

EASY CHAIR

Poison Apples By Rebecca Solnit

Thirty years ago, Apple Computer launched a new product with a messianic commercial in which legions of blank-faced, coverall-clad workers march, as if in a trance, through a strange industrial world. They arrive at a bright screen, which they sit in front of in homogeneous rows to watch a Big Brother–like figure announce the triumph of a mind-controlling monoculture. An athlete speeds toward the massive hall. Her sprinting power, her golden skin and bright red shorts, and even her gender stand in contrast to the zombie shuffle of the male figures.

The ad cuts back and forth between this vivid, supercharged woman in color and the bald ghost-workers in black and white. Pursued by faceless police in riot helmets intent on stopping her, she nevertheless finds time to spin her sledgehammer round and round before hurling it at the screen, where it smashes the image of Big Brother. The screen explodes in brightness, like an atomic blast, before the video cuts to a shot of the audience's illuminated faces, their mouths open in shock. Then comes the famous tagline: "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984.'" It's perhaps Silicon Valley's first announcement that they don't just make tools; they make culture. But what kind of culture?

This minute-long movie was made in an era of considerable anxiety about the future. *Alien* (1979) postulated the usual hostile invaders, with better effects; *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981) showed a chaotic world of post-peak-oil car mania; *Blade Runner* (1982) was set in a Los Angeles that was a weird mix of post-human and post-white, two qualities that were regarded with what seemed like equal dismay; and *The Terminator* (1984)

worried about smart machines. This little Apple film was made to pep you up about the future, not to scare you, back in the days when the power of computers was puny compared with now, and nuclear threats were huge.

Watching the commercial again, I recall Delmore Schwartz's short story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," which takes place in another movie theater, where the dreaming Schwartz watches the courtship of his parents before his birth and stands up in horror to shout, "Don't do it! It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous."

The Macintosh was and is a good product, but the corporation that made it is part of a nightmare industry. I want to yell at that liberatory young woman with her sledgehammer: Don't do it! Apple is not different. That industry is going to give rise to innumerable forms of triviality and misogyny, to the concentration of wealth and the dispersal of mental concentration. To suicidal, underpaid Chinese factory workers whose reality must be a lot like that of the shuffling workers in that commercial. If you think a crowd of people staring at one screen is bad, wait until you have created a world in which billions of people stare at their own screens even while walking, driving, eating, in the company of friends and family—all of them eternally elsewhere. Apple's iPhones will make their users trackable at all times unless they take unadvertised measures to disable that feature. They will be part of the rise of the Internet, which will savage privacy, break down journalism as we know it, and create elaborate justifications for never paying artists or writers—an Internet that will be an

endless soup of grim porn and mean-spirited chat and rumor and trolling and new ways to buy things we don't need while failing to make the contact we do need.

I'm still not sure why 1984 the year wasn't supposed to be like 1984 the novel. Maybe it took us longer to get to that Orwellian dystopia, but technology smoothed our path. The way that online documents, including news stories, are endlessly revised to cover up errors and reverse opinions, often untraceably, makes much of the Internet a kind of Ministry of Truth. As for Orwell's doublespeak, tech-capitalist euphemisms—like "the sharing economy" for outsourced labor and consolidated profits—fit its pattern nicely. Big Hipster Brother is one of my nicknames for Google—Apple's ascendant younger sibling, the corporation that terrifies Europeans with its ambition to be a global information monopoly, the multifaceted Google that is YouTube, Gmail, the Android operating system, the Chrome operating system, Google Groups, and several other powerful threads that make up the fabric of everyday life. Google is also the world's biggest advertising company, watching you on nearly every website you visit.

Maybe Apple's "1984" ad is the beginning of Silicon Valley's fantasy of itself as the solution, not the problem—a dissident rebel, not the rising new Establishment. The fantasy shows itself in the industry's favorite Orwellian word of recent years, "disrupt." The term is so totemic that just a few months ago *Wired*—which for twenty years has preached the gospel of a utopia just one gadget or app away—used variations on "disrupt" eight times in a single paragraph. The article doesn't explain why

Uber (which has been banned in several cities for breaking the law and for its lack of accountability) is better than taxis, or why “Twitter disrupting the media industry; Facebook disrupting the communications industry; LinkedIn disrupting the human resources industry” are good things, or even what the nature of that disruption is.

