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“Challenge your Status Quo” : Exploring Digital Dystopian Fantasies in *Lapsis*

Abstract

Noah Hutton's low-key SF flick *Lapsis*(2020) depicts a dystopian future in which quantum computing has replaced run-of-the-mill communication technologies and ushered in a paradigm shift with everything from parking calendars to the most sophisticated algorithms being run on this newly harnessed power. Whereas in classical computing, bits hold data encoded as ones and zeros, in quantum computing, data is measured in qubits, with each qubit having three possible states—one, zero, or an indeterminate state involving the superposition of one and zero. The movie, which gives us premonitions of an AI-dominated future and the realization of Moore's law, works as a wry satire against the monopolization of upcoming forms of technology by avaricious Capitalists. The present paper attempts to analyse the film in the light of neo-Marxism which focuses on the oligarchic elements of Capitalism. Unlike traditional Marxism which believed that industrial capitalist societies would naturally give way to workers' class consciousness, neo-Marxism contends that industrialism would only lead to the accentuation of inequalities, with digital technologies and AI being the latest manifestations of this downward spiral. Using neo-Marxist ideas as a springboard to initiate a discussion on the gig economy, the paper argues that the film alerts us to a future in which human labour becomes obsolete. In doing so, it examines the reservations the film expresses regarding the potency of a neo-Marxist struggle to regain human autonomy in the face of ever-increasing automation. It discusses how the film short-circuits the possibility of a socialist utopia attained through a “cognitarian” revolution by invoking the naivete implicit in visualising technology as the Other that can be brought under human control.

Keywords: automation, quantum computing, gig economy, neo-Marxism, digital technology

Noah Hutton's SF film *Lapsis*(2020), which presents the problems facing the gig economy in a slightly humorously light, is, at bottom, a serious rumination on the dehumanizing aspects of monopolistic and oligarchic companies. Hailed by the director himself as “a blue-collar sci-fi” (*Blunt*), the film plays out as an intelligent critique on neo-Marxism's potential to frame a counter-narrative to advanced Capitalism in a world overrun by technological gadgets. Whereas classical Marxist thought deals with across-the-board class inequalities and the exploitation resulting from class hierarchies, neo-Marxism deals mostly with the monopolistic and oligarchic nature of Capitalism.

It is not to be supposed that neo-Marxism entails an outright rejection of Marx's ideas. For instance, Jacques Derrida, in his *Spectres of Marx*, even while critiquing Marxist theory for its messianic tone and inability to live up to contemporary reality, acknowledges the importance of Marx. He says: "There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits" (32-33). Despite the pseudo-Marxist ideologies purveyed by the state apparatus, Derrida finds in Marxism an irreducible kernel of truth. It is this kernel that neo-Marxists take upon themselves to preserve and defend vehemently. However, unlike classical Marxism whose central failing has been the promise of liberation at a particular point in history, neo-Marxism does not overtly subscribe to the prospect of utopias appearing at any historical terminus. Moreover, it incorporates several novel theorizations on technology that are adapted to the contemporary world. It is in addressing the role played by technology in modern societies that neo-Marxism really makes a break with classical Marxism. It argues that capital has penetrated into the entire society by technological means to such an extent that the political repercussions arising thereby cannot be ruled out.

While dealing with the question of technology, neo-Marxism is extremely cautious to avoid the traps classical Marxism set for itself in the past. Karl Marx's declaration in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that "The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist" (109) has been interpreted by many neo-Marxists as an aphoristic rendering of technological determinism. To be a technological determinist is to believe firmly that technological change has a greater role to play in social change than any of the other variables. Although there is not much in Marx's writings to warrant a deterministic interpretation of technology, economists like Alvin Hansen have categorically concluded that Marxism entails a technological interpretation of history.

