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Apple “Porn”: Design Videos as Seduction and Exploitation

Abstract

In addition to broadcast commercials, Apple creates design videos—screened at Apple launch events and developers’ conferences, and simulcast on the Internet and streaming on Apple TV—as a second-order of promotional activity. They are not nationally broadcast commercials but advertising disguised as how-its-made documentaries. Purportedly, they document design and manufacturing, but, ironically and tellingly, they do little, if anything at all, to reveal actual work. As this article demonstrates, they fetishize the manufacturing process of a commodity that is already fetishized: the iPhone. The videos simulate cinematically both the device and its manufacturing process, making both the object and its creation appear self-directed, uncoupled from human agency. As such, more than the corporation’s commercials, they seduce viewers into accepting a fantasy world of enchanted technological devices uncoupled from the realities of labor, including exploitative working conditions, making the design videos a form of Apple “porn.”

Keywords

Apple, Exploitation, Apple Porn

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“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”—Arthur C. Clarke

“A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”—Karl Marx

“Seduction is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production.”—Jean Baudrillard

Indisputably, Apple produces products so advanced that they fit Arthur C. Clarke’s famous third law. The iPhone is a phone, yes, but also a camera—still and moving—a video player, a streaming device, a gaming console, a fitness and health tracker, a compass, an altimeter, a level, a payment system, a music player, a means of accessing the internet, and, through millions of software applications, capable of ever more functions. Users—estimated at 7 million, on par with the entire population of the world (Miller and Kraidy, 2016)—now hold in their hands and wear on their wrists super computers a trillion times more powerful than those occupying vast spaces in 1956 (Experts Exchange, 2016). The combined pace of increased power and miniaturization challenges our capacity for understanding what this magical device is that we hold in our hands.

Advertisements for Apple’s most recent inventions—the Apple watch and AirPods—deliberately and cannily foreground their magical properties. “[Roll](#),” an ad for Apple Watch Series 3, represents the device, when paired with the corporation’s streaming music service played through its AirPods, as propelling the user to transcendent heights of physical performance: skateboarder Kilian Martin performs tricks as he traverses the Kiev train station while listening to the track “Misbehaving” by Labrinth (Jardine, 2017). Midway through the visual sequence his feats defy physics: time slows as he passes before a snack kiosk, which appears to lift and break apart as he leaps. His spin propels station crowds to perform acrobatic flips, simultaneously, in super slow motion. “[Sway](#)” similarly presents a couple (married New York-based dancers Lauren Yalango-Grant and Christopher Grant)—sharing a pair of AirPods—transported from crowded, snowy urban streets of Prague into a romantic space of isolation, where they dance to Sam Smith’s “Palace,” attaining fantastic heights on their leaps and spins (Phelan, 2017). Both ads open in a realistic setting—a train station, an urban street—followed by shots of the Apple products. Once the characters hit play, cinematic artistry registers their entrance into an alternate universe where ordinary constraints, such as gravity and time, no longer hold sway (forgive the pun). As the female dancer in “Sway” begins to move to the music, the street appears cast in technicolor blue as a single spotlight follows her progress. The spell breaks temporarily as she bumps into a male passerby, but as she inserts one of her AirPods into his ear, the fantasy elements return. Both videos end, as the music does, with a return to a realistic setting. The couple, poised to kiss at the end of the fantasy sequence, separate as the scene reverts to the gray, snowy streets; the train-station patrons quite literally descend to earth, and normal temporal pacing resumes as the skateboarder tucks his board under his arm and walks through the crowd. The message is clear: Apple’s advanced technology, as Clarke (1973) would say, is “indistinguishable from magic,” and, as such endows its users with seemingly magical physical capacities.

But magic it is not. Apple’s devices are products, designed, manufactured, transported, distributed, advertised, sold, repaired, salvaged and recycled by human labor—intellectual,

physical, mechanical and creative. The advertisements described above do effectively convey the devices' potential to enhance consumers' lives, while acknowledging, at least in part, the work necessary to simulate the user experience. They showcase the skill of athletic performers as well as film artistry, by foregrounding lighting, color, camera speed, shot selection, set design, special effects and other cinematic tools. Consumers—who themselves employ the devices to both create and watch videos—recognize that the commercial is as much a product as the phone, watch or earphones, as millions of views of the ads on YouTube attest.

