Apple's *1984*: The Introduction of the Macintosh in the Cultural History of Personal Computers

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[Note: This page is a work in progress. The live version of this paper includes numerous slides and a video presentation.]

In the third quarter of the 1984 Super Bowl, a strange and disorienting advertisement appeared on the TV screens of the millions of viewers tuned in to the yearly ritual. The ad opens on a gray network of futuristic tubes connecting blank, ominous buildings. Inside the tubes, we see cowed subjects marching towards a cavernous auditorium, where they bow before a Big Brother figure pontificating from a giant TV screen. But one lone woman remains unbroken. Chased by storm troopers, she runs up to the screen, hurls a hammer with a heroic grunt, and shatters the TV image. As the screen explodes, bathing the stunned audience in the light of freedom, a voice-over announces, "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce the Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like "1984."

This commercial, designed by the advertising agency Chiat/Day to introduce Apple's Macintosh computer and directed by Ridley Scott fresh off his science fiction classic *Blade Runner*, has never run again since that Super Bowl spot. But few commercials have ever been more influential. *Advertising Age* named it the 1980s' Commercial of the Decade. You can still see its echoes today in futuristic ads for technology and telecommunications multinationals such as AT&T, MCI, and Intel.

The *1984* commercial was a critical moment in the development of the American public's conception of the proper uses and cultural implications of personal computers. PCs were introduced in the 1970s as *tools* - utilitarian objects designed to facilitate specific tasks. In the 1980s, they became full-fledged *commodities* - shiny consumer products defined not just by their use value, but by the collection of meanings, hopes, and ideals attached to them through advertising, promotion, and cultural circulation. With the *1984* ad, Apple identified the Macintosh with an ideology of "empowerment" - a vision of the PC as a tool for combating conformity and asserting individuality. And while Apple's own fortunes have waned of late, its vision of the power and potential of the personal computer has triumphed, becoming the ideological underpinnings of techno-boosterism in the 1990s.

Before going any further, let's now look at the ad itself.

So what does it mean for a consumer product to claim to be "empowering"? What kind of political vision does this promise imply? In order to begin assessing the implications of Apple's ideal, I want to look more closely at the "1984" commercial, to track how the ad negotiates the irony of promoting individual liberation via the purchase of a mass-produced machine.

I should clarify that this discussion is part of the larger project of my dissertation, which is a cultural history of personal computers. The perspective of my work is that the meanings, uses, and ideals we associate today with the personal computer are not the inevitable result of technological determinism, but rather are the consequences of struggles among groups with different visions of what computers can and should do. To trace the intersecting discourses of these groups, the dissertation looks at a wide variety of materials, from corporate archives to user group newsletters to novels, films, and of course, commercials.

This discussion here can only address one particular angle of influence: the Apple corporation's attempt to define the meanings of its product. The commercials, of course, were not the end of the story; viewers saw the commercials, bought the computers, then proceeded to do things with them Apple never could have envisioned. In fact, it wasn't until the development of desktop publishing later in the 1980s, a phenomenon nobody in 1983 could have foreseen, that the Mac really established its long-term viability.

Nonetheless, the 1984 commercial was what established the framework through which people made sense of the Mac, and eventually, I'd argue, all computers. Ever since that commercial, the Mac has glowed with an aura of rebellion and empowerment. Without that commercial, those subsequent developments might not have been possible. The creative workers who embraced the Mac later in the

1980s may have never taken the plunge, without the buzz the commercial created. Without such a blockbuster introduction, in fact, the Mac might have sank before it ever had a chance to prove itself - as happened to its immediate Apple predecessor, the Lisa.

So, the purpose of looking more closely at the 1984 commercial is not to assume that, by itself, it established everything the Mac signifies today. But it remains a critically influential juncture in the cultural history of personal computers. Its massive success implies that to some extent, it worked because it managed to articulate the ideals and anxieties of its audiences - the Super Bowl viewers who saw the ad, the media professionals who celebrated it, the software developers inspired to write Mac programs after seeing it, and the consumers who actually went out and bought Macs in its wake. Looking more closely at the commercial, then, can help us understand the bundle of fantasies, and fears, about technology in late capitalism that the ad addressed - and how the image of the Mac so successfully responded to them.