Neo-Marxism, in a move to distance itself from Marxism, attempts to turn technological determinism on its head by invoking the urgency of regaining human autonomy in response to the exponential growth of technology. It takes for granted the deleterious effects accruing from automations and matches the idea of technology as dependency against human control as emancipation within a dialectical schema. Whereas classical Marxism is fairly enthusiastic about the ability of technology to produce radical social change, neo-Marxists, following the revisionist Marxism of Herbert Marcuse and others of the Frankfurt school, claim that the popular picture of a neutral and value-free technology is inherently flawed and that technology is never above social and political differences.

Many neo-Marxists nowadays claim that instead of bringing about liberation as promised, digital technologies have enslaved the masses. The most pronounced effect of

this digital servility, they argue, is seen in the progressive attrition of human autonomy. They seek to prevent the impending doom of humankind at the hands of intelligent machines by calling upon policy makers and scientists to adapt technologies to the long-term benefits of the human race rather than investing in forms of technology over which their human masters will have minimal control. One problem with this approach is the dualism it gives rise to. By viewing technology as positioned at the vanguard of totalitarian Capitalism, neo-Marxism creates a rift in human-technology relations and obscures the fact that technology is a constitutive force for human beings. It ignores the importance of conceptualizing technology as an essential part of our ontology and not as something that remains distinct from it. In this respect, it is yet to formulate a counter-response to Capitalism that does not involve regression or technophobia. By reducing computing technologies to the status of mere purveyors of capitalism, neo-Marxism emphasizes the pressing need to separate humans from technology in a manner that makes us question whether it is not snidely reactivating classical Marxism's preoccupation with technological determination. If so, neo-Marxism, though outwardly unwilling to acknowledge the superior role played by technology in effecting social change, is actually trying to foreclose the possibility of machine takeover in the name of regaining human autonomy.

It is exactly the failure of this neo-Marxist ideal of extricating humans from technology that *Lapsis* portrays through a proletarian revolution that is quietly foiled at the end despite all indications to the contrary. Combining elements of wry humour, slapstick, and the pastoral, the film weaves a narrative that is a bit slow-paced yet very compelling throughout. The film depicts an immediate future where the "gig economy" enjoys an unprecedented boom, thanks to the quantum revolution. The "gig economy" refers to markets revolving around short-term, on-demand, occasional, and task-based labour. What differentiates the gig economy from previous categories of short-term labour is its breadth of scope and scale, embrace of various kinds of industry, low-barrier entry, and the dependence on digital technologies including app-based digital platforms that "actively facilitate direct matching between providers and customers on a short-term and payment by task basis" (Broughton4).

The film's protagonist is an ex-delivery driver Ray Tincelli (Dean Imperial), whose beefy physique complemented by a frowsy appearance gives vibes of the 70s mobster type. A died-in-the-bone luddite, Ray is inducted into the world of quantum computing by his friend Felix (James McDaniel), who is engaged in a number of shady dealings. It is not the lure of windfall gains that persuades Ray to take up cabling as such, but the debilitating condition known as "Omnia" suffered by his half-brother (Babe Howard). A form of chronic fatigue, Omnia leaves him with barely any energy between normal chores and confines him to the bed most of the time.

When the film begins, Ray is shown as struggling to keep his delivery gig at the

airport. It is clear from the outset that Ray represents the obsolescence of the working classes who refuse to swim with the changing tide of technology. The film gives us the first glimpse of Ray's redundancy in the new world when he gets a ticket for not parking his vehicle in accordance with the instructions mentioned in the new parking calendar. Ray, who claims that he checked the standard calendar for parking instructions, gets a curt reply from the traffic enforcer: he is told that it is only quantum calendars that give the correct dates and that he should buy a new system to stay ahead of the game.

Felix hooks Ray up with a “cabling medallion” on condition that he receive a cut of the profits periodically and without fail. Consequently, Ray attends a walk-in interview along with a somewhat shy guy (cablars are supposed to turn up for the interview in pairs). He is reassured by one of the girls at the interview site that everyone passes easily. The simplistic nature of the interview comprising an introductory video on quantum cabling followed by an easy-to-crack written test and a physical check acts as a send-up of the recruiting protocols of many of the present-day sweatshops whose focus is on quantity rather than quality. It is revealed later that under the pretext of a physical examination the company was actually compiling a detailed genetic profile of its employees to guard against possible infractions during cabling spells.

