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## **“THANKS AMAZON FOR RUINING MY LIFE”: WORKER BREAKDOWN AND THE DISRUPTION OF CARE AT AMAZON**

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### **Summary**

Infamous for their highly exploitative, algorithmically-managed labour regimes, Amazon fulfillment centers are sites of continual breakdown and disrepair for the bodies and minds of its workers. From a methodological approach via workers' inquiry, this paper aims to theoretically frame the effects (and affects) resulting from Amazon's strategy of augmented despotism, which engenders "new forms of domination mediated and augmented by digital tools" (Delfanti, 2019, p.3). Through an analysis of online video confessionals detailing the physical and mental experiences of worker burnout and breakdown, this paper aims to bring the voices of (ex)-workers at Amazon to the forefront of understanding Amazon's integrated architectures of labour management, surveillance, and control. The rallying cry of Amazon workers, "we are not robots," implies that there is a direct relationship between the treatment of their minds and bodies as machinery, and the forms of mental and physical breakdown they experience. The experiences of "broken" Amazon workers interacting with Amazon's technological media apparatus of augmented despotism on the warehouse floor explain how Amazon's rate metering and notification delivery systems cultivate "automatic subjectivities" (Till, 2019) for its workers through forms of automated and networked surveillance, control, and discipline. As worker confessionals on YouTube attest, Amazon's infrastructure of caring for its workforce, Amazon Care, is as much an architecture of managerial surveillance, control, and discipline as it is of "care." While other wearable and trackable technologies haunt the Amazon worker during their shift, Amazon Care extends the company's technological power beyond the confines of the fulfillment center directly into their personal lives. Drawing from political and technological theories of labour and care, this paper will look into how Amazon workers navigate (and often escape) the affective and embodied confines of Amazon's augmented despotism.

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## **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

This paper is an exercise in broken world thinking, which Steven Jackson describes as an approach that takes “erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points in thinking through the nature, use, and effects of information technology and new media” (Jackson, 2014, p.221). I hypothesize that the experiences of breakdown and disrepair shared by workers and ex-workers at Amazon can serve as a starting point for thinking about the relationship between productive (rather than sustainable) bodies, minds, and machines. In keeping with the conference theme, and with the rallying cry of Amazon workers, “we are not robots,” this paper asks: what does it mean to be treated as a robotic lifeform, such as the Amazon worker is in the fulfillment center? What role does the technological media apparatus enable for Amazon’s treatment of its workers as robots?

This paper was developed through a process of transcribing and coding online video confessionals of Amazon worker breakdown. By means of workers’ inquiry, the aim of the paper will be to bring the voices of Amazon workers’ embodied and affective experiences of breakdown and disrepair to the forefront of scholarly theory and dialogue on the broader topic of media technology and wellness. The focus of the analysis will be on the relationships between workers and ex-workers with the digital tools that mediate their experiences of breakdown.

Drawing from literature at the intersections of digital labour studies and critical mental health studies, this paper looks at how workers experience being treated as machinery through their relationship with digital technologies that quantify, track, and discipline. It will proceed from the basis that the experience of being treated like a robot is the result of a managerial articulation of cybernetic psychology: an analysis of the body and mind that is “applicable to both machines and living things” (Edwards, 1996, p.181).

This paper is also following the premise of a media genealogical approach that situates technologies such as Amazon Care in terms of a “practical rationality and a means to govern specific practices and people” (Packer, 2013, p.4). The content analysis will trace what denotes the practical rationality of Amazon’s technologies of augmented despotism by looking for how the bodily and affective limitations of Amazon workers are problematized through these technologies. By looking at how the bodies and minds of workers are encountered as a problem through these technologies, I want to suggest that we can think of Amazon’s strategy of augmented despotism as a managerial articulation of cybernetic psychology.

This paper is also drawing from theories of psychopolitical power and managerial control that understand industrial psychology as a science of managing behaviour and conduct in accordance with specific norms (Braverman, p.60 -62). These experiences of technologically-mediated breakdown can tell us about how Amazon automatically produces and selects workers on the warehouse floor as ideal automatic subjects.

## Conclusion

The story of relations between Amazon and its workers is more complex than one of linear exploitation, in which bodies are overworked and experience breakdown as a result. Instead, these experiences of breakdown are integral to the networked production and selection of workers as ideal automatic subjects. The more that workers are made to feel individually responsible for their own productivity and well-being, the more they are made to realize themselves as something machinic and inhuman. Amazon's technologies on the warehouse floor, such as the scanner's rate meter and notification system, affords Amazon to automatically place responsibility upon workers to manage their own time, productivity, and wellness. Amazon Care blurs the division between the worker's life on the warehouse floor and their personal lives, as it extends Amazon's surveillant gaze into their time off work after having sustained workplace-related injuries. These are not simply technologies that push unfit workers toward breakdown, thus helping Amazon to separate the fit from the unfit. I argue that they also, and perhaps more importantly, function as automated *psychotechnologies* that steer and govern the affective and cognitive capacities of Amazon workers. The experiences of worker breakdown at Amazon either transform workers into ideal docile bodies and automatic subjects, or signal their disposability to Amazon's technological apparatus of augmented despotism.

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