Paradoxically, another type of filmed promotion—the videos Apple produces about the devices' creation and manufacture—erase all evidence of human labor, including that required to represent the product visually. The design videos—screened at Apple launch events and developers' conferences, and simulcast on the Internet and streaming on Apple TV—are a second-order of promotional activity. They are not nationally broadcast commercials but advertising disguised as how-its-made documentaries. Purportedly, they document design and manufacturing, but, ironically and tellingly, they do little, if anything at all, to reveal actual work. As this analysis will demonstrate, they fetishize the manufacturing process of a commodity that is already fetishized: the iPhone. The videos simulate cinematically both the device and its manufacturing process, making both the object and its creation appear self-directed, uncoupled from human agency. As such, more than the corporation's commercials, they seduce viewers into accepting a fantasy world of enchanted technological devices uncoupled from the realities of labor, including exploitative working conditions, making the design videos a form of Apple “porn.”

Apple's dual strategy of promotion—broadcast commercials and promotional events—was launched in 1983-84, when Steve Jobs and then-CEO John Sculley contracted ad agency Chiat\Day to create an advertisement for the Macintosh to be broadcast during Superbowl XVIII. Directed by Ridley Scott, the now-[iconic “Big Brother” commercial](#) closed with an announcement: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like Nineteen Eighty-Four” (Collier, 2005). Job's [keynote address to shareholders](#) (EverySteveJobsVideo) on January 30 was followed by subsequent appearances at computer conferences and inaugurated contemporary practice at Apple—and other tech corporations, such as Samsung, Microsoft and Google—beginning in 2001.¹ Apple now hosts annual media events—Apple Special Events and the World Wide Developers Conference (WWDC)—to introduce new products and software (“Apple Events Chronology”; Merchant, 2017).

The design videos produced for these promotional events represent products divorced from real-world constraints, as well as their human creators and users. Shiny black iPhones float unaided in space. White AirPods levitate out of their charging case, turning transparent to reveal their micro components. Gray MacBook Pros disassemble themselves into suspended layers of parts. A disembodied voice describes the objects' components and manufacture, while stressing design details. Within no sign of the cinematic artifice behind such actions, the devices appear endowed with magical abilities.

¹ Though they were eventually dubbed “Stevenotes,” Merchant (2017) identifies the first tech-industry keynote as a 1968 presentation by Doug Engelbart at the San Francisco Civic Center, shared by video feed, demonstrating keyboards, the mouse, word processing, video conferencing and windows. Kahney (2014) claims that Jobs got the idea from Sculley who thought product announcements should be “news theater,” leveraging the press to provide free advertising.

In short, the devices exactly fit Karl Marx's definition of commodities as fetishes, objects valued not as products of human labor but for intangible properties attributed to them through societal exchange. Like fetishes in the anthropological sense, objects granted mystical properties of protection or presumed to be embodied by spirits, commodities acquire "mystery, ... magic and necromancy." Marx (1976) likens the process to religion, where "the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race" (165). His example is a wooden table: it "continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing" but as a commodity "it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will" (163–64). To the consumer, the table—like all other commodities exchanged in a capitalist economy—appears to have an independent, enchanted existence.

As in Marx's description of the table, Apple's design videos visually re-present their products' capacity for enchantment. Without question, black palm-sized rectangles that come to life with a touch or glance, speak to us, record our voices, pay for our purchases, capture images and play video—even of their own creation—appear possessed by supernatural forces. As Jim McGuigan argues in *Cool Capitalism* (2009), "no kind of technological commodity is fetishised to a greater extent than the cluster of portable devices that now exist for computing, telephony and Internet connectedness on the move" (119) and, in his subsequent book, *Neoliberal Culture* (2016) crowns Apple the "coolest of corporations" producing the devices "believed to be essential to life under cool capitalism" (38).

