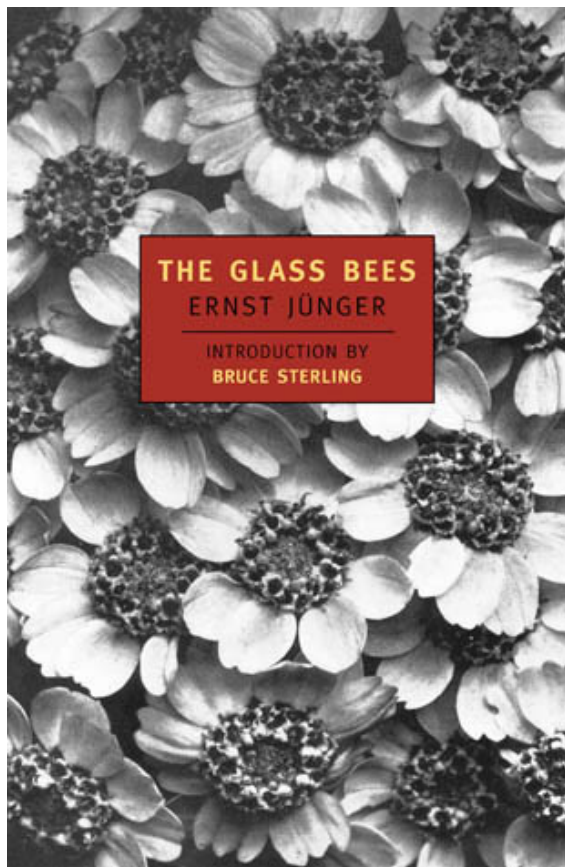


The Glass Bees

Jim Groom

Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Jim Groom's blog](#) on May 25, 2008.



With my no-internet, hippie-like vacation to [Montauk](#) behind me

now, I can return to the bava and continue the excruciating futility that is my life online. I enjoyed the time away because I was able to do something I hadn't done in too long, i.e., read a few books that have nothing to do with a course I was either taking or teaching. One of the books I read that has me both excited and scared is [Ernst Jünger's](#) 1957 novel [The Glass Bees](#) (*Gläserne Bienen*).

I got this novel back in 2000 when it was re-published by the [New York Review of Books](#), and it sat on my shelf for almost eight years. And I am now convinced it had to sit there for that long. For this book wouldn't have meant half as much to me had I read it before my full-fledged, self-obsessed foray into the land of the lost, a.k.a the internet, almost four years ago. I happened upon this novel last week when I was searching for something to read on my shelves. I was immediately drawn in by the fact that [Bruce Sterling](#) wrote the introduction, whose talk on "[The Internet of Things](#)" I had recently listened to. I took this as a sign that the lattice of coincidence was in full effect, and I decided to give it a go.

Sterling's introduction immediately grabbed me, his description of Jünger's novel as anachronistic in the most uncanny of ways is perfectly put when it comes to the social and economic realities of this dark, visionary novel. This quote from Sterling's introduction (which you can read in its brief entirety [here](#)) made me realize that this isn't just a novel I should read, but one I *need* to read:

Jünger perceived that industrial capitalism is a ridiculous game, so he proved remarkably good at predicting its future moves....[He] understands that technology is pursued not to accelerate progress but to intensify power. He fully understands that popular entertainment comes with a military-industrial underside.

This passage brings into sharp focus a scary reality that often gets overlooked (or is it intentionally downplayed?) in educational technology, namely that the Utopian, blue sky ideas of technology as a singular harbinger of possibility and liberation ignores the cold and all-consuming role that capital plays in the shaping of technology as means of control. Now I understand that this struggle is by no means unilateral, and that for every instance of technology as a means to consolidate power for capital, there is another instance in which that same technology can be used to undermine the fallacious logic of capital's vision of progress.

So the question that this book (as early as the introduction) immediately forced me to consider is where do I stand in this equation. More specifically, how do I understand the work I am doing in the field of EdTech when it comes to the intersection of progress, power, and the voracious appetite of capital to co-opt and re-package the labor of others as its own, patented, insanely expensive, proprietary product?