It’s often suggested—but not, apparently, true—that the Apple logo, with its bite taken out, is an homage to Alan Turing, the prophetic British computer genius who was born nine years after Orwell and who died by his own hand in 1954. Or perhaps not by his own hand, but by his own apple; he left one, partially eaten and possibly laced with cyanide, at the site of his suicide. Turing had been a hero of the Second World War, a code breaker and technologist of incomparable intelligence. In 1952 he was convicted of homosexuality (or, as it was then known in British law, gross indecency) and punished horribly. When Turing killed himself, hardly anyone but the government had the capacity to spy on individuals, and even their methods were clumsy and limited. Physical devices were needed to wiretap a phone or bug a room or steam open a letter. Communication wasn’t inherently leaky the way it is now.

These days, punishing others for private behaviors can be done by any citizen. Tyler Clementi was a talented young violinist and Rutgers student whose roommate, Dharun Ravi, used Skype to spy on him during a tryst with another man in 2010. A few days later, Ravi, who despised Clementi, remotely activated Apple’s iChat (since replaced by Messages) while not in their room and organized a community viewing of Clementi’s next rendezvous. When Clementi found online evidence of the viewing, he requested a change of housing arrangements. On September 22, 2010, three days after the iChat incident, Clementi jumped off the George Washington Bridge.

On August 31 of this year, news broke that hackers had released nearly two hundred private photographs of celebrities, mostly women, mostly naked, on the website 4chan. The photos immediately spread to sites such as the

notoriously misogynistic Reddit. They were sold for Bitcoin, the online currency, and many had been taken from Apple’s iCloud storage system.

Posting the pictures turned them into a kind of revenge porn, albeit against people the posters never had sex with and never would. (It says something about the Internet that it has given rise to a hitherto unimagined genre called revenge porn.) It was a way for the hackers to take away women’s power and to aggrandize their own.

One of the actors whose images were in the collection was Jennifer Lawrence, who plays Katniss Everdeen, a rebel against the Establishment, in the Hunger Games film trilogy. Like the heroine of the “1984” commercial, Katniss is a powerful athlete; she runs, climbs, fights, and shoots her arrows. She’s more than a sledgehammer swinger: she’s a latter-day Robin Hood, a female Che Guevara, a catalyst for the resistance against the Big-Brother-meets-elite-decadence society of the Capitol. Katniss is the rare woman allowed full power in our own dystopian media landscape, where women sometimes seem to exist only as subsidiary franchises, pornographic and otherwise, in male lives.

Privacy is part not only of our dignity but also of our power, political and psychological. A technology-government cabal that insists on more and more privacy for its own acts and less and less for ours is part and parcel of a society in which power is rapidly being stolen from citizens and the thieves are increasingly unaccountable. Jennifer Lawrence and the rest lost bodily privacy in a very high-profile incident; quietly, the privacy of your mind and life—your thoughts, communications, purchases, even your Web searches and movements—has been seeping away, thanks to the collusion of tech and communications corporations with a government intent on violating all of us all the time.

Imagine a sci-fi movie that’s a mash-up of the nude-photo scandal and *The Hunger Games*. Who would Lawrence’s arrows take out? Apple issued a statement, which read, in part:

After more than 40 hours of investigation, we have discovered that certain celebrity accounts were compromised

by a very targeted attack on user names, passwords and security questions, a practice that has become all too common on the Internet. None of the cases we have investigated has resulted from any breach in any of Apple’s systems including iCloud® or Find my iPhone.

In other words: The fact that your account got hacked and your personal photos were stolen doesn’t mean that our service has flaws.

Weeks later, a website called emmayouarenext.com appeared, targeting former Harry Potter star Emma Watson. She had been in the news for her work as a U.N. goodwill ambassador, particularly for a speech in which she called on men to step up for feminism. The site, which threatened to leak nude photographs of Watson, claimed to have gotten 48 million page views and 7 million Facebook likes and shares. Watson was trying to encourage solidarity about human rights in the world, and anonymous people were trying to reduce her to flesh. The threat turned out to be baseless, issued by marketers who knew how to draw attention to themselves and didn’t care how they did it.

By 2013, the world had begun, at long last, to despise Silicon Valley—for its hubris, its narcissism, and the bad faith of much of what it does. It took that long for people to stop subscribing to the industry’s propaganda. Midway through last year Edward Snowden supplied us with new reason to loathe these corporations. As Glenn Greenwald puts it in the beginning of his book *No Place to Hide*, “Technology has now enabled a type of ubiquitous surveillance that had previously been the province of only the most imaginative science fiction.” While the focus of Snowden’s revelations was the National Security Administration’s invasions of privacy—whether German chancellor Angela Merkel’s or yours—the co-operation of Silicon Valley (notably Google, Facebook, and Apple) was essential to the NSA. A few smaller companies resisted, and one destroyed itself rather than comply, but most of the giants only offered up excuses when they were caught.

