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## 7 Rocket Theory

*Rita Raley and Russell Samolsky*

After all, it is only a post-capitalist society, made possible by an accelerationist politics, which will ever be capable of delivering on the promissory note of the mid-Twentieth Century's space programmes, to shift beyond a world of minimal technical upgrades towards all-encompassing change.

(Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, "Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics")

It's not rocket science; it's rocket theory. Or, rather, it's both. The basic scientific principle of the rocket is one of opposition—a force or thrust in one direction produces a force in the other direction—and in this sense, it might seem the very antithesis of our larger assignment for this volume of investigating the convergences of the alt-right and left theory.<sup>1</sup> Reduced to this elementary propulsive principle, in other words, the physics of the rocket would on the face of it belong more to a project examining the divergent and repulsive forces driving these political formations apart. However, as we shall see, what we are calling "rocket theory" is not simply a play on an idiom but also proposes a theoretically informed way of thinking through the convergence of oppositional forces as manifest in accelerationist politics, or anti-politics, in our moment. More specifically, "rocket theory" also denotes the as-yet-unrealized potentialities held in the rocket, those which remain speculative and theoretical but which might rapidly be on the way to their actualization.

While we begin with a brief historical account charting the shifting between left theory and right politics that has characterized accelerationism from its inception in the writings of Karl Marx to the accelerationist manifestos of the 21st century, our focus will not be on fully reprising this history, which has been extensively documented and debated, but rather on an analysis of the way in which accelerationism has itself been appropriated by contemporary capitalism as motif and meme.<sup>2</sup> What we are offering is not another history of accelerationism as philosophy or coterie, but rather in part a tracing out of accelerationism as it has become co-opted and memetically entered into popular discourse as political affect and cultural condition. What, we ask, is the significance of this memeification, and why, beyond the obvious literalization, does this take the form of the rocket? We shall try to take account of the way in which a political philosophy committed to pushing capitalism to its breaking point and beyond ironically finds itself deployed for capitalistic, even hyper-capitalistic, ends. We shall not however try to decide if this denotes something like a post-accelerationism or instead indicates an accelerationist infiltration signaling the horizon of capitalist implosion. Constituted as they both are as machines of co-optation, it may not be possible to decide this until after the fact, whenever in the course of human history this may be. While accelerationism continues as a politics motivating both the alt-right and left theory, under the rubric "rocket theory," we aim to examine the way in which the material rocket, and mediatic representations of the rocket, signal both an accelerated destruction and accentuated fantasy of escape, or escape velocity, as one of the hallmarks of accelerationism in our time.

So what exactly is “accelerationism”? While the term cannot be contained in a single definition and is differently deployed by its various proponents, the credo of accelerationism asserts that the way to destroy a malign system, and to go beyond it, is to accelerate the forces of destruction that are already immanent in it. The term “accelerationism” was first coined by Benjamin Noys in 2010 in his attempt to historicize and critique the shared, albeit escalating, left political engagements of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy*, and Jean Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Summarizing the thrust of their arguments, Noys writes, “if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalize capitalism itself: the worse the better. We can call this tendency *accelerationism*.”<sup>3</sup> The notion was not new of course; Marx had already contended that sown into the structure of capitalism were the seeds of its own destruction, but in reaction to the perceived failure of May 1968, this poststructuralist triune urged an intensifying of the process. The “revolutionary path,” Deleuze and Guattari propose, is “not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to ‘accelerate the process,’ as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven’t seen anything yet.”<sup>4</sup> Or as Noys states, “the only way out of capitalism is to take it further, to follow its lines of flight or deterritorialization to the absolute end, to speed-up beyond the limits of production and so to rupture the limit of capital itself.”<sup>5</sup> In Steven Shaviro’s formulation, the philosophy, aesthetics, and politics of accelerationism thus come to be characterized by the general idea that “the only way out is the way through”; in other words, the “potentialities of capitalism” must be expressed in order to “exhaust it and thereby open up access to something beyond it.”<sup>6</sup>

If accelerationism grows out of an application and intensification of Marx and Nietzsche, it is out of an analysis of Nietzsche, and the question of what responsibility Nietzsche’s own texts bears for their use in the service of a Nazi politics, that Jacques Derrida formulates his notion of a “programming machine” orchestrating the possible left-right political oscillations of all post-Hegelian texts, including Marx. Indeed, Derrida insists, “There can always be a Hegelianism of the left and a Hegelianism of the right, a Heideggerianism of the left and a Heideggerianism of the right, a Nietzscheanism of the right and a Nietzscheanism of the left, and even, let us not overlook it, a Marxism of the right and a Marxism of the left. The one can always be the other, the double of the other.”<sup>7</sup> And this political pendulation is not a matter of misguided interpretations but the consequence of the way these texts address themselves to the future that has conditioned philosophy since the time of Hegel. Thus, Derrida tells us, “This is no accident. It is an effect of the destinational structure of all so-called post-Hegelian texts.”<sup>8</sup> And this is especially evident in accelerationist works that are after all concerned not only with a destinational structure but also with speeding that structure to its limit and beyond. Perhaps then this accounts, at least in part, for the political oscillations of the accelerationist field in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. For what began as a radical left politics has now also manifested its right and alt-right variants.<sup>9</sup>

