QUICK MILLIONS

Jenna Collins
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Conversation between Jenna Collins and Dean Kenning.

Jenna Collins: One of the first things I was doing after art school was working with streaming video, this was in 2000, before it was really practical. We were a group of about ten, supposed to be training people on how to use the internet, email, SoundEdit 16 etc., and doing projects on the side including live streaming from our building in Manchester every Thursday night. One thing I remember was that we only had one video card between us so all the computers were open with their guts spilling out in order that you could attach this thing to the inside and do some work. But I wouldn't dare to go into my Mac now.

Dean Kenning: It would invalidate the warranty! That's what people love about Apple, what made them so successful was that they created that pure operating system that you never had to go into, they just give you a surface. It reminds me of that image you end up with, that black box in scene two, which is a sublime object in a way, sucking itself in. It's a completely narcissistic object, which is impenetrable to any form of representation or knowledge about it.

JC: The screenplay is based upon an essay called, *HDTV: The Engineering History*, written by students doing The Structure of Engineering Revolutions course at MIT. The course last ran in 2001 and the website is not in use, you can't get to it from the main MIT website but it is still there. The essay was group written by four students who use the black box as a metaphor a few times, even when it isn't particularly appropriate; it seems to have had some sort of romance for them. They use it to describe the way in which the group of eight companies, the Grand Alliance that developed the US HDTV standard (AT&T, Bell Labs, GI, MIT, Philips, RCA, Sarnoff and Zenith) worked together, which was to take on different parts of the engineering problem and present the end result but not the workings. It meant they could keep as much as secret as possible and patent it. So as well as being the impenetrable object with only ins and outs, the students use the black box to describe a way of collaborating, a really paranoid way of collaborating.

DK: And a way of protecting your profit. You could say all sorts of areas of life are becoming black boxed. I think it has seeped deep into how we interact with the world on an ideological level. The whole basis of behaviourist psychology is basically a black box – inputs and outputs. We will get rid of the modelling of the psychic structures, how emotions function, how we have unconscious desires that position us intersubjectively, it doesn't matter, what matters is how we can change behaviour – external outputs. So that the concept of the 'black box', that came from electronic engineering and cybernetics in the 40s and 50s was almost immediately taken up, in effect already the model for behaviourist views on animal learning, and went on to have a profound influence in human psychology. The Turing test is all about eliminating the mechanics of what's happening, either with the machine, or with the human, and you simply have the question of does it fool you into thinking it is human. And if it does, that means it is human, which is a very particular, limited way of thinking about what is human intelligence.

I wasn't sure how much of the actual speech, of Jack Diamond, how you actually put that together. Are they actual words spoken by anyone or was that kind of artistic license, creation from some other source or bunch of sources?

JC: The basic historical narrative came from the student's essay. It's an unattractive source as far as archival sources go, it has little authority or romance and it might well be factually wrong; I don't know what grade they got. But it is a document about the historical development of a technology, on a ghost website for a discontinued course about how technologies come about. I love that looping and realise that if I did the course (all the materials are still there) I would do a better job of reading the website as an historical source and assessing its worth. And why did the course close so quickly? The course website ran from 1997- 2001, one of the last assignments asks the students to reflect on the 9/11 attacks less than a month after they happened. I still have a lot of questions about all this.

The speech moves through the chronology in the students paper in the correct order, but the screenplay shows that I am not an historian, I get bored with historical specifics very quickly. I have tried to give that impatience a form in the screenplay in a couple of ways, quite literally in the first scene where the direction in the left column tells us, 'our focus begins to drift'. I used Stuart Brand's *The Media Lab* (1987) in a couple of places to tap into the atmosphere of the Californian Ideology; a hybrid of cybernetics, free-market economics and the counterculture, and selected phrases where it is revealed

in it's viciousness. The relentless certainty about the rightness of technological progress runs through everything I read in industry, engineering and consumer sources. The line, 'if you're not part of the steamroller you are part of the road' is from Brand's book, which is an enthusiastic account of what was going on at the MIT Media Lab in 1985 and an attempt to predict what the future would be like based on the technologies they were developing. Brand himself is interesting. He was one of the Merry Pranksters described on page one of Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), 'Stewart Brand, a thin blond guy with a blazing disk on his forehead too, and a whole necktie made of Indian beads. No shirt, however, just an Indian bead necktie on bare skin and a white butcher's coat with medals from the King of Sweden on it.' Brand's hippy provenance is part of what makes his predictions, or report on the future based on Media Lab activity appear benign, which I don't think it is, but his book produces a feel of MIT and the excitement of the time.

DK: It's funny, I heard the steamroller quote just a few days ago in Roger & Me by Michael Moore (1989) which is about the guy who is shutting down a General Motors factory. I'm sure it's that quote, he doesn't acknowledge it, but it's a great quote. It is so brutal. So what were people predicting?