Let me now give you a little more background on the context of the "1984" ad, before moving on to a closer analysis. The "1984" ad came at a crucial moment in the history of Apple computer. Apple, of course, began as two guys in a garage, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. In the late 1970s, they developed the Apple II [**slide**], the first mass-produced personal computer. It took off beyond their wildest dreams. By the early 1980s, Apple was one of the fastest-growing companies in the history of American business.

Apple pitched the PC as a tool for personal empowerment and liberation. The American public had long been wary of computers, suspicious that information technology was a force of standardization, centralization, and hierarchy. The popular image of the computer was of a giant IBM mainframe [**slide**], tended to by a cadre of lab-coated technicians. Steve Jobs promised to harness the power of the computer for the individual, to bring about what he called "the democratization of technology."

This, at least, was what Apple promised. What an Apple II could actually do was somewhat more limited. What really made Apple sales take off was less vague promises of empowerment than the success of a "killer application": VisiCalc [**slide**], the first spreadsheet, a product of demonstrable use to millions of business people. This tension between the fantasy of what a personal computer represents, and the reality of what it can accomplish, is a continuing theme in the cultural history of the PC.

In any case, by 1983, Apple was in danger. Their competitors in the emerging PC industry had been joined by IBM. Purchasers who'd chosen Apple out of necessity were relieved to be able to turn now to Big Blue. Apple's first attempt at a next-generation product that could re-establish the company's pre-eminence was the Lisa [**slide**]. A $10,000 computer designed for the business market, it was a flop. The Mac [**slide**] was a streamlined version of the Lisa, rushed out by Job's development team in the wake of the Lisa debacle. It was built to be compact, relatively affordable, and easy to use. Jobs hyped it as "the peoples' computer." It was designed to look not like an imposing piece of machinery, but an "information appliance." In its sleek, inviting shape, it bore the influence of another phenomenon of the early 1980s: [**slide**] the Cuisinart.

What really made the Mac different, of course, was the mouse [**slide**]. First developed by Douglas Englebart of the Stanford Research Institute, the point-and-click interface replaced the cumbersome commands of MS-DOS with an intuitive, elegant means of interaction. One might presume that the mouse was such a brilliant idea that it was inevitable the Mac would succeed. But keep in mind, the Lisa, the first PC with a mouse, had already failed. Many computer industry insiders dismissed the mouse as a toy, a gimmick nobody could ever take seriously. Today, of course, Microsoft Windows has made the mouse ubiquitous. But if the Mac had fizzled on introduction, we might still all be typing our commands in MS-DOS. The hypertext linkage of the World-Wide Web might have never been possible. Or perhaps, another system, such as pen-based or touch-screen computing, might have emerged in the place of the mouse.

Anyway, after a frenetic design period, the Mac was ready to be introduced in January of 1984. What was needed was a marketing campaign that would make the product stand out, and communicate what was special about Macintosh. A storyboard was prepared and approved, organized around the concept "Why 1984 won't be like 1984." Film director Ridley Scott was hired to direct, and given an unheard-of production budget of approximately $700,000.

After seeing Scott's work, Jobs and his new hand-picked President of Apple, John Sculley, were sure they had a hit. With one and a half minutes of Super Bowl time purchased, they screened the commercial for the Apple Board of Directors in December of 1983. To Jobs' and Sculley's surprise, the entire board hated the commercial. Panicked, Sculley ran back to Chiat/Day to try to get them to sell back the ad time. Chiat/Day, still enthusiastic about their ad, dragged their feet, and only managed to sell off 30 seconds. Rather than take a loss on the 60 second ad, Apple decided to go ahead and run "1984."

Despite the board's fears, Super Bowl viewers were overwhelmed by the startling ad. The ad garnered millions of dollars worth of free publicity, as news programs rebroadcast it that night. It was quickly hailed as a masterwork. Unintentionally, Chiat/Day had invented the phenomenon known as "event marketing," in which a high-visibility commercial garners mountains of extra free publicity. "1984" also inaugurated the phenomenon of showcasing commercials on the Super Bowl. And, most importantly for Apple, the ad brought consumers into the stores. Apple's sales in the first 100 days of the Macintosh's release exceeded their already high expectations. Although it would take several years for the Macintosh to fully establish itself as a commercially viable product, the "1984" commercial created the image of the Mac.