For contemporary academic discourse on accelerationism as well as its rightward trajectory, the central figure is Nick Land. The story of the formation and dissolution of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick has been well rehearsed but we can by way of overview characterize the theoretical school or movement that emerged there in the mid-1990s as one that synthesized Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, William Burroughs, cybernetics, science fiction, cyberpunk, rave culture, and much else besides. Insofar as there is a canon, *Anti-Oedipus*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Neuromancer* would be in the mix; and speed, escape velocities, machinic desire, and the accelerated and transformative merging of human and technology are central motifs. So wild, weird, and varied were the influences, and so commingled were its reactionary and liberatory inclinations, that in hindsight it is hardly surprising that the lines of thinking that can be traced back to it would seem to share the same intellectual DNA, yet also diverge in political and aesthetic commitments.

If the neo-reactionary strain of accelerationism (NRx), that which was eventually articulated as “Dark Enlightenment” by Land, was latent within it, so too was its liberatory and revolutionary impulse. What “accelerationism pushes towards,” Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek propose in their influential manifesto, “is a future that is more modern—an alternative modernity that neoliberalism is inherently unable to generate.”<sup>10</sup> The way forward, then, for the left, right, and unconditional variants of accelerationism, is out and beyond—not, as Mark Fisher notes, to return to a world before capitalism, “even if we could,” but instead to persevere and arrive at something that comes after it.<sup>11</sup> A post-capitalist world is not easy to imagine (this is a premise after all of Fisher’s influential text, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*). Nonetheless, the accelerationist vision holds, neoliberalism can be exploited as a “springboard” to initiate an alternative future, “unfastening our horizons towards the universal possibilities of the Outside.”<sup>12</sup> The pivotal move here is to repurpose and “unleash” the “latent productive forces” of accelerationism—and to reclaim its impetus and orientation from Land’s “myopic yet hypnotizing belief that capitalist speed alone could generate a global transition towards unparalleled technological singularity.”<sup>13</sup>

What was once termed a “fringe philosophy,” and once thought within the space of theory and small-action groups, has itself accelerated and has been seized on and mobilized in general terms by political factions across the spectrum, from the so-termed Dirtbag Left to Reddit’s incendiary/pol/sub.<sup>14</sup> Just as some aspects of left and socialist political movements have been informed, indeed instructed, by accelerationist thinking, so too can direct lines be traced from the alt-right and NRx to Land.<sup>15</sup> The far right’s belief that the rocket should have, so to speak, a newly “red glare” is chillingly evinced, in the aftermath of January 6, by an FBI warning of further attacks on state Capitols: “members of the so-called boogaloo movement ‘believe that an impending civil insurgency against the government is forthcoming and some believe they should accelerate the timeline with armed, antigovernment actions leading to a civil war’.”<sup>16</sup> The appropriation of accelerationism by both contemporary left and right—the conversion, even at times perversion, of theory into practice—is visible in its memeification, by the ubiquity of “burn it all down!” as mantra, and by innumerable social media posts, hashtags, gifs, and emojis of incineration, all of which can now be understood to have done the work of mobilizing and inflaming political sentiments.

In both its formulation and its possible practice, accelerationism itself paradoxically hovers on the edge of its own destruction. Take, for example, this claim regarding acceleration by Land: “It describes an absolute horizon—and one that is closing in. Thinking takes time, and accelerationism suggests we’re running out of time to think that through, if we haven’t already. No contemporary dilemma is being entertained realistically until it is also acknowledged that the opportunity for doing so is fast collapsing.”<sup>17</sup> And there is also a way in which the practice of accelerationism is defined by its own annihilation in that the very process of acceleration, of speeding to a limit and beyond, burns itself out. However, the credo of accelerationism is not simply a celebration of speeding up a system, of turning a system against itself, only to crash it or burn it down, but rather to break through to something liberatory beyond this limit. And because it twins both the threat of absolute destruction and the fantasy of liberatory escape, as with nuclear war and colonization of Mars, the rocket is both the perfect symbol of accelerationism and the perfect accelerationist machine. It is not however only because it holds together, in the same mechanism, the dual forces of destruction and salvation that the rocket has become so emblematic of accelerationism, but rather that we are now on the accelerating cusp of rocket theory becoming rocket reality, or rocket practice. In what follows, we trace an ironic twist or turn by analyzing the left-right co-opting of accelerationism by media; how the scenario of destruction and the fantasy of escape has been deployed, and how accelerationism has ironically been put to performative use not to rupture capital, but to accelerate its accumulation in the hands of the few in the form of crypto-crashes,

and the tactical use of the accelerationist ethos for hyper-capitalist gain. We turn now to how this is all bound up with the long history of rocket theory, or what we might also call the dialectics of the rocket.