The medallion, which is nothing more than a GPS-activated digital device showing the employees' point level and other relevant personal information, becomes the hub around which the plot rotates. It assigns employees cabling routes and gives information regarding the rewards a particular route will fetch them. It also notifies them when to take breaks between work and attempts to boost their performance through pseudo-motivational messages like “Challenge your status quo” and “Time to continue your adventure” (*Lapsis*). Whereas novices are assigned territory that is relatively easy to hike, more experienced cablers have to sweat blood to complete their routes. Hiking through dense forest cover and potentially hostile territory, the cablers are followed by a reptilian-looking robot whose plodding gait invites parallels with the parable of “the hare and the tortoise.” The catch is that once the cablers are passed by these automated carts, they have to catch up or reconcile themselves to kissing their rewards goodbye. The fact that the enervating schedule makes most of the cablers fall asleep on the way and get passed by the carts in the process works in favour of the company which can then disown its “erring” employees. The company also prosecutes its workforce that attempts to sabotage the draconian rules that guide its operations. Security personnel can haul employees away to forbidding dungeons and hold mock-military trials whose outcomes are mired in conjecture.

On the first day of his job, Felix is taken in a taxi by some of the other employees to the garage of a suburban home located at 54 Mayberry where the company keeps its cabling gear. When Felix expresses surprise at the company choosing such an offhand approach to its storage needs, he receives the disarming answer that the company keeps its transport

costs low by renting garages near work sites through an online bidding system. When the batch reaches the Allegheny State Park where a transistor having the proportions of a monolith squats in the middle of a patch of grass, Ray is assigned the name "LapsisBeeftech." Although Ray does not think twice about the quizzical name he is given, he receives a number of unfriendly stares from fellow cablers. On one occasion, the cablers he camps with at night renege on their promise to invite him to breakfast on knowing that he is "LapsisBeeftech". On another, an old cabler grows enraged over realizing he was having supper with "LapsisBeeftech" and proceeds to fulminate against him. The film does not reveal the significance of the name at this stage, but the cobbling together of "lapsis" with its implications of a "lapse" or "mistake" and "beeftech" which smashes together "beef" signifying "materiality" and "tech" meaning "technology" is bound to give the viewers a few premonitory tremors.

Ray has to string miles of cable through the bosage despite having received no practical training in this regard. His incipient rotundity, with its implications of a high-calorie diet and the lack of much-needed exercise—the trademarks of the burgeoning middleclass—causes him to take temporary breaks, but the automated cart follows him around with a doggedness verging on the voyeuristic. Having entered his brother in "Barr-Crider", a facility specializing in the treatment of "Omnia", Ray decides to move heaven and earth to complete his route and earn enough money to save his brother and break out of his middleclass lifestyle. The film does not reveal much about Omnia other than that it induces chronic fatigue in those affected by it. More of a lifestyle disease than a regular ailment, Omnia inverts the middle-class pattern of frenetic consumerism and aggressive mobility. It might be that Noah Hutton wanted his viewers to visualize the flip side of the demands of hyperactivity and insomnia our media-saturated world makes on us with its round-the-clock persistence. It is also no wonder that clinics like Barr-Crider resort to phony treatments with esoteric names like "magnesium acoustics" to cure Omnia, which might after all be the side effect of the human constitution reacting against the procrustean regimen of long bouts of work followed by hard partying and relentless calorie-burning exercises.