The technology is not necessarily the problem; you go back to 1984—before smartphones and social media, before

our computers all talked to one another—and you know it all could have been different. Online culture took shape at the hands of particular individuals and corporations whose goals were not the liberation of all beings or justice or democracy but profit, the consolidation of power, and the deprivation of the rest of us of the power that lies in privacy. It wasn't a rupture with the past but an expansion of what was worst about that past. As the cybersecurity expert and genuine rebel Jacob Appelbaum puts it in Laura Poitras's new film on Snowden, *Citizenfour*: "What we used to call liberty and freedom we now call privacy. And we say, Privacy is dead."

In *The Terminator*, Arnold Schwarzenegger plays a cyborg sent back in time from the age of the machines to annihilate Sarah Connor, the woman who is going to give birth to the leader of a human revolt against the machines. She's a sort of Madonna of the Luddites. When Apple's "1984" commercial aired during the Super Bowl in January 1984, Edward Snowden was a little more than six months old. He was sixteen months old when *The Terminator* came out. This is another thing you can imagine yelling at Apple and the rest of them, with the kind of hindsight that Delmore Schwartz had about his parents: You're going to become part of a state apparatus that demands infinite privacy for itself and endless nakedness for the rest of us; you're going to invade our privacy in countless ways and with it our dignity and freedom and confidence; but a child has been born who will pit himself against you, who will reveal your secrets and help turn the world against you, who will risk his life to stand up for us and against you.

We could tell the story with more depth, and possibly with more *Terminator* parallels, by mentioning Sarah Harrison, who isn't scheduled to give birth to any messiahs, but who might be viewed as the Sarah Connor in our current revolt against the machines and their masters. It was Harrison, a key associate of WikiLeaks, who traveled with Snowden from Hong Kong to Russia and kept him company as he was stranded in the Moscow Airport. It was Harrison who sought asylum for Snowden and has

founded the Courage Foundation to support whistle-blowers and leakers like him.

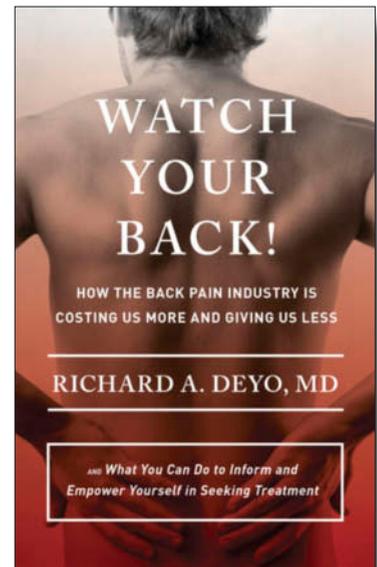
Oswell's *1984* was, of course, like all science fiction, about the time in which it was created; it could have been titled *1948* for its picture of Stalinist Russia and shabby postwar Britain. Apple's movie from the year 1984 was not science fiction so much as propaganda. It was made by Ridley Scott, whose film *Blade Runner*, released only two years earlier, expounded a darker view of the future, set in 2019.

We now live on the cusp of that future, in a world that is wilder in many ways than anything anyone anticipated. Some of the change is good: the transformation of gender roles, the gains in the rights of the hitherto marginalized, and the new distaste for bullying, everyday violence, hierarchy, and authoritarianism are cumulatively astonishing. Even new technologies have valuable uses for medical and scientific research, decentralized media, political organizing, and more. But most of our world is scary. Climate change, as Bill McKibben has pointed out, essentially means that we have landed on a turbulent, inhospitable planet that is unlike in crucial ways the stable, nurturing world in which we evolved. Society has been divided into a desperate majority and an obscure minority that hoards wealth so colossal it's meaningless.

To tell the truth is now a crime. Chelsea Manning is in prison for decades because she told us what our government does, Edward Snowden is in exile in Russia, and Sarah Harrison is in Germany, unwilling to go back to her native Britain.

As Harrison says, "Britain has a Terrorism Act, which has within it a portion called Schedule Seven, which is quite unique.... It gives officials the ability to detain people at the border as they go in or out or even transit through the country. And this allows them to question people on no more than a hunch.... All the legal advice received is that the likelihood is very strong that I would be Schedule Sevened." If you want to know who will throw the sledgehammer at the screen of a technological dystopia, Sarah Harrison is a good candidate. Because 2014 has turned out quite a bit like *1984*. ■

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- We are spending tens of billions of dollars annually treating back pain with painkillers, steroids, and surgery.
- And yet there is no clear consensus on the best way to treat back pain.
- You'd better . . .



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