But Apple's design videos are *representations* of the devices, not the devices themselves. As such, they augment their magical properties, enhancing their appeal to consumers. The fetish associations tip toward the psychosexual. I am not suggesting that the iPhone itself is fetishized in the Freudian sense, that is, that as a fetish object, as some sort of pocket penis, it wards off fears of castration in men.² In this case, the commodity, already a fetish object, is represented or reimagined cinematically to enhance its allure. Not the device itself but its representation, what Jean Baudrillard would term a simulation, seduces consumers. Baudrillard (1988) defines simulation as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." In the space of simulation, the imaginary world (Baudrillard's example is Disneyland) appears more engaging and stimulating—hyperreal—than the banal realities of everyday life and thus exert a seductive power over consumers. Consumers are seduced more by the fantasy image of the object created on film than by the commodity itself or the values of status or "coolness" they ascribe to it in their own minds. Baudrillard (2001) argues, "Seduction ... never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice" (2). Artifice and appearance prevail over the realities of use and manufacture.

Additionally, the cinematic strategies of seduction—from lighting to pacing to sound—resemble those employed in erotic films, not pornographic films, per se, which are notorious for their low production values and attention to the "microscopic truth of sex" (Baudrillard, 2001, 31), but films that entice viewers by constructing fantasy worlds of perfect bodies in romantic settings with flattering lighting and languid pacing. Such sequences highlight only isolated parts

² Freud theorized that men, fearing their sexual potency will be diminished in contact with an actual partner, transform a benign part of the female body or an object associated with it into a non-threatening substitute. Owing to its connection to the body, clothing is particularly likely to be fetishized. To cite an extreme example, some men can become sexually aroused by high heels—not on women but as objects in their own right (Steele, 1996).

of bodies, often in close-up, and tantalize viewers by employing light and shadow to alternately conceal and reveal. Careful editing can suggest, rather than show, physical connections, enticing viewers and eliciting desire. A similar practice has been identified in food photography and cooking shows. The term “food porn” now refers—in popular discourse, if not film studies³—to portrayals of food so transformed by staging and lighting that it appears disconnected from the actual, humble labor of cooking. Richard Magee (2007) has argued, “Food, when removed from the kitchen, becomes divorced from its nutritive or taste qualities and enters a realm where surface appearance is all-important. The interest here is in creating a graphic simulation of real food that is beyond anything that the home cook could produce.”

A similar phenomenon occurs in Apple’s design videos, which we could call Apple “design porn” or, more simply, Apple “porn,” where the products are shorn of their relation to functional interaction with users and the laborers who produce them. Both the products and their manufacturing processes appear to inhabit a universe of resplendent surfaces disassociated from human agency.

The video produced for the launch of the iPhone 7 is representative of the cinematic strategies employed across Apple devices, from earphones to laptops and beyond. Produced in house, the videos share a common visual aesthetic. However, the iPhone is worth isolated scrutiny for additional reasons. The iPhone is arguably the company’s most ubiquitous (and profitable) device, with each new launch inspiring desire in consumers bordering on frenzy. Its sales eclipse that of all other Apple products.⁴ Finally, its manufacturing processes and labor practices have drawn greatest journalistic and academic scrutiny.

From its opening frames, the “[iPhone 7: Design](#)” video situates its product and its viewers in a simulated world detached from natural references and governed by Apple’s design imperatives. Apple’s overall design aesthetic stresses simplicity (O’Grady, 2009, 43, 151), a principle translated visually into a spare, black-and-white palette. The author of Apple’s design philosophy (since 1996), Jony Ive, asserts his own associative magical power visually and aurally as his name, in white and light gray type, appears in a title card, “Jony Ive, Chief Design Officer,” against what initially appears to be an abstract black-and-gray backdrop (see Fig. 1). Otherworldly ambient music plays as a flash of light originating from an unseen source flows from the left across the lower half of the screen, receding to a single line. A cut then reveals the upper back corner of the phone, showing the camera lens and revealing, in retrospect, the gray rectangular shape at the opening to have been the phone resting horizontally at a slight angle. Ive’s disembodied voice intones, “We have created a product that is the most deliberate evolution of our original founding design,” as the phone rotates in slow motion, light illuminating distinct parts—the home button, camera, rounded edge. A quick cut introduces a brief animated sequence: a light traces the outline of the Apple logo, casting a bluish tint—the only color in the piece. The sudden burst of light suggests the “big bang” or divine moment of creation (“Let there be light”). This cosmic creation scene invokes filmed representations of the world of classical physics: “When the TV camera, accompanied by Carl Sagan’s voice-over, zooms through the galaxy to explore the latest advances in cosmology, these presuppositions are visually and verbally encoded into an implied viewpoint that seems to be unfettered by

³ See McBride (2010) for a discussion of the term’s merits. Baudrillard (2001) would argue that the term is entirely wrong for “A pornographic culture” is defined by “its ideology of the concrete, of facticity and use, and its concern with the preeminence of use value, the material infrastructure of things, and the body as the material infrastructure of desire” (34).