So, what exactly made the commercial so compelling to so many viewers? The production values, of course, were amazing. Nobody had ever spent the money to make a commercial look as good as a big-budget movie. "1984" changed all that. Today, few Hollywood blockbusters can match the gloss of the most expensive commercials for major multi-national corporations. But beyond that, why did the message of the ad connect?

Apple, of course, had been advertising for years. But according to Steve Hayden, creative director of Chiat/Day in the early 1980s, the spots before "1984" had never really succeeded in communicating

Steve Job's vision of the liberating power of the PC. The ads that first introduced Apple to most consumers starred Dick Cavett [**slide**] giving self-deprecating testimonials to the power of the Apple II. Later campaigns centered around what were called "lifestyle" ads, in which attractive yuppies - including [**slide**] a young Kevin Costner, make their lives easier and more productive with Macs.

But while these "slice of life" ads established what kind of person uses an Apple - or, more to the point, what kind of person you can be if you too use an Apple - they didn't really clarify what, in particular, the Apple itself stood for, or what distinguished it from other computers - especially as more and more computers with powers equal to the Apple II were entering the market. Steve Jobs thought he knew what was special about Apple: they were the underdogs, who'd battled the corporate giants and brought computing power to the masses. What was needed to tell that story, though, wasn't a slice of life, but an allegory. And the best mode would be science fiction.

Early computer advertisers for the most part had avoided science fiction in promoting their products. This might seem surprising, since one would think they'd want to associate their product with bold promises of the future. But computer makers were afraid of intimidating their audience. The problem was, when Americans thought of computers and science fiction, they imagined HAL of *2001: A Space Oddessey*. Companies wanted to reassure consumers that computers were simple, unthreatening devices. This was why IBM, in their first PC ads, ran as far in the other direction as they could, associating their PC, improbably enough, with the quaint antics of Charlie Chaplin [**slide**]. (Turning the creator of *Modern Times* into a shill for the postmodern workplace, of course, was an act of astounding gall - and a very successful campaign. But that a whole other story.) Apple's early print campaigns looked back even further: one ad starred Thomas Jefferson [**slide**], another Ben Franklin [**slide**].

All this explains why the Apple board hated the "1984" spot so much. Why evoke the dystopian nightmare everyone's afraid computers will bring on? But what "1984" did was tackle these anxieties head-on. It turns the confusing complexity of the Information Age into a Manichean battle of good vs. evil. There's the *bad technology* - centralized, authoritarian - which crushes the human spirit and controls peoples' minds. Read, IBM. But we can be liberated from that bad technology by the *good technology* - independent, individualized - of the Mac.

One irony of the commercial, though, is that what really impressed the TV viewers - what cost so much money to put on the screen - was the vision of the bad technology. [**slide**]. It's the futuristic gloss of that technology which is so compelling; all we get of the good technology is a hammer and the Mac logo on the athlete's T-shirt. The schema of the "1984" ad allowed Apple to harness the visual fascination of a high-tech future, without associating itself with dystopic potential.

Now I want to look more closely at a few of the interesting features of the ad that may not be apparent at first glance, but which I think were critical to its impact. One aspect worth closer investigation is how gender works in the ad. The lone runner is female [**slide**]. As far as we can see, every single one of the drones, as well as Big Brother himself, is male. In the Manichean framework of the ad, women are on the side of the angels. This setup helps identify the Mac user as the underdog, the member of an

oppressed group. It also distinguishes the Mac from all those other, male-identified computers. Despite the fact that the very first computer programmer, Ada Lovelace, was a woman, modern computing has been gendered as a male activity. Women remain a minority of all computer programmers, and young girls continue to receive less encouragement to use computers. The Mac signaled from the beginning that it stood for something different. This was a bold, and implicitly feminist, step for Apple to take, in keeping with its California, counter-cultural image. It did, however, serve other purposes beyond affiliating Apple with the goal of equal access to computing for women.