JC: Well, the Internet, smart TV's and fridges, the guardian online, all that normal stuff. And there was a lot of hologram activity which I really got into. I find the problem of making a hologram work as an image interesting in that where it most often fails is in the viewer; they need to bob around and squint because the light is the wrong sort or in the wrong place, and it means that the technology is being let down by it having to be seen by eyes! I bought a few holograms on ebay and have been photographing them, which made me laugh as that obviously misses the point, but actually the photographic images of the holograms are full of detail and mood, and although the colours are pretty horrendous, they are alluring in a way that the holograms are absolutely not. You can buy them, people still make holograms and as far as I can see it's a load of taxidermy, snakes and owls and because they are difficult and expensive to make they are used on passports and money, things like that.

DK: I remember in Forbidden Planet in the 80s they had one of Judge Dredd, a big head-size one, it was really impressive.

Virtual reality is coming back now, it's almost like a 20 year gap between the promise of immersive games and stuff, around in the 90s and they just stayed quite crap because the computers weren't fast enough to process the information, the turn of your head you know, and now it seems like they've got to that stage. In the meantime, they've had very specific functions in science and medicine for example, and military as well. The combining of atoms to form new chemical compounds, and using virtual reality for that really old-fashioned reason that doing stuff with your hands is much more intuitive so you're able to make new connections. It is this the same thing as geometry being a clearer way of understanding patterns than abstract mathematics is because there is that sensual immediacy, it's partly why I'm interested in diagrams, it allows you to do those things.

JC: I have been really enjoying thinking about invention, making stuff up in the way you're talking about, by moving existing things around. I looked at the logos of the companies in the Grand Alliance (the consortium of American companies that developed the US HDTV standard), as well as the governmental bodies involved and I found you could reduce the logos quite easily into three elements; pillars, gridded globes and electricity spikes. I really like the idea that if you put them in a diagram it puts them into relation with each other and potentially other things, you can move them around and it's a way of getting hold of the ideas that the logo is meant to stand for, but also the other things inadvertently attached to them, like motives.

DK: Those icons are also impenetrable aren't they, they have a fetishistic quality of having a kind of life, that all you can do is passively lie back and be penetrated, (that's a terrible word!) by these things because what can you do with them? You're not really supposed to do anything with those things are you, they just penetrate your consciousness somehow, modify your behaviour in certain subliminal ways. They are trying to convince you of their authority.

JC: For the installed part of the project I am cutting the reduced logos out of wood and attaching them to a load of chairs. The chairs are cheap IKEA ones, a group of about 20 to stand in for the different groups of people convened by the screenplay and my one concession to prop making. It forces together the world of logos with the world of furniture which already has a diagrammatic aspect to it in the way that furniture layout maps social relations, head of the table, speaker etc. but also that they are mobile and different configurations are inevitable. So the logos become chair decorations, not very elegantly made because I made them with my consumer power tools.

DK: It's like getting some control over these things through humour.

JC: Yes, they have become phallic and ridiculous, but also they look like a fun crowd and crowds come up a lot in this. The MIT students who wrote the essay and who are the basis for the student group in the scene three; the amateur inventors, coming up with solutions to the call for HD designs in their garages, perhaps imagining they are Bill Gates style

entrepreneurs and about to make it big but are actually producing strange objects that describe what they think HD might be, could be. Then there are the professional electrical engineers who remain aloof, and the sales guys, the punters and finally the audience of the screenplay, who are the only group that I don't have control of.

DK: I liked your juxtaposition between the speech and Lewisham Shopping Centre, your focus on the audience; they seem very excitable and slightly aggressive, very cultish, like a religion or something and they have an element of being very Ayn Randian. They are cheering for the idea of the market being the destination, where you would achieve full democratic contact with the people. And then there is this shift to Lewisham. Can you say something about that?

JC: The shopper's comments come from *Behind the Lines*, a 1985 consumer TV programme that was on ITV. A group of TV professionals; directors, newscasters, Fern Britten, were sat in a studio and shown the Japanese HDTV system, which was significantly more advanced than anyone else's. They then proceed to tell the viewers about the amazing quality as it cuts to images of the Japanese television screen, but of course the viewers couldn't see the higher quality because the studio cameras, broadcast system and home sets weren't good enough, so the professionals try and explain the difference and struggle with ways to get it across with words, my favourite line described it as, 'the Harrods of television systems'. I love this absurdity, this catch, because it means the image is withheld and so the image is still free somehow, still part of the imagination and not a demonstration of a tech spec. I also liked the specifics of what they were concerned about, Beirut and the hairs on a girls face.