This line of inquiry came into sharper focus when talking to [Brian Lamb](#) and [Keira McPhee](#) at [Freddy's Bar in Brooklyn](#) soon after finishing the novel. After my vociferous and impressionistic explanation of the ways in which the novel was not about technology, but the relations of power and capital through an idea of technology as a figure of progress, Brian suggested how this wasn't unlike BlackBoard's newest product announcement, their "Next Generation" of Learning Management Systems, BlackBoard 8.

What is BlackBoard doing? Well, they are taking the experiments and innovations of thousands of people and re-packaging them as their own, unique contribution to the educational world of Web 2.0. And why are they doing this? Well, to survive as a LMS, but that survival is not necessarily dependent on a technology or an innovation, rather it is a means of taking the imaginative experimentation of others and wrapping them up as a product that can be bought and sold like a pair of shoes. The insanely irresponsible advertising for BlackBoard 8 suggests that [Academic Suite release 8.0](#) will "enhance critical thinking skills" and "improve classroom performance." What LMS can do this? What Web 2.0 tool can do this? This is total bullshit, how can they make such an irresponsible claim? These things are not done by technology, but rather people thinking and working together. Our technology may afford a unique possibility in this endeavor by bringing disparate individuals together in an otherwise untenable community, yet it doesn't enhance critical thinking or improve classroom performance, we do that, together.

And this move by BlackBoard to commodify the labor of others is exactly the problem with the idea that educational technology "is about the technology," which [Gardner](#) exclaimed in his swan song presentation at UMW's Faculty Academy.. It was a great talk, but an insistence that what we do is about the technology and not the community around the ideas is a dangerous one. The two go hand in hand, and I am sure Gardner realizes this, but; (in fact, this was a poor reading on my part, a full apologies to Gardner for my being so caught up on a phrase and not an idea—an ongoing problem I have :)) in my mind the technology is often the means through which the communal acts are traced, recorded, and archived. The learning happens not as a by-product of the technology, it is, or rather should be, the *Raison*

d'être of the technology. The teaching and thinking happen within the medium of texts, videos, film, images, art, conversation, game playing, computers, etc. Technology may provide new ways of delivering and accessing this information, and mark the basis of many a medium, but the idea of a community and its culture is what makes any technology meaningful and relevant.

This is why the idea that “it is about the technology” makes BlackBoard 8 so troubling to me. If it is about the technology, then capital can quickly recognize this fact and co-opt all the hard work by so many to move outside of the taylorized vision of educational technology grafted upon our institutions. If the technology is what is important, than what do we say if a faculty member or student notes that Bb can do what del.icio.us can, or [can “mash up” YouTube, Flickr, and Google Earth maps](#) like WPMu, or can make content at long last open, or has a slick AJAX interface, then we what what can we say about the technology?

BlackBoard will leverage their relative omnipresence to gouge schools everywhere into using their tools because they can, and they'll sell them up with all the administrative, vending machine, and surveillance cameras one could dream of. This is what we are missing. BlackBoard makes an inferior product and charges a ton for it, but if we reduce the conversation to technology, and not really think hard about technology as an instantiation of capital's will to power, than anything resembling an EdTech movement towards a vision of liberation and relevance is lost. For within those ideas is not a technology, but a group of people, who argue, disagree, and bicker, but also believe that education is fundamentally about the exchange of ideas and possibilities of thinking the world anew again and again, it is not about a corporate mandate to compete—however inanely or nefariously—for market share and/or power. I don't believe in technology, I believe in people. And that's why I don't think our struggle is over the future of technology, it is over the struggle for the future of our culture that is assailed from all corners by the vultures of capital. Corporations are selling us back our ideas, innovations, and visions for an exorbitant price. I want them all back, and I want them now!

Enter stage left: EDUPUNK!

My next series of posts will be about what I think EDUPUNK is and the necessity for a communal vision of EdTech to fight capital's will to power at the expense of community. I hope others will join me.

Also, sorry this tangent went so far afield, I am currently working on a Wikipedia article for [The Glass Bees](#), which hopefully will fill in all the gaps I left here. But in the end, you should really just read it!



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