⁴ See the company’s most recent earnings (Haslam, 2017).

limitations of context and free from any particular mode of sensory processing. As a representation, this simulacrum figures representation itself as an inert mirroring of a timeless, objective reality” (Hayles, 1995, 51). Simply substitute Ive’s British-accented voice-over (with its references to “creation,” “evolution,” and “our founding design”) for Sagan’s, and the slow, unaided rotation of the phone for revolving planetary objects. The languid pacing also alludes to cinematic renderings of space, especially Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The rectangular black shape of the phone resembles the monolith seen at the opening and closing of the film, that symbolizes the dawn of humanity (see Figs. 2 and 3).

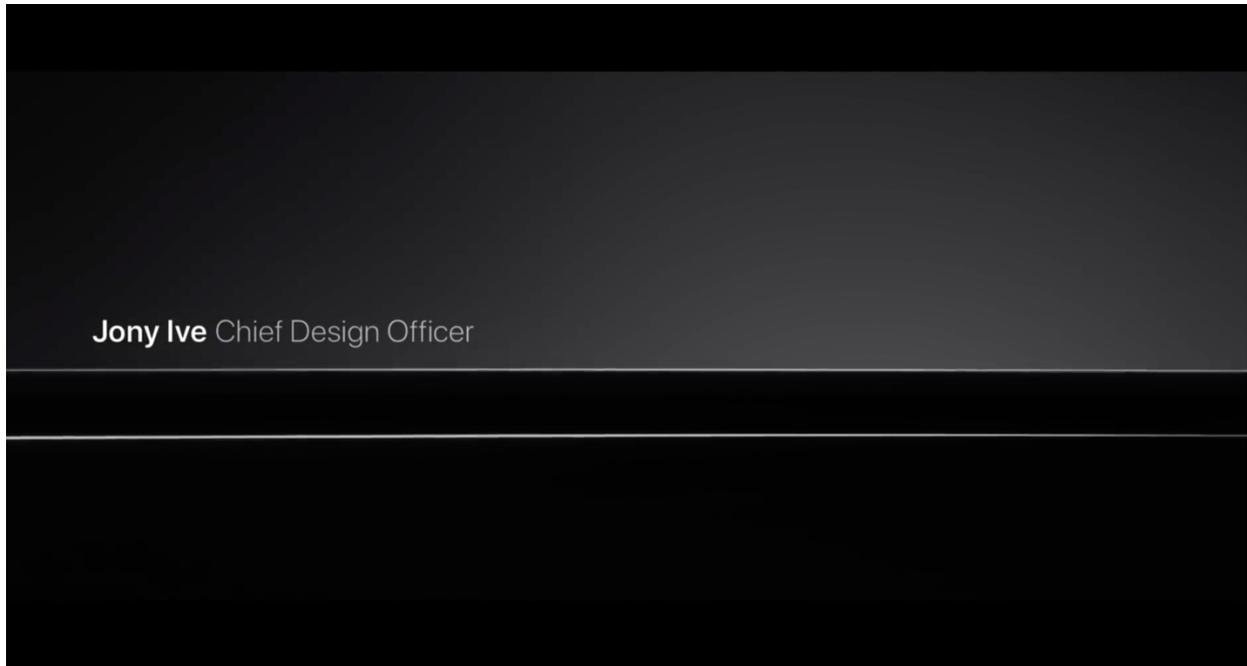


Figure 1

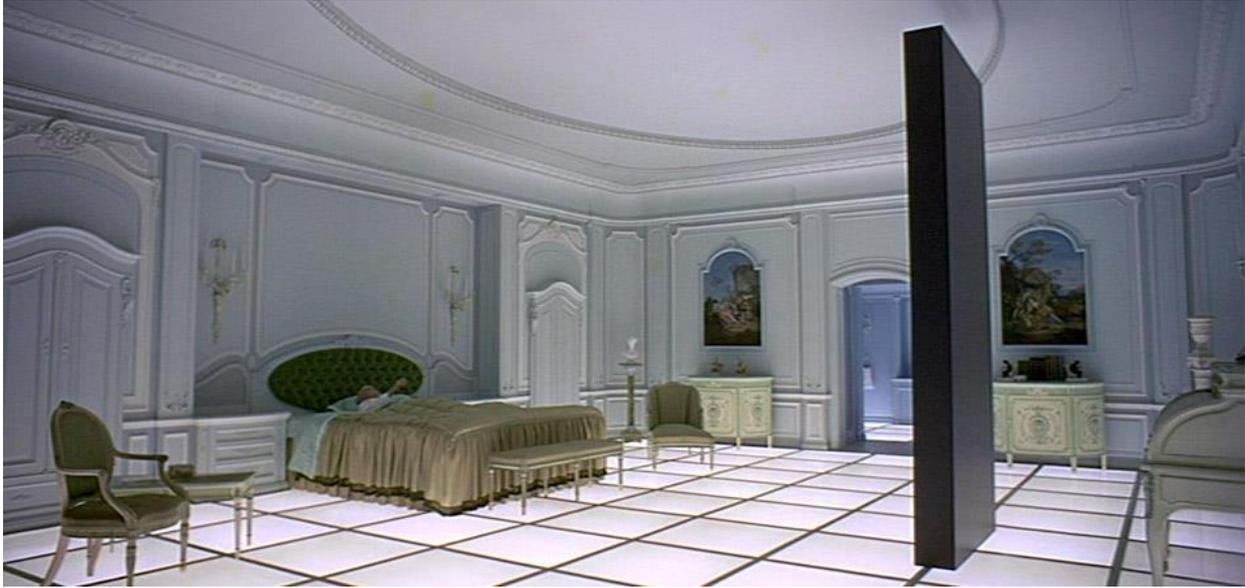


Figure 2



Figure 3

This disembodied opening segues into eroticized shots of the device as Ives explains, “An aluminum body and formed sheet of glass describe a singular shape, one made with very few, very precisely engineered parts.” Light traces the curves of a rotating form, not a human body but an “aluminum” one. As in erotic photography, the body is shown only briefly in a full shot (from behind). Subsequent shots linger on fetishized parts: openings (for speakers) and protuberances (the camera lens and on/off switch). A play of light and shadow, alternately concealing and revealing parts, teases viewers. As Ives speaks of an “obsession . . . to simplify and improve,” a drill suspended above the device appears and descends as though penetrating the device as it shaves metal from the edges.