### Accelerationism in Our Time

The appellation “rocket theory” is not simply a playful rubric to mark accelerationism now, and not a rubric that we deploy or impose from above, but rather rocket theory both inheres in and derives from our case studies in documentary media, advertising, and prestige television. The first of these, “The Rocket,” an episode in PBS’s documentary series, *Breakthrough: The Ideas that Changed the World*, charts the history and future of rocket development, felicitously offers us a chance to trace out the significance of this history for rocket theory, and also provides us with our first mediatic example of rocket theory itself.<sup>18</sup>

Opening with narrator Patrick Stewart’s announcement of the contemporary “rocket revolution” and the onset of a new space race ushered in by private companies such as SpaceX and Blue Origin that promise to enable humanity to go beyond this world and become a multi-planet species, *Breakthrough* then shifts to an interview with a private astronaut who proclaims that “it is difficult to overstate how fast and how transformative this is going to be.” Such is our newly accelerated rocket future, the CEO of the Ad Astra Rocket Company declares that “20 years from now space travel is going to be like air travel today and then humanity will have truly become a space faring species.” Deftly transitioning from outer space and this speculative near future, the documentary locates the origins of rocketry and the eventual quest to leave Earth underground, deep within a network of caves in China in the 7th century. Here the monk Li Tian, tasked by the emperor with the problem of how to ward off the evil spirits causing floods and droughts, sets out to collect the potassium nitrate-rich bat guano that he will mix with charcoal and sulfur to form gunpowder. Li Tian’s innovation was to pack the powder into the confined space of bamboo tubes, thereby amplifying the effect of the fireworks. The rocket was born when these tubes were accidentally thrown onto the fire and shot out, releasing gas as the powder ignited. Thus was discovered how to turn chemical energy into thrust. It was not long before the spectacular bamboo fireworks used for banishing evil spirits and protecting against environmental disasters were transformed into bamboo rockets deployed as weapons of war. And it is this pattern—in which the benign ends, or liberating fantasies, of the inventors of the rocket are diverted or co-opted for the malign ends of war, including total nuclear war—that will serve as the governing trope orchestrating the narrative of the documentary and marking it as its own instance of rocket theory.

If gunpowder and fireworks set off the beginning of the rocket, they also fuel the story of its ongoing development, the trajectory of which now leads to Guy Fawkes and the failed Gunpowder Plot, which has also embroiled the polymath astronomer, Thomas Harriot. After successfully pleading for his life, Harriot devotes himself to science, and in 1609, he makes the first telescopic observations and drawings of the moon with a Dutch spyglass, confirming it as a material, Earth-like body just a few months before Galileo’s own observations. Closely following Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium* (1608), the first science fiction account of a young astronomer’s voyage to the moon, this new observational astronomy conferred a still far-away, but now possible, realization of what until then was mere fantasy. This interplay between fantasy and scientific theory was to prove pivotal for the development of the rocket: it was after all Jules Verne’s science fiction novel *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), in which three men are blasted from a giant cannon to the moon, that fired the imagination of one of the pioneers of the modern rocket, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, who set himself the task of figuring out the math of escape velocity. Swiftly realizing that no human could survive the g-forces of a cannon blast, Tsiolkovsky turned to a calibrated, staged acceleration of

the rocket as the potential mechanism of space flight. The story then shifts to the physicist Robert Goddard and his experiments with early liquid-fueled rockets and the crucial (and for our paper aptly named) convergent-divergent nozzle, which provided greater thrust, preparing the path for humans to leave Earth.<sup>19</sup>

