

as if in the dark. The group *Death Grips* are read in this way, and the exclusion is considered in relation to a later flowering of the legacy of late 1960s California: neoliberalism and virtuality.

### *The Californian Ideology*

Virtuality—as theorized through now quaint terms such as “the information age,” “hypermedia,” “the digital future,” “virtual reality” and “the information superhighway”—is read as the coming condition by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, writing in August 1995. And with a state of virtuality, for a “virtual class,” comes the radical transformation of modes of work and life: the merging of social and professional spheres.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear why this turn is referred to as “The Californian Ideology.” The authors identify what seems to be a coined term, but without attributing authorship to any one element of that “loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA [who] have succeeded in defining a heterogeneous orthodoxy for the coming information age: the Californian Ideology” (Barbrook and Cameron). However, in any intellectual history of Californian culture, two parallel tracks are held as dominant: the counterculture, particularly around the Summer of Love of 1967, and its utopian and communal concepts and ideals of freedom; and a venture capitalist/information technology culture, as originating in part in that counterculture (the Homebrew Computer Club of the mid-1970s, for example), with its utopian and communal concepts, and libertarian ideals. In the Californian Ideology, these two tracks entwine: countercultural positions meet anti-statist positions.

Thus, one could think of moving to a situation of historically unprecendented levels of personal freedoms for individuals (through progressive legislative elements of decriminalization, the “rolling back” of state control, freedoms of movement, speech, thought and choice, and so on), but as coexisting with a regime of near total surveillance of the individual. For those who once baulked at Ronald Reagan’s position as governor of California (1967–1975), especially in respect of Reagan’s strategic attempts to gain political traction, as achieved via attacks on the countercultures around Berkeley campus (see Kahn), the Californian Ideology is a placating combination of radical and conservative perspectives (Barbrook and Cameron, n.p.). The common denominator or foundation for this new alliance, and one that Reagan articulated when he chastised academics and students on the grounds of their lack of responsibility, was taken to be individual agency.

What the Californian Ideology considers in respect to the coming state of virtuality is the way in which such agency is to be computer-facilitated. To put it in very vulgar terms, this agency is not the freedom granted to slaves

## Tension of Exclusion *On Death Grips and the Californian Ideology*

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### *California Light, 1969*

The *Pirelli* calendar shoot of 1969 can be read as exemplifying the use of the light of California. Each photograph is presented as mounted above the car number plate CALIFORNIA PIR 1969, stamping the slightly washed-out aesthetic of the beach images, which draws on sunlight and the colors of illuminated sand and sea, with location, brand and date. Blondes in bikinis were *Pirelli*’s stock in trade but for the 1969 shoot (on Big Sur), photographer Harri Peccinotti, designer Derek Birdall and Art Director Derek Forsyth crudely calibrated and synchronized a number of themes. In this portfolio, oral sex and orality (the celebration of the year of ’69; the first image is the numerical figure on the t-shirt of a jumping blonde, and subsequent shots feature open mouths, or mouths with bottles, ice pops or cigarettes), as relatively “sophisticated” sense and pastime of pleasure, is writ large across the presentation of California and its beach-dwelling, sun-kissed denizens.<sup>1</sup> The late 1960s light is seen to gloss the State of California and warm the images of pleasure and freedom. And the wealth and well-being needed for pleasure and freedom, that seem intrinsic to the idea of California more generally, are often presented as intimately connected to Californian sunshine.

To darken this sense of California is to consider those excluded from this vision of a secular utopia—those not illuminated by or luxuriating in Californian beach sunshine—and a darkened California is the concern of this essay: not in respect to those who failed to party across the late 1960s (although that legacy also figures here), but those who proclaim themselves excluded and dispossessed, and living in a state of exile, and so dwell unseen,

once their chains have been removed: freedom of movement, freedom of choice, freedom to work for, in part, their own financial gain (and freedoms which seem to resonate across the myths of California in the late 1960s). Rather, this agency is the freedom that is possible for those who remain enslaved or choose enslavement—that is, surrendering their lives to the forensic and archived surveillance of the computer-city. “Freedom is slavery” write Barbrook and Cameron (n. p.). And insurrection, for those “off the grid,” is not merely just a matter of (as many 1970s science fictions had it) destroying or shutting down the central computer. Rather, the physical focus or target of insurrection is itself lost: there is no central computer, but an infinitely interconnected grid with no center. That “central command” “thing” has, in a neoliberal maneuver, vanished.

