the owner to maintain a competitive edge by determining fashions, trends, and other timely increases or decreases in interest. Spotify and Pandora are perfect examples of this, offering “music for everyone”, *allowing* the listener to freely “choose” while silently taking notes in the background. As these streaming services perfect their business models, even the finite amount of control that comes with “buying” (licensing) a song from iTunes may soon disappear. While streaming customized playlists may offer the utmost configurability and convenience, the power ultimately lies in the hands of the streamer.

Despite being fashioned against the masses, music is also an agent of the movements against controlling bodies. Peer-to-peer file sharing systems turn the vectorial structure of the internet against itself, allowing users to share media with one another directly, with music being especially ripe for this type of sharing given the mp3 format. Technological advances of bandwidth capacity, the personal computer, and the digitization of media has facilitated this ability. Some companies have begun to battle this resistance; Comcast, for example, flexes its muscle by throttling internet speeds (modulating) when it detects illegal downloading and/or torrenting. Though this does serve as a deterrent, it is by no means as comprehensive or successful as the End-User license agreements and other litigious nonsense are intentionally made dense, impenetrable by the common man, as to deter any sort of counteraction.

Enimem’s music video for mosh, broadcast freely through YouTube and various other online sources, presents a strong political message, begging listeners to take a closer look at the system of government, the deception it may be employing, and the opacity of the entity as a whole. However, somewhat ironically, Eminem misses the point, urging individuals to let their voices of opposition be heard… by using the very same corrupt system to elect a new ‘controller’.

While Eminem may not be the ideal icon to follow, he’s on the right track, and engages the appropriate technological channels to spread his message of defiance. As technology continues to develop, the balance of power will likely continue to shift in favor of the masses; it is becoming increasingly difficult for control societies to maintain full authority over means of distribution. In the meantime, society must remain conscious of how “forms of social life are established and renewed, albeit at the often sub-conscious levels of practice, habit, passion, and routine" (DeNora, 110), and continue to form their own ideas and opinions instead of merely accepting what they are fed by algorithms.