The mechanical processes are equally fetishized. Intercutting between scenes of tools shaping the phone and the device itself, the video presents both the manufacturing process and the product as Apple's creation. Both Ive's voice over and the imagery aestheticize the "putrid, dangerous" (Miller and Kraidy, 2016, 82) business of mass manufacturing. The camera housing is "sculpted" out of the aluminum body, rather than drilled or sanded by a machinist. The antenna is embedded, "essentially making it disappear." In both the finished phone and the video, the intent is "refinement." The sequence dedicated to the high-gloss finish is revelatory: four black rectangles are suspended in space on arms descending from a rotating tool above a grayish surface resembling a moonscape, again invoking sci-fic imagery of satellites orbiting space (see Fig. 4). As the machine descends, the phone bodies break the surface, revealing the moonscape to be a "specialized compound" that Ives describes as "flow[ing] over the intricate geometries of the housing removing imperfections, establishing a seamlessness between materials and producing a pristine, mirror-like surface." Rendered visually, the harsh chemical compound is as sanitized as Ives' language, stripped of color, odor and corrosive potential. Images of the dyeing process similarly sterilize it, as the black-and-white images make the phone casings appear submerged in water. In fact, the phones disappear from view as a clean white line undulates against a glossy black surface, an image of complete abstraction from the process and the product (see Fig. 5).