The aerospace engineer Wernher von Braun and the co-optation of his dreams of space flight are at the center of the next part of the story, which takes up the weaponization of the rocket as an instrument of war. *Breakthrough* then relays the story of von Braun's surrender to U.S. forces and the role played by captured V-2 rockets in the U.S. space program, and in keeping with its organizing trope, frames the story of Sergei Korolev, von Braun's counterpart in the Soviet Union, as another brilliant rocket scientist who also dreamed of space flight. Plucked from the gulag after having been falsely accused of political activities, Korolev was made a colonel of the Red Army in 1945 and tasked with the manufacture of a rocket that could carry a 5-ton nuclear warhead with a range that could strike the United States. Going back to Tsiolkovsky's design of a rocket built of stages, Korolev fulfilled his charge by building an immense rocket that would shed weight by dropping booster tanks on the way to delivering its payload. Korolev's true ambition, however, was to use this rocket to place a satellite in space. Blocked by superiors whose interest was only in ICBMs, he engaged in the "risky subterfuge" of planting a newspaper article falsely claiming that the Soviets were working on sending a satellite into orbit—a move that cunningly baited the United States into asserting the need for a space program of its own. Korolev then was able to convince Soviet authorities to respond, which allowed him to switch out the 5.4-ton nuclear warhead for a 184-pound satellite, thus making possible the launch of *Sputnik* and igniting the space race culminating in the U.S. Apollo rockets and the lunar landing.

Having given us the history of the rocket via its seminal moments and figures, *Breakthrough* returns to the present and ponders the near future of rocketry. Although hydrogen-fueled rockets have enabled lunar exploration and the building of an international space station, chemical energy has been taken as far and as fast as it can go. Speculation follows that the future of space flight may lie in plasma-propelled rockets, which would cut the journey to Mars from three years to 39 days and open up access to the solar system. "Breakthroughs," Stewart intones, "don't get any bigger than that." And to punctuate this exclamation, *Breakthrough* concludes with Tsiolkovsky's early 20th century proclamation: "Earth is the cradle of humanity. But one cannot live in the cradle forever."

It might be tempting to draw from this documentary history an analogy between the mechanics of rocket flight—particularly the convergent-divergent nozzle and the chemically fueled rocket burning itself up, expelling itself, or a large part of itself, in order to deliver its payload—and the accelerationist ethos of "burn it down so as to propel forward." But what even more strongly inter-fuses this documentary with what we are calling "rocket theory" is first the shaping of the narrative history of the rocket by a dialectic in which the fantasies of science fiction writers ignite the desire of engineers whose efforts to develop rockets that would turn these fantasies into a reality are co-opted, and then realized, by the increasingly deadly war-machine. There is, however, yet another dimension of rocket theory still to unfold.

When *Breakthrough* begins and ends with the vision of humans becoming a spacefaring multiplanetary species, it does so not only to situate us within the long history of this fantasy and to claim that we are now on the horizon of this dream, but also to join the chorus of those who assert that we, or some part of us, will eventually have no choice but to try to leave a dying planet. It will be the rocket that makes it possible to escape the apocalyptic scenario of nuclear war. And it will be the rocket that makes it possible to flee from the inexorable catastrophes of global warming, fueled, ironically, by the industrial processes at whose apogee lies the rocket itself. Paradoxically,

the very mechanisms that may well destroy Earth might also facilitate interplanetary refuge; in other words, we may need to escape the very socio-technical apparatus and geopolitical crises that enable, indeed accelerate, the development of the rocket. It is this paradox—that the very thing that would lead us to our destruction would also offer us salvation—that aligns rocket theory with the paradox of accelerationism.<sup>20</sup> Accelerationism assumes the form of rocket theory now precisely because of this accelerated twinning of the oppositional forces of the rocket simultaneously offering both destruction and escape.

Having laid out the historical and theoretical elements of rocket theory, we proceed to our second case study and comparative analysis of how the space-colonization vs. stay-at-home and cultivate the Earth debate is appropriated and played out in a contest between cryptocurrency and cloud computing commercials. What is at stake in our media analysis is what it means for the interruptive anti-politics of accelerationism to be exploited as a performative media meme.

Readers may recall the basic format of “Fortune Favors the Brave” (October 2021), Matt Damon’s advertisement for the cryptocurrency exchange, [Crypto.com](https://crypto.com), which opens with the illumination of a distant figure in a cavernous white cube and Damon’s pronouncement, “history is filled with almos<sup>t</sup>.”<sup>21</sup> That viewers are expected to be awed by the solemnity and the grand historical narrative that is to come is underscored by the jump to a close shot of the charismatic actor dressed in black, walking toward the viewer through what will unfold as a linear series of computer-generated tableau vivant: Ferdinand Magellan, followed by Sir Edmund Hillary, then one of the Wright brothers at the moment of flight. Now picking up the pace on what is in effect a runway, Damon steps across to a vaguely techno-gothic club scene that more directly aims to seduce and interpellate the viewer as one of the “mere mortals, just like you and me.” Having invoked the romantic thrill of conquest and discovery, Damon turns right and the explicit pitch for crypto takes off. Around the corner are astronauts. Dressed for imminent space flight, with “Satoshi,” the presumably pseudonymous name of the creator of bitcoin, inscribed on their collars, the “intrepid” capsule crew marches in slow-motion and with serene determination toward the camera, their presumably steeled if not by Damon’s voice then by the crypto meme that appears on the ceiling above them (HODL, for “hold on for dear life”). The camera cuts to the tableaux dissolving as if washed away in a flood and jumps back to Damon, who halts before a glowing image of Mars and intones, “fortune favors the brave.” We then arrive at the final shot, a paradigmatic instance of both cringe and aspirational media: the [Crypto.com](https://crypto.com) logo imposed on the red planet as the next frontier, idealizing the twinned accelerative fantasies of space exploration and cryptocurrency (Figure 7.1).