You might have noticed some slippage in the previous paragraph, from my reference to the Mac user to may reference to the Mac itself. In the allegorical framework of the ad, two levels of representation are at work. In one sense, the running woman stands for Mac users; in this interpretation, the Mac is the equivalent to the hammer, the tool she uses to destroy Big Brother. In another sense, the woman can be considered the personification of the Mac itself; the tank top she wears, which displays the Mac logo, suggests this correspondence. The ad does two things, then. It genders the archetypal Mac *user* as female. And it genders the Mac *itself* as female.

Gendering the Mac user as female implied that Apple stood for equal access to all for computing. It also helped open up an untapped market of potential women consumers. But just as importantly, gendering the Mac *itself* as female associated the Mac with a host of "feminine"-identified qualities which helped make the Mac seem more "user-friendly" for *all* users. [**slide**]. Other computers were associated with the traditionally male-gendered sphere of the workplace; the Mac was the *home* computer. Other computers were rigid, imposing; the Mac was soft, curvaceous, user-friendly. Other computers were emotionless; the Mac was the *personal* computer. If gendering the Mac *user* as female implicitly presumed women had equal interest in using computers, gendering the Mac *itself* as female bucked computer conventions while still evoking a traditional gender model: the image of the computer as the friendly secretary, the able assistant with a smile on her face.

The star of the "1984" commercial [**slide**] isn't just a woman; she's an *athlete*, in clear control of her own body. The "1984" star is an early example of a media image now ubiquitous with the rise of the WNBA: the woman empowering herself through achievement in sport, what we might call the "Reebok feminist."

In contrast to the body of the athletic hero of "1984," the bodies of the oppressors have been colonized by technology. [**Slide**] The Big Brother figure, his face hidden by reflected glasses and framed by blinking letters and numbers, seems almost to be a creature of the TV screen itself, rather than a flesh-and-blood person. [**Slide**] The storm troopers' entire faces are covered by masks the shade of an unplugged TV screen. [**Slide**] And the drones' bodies are covered in drab gray garments. Some drones even wear what appear to be gas-masks. The drones' masks, in fact, evoke the breathing apparatus of that quintessential cyborg nightmare of the era, Darth Vader. And their resemblance is even more striking to a subsequent popular vision of the horrors of the hyper-technologized body, the Borg of *Star Trek*. [**Slide**.]

Compared to these figures, the running woman [**slide**], unencumbered in shorts, sneakers, and tank top, might seem to represent the body freed from technology. But I don't think that's completely right. Rather, I think, she's an example of the new kind of athletic ideal which emerged in the 1980s: the athlete who employs Nautilus, Stairmaster, and the other technologies of exercise to hone the body to perfection. This "robo-cized" athlete is the flip side of the cyborg nightmare. Rather than the technology wearing her, she wears the technology.

Another irony of "1984" is the fact that the villain of the commercial is a television image [**slide**]. In the framework of the ad, TV is bad, PC is good. This would become a perennial theme of computer commercials - buy a PC so your kids will do something more constructive than watching TVcommercials. Allegorizing the TV-viewing experience was a clever way to engage the Super Bowl audience - especially since, by the Third Quarter of the typically one-sided game, most viewers were likely to feel something like zombies themselves. The commercial really did accomplish in real life what it dramatized onscreen, blowing the dazed viewers out of their chairs. [**Slide**.]

The odd part, though, is that more viewers didn't resent the implication that they were nothing but drones in need of deliverance. Presumably, this didn't rub viewers the wrong way because it left open the possibility for everyone to identify with the hammer-thrower. Even if you didn't rush out the next day to buy a Mac, you could imagine yourself as the kind of person who would, eventually. But the arrogance implicit in the "1984" ad would come back to haunt Apple the following year. Apple and Chiat/Day's much-anticipated follow up for the 1985 Super Bowl, a spot called "Lemmings," was a flop. Mac sales, which had already begun to slow down by the end of 1984, continued to stagnate, and soon Apple fired Chiat/Day and moved its account to BBD&O. There was no blockbuster Mac commercial on the 1986 Super Bowl.