Figure 4



Figure 5

The video thus erases all traces of the actual manufacturing process, the hazardous labor of humans operating the machines and coming in contact with noxious fumes and materials, much less their actual working conditions. As McGuigan (2016) and others⁵ have argued, “Outsourcing the manufacture of digital electronics to low-pay economies where labour conditions and human rights are unprotected, to say the very least, has caught up with the scandal of garment manufacture by children and young girls in sweatshops” (59). He notes that “ethnographic studies of the treatment of labour in Chinese factories” where iPhones and other personal electronic devices are manufactured “are reminiscent of Marx’s citations from governmental ‘blue books’ on Victorian industry in the later part of *Capital Volume One*” (59). Well known and well documented abuses include below subsistence wages, necessitating long hours of overtime, lack of formal labor contracts or violations of contracts in practice, child labor, chemical poisoning, and suicide (McGuigan, 2016, 59; Miller and Kraidy, 2016, 91-92). In an episode of *Nightline* (ABC News, 2012), journalist Bill Weir, who gained exclusive access to a Foxconn factory manufacturing iPads, noted that, contrary to what the design videos imply, the devices are made largely by hand, not machine, by workers in their late teens and early twenties. Their wages rarely allow them to purchase the devices they labor to produce.⁶ Hong Kong’s Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior (SACOM) quoted one Foxconn

⁵ See, for instance, Wilde-Ramsing and de Haan, 2006; China Labor Watch, 2011; Smith, 2016, 22-31; Merchant, 2017, Chapter 12; and, on precariat workers under global capitalism in general, Standing, 2011. Smith (2016) further argues that workers’ contributions are erased in economic data: “trade, GDP, and financial flow data show no trace of any such contribution; instead, the bulk of the value realized in the sale of these commodities and all of the profits reaped by the retail giants appear to originate in the country where they are consumed” (13). Beyond the workers employed in the device’s creation, are those involved in producing its materials, particularly metals. Miller and Kraidy (2016) note that profits from mining coltan have supported armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, fueling a civil war that, since the 2000s, has killed more than five million people (91). Consider, as well, the workers engaged in the hazardous business of e-waste recycling (Miller and Kraidy, 2016, 94).

⁶ By contrast, Henry Ford, who invented the assembly-line process employed by Apple and other mass manufacturers, raised employee wages “to five dollars a day in 1914 ... saying he thought they ought to be able to afford the Model Ts they were making” (Merchant, 2017).

worker as noting, “Though we produce for iPhone, I haven’t got a chance to use iPhone. I believe it is fascinating and has lots of function. However, I don’t think I can own one myself” (qtd. in McGuigan, 2016, 60). Clearly, this worker—and the others like him/her—are not part of the collective “we” Ive invokes when discussing the iPhone’s creation. In “Designed by Apple in California,” Ive argues that “designing and making really should be inseparable.” But the video focuses exclusively on the design team, with references to “making” limited to creating tools and processes. Shots of work feature an individual team member experimenting with machining or finishing (see Figs. 6 and 7), rather than the collective action required for mass production (see Fig. 8).



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

The other workers left out are the uncredited filmmakers who designed and manufactured the video. Apple's corporate videos, with their voice-over narration and shots of machines in action, can easily be mistaken for documentaries or industrial films. In contrast to Apple's commercial advertisements, which, as we have seen, foreground cinematic artistry and performance, the design videos eliminate all traces of creative labor and could be mistaken for unmediated reports, documenting design and manufacturing processes. But they are aimed at consumers rather than employees or industry insiders. Broadcast during Apple's televised product launch events and posted on YouTube, they are advertisements of the highest quality, with sleek visuals, masterful editing, meticulously recorded sound (music and voice over), and post-production retouching. In short, they represent hours of work by filmmaking professionals. For comparison, consider the complex, time-producing process involved in taking still photographs of Apple products. Peter Belanger, the uncredited artist behind many Apple product images, documents the painstaking labor involved in producing a single image of an iPhone 3GS for the cover of *MacWorld*: set up, staging, multiple lighting changes, adjustments in camera position and angle, and meticulous editing and retouching in Photoshop (Shane, 2013). As the video documenting Belanger's process reveals, his work requires assistants, as well. Cinematic productions, like the Apple video, involve entire teams of workers, not simply the director, cinematographer, editor and screenwriter. In short, Apple's design videos appear, like their devices, as magical productions, shorn of all vestiges of the human labor behind their creation.