In its expansive sweep, the commercial presents an epochal overview of capitalism, beginning with early modern colonialism and the spice trade and looking out toward the speculative future of space colonization. With SpaceX and the billionaire space cowboys in mind, we might borrow Jill Lepore’s language and observe that the concluding shot perfectly captures “Muskism”: “an extreme, extravagant form of capitalism, really extraterrestrial capitalism.”<sup>22</sup> Extraterrestrial capitalism, for which the overlaying of the crypto exchange logo on Mars would be emblematic, is informed by, and pursues, the idea of unimpeded capital, freed from regulatory and gravitational forces that would restrict its movement. To push even further, we can see behind this commercial an unintentional iteration of the paradox of rocket theory, in its intertwining of the fantasy of escape from Earth and a prefiguration of the annihilation of human history as the tableaux disintegrate, giving way to dark space illuminated by the red planet.

Almost immediately after its release, “Fortune Favors the Brave” was met with derision on social media and in the press, such that even before its airing during the Super Bowl in February 2022, it had already been lambasted.<sup>23</sup> As the value of bitcoin plummeted and the cryptocurrency exchange FTX declared bankruptcy later in the year, both the critiques and the mockery intensified, and the commercial, its title, and its featured actor have come to function as shorthand for both the



Figure 7.1 “Fortune Favors the Brave”

cult of crypto and the inevitable puncturing of the speculative bubble. So securely lodged was the Damon crypto ad in the cultural imaginary that the software company Salesforce could air a direct rebuttal during the same Super Bowl without even naming its foil as such. While the two commercials are at some level merely engaged in a kind of mundane ad war, taken together they play out contemporary debates about space exploration and environmental activism, as well as between folk and accelerationist politics.

In nearly every aspect of its form and content, “The New Frontier” takes direct aim at the [Crypto.com](#) commercial as well as the ideology that informs it.<sup>24</sup> Such refutation is explicit, as when it opens with the overture taken from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* as audioscope for Matthew McConaughey’s wryly bombastic narration: “Space. The boundary of human achievement. The new frontier.” This quasi-operatic, quasi-epic opening is swiftly undercut by McConaughey’s own interruptive exclamation, “eh.” What follows is a series of inverse shots and images, all contrapuntal, carrying the Salesforce ad backward, with the spacesuit-clad McConaughey aloft not in a rocket but in an air balloon before he pulls the plug and returns to orbit, almost as a retarding of astronomical history. Cut then to boots hitting the ground and the voice-over narration, “It’s not time to escape. It’s time to engage.” What follows are ironized but still idealized scenes of a 21st century corporate boardroom, agrarian labor, and a garden wedding with “real people” (in which we also see no doubt unintended echoes of Grant Wood’s 1930 painting, *American Gothic*). In case viewers may have somehow missed the exhortative point, McConaughey makes it unambiguous: “So while the others look to the metaverse of Mars, let’s stay here and restore ours.” The closing shot for the commercial is, naturally, not the red planet but Earth in its blue and green splendor.



What the Salesforce ad presents then is what we might call a left reaction to crypto culture and the right, and alt-right, politics that underwrite it.<sup>25</sup> In tone and substance, particularly in its incorporation of rainbows and a distinctly diverse cast—“Time to make space for all of us” is the refrain, in effect contrasting with both the obvious tokenism of the bitcoin astronauts and that commercial’s ethos of radical individualism—“The New Frontier” presents a sanitized, benevolent form of capitalism. This is capital in its supposed good form, with the same mythology of innovation undergirding the crypto ad here spun as social good. So does the motif of ascent, with the narrator releasing a now-unoccupied beatific balloon into the sky, register not fear and a desire to escape but rather nostalgia, communal affirmation, and terrestrial investment. And in case the argument is not yet self-evident, McConaughey brings it home: “It ain’t rocket science. It’s right here.” That the larger promotional campaign of which this commercial is a part should be tagged “team Earth” further underscores the nominal investment in “here” as metonym for an activist bioregional politics that disavows the fantasy of human flight from an increasingly uninhabitable planet and endeavors instead to repair and cultivate the place at hand for future generations.