As the latest iteration of grunt work, the cabling industry is reliant on cheap labour for meeting its ostensibly professional needs. The company keeps its employees in line by forcing them to sign a Non-Disclosure Statement and by threatening them with non-payment and possible incarceration should they dare to go against its established practices. Though Ray does not learn the basics of quantum computing even after completing his first route, he gets to learn that the company prospers by exploiting its cheap and expendable workforce. Ray's question to the girl who sets him up with the written test during the interview is very relevant here. He asks her if quantum cabling is safe for humans and is not quite convinced when she answers perfunctorily that it is absolutely without any known health hazards. The film does take its viewers back to the

implications of Ray's question time and again. Signboards giving warnings of very powerful magnetic fields near the transistors flash past us with fleeting ominousness. But the fact that no one other than Ray actually pauses to ruminate on their significance indicates the extent to which the employees have been indoctrinated by the company. Another momentous discovery that Ray makes is that his medallion which already contains thousands of points once belonged to the real “LapsisBeeftech” who might be one of the reasons the employees have to work under constant surveillance.

Ray makes still more startling discoveries when he stumbles into Anna (Madeline Wise), a veteran cabler who spends half the year cabling and the rest living life on her terms before returning to work the next year. Anna and Ray have a debate on the unscrupulous methods employed by companies like CABLR for maximizing their profits. Ray, who believes that a healthy competitive environment is essential for the job market to boom, is given the lie by Anna when she makes the revelation that all the cabling companies in operation are in fact owned by a blanket company and that the semblance of completion is really a cover-up for a blatant monopoly. The surge of cabling has also given birth to an assortment of other businesses prominent among which is the lineup of “Gen stores” selling essential supplies to cablers in return for cash or accumulated points. The darker side of the boom is represented by a group of juvenile delinquents who ambush the cablers for their expensive gear and money. They are the offspring of disgruntled seasonal workers whose jobs have been put at risk by the advent of cabling.

Things come to a head when Ray makes the serendipitous discovery that an audio trigger found in the original programming code can switch off the automated carts without alerting the authorities. He breaks his brother out of Barr-Crider, and along with Anna, instigates the workers to revolt against the system of surveillance and press for more employee freedoms and benefits. The scene where all the cablers gather in a sort of pastoral setting to discuss the modus operandi of their rebellion is emblematic of Marx's injunction to the workers of the world to unite. Led by Anna and Ray, they proceed to turn off the automated carts by playing an auditory sequence recorded on Ray's medallion (the one that belonged to the original Lapsis).

The cablers have a brief moment of success when all the automated carts are shut down and they are freed of the rigour of their schedule. They slip into a self-congratulatory mode and the authorities are also alarmed. With the system having broken down, NooriCapahardi, the new CEO of CABLR, summons John, the original Lapsis who began his career as an ordinary cabler and then ascended the managerial hierarchy by selling out his co-workers. He now runs a company called “Half Moon Naturals” specializing in natural remedies for ailments like Omnia. John confesses his ignorance regarding any auditory triggers than can switch off the automated carts he helped to design and the Noori shows him an aerial photograph of Anna whom she says might be

behind the sabotage. John, who is revealed to be Anna's father, lies that he does not know her. The evening news rhapsodizes on the success of the workers' revolt against CABLR for securing greater protections even as the share prices of cabling companies nosedive on the Wall Street. Basking in the glory of all this is Anna, Ray, and his brother, all three of which now engage in banter followed by a facetious pillow fight.

At this stage, the audience expects the management to have accepted defeat and knuckled under to the cablers' demands since there is no possible way in which they can leverage the situation now. What Hutton reinforces here is Marx's belief in the dynamic role played by the proletariat as an agent of historical transformation. It seems as though the internal contradictions of the Capitalist system represented by quantum cabling that at the same time promises more jobs and threatens the automation of work processes, have lashed the workers into fury and awakened their class consciousness to stage a seizure of power. But then the camera shifts to the highway where an automated cart that somehow evaded the attention of the cablers crawls back to the garage at 54 Mayberry where the same householder who balked at Ray's use of the charging port plugs it in. As the cart lights up, ominous music strikes up and the screen cuts to black with the implication that the neo-Marxist revolution whose wheels have been set in motion is at best short-lived.

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