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From Speculative Media Theory To Net Criticism
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Arthur Kroker once pointed out that 'media' are 'too slow'. The term is no longer appropriate to express the speed culture of the digital age. 'Media' still refers to information, communication and black boxes, not to pure mediation, straight into the body. Media, almost by definition, are about filters, switches, technical limitations, silly simulations and heartless representations. Focussed on particular senses, they still need access and selection mechanisms. There are only particular media. We should therefore look for terms that are even more fluid, being able to break through all interfaces, geographical conditions and human imperfections. This is the ultimate 'speculative' media theory, the wish to overcome the actual object of our studies and passions, heading for 'The World after the Media', as one of the early pieces of the Adilkno called it.

This view defines the Net as the 'medium to end all media', the 'Metamedium'. But at this very moment, there is not yet a General Net Theory. Cyberspace is still a work in progress. We face the realisation (and therefore decline) of a specific kind of media theory (being 'too slow'). It is in this ideological vacuum that a temporary autonomous project called 'net criticism' shows up. A pragmatic form of negative thinking, in the aftermath of a period dominated by speculative thinking that tried to define the 'new'.

before media

My generation, which entered the intellectual arena in the late 70s, witnessed the collusion of Marxism-in-crisis with the rising post-modern theory and got crushed in between the two. The dirt of punk was still too political and existentialist for cool people and free-thinking academics. Most issues centred around the writings of Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault. We were obsessed with the question of power and ideology, beyond historicism, humanism and the deadly economic determinism. Media were a part of the ideological realm (but nothing more than that). Like other instances, media had their own 'relative autonomy', a term that sounded like a profound revelation. And media were not only repressive, but productive, as Foucault pointed out. So where to locate power, if it is no longer in the corporate headquarters and the government? Capitalism dominates through its ideology. And slowly ideology became more and more identical with the media and its emerging technologies.

When I got involved in the so-called 'new social movements', it became clear that it was no longer useful to reflect on the problems of the previous generation, the generation of 68. But it was not entirely clear whether we could

use elements of the new French thinking. We did not practise 'micropolitics'. We did not just want a piece of the cake, but 'the whole bloody bakery.' It was not enough to be a 'patchwork of minorities'. The radical movements had much stronger desires. The fear and anger were much stronger, no future involved here, less theory, just action. Deleuze and Guattari only became popular in the nineties, after all these movements had dissolved into the virtual, to reappear as pop cultures, in rap, techno and jungle.

During the political and social clashes of the 80s we also faced another change in society. We were well aware of the explosion of the media realm. I studied political science and mass communication and I remember we did not speak about media in plural, only about 'mass media' as a monolithic block. Our main concern was the change of 'public opinion'. The movements of the early 80s questioned the rigid definitions of politics as such, but did not yet position themselves within the media realm. The mysterious laws of 'public opinion' dealt with mentality, consciousness, attitudes, a semiotic process that would ultimately bring about social and political changes, without requiring reformist compromises or self-marginalisation as embittered, dogmatic Marxists.

media breakthrough

The amount of channels on TV, radio and the growing availability of microelectronics and the PC in the mid-80s gave us more access to media, and this changed the nature of the political fight. The Do-It-Yourself media strengthened the position of rising movements, specially in the ongoing attempt to influence the journalists of the established media, without depending on them entirely. For me, the rise and the expansion of this media experience went together with the birth of 'media theory'. When my (direct) involvement as a squatter and eco-activist transformed itself into a commitment to 'the media question', I discovered the then emerging media theory in Germany. I even got involved in it, although I was not anymore on the university and had abandon all academic rituals like footnotes, PhDs, etc. One might be familiar with their names: Friedrich Kittler, now in Berlin, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio from Paris. But also Avital Ronell from the United States, the Jewish-German-Brazilian media philosopher Vilem Flusser, and Peter Weibel and Florian Roetzer, who made connections to the arts.

It seems important now to summarise this specific type of media theory. It is not exactly academic or even scientific. There is a strong emphasis on style. At its best, it is techne-poetry, brilliant in its search for new, historical patterns. At its worst it is dry, academic hermeneutics. There is a strong affection for art and aesthetics, and it has a strong relationship to the history of literature and philosophy. If our English-speaking colleagues could read this stuff, it would be fun to read their critique of its metaphysical, almost 19th century style and premises. Take the works of Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Juenger, Friedrich Nietzsche and J. W. Goethe, simmer them in the sauce of the media technologies, flavour with a dash of French Theory. That is the basic recipe. This postmodern media theory tries implicitly to escape its 68- past. Also

typical is the rejection of the existence of rival media theories. It makes no reference to the existing media studies like 'mass communication' or cultural studies (with McLuhan being the exception). Its dislike of social sciences remains a secret. The condemnation of the Frankfurt School is also standard. Media theory dislikes ideology criticism. It reduces media to the essence of the machine logic. It is no longer interested in the meaning of its message, which was once assumed to be propaganda.