One is tempted to pick an argument with this continuum: libertarian positions often tend to center on individual freedom, whereas the counter-culture’s concept of freedom was often communal. Indeed, the counterculture was to a far degree about communing: happenings, orgies, music festivals, squats, communal living, communes.<sup>3</sup> But the erosion of that sense of the mass or (to use a later term) multitude,<sup>4</sup> can be seen as occurring during the dying days of 1960s. This shift is often imagined, in a clichéd and journalistic way, as the ending of the Summer of Love, or death of the counterculture, around an eruption of violence associated with Charles Manson and his followers in August 1969, with five members of the Bel Air/Hollywood set seemingly ritually murdered. More arrestingly, this cliché is understood to have resonated in a changed or changing cultural sensibility of the time, for the perceptions around the music festival, and the entire “culture” of culture itself, as argued by Wright, or sexual subcultures, as argued by Halligan and Wilson. Here, communalism comes across as vulnerability, and the heightened potential for things going wrong rather than a joyous coming together. One immediate solution to such danger was the social apartheid of the Californian gated community, which is often traced to the intrusion of Manson’s associates; or the refashioning of recreation to the individual him or herself—“bowling alone,” as Robert Putnam put it. And, beyond this, comes communalism-in-isolation: something achieved via the interconnection of isolated individuals via virtuality, and institutionalized via social media.

Of course these protective tendencies refer pretty much exclusively to the upper strata of class and wealth. Barbrook and Cameron remain aware that the coming neoliberal city of the Global North is one that contains the Global South at its borders, or within it—in its public spaces (the homeless and destitute), or in its business spaces (a service industry of precariat or grey collar works, from cleaners to sex industry workers). And the Californian Ideology is also exclusionary. Those “techno-booster” ideologues and evangelists “are at the same time reproducing some of the most atavistic features

of American society, especially those derived from the bitter legacy of slavery. Their utopian vision of California depends upon a willful blindness towards the other—much less positive—features of life on the West Coast: racism, poverty and environmental degradation” (Barbrook and Cameron).

Barbrook and Cameron footnote this comment with a reference to West Coast rap, and list a number of figures who, since their gangsta rap early/mid-90s heydays, have all gone on to become pillars of the entertainment establishment (even specifically extolling the hedonistic virtues of the State of California).<sup>5</sup> But the point is usefully made, and makes for a cultural critique of the unenviable situation of the excluded majority. A mid-point in this downward trajectory in respect to gangsta rap, or a text indicative of the way in which criminal routes out of racism and poverty are then subsumed into bourgeois culture, can be found in Tupac’s “California Love.”<sup>6</sup> The first verse lists the benefits of the titular new Wild West: a city characterized by eroticism, with good quality marijuana, full nightclubs, efficient pimps focused on making money, and endemic bling as emblematic of new and crass wealth.

Unlike Tupac, Ice-T is listed by Barbrook and Cameron. His 1989 album *The Iceberg (Freedom of Speech ... Just Watch What You Say)*—the very subtitle of which points to the paradox mentioned above of freedom and surveillance—opens with the track “Shut Up, Be Happy”: a millennial, dystopian vision consisting of doom metal chords under a shouted monologue by Jello Biafra, formerly of the hardcore punk group Dead Kennedys. Biafra adopts the position of a threatening newscaster declaring martial law for reasons of national security: all rights have been suspended, a curfew is being enforced, gatherings are prohibited, and DNA material will be collected from everyone. Instructions not to think (which risks depression), and to remain calm, and to continue to take prescribed medications, are repeated throughout. Biafra’s satirical twist, as per the track’s name, is that this then is the coming state of happiness where, finally, all needs are catered for by unnamed external agencies. One surmises that the material that follows, on *The Iceberg*, then represents the mindset of the rebels against this state—but the cultural critique one derives from this is often reactionary and trivial.<sup>7</sup>

## Death Grips

The music of Death Grips, the Sacramento punk/rap/noise/electronic group,<sup>8</sup> can be read as exemplifying this tension of exclusion. But, rather than boast of strategies of personal resilience, or complain in respect to infringements of liberties, or even simply articulate narratives along these lines, Death Grips seem to prefer to act out the material conditions and resultant mindset of exclusion. In these respects, Death Grips find some common ground with