More recently, as innovation in mobile phones has moved from their physical design to their capabilities, Apple has incorporated human presences, ostensibly to foreground user interface with its devices. Its design video for the [iPhone X](#) features actors in simulated uses of the device, with animation to illustrate internal capabilities. The effect is still supernatural, rather than natural. Ives argues that the iPhone X is "a physical object that disappears into the experience." To do so, the video shows a shot of the phone perched poolside. As its owner rests at the pool's edge, beams radiate out from phone toward her face. Ives explains, "it maps the unique geometry of your face with over thirty thousand invisible dots," which then appear on screen hovering beyond her face like a mask, before a cut shows the dots streaming as colored waves of light through the interior of phone toward the "neural engine on the A11 bionic chip." The animation—of beams, dots and light waves—graphically represent the machine-human interface as some sort of sci-fi wizardry, rather than the product of engineers and manufactured machine parts. Another sequence features a surfer being captured by an iPhone-wielding friend, which is gradually slowed to a static shot to demonstrate how machine learning enables the camera "to detect elements in the scene to optimize the image before the photo is even taken." The filmed sequence defies physics to arrest time—an impossible feat—to illustrate a process the device accomplishes in fact, in nanoseconds of real time. A final sequence claims that the phone's capacity for augmented reality will "redefine what's possible." On the phone, a dinosaur stands near players on a basketball court, a *Jurassic Park*-like fantasy achieved only through representation, and thus not a "redefinition" of the possible but a simulation actually made possible by tangible but unseen human creators—both the filmmaking crew and the device's designers, engineers and manufacturers.

"Contained within each hand-held device are the social relations of contemporary global capitalism" (Smith, 2016, 27). These social relations are not visible to the consumer, for the device's "dazzling sophistication and iconic brand status can too easily blind the observer to the exploitative and imperialist character of the social and economic relations they embody" (21). However, the devices do not cast a spell over consumers on the basis of their quasi-magical

powers alone, nor can branding account fully for their appeal. Miller and Kraidy (2016) place the blame on us: “when we occupy the position of an iPhone customer, it’s easy to forget a worker’s or citizen’s perspective on its industrial origin, manufacture, legal status, and environmental impact. We forget those links to our lives as we pursue the magic and pleasure of consumption” (90). As consumers, we do bear some responsibility for succumbing to the phone’s magical charms but we do not simply “forget.” Instead, strategies of equally “dazzling sophistication” shape our perceptions—to see the devices as desirable commodities, while erasing all traces of their economic and social relations. “Seduction,” according to Baudrillard (2001), “removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view, be it an object, a number or a concept” (34). McGuigan (2016) expresses the relationship as less binary than reciprocal: “Seduction is the complement in the sphere of consumption to exploitation in the sphere of production” (39). The corporation is as responsible for seduction as exploitation. I would argue that Apple’s design videos fuse the two spheres: they employ seductive cinematic techniques to represent the devices’ production and construct a verbal and visual narrative that sanitizes manufacture and erases evidence of human labor. To put it more simply, as Apple would: seduction = exploitation.

This is not to suggest that I am advocating a boycott of Apple, nor that, as a corporation, it is anything but exemplary. These words appear on the screen of my MacBook Pro as I type using a Bluetooth keyboard and track pad—all Apple products. You may be reading this article, published online, employing Apple devices as well. But we need to recognize the devices for what they are—technological tools—not enchanted objects. What we perceive as magic is a remarkable human achievement, the work not only of one individual—Steve Jobs or Jony Ive, for instance—but teams of engineers and designers, and vast legions of workers toiling on assembly lines, in mines, in transportation, in retail outlets, in recycling centers and other locations across the globe. Humans also labor in producing the filmed representations of the devices that simulate their use and their manufacture. When consuming both the devices and their representations, we must recognize the seductive strategies affecting our decisions and employ our own critical and creative abilities to envision the human labor Apple works so diligently, at such a high price, to erase. Only then will we be cognizant, as human beings, of their place and ours in the social relations comprising global capitalism.

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