What makes it rocket theory and not rocket science, however, is not the turning away from space to Earth, the frontier “right here,” but rather its substantive alignment with the converging-diverging politics of “folk” and accelerationism. Williams and Srnicek’s #accelerate manifesto succinctly articulates this split as one internal to the left but a decade on, in light of the political realignments still underway, the fracture cannot be so simply situated: “The most important division in today’s left,” they write, “is between those that hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology.”<sup>26</sup> While on the surface, it may seem to be the case that the division between folk and accelerationist politics aligns with the Salesforce and [Crypto.com](#) advertisements, respectively, even in their style—actual humans vs. animated CGI figures; thriving urban and rural landscapes vs. empty white cube; sincerity vs. missionary zeal—they are each propelled by an ideology and practice of accumulative technological capital.<sup>27</sup> (For all its agrarian folk politics, Salesforce is a cloud computing company, balloon in the clouds notwithstanding.)

For an even more explicit appropriation of accelerationism by and in popular media, we turn to the HBO series, *Succession*, a darkly satirical portrayal of a global media conglomerate family in battle for control of the company. An incisive sketch of an industry in transition, *Succession* is also a thinly veiled, or at least allusive, story of the twilight of Rupert Murdoch’s right-wing empire, with the patriarch’s children and newer media companies both angling to take the helm. It is the latter—the move that the fictional streaming company, GoJo, makes to acquire Waystar RoyCo in the third season—that makes the show a particularly illuminating case study for rocket theory, although as we will indicate the rocket launch as motif and actual event plays through the narrative arc of the drama.

Entirely apropos for the character of a tech billionaire, the Swedish CEO of GoJo enters the scene via his Twitter antics. Lukas Matsson, played by Alexander Skarsgård, has been posting cryptic messages in what seems a ploy to boost his company’s stock, their ambiguity introducing an even greater uncertainty into the discussions about a possible merger with Waystar RoyCo.<sup>28</sup> The scene in question unfolds when Waystar CEO Logan Roy, played by Brian Cox, sends his son Roman to meet with Matsson and ascertain both his motives and his psychological stability. On the grounds of his palatial Italian estate, while overlooking Lake Como, Matsson poses what seems a perplexing question: “Hey, what are you worst at?” Roman is initially stymied (“uh, me? worst?”), so Matsson proceeds: “Success doesn’t really interest me anymore; it’s too easy. Analysis plus capital plus execution. It’s fucking, anyone can do that. But failure, that’s a secret, just as much failure as possible, as fast as possible. Burn that shit out. That’s interesting.”<sup>29</sup> If we

started our essay with a formula for rocket propulsion—a force in one direction produces a force in another direction—Matsson now presents us with an inversion of this formula: not an additive progression fueling capitalist accumulation, but rather the subtractive, accelerative regression of “burn that shit out.”

On the face of it, the speech defies common sense. The K Foundation’s burning of a million quid notwithstanding, it is certainly harder to accumulate capital than to destroy it. But, read more subtly, or ironically, we might see in Matsson’s assertion an alignment with accelerationism. If we take failure as a “secret” to mean the proper “execution” of accelerationism, then indeed accelerationism is the harder to attain. In other words, what is in fact truly difficult is not the accelerated accumulation of capital, but rather the accelerated turning of capital against itself. Indeed, Matsson projects an almost-palpable ennui and first comes across as a character who has pushed himself to the point of accelerationist burnout. Viewers are suspended for a moment in this scene, unsure if Matsson is playing a character or if he is that character—in other words, if he is performing accelerationism, or if he personifies it. What we soon come to find out, however, is that it is neither, but rather a cynical appropriation, tactically using the ethos of accelerationism against itself so as to position himself to take over Logan’s company.

This move will lead to a climactic showdown and eventual alliance between Matsson and Logan, with the sidelining of Roman during the negotiations recalling his earlier humiliation during his sister’s wedding party, which ends the first season. The siblings are in this scene performing a kind of left-right quarrel, and Shiv sarcastically advises her younger brother to stop watching the family network, ATN (its programs’ “bigot spigot” is modeled on Fox).<sup>30</sup> Roman at this point is interrupted by a telephone call, which he takes with a parting shot at Shiv’s supposed woke politics: “Excuse me, I actually have to go watch a fucking satellite launch in Japan, that I’m actually in charge of...that I reorganized for you, but you’re too fucking carbon neutral to enjoy.” What transpires is perhaps predictable but no less darkly comic for being such. Roman rushes to the bathroom to watch the live stream of the launch on his phone, and the rocket explodes, with plumes of fire and smoke filling the frame. The failure, as expected for this inept character, is his: he did, as he will later admit, “put a lot of pressure to accelerate the launch, even though there were concerns.” In this respect, his acceleration of the process goes awry, resulting in grave injuries, and the “burning out” is accidental rather than intentional. While Roman’s accelerated launch is in the service of his own advancement and capitalist accumulation, Shiv comes closer to articulating an accelerationist program later in the series, although it is equally in service of her strong ambition to take over the company: “Remake ATN. Destroy it, raze it to the ground....Blow up Roman and I’m the only candidate left in the field.”<sup>31</sup>