DK: So there is a discursive framing of HD being valuable. What do the guys writing the essay say about HD being important; do they say anything about that?

JC: The industry articles I read didn't question the imperative to endlessly produce new products, and the students who were studying the different influences on technological development, do not question it either. HDTV was possible much earlier, as was shown by the Japanese system, but there was no reason to risk the profitable market. However, the climate changed when Reagan deregulated competition and there was a proposal that the government would give unused bandwidth to the mobile phone companies, just as convergence of personal computers and televisions was coming onto the horizon. The companies had to act at that point.

DK: It's the way all kinds of things operate, it's about the complex networks that come into play; laws changing, funding flows, company take overs, or whatever it is, that never really gets discussed very much. The way that there is an ideological image of the entrepreneur, Steve Jobs in his garage, a college drop out, and then we have a downmarket version of that with *Dragons Den* where someone describes their terrible idea that nobody really wants, or needs, and is not going to improve the lives of anyone, or benefit humanity, but if it is believed they can make a profit then that would be it.

JC: And it all appears so inevitable on the outside. And that is one of the things that I think is important, it really is not inevitable, and that those decisions have effects and consequences, that are political but don't look like it. It is felt as inevitable which is depoliticising. I asked Professor Tim Ellis of the Computer Science & Mathematics department at Kingston University who works on ways of tracking people using CCTV about how electrical and computer engineers go about developing such capabilities. He described broadly two approaches; the artificial intelligence route which thinks about cognitive functions; and the engineering method which is about solving specific problems.

DK: You find that in politics all the time, a technocratic approach to politics. We do this, because this is what works, which means you don't have to look at inequalities, or class divisions, or the operations of power, or who it works for, simply, someone determines what the goal is and the technocrats engineer the solution.

JC: Regardless of the chaos it might cause elsewhere, and the new thing will get bolted onto what is there already. With the engineering approach to computer vision, they start out with one bit of code, and when they need it to do more they just add it on top.

DK: That's very EU laws or something.

I was thinking about this with regards to art education, and I was thinking that you are identified as the producer, and it's that level of control that you have as a producer, which is quite powerful actually. And I wonder, what you're describing in terms of MIT, in terms of the mechanics of invention and creation, is there something seductive about that?

JC: I was interested in finding out if the infrastructure of the technology world mirrored that of the art world seeing as they both have claims on invention and creativity, not to say that an engineer does the same thing as an artist of course, but I thought that the infrastructure might be comparable. I asked Professor Ellis what a lab was; you've got Bell Labs and the MIT Media Lab, and the A.I. Lab and so on, but what is a lab? They are the rooms with bunsen burners and glass tubes of course, but the term is also used as an institutional name that has a certain cache, which helps with building reputa-

tions and gaining funding, more so in the US. And I was interested in finding out what the pecking order was, I asked him a few questions and he was helpful, but I think he thought my questions were daft. I was probably too impressed that he had visited the MIT Media Lab because obviously that is just an incidental footnote in a successful career, but he mentioned that he had sorted out the seating space in Kingston after his visit to MIT. I sat in it while waiting to meet him and it was not a very sociable space, the comfy seats were sort of lined up, and there was a large smelly bin next to my head, and there was terrible graffiti on the breeze block wall. I might well be remembering it as worse than it was and doing him a disservice, but I am pretty sure it wasn't good.

DK: I was thinking of MIT as some sort of avant-garde collective endeavour, there are individual inputs and a few scattered geniuses, but there is a bigger picture, contributing something valuable, on the cutting edge of technology. But that it was a sort of bottom up affair in terms of the physical spaces.

JC: I wonder how that compares to artists spaces in the UK in the '80s, I wonder how that has changed?

DK: That's an interesting question. There is a sense now that higher education is very bound and corporate, precisely because there are other criteria that are determining the look of these places; the branding, the marketing, whatever it is, the experience you are selling to students and the need to try to enter into partnerships with other institutions or businesses.

JC: The Media Lab of the mid '80s was funded by big companies, IBM, Warner Brothers, ABC, NBC, Polaroid, Lego, Apple and so on, and by government via the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). In the 1986-87 financial year, sponsorship was $6 million, compared to the $1 million from MIT itself.

DK: You might imagine these companies were investing in the vision of these people and so give them a free hand in determining these things. It has become a bit of a cliché hasn't it, like Google, where everyone hangs out, eats jelly babies and plays ping-pong. It all becomes a generalised exercise in the most efficient use of staff within creative environments, but, the way you were describing Kingston is a good example of what we all already know, which is that environments are really, really important, which is why we come to the South Bank, because there is something amenable.

JC: So you think about Google and what it means is that lots of horrible offices now have a ping-pong table in the corner.