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### Simulated Management and Labor Dignity

One piece that particularly resonated with me was the discussion of simulacra regarding labor issues in Simon Head's *Mindless*. Head's work discusses at length the computer business systems used in retail establishments such as Walmart and Amazon. Of particular note was Walmart's "Task Manager" system, which is meant to tell "employees what to do, how long they have to do it, and whether they have met their target times" (Head 31). If taken out of context, this definition fits the duties of a shift manager well. However, it appears the Task Manager attempts to simulate the duties of a human manager without the "inconveniences" of interpersonal social interactions. The Task Manager works in a binary: workers either complete their work in the expected amount of time or they did not. This all-or-nothing means of labor accountability is a technochauvinist nightmare that serves as an affront to "traditional" manager relations. Often managers are employees that moved up the ranks, understanding the processes followed by the workers they oversee because they were once in their place. They understand the nuances and realities of labor, unlike the faceless machines that spit out directions and "calculated" time expectations.

By implementing the Task Manager, Walmart intended to boost productivity and ultimately increase their bottom line. What they received was the opposite: long lines, unstocked shelves, and unhappy employees and customers. By eliminating the human-manager aspect of labor, Walmart introduced "an object of scorn among thousands of Walmart associates" (Head

31). Human managers can directly help employees with their tasks, give guidance, and critically assess and understand issues when they arise. Unlike the Task Manager's pure discipline, human managers can also supply positive reinforcement. The elimination of this human element in management creates impossible expectations and a culture of labor futility that lowers worker morale and productivity well below pre-Task Manager levels. If the CBS expects workers to stock an entire shoe department in 15 minutes, it is clear the simulacrum is *deliberately not* simulating any elements of actual human expectation.

The Task Manager issue provides a great case study for Meredith Broussard's idea of technochauvinism and its faults: you cannot throw a computer at a human problem and expect it to work because of its "objectivity." Having worked extensively in the supermarket retail space, I am used to dealing with human managers and their expectations. I thought that because I have never had to report to a Task Manager-like system, I have never had to deal with computer business systems in practice. What this piece made me consider were the "invisible" computer business systems that I had to contend with. Everyday, the store manager would hold storewide meetings to discuss profits and sales figures (many of which I did not understand) and compare them to previous periods. While I was not reporting directly to any management simulacra, the operations of my department were indirectly influenced by the computer business systems keeping track of profits. The emotionless spreadsheets of numbers eliminate the human aspect, but because I reported directly to a *human* manager, the work environment did not manifest the same sense of urgency as places like Walmart or Amazon. It was perhaps the lack of sense of computer micromanagement that made the work feel more "free" (as in freedom).

Human managers serve as a "buffer" between calculated expectations and human reality. This work, like many of the works we have discussed previously, has made me reconsider

technology's role in our lives: it must serve as a supplement rather than a replacement. By choosing to simulate the power dynamics of labor while deliberately foregoing any social connection, Walmart failed to apply a technological solution to a human issue, and by extension, failed to be productive by treating its employees as "inputs" in the productivity machine.

Many people, especially older generations, tend to treat retail jobs as trivial: unskilled work for low pay. It is easy for developers and corporate figures to throw inhumane technology at these sources of labor because of their strong disconnect from that work. Having worked in these positions sacrificing physical and emotional labor, and planning on working in the technology sector after graduation, I realize that these ham-fisted attempts at "boosting productivity" (i.e. boosting profits) are futile. The interpersonal relationships between managers and employees must be upheld for any sort of labor to sustain. Head's work and my personal experiences have convinced me there is a delicate balance between human and computer management, and the roles given to computer business systems must neither mimic nor superimpose on the roles of human managers. My hope is that systems are developed with this social balance in mind, disallowing full simulacra of management that laborers find necessary. My supermarket is a solid case study for this balance: numbers from the computer acted as a framework, but humans could interpret the actual operations of the store and provide any arbitrary judgements. At the end of the day, these systems are tools to help humans, and *all* human beings in the chain (from corporate to employee to customer) should be treated with dignity, and avoidance of simulacra that aim to replace the human aspect of labor that reward dignity is an important step.

Works Cited

Broussard, Meredith. *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*. The

MIT Press, 2018.

Head, Simon. *Mindless: Why Smarter Machines Are Making Dumber Humans*. Basic Books,

2013.