If Roman and Shiv fail in the battle for succession by means of acceleration or faux-accelerationism, Matsson by contrast is the true Machiavellian figure, appearing initially to bespeak a kind of left accelerationism that turns out to be merely a cynical deployment of it. This cynicism is especially manifest during his meeting with Logan, when he relays a parable he heard from Mark Zuckerberg: in ancient Rome, the story goes, the thinking was that slaves should be made to wear something that would identify them as such, but the idea was dismissed when the masters realized that visibility would allow the slaves to come to consciousness about the power of their numbers and revolt. “The point is,” Matsson explains, “if we want to survive, you and I, then we need a hell of a lot of little folks running around shitting us data, you know, for the eyeballs, for the revenue, for the scale.” Our analogy with the rocket becomes even more pronounced in this scene, as Matsson will have recourse to the symbol of the rocket as he more directly makes his pitch for the acquisition of Waystar: “we are flying like a fucking rocket ship and you are sinking like a lead balloon.”<sup>32</sup> (In this we cannot but hear an ironic echo of the [Crypto.com](#) astronauts and the Salesforce hot air balloon.)

Having supported our claim for the appropriation of the rhetoric and ideology of accelerationism in popular media, let us briefly remark its significance. At one level, what *Succession* illustrates is that a politics designed to accelerate capitalism to its limit has now become a malign device by which to play the capitalist game. One question, though, is to what degree the show is self-reflexive in its deployment of accelerationism: is it making an ironic comment on the inextricable and mutually constitutive relations between speculative finance and media? Both the script for Matsson's character and Skarsgård's performance suggest that this is indeed the case—that the show is reflexive about the extent to which accelerationism can ironically be made into a capitalist game for capitalist gain and, by extension, that the notion of a limit or end to capital in our moment might itself be a dramatic fiction.

### The Great Acceleration

If the early 20th century began with a cosmic bang leading to the discovery of an expanding universe, the late 20th century, and with it the millennium, ended with news of a cosmic whimper brought on by the discovery of an exponentially accelerating universe. Indeed, the universe is not only accelerating, but it might also be said to be accelerationist because the stars will burn out, and the galaxies will continue to accelerate away from each other. While the fate of the universe has not been conclusively determined (it might end in a contracting big crunch), current science projects that it will eventually succumb to the force of entropy and heat death. Either way, it is continually accelerating, toward what ultimate transformations we know not.

The fate of the Earth will of course already have been long decided, consumed as it will be by our exploding sun. But on contemporary Anthropocene Earth, too, the news is not good. Global warming is accelerating beyond a sustainable tipping point, bringing with it accelerated ecocide, and the extinction of a great number of animal species. Climate refugeism is burgeoning. And in the year since the announcement of this book project, Russia invaded Ukraine, bringing into stark relief the ever-present peril of tactical or total nuclear war. We began with the quip, it's not rocket science, it's rocket theory, and we hope that we have now substantiated what lies behind our play on idiom, and how our analysis of the dialectic of the rocket situates, and partly accounts for, its memeification.<sup>33</sup> Of course, we quickly qualified this play on words to say that embedded in rocket theory, as rubric for accelerationism, is rocket science; indeed, it is acceleration in rocket science and rocket production that is placing us on the nearing cusp of planetary colonization. And it is an irony, in keeping with our focus on oppositional and overlapping elements, that the very carbon chemistry driving global warming on Earth might also terraform Mars. The future of accelerationism will have to contend with the expansion of capital into space. Whether, and if, this will be attended by an accelerationism of the right or the left, or both, remains to be seen.

### Notes

- 1 NASA, "Rocket Principles," *Nasa.gov*, accessed May 2022, [https://www.grc.nasa.gov/www/k-12/rocket/TRCRocket/rocket\\_principles.html](https://www.grc.nasa.gov/www/k-12/rocket/TRCRocket/rocket_principles.html).
- 2 On memes and memetics, see Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).
- 3 Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010), 5.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 239–40.
- 5 Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), x.
- 6 Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), [chapter 1](#).