[**Slide**]

Cut to August, 1997. In a hotel ballroom in Boston, the assembled Apple faithful, convened for the annual MacWorld Expo convention, receive a jarring dose of deja vu. Onstage is Steve Jobs. Jobs, of course, had been forced out of Apple shortly after the introduction of his pet project, the Mac. But as Apple struggles to survive in the world after Windows 95, Jobs has emerged once again as the company's designated savior.

Jobs takes the podium to announce a deal he promises will turn Apple around. He turns to the enormous video screen behind him, and up pops a giant image none other than [**slide**] Bill Gates, CEO of the hated Microsoft, IBM's successor as Apple's arch-rival. Gates has agreed to invest $150 million in Apple, in return for Apple's endorsement of Microsoft's Internet Explorer web browser. That ominous image of Gates, of course, recalls another image from Apple's history. The crowd is stunned; many boo. Jobs, it seems, has made a deal with the devil. [**Slide**] [I found this image, by the way - of Bill Gates as a Borg - on one of the several anti-Microsoft sites on the web.]

So, has Apple betrayed what it promised in "1984"? Yes, I'd argue, but only in the sense that by 1997,

the contradictions implicit in the original ad had come home to roost. As I've discussed, the ideology of "1984" was built on a series of Manichean dichotomies. The heroic individual vs. the despotic institution. The spunky start-up vs. the smothering monopoly. These libertarian fantasies live on in Silicon Valley today - just pick up an issue of *Wired* magazine, for example, to see them in full-blown manifesto form. But they're of limited use in judging the social value of a technology.

Casting IBM as a monolithic threat to freedom allowed Apple, a $500 million company, to present itself as a lone underdog by comparison. (I'm sure even smaller computer manufacturers, such as Commodore, saw the picture somewhat differently.) Apple may present itself as a smaller, kinder, gentler corporation, but it operates by the same rules of the marketplace as everybody else. In comparison to a smothering monopoly, entrepreneurialism can look pretty exciting. But that doesn't much affect the underlying inequities of capitalism. While Apple celebrated its computers' ability to empower knowledge workers, the manual laborers who built the Mac's chips, assembled its hardware, and swept up after its programmers were not so liberated by the promise of individual computation. For those workers, the difference between the era of IBM hegemony and the hyper-competition of today's marketplace is that the "just in time" pace of today's "virtual management" increases job instability, which in turn makes unionization incredibly difficult. Unions don't fit in well with the libertarian fantasy of the "1984" ad - workers are somehow supposed to empower themselves individually. High technology, in fact, is the least unionized industry in the United States. As of 1993, only 2.7 percent of workers in electronics and computer equipment belonged to unions.

The framing of the battle of monopoly vs. competition, then, elides another conflict - between labor and management. It also avoids another alternative to competition: state regulation. In Orwell's original scenario, of course, the *state* is Big Brother, the source of oppression. In Apple's version of 1984, the target is not so clear - Big Brother is most obviously IBM, but more generally seems to represent any conglomeration of centralized power. This recognition that multi-national corporations may be more powerful and dangerous than nation-states is a theme the ad shares with its literary contemporary, cyberpunk fiction, and is part of what makes the ad feel so compelling and relevant. But by lumping in the state with the mega-corporation as just another monopoly of power, the ad presumes that the only route to liberation is unregulated competition - the free market. In the guise of counter-cultural idealism, the ideology of "1984" has come to mean endorsing the most unrestricted, brutal forms of capitalism competition.

So perhaps it's not worth crying for Apple's loss of innocence in 1997. Steve Jobs promised to change the world, but for all his supposed idealism, Apple never questioned the rules of competition. This is no surprise; Jobs was a businessman with a company to run. If he were any more of an idealist, he would've been out of a job even quicker than he was. But the collapse of Job's idealism suggests the limitations of tying one's dreams to an institution ruled by the marketplace.

As political fantasy, "1984" was inspired dreamwork. Appealing to viewers' fears and frustrations in the Information Age, it offered a utopian alternative.But as the dream of "1984" fizzles, it's time to imagine new, better utopias. Certainly, we can't expect a global computer corporation to hand them to us. But perhaps, through more modest means, we can begin to construct another dream of what computers can

do for us - a more honest fantasy, which might lead to a future that looks even less like *1984*.

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