- 7 Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other : Otobiography, Transference, Translation : Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. Christie McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 32.
- 8 Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 32.
- 9 A fair amount has been written about left, right, unconditional accelerationism and the many understandings thereof. In addition to the works cited here see Alex Williams, "Escape Velocities," *e-flux* 46 (June 2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60063/escape-velocities/>; Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian, eds., *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014); and Matt Colquhoun, "A U/Acc Primer," *Xenogothic*, March 14, 2019, <https://xenogothic.com/2019/03/04/a-u-acc-primer/>.
- 10 Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, "#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," *CLT*, May 14, 2013, <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>.
- 11 Mark Fisher, "'A Social and Psychic Revolution of Almost Inconceivable Magnitude': Popular Culture's Interrupted Accelerationist Dreams," *e-flux* 46 (June 2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60084/a-social-and-psychic-revolution-of-almost-inconceivable-magnitude-popular-culture-s-interrupted-accelerationist-dreams/>.
- 12 Williams and Srnicek, "#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics."
- 13 Williams and Srnicek, "#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics."
- 14 Andy Beckett, "Accelerationism: How a Fringe Philosophy Predicted the Future We Live In," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>.
- 15 See Florian Cramer, "Alt-Right Camps and Currents," *Synthetic Zero*, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://syntheticzero.net/2016/11/29/alt-right-camps-currents-w-florian-cramer/>. and Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2017).
- 16 Fintan O'Toole, "Beware Prophecies of Civil War," *The Atlantic*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/america-civil-war-prophecies/620850/>.
- 17 Nick Land, "A Quick and Dirty Guide to Accelerationism," *Jacobite*, May 25, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210307115755/https://jaobitemag.com/2017/05/25/a-quick-and-dirty-introduction-to-accelerationism/>.
- 18 PBS, "The Rocket" May 5, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-rocket-vcjabh/>.
- 19 For a general explanation of the converging-diverging nozzle, see NASA, "Nozzle Design," accessed May 2022, <https://www.grc.nasa.gov/WWW/k-12/airplane/nozzled.html>.
- 20 So too the recent experiment with changing the trajectory of an asteroid suggests that the rocket holds out the promise of negating an annihilating asteroid strike on earth. "NASA Confirms DART Mission Impact Changed Asteroid's Motion in Space," *Nasa.gov*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasa-confirms-dart-mission-impact-changed-asteroid-s-motion-in-space>.
- 21 The *Crypto.com* commercial was pulled from TV and YouTube in August 2022 but has been archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20220104003755/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hBC5TVdYT8>.
- 22 Daniel Estrin, Mallory Yu, and Sarah Handel, "How a Love of Sci-Fi Drives Elon Musk and an Idea of 'Extreme Capitalism,'" *NPR*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/19/1093352683/elon-musk-twitter-scifi-technology-futurism-takeover>.
- 23 See, for example, Jody Rosen, "Why Is Matt Damon Shilling for Crypto?" *The New York Times*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/magazine/matt-damon-crypto.html>.
- 24 Salesforce, "The New Frontier," *YouTube*, February 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up251KCz6k>.
- 25 David Golumbia has written incisely of the dark side of crypto in *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- 26 Williams and Srnicek, "#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics."
- 27 Fisher's analysis of accelerationism vis-a-vis *Terminator* and *Avatar* resonates with this schism. See "Terminator vs. Avatar: Notes on Accelerationism," *Tumblr*, September 14, 2010, <https://www.tumblr.com/markfisherblog/32522465887/terminator-vs-avatar-notes-on-accelerationism>.
- 28 There is a further joke in Matsson's tweeting of an emoji of an eggplant, given the role that the "dick pic" plays in the series and the figurative association of the phallus and the rocket.
- 29 *Succession*, season 3, episode 8, "Chiantishire," directed by Mark Mylod, written by Jesse Armstrong, aired December 5, 2021, HBO.
- 30 *Succession*, season 1, episode 10, "Nobody Is Ever Missing," directed by Mark Mylod, written by Jesse Armstrong, aired August 5, 2018, HBO.
- 31 *Succession*, "Chiantishire," HBO.

- 32 *Succession*, season 3, episode 9, “All the Bells Say,” directed by Mark Mylod, written by Jesse Armstrong, aired December 12, 2021, HBO. This chapter was completed before the final season of *Succession* aired, so we are unable here to comment on the way in which the series ultimately ratchets up the linkage of capitalism, accelerationism, and the rhetoric of the rocket, but we hope to do so in a future companion piece.
- 33 For an analysis of the role that computing has played in the “great acceleration,” using the rhetoric of the rocket to demarcate three socio-technical “booster” phases, see Felix Stalder, *Escape Velocity: Computing and the Great Acceleration* (Ljubljana: Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, 2022).

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