Speaking about the fascist past of some of the authors in an open way, still seems highly problematic. It is not done to just enjoy dubious thinkers and appreciate Heidegger as a fascist (not: despite his short fascist engagement). A secret or unconscious fascination for authoritarian models is still there. Don't laugh about the totalitarian heritage, it is still taken very seriously. In that sense, the Cold War, being the project to freeze-dry the fatal European passions, had not yet ended in this particular branch of theory.

the power of ideology

Central to this theory is the definition of media as technical media. This should be seen as a polemic gesture to remove all references to an economic, political, social or even cultural context. First and foremost, media have to be described in the language of the technical, in the language of the technology itself.

Strangely enough, this is a precise expression of the further rise of media as an 'autonomous' realm, the victory of ideology over the other instances. When the media starts to float (and becomes 'immaterial'), it first of all has to cut all references to journalism, social sciences, ideas of progress and enlightenment, state propaganda, public opinion, being a tool to educate and entertain the people. Media from now on are merely spin-off products of the military that basically deal with the war of perception. The rest is merely noise.

It is important to see that there is a continuity from the debate about ideology and power as a first phase, the notions of discourse and structures as a second stage and the centrality of the technical media as the third. Crucial for all three stages is their relation to Jacques Lacan and the question of language. We can see a shift here and a continuous process of redefinition of 'language' from being just the spoken and written word, towards 'language' as a general structural mechanism, ending up with a very abstract definition, the language of the technology, which can no longer be deconstructed as an ideology so easily. Although 'language' became so crucial, at the same time these thinkers were confronted with the so-called crisis of linearity, the crisis of the text. With the rise of the personal computer, the status of the text in society changed and so did the role of writing in the electronic age.

Essential for these thinkers is that they have to introduce the 'new' in the terms of the old. They always have to proclaim the new and condemn the old, while still keeping a channel open to the traditional disciplines. So there is a constant oscillation between the new and the old, both of which must be incorporated in the theory. Also characteristic is a melancholic position towards the old

terminology and sources, combined with a deep, philosophic fascination for the new. But never in a truly futuristic manner. The destruction of the old seems an alien notion in this context. Being post-political intellectuals, it is difficult for most of them to become prophets, visionaries or even propagandist for the new. They cannot so easily be transformed into salesmen for Siemens or Philips. Instead, their task remains the careful exploration and explanation of the objectives of the 'new' in the language of the old. Their success is in presenting this to the conservative (but enlightened) cultural elites.

This postwar generation is used to constantly undermining its own premises (an old leftist habit). In particular, the premises of their commitments of May 68. This became an obsession for most of them -- especially for Baudrillard. They are even more influenced by the trauma of the Second World War. All of them are making references to the crucial period between the two world wars, both historically and theoretically. The War is the father of all media and the founding fathers of media theory are Heidegger and Benjamin (McLuhan being the good third). Combine all these elements and you have an impressive and productive research program for decades to come.

the beginning of the end

The media theory of the 1980s is in essence a philosophy of The End. It works its way up to its historical height in 1989. It contemplates The End (of the social, history, ideology etc.), but because of its refusal to be radically modern, it is unwilling to overcome its own ideological framework, which was formed in the period 68-89. As for many of the intellectuals of the same generation, it seems impossible to fit the Fall of the Berlin Wall into the aesthetic program. Most of them do not want to be bothered by the East and can only interpret it as an atavistic, disturbing factor, just another sign of ongoing disintegration and fragmentation. Technology is hardware in the first place. It has no users that play with it in a productive way. That is why pop culture can be ignored so easily. Hardware is the driving force, not people, let alone East Europeans. It sounds almost Marxist, this technological determinism, but that is what happens if theory lacks the categories of subjectivity.

There are two methods used. On the one hand they are exercising the fascinating 'archaeology of media' (like in the works of Werner Kuenze, Siegfried Zielinski, Bernhard Siegert, Christoph Asendorf and Erkki Huhtamo). Examples of this can be found in Paul Virilio's 'War and Cinema', Friedrich Kittler's 'Grammophone, Film, Typewriter' and Avital Ronell's 'The Telephone Book'. On the other hand, there is the tradition of hermeneutics, the essay or theory as such, which can easily be used to speculate about the future possibilities of new media, combining etymology with technological forecasts. But it can also go into the direction of the historical anthropology (Dietmar Kamper, Peter Sloterdijk, etc.) or stay within the academic borders of the science of literature (Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, Jochen Hoerisch, etc.). And then there are the hard core scientists with literary ambitions like Otto Roessler,

Heinz von Foerster and Oswald Wiener. It is impossible to give an overview here. 99% of all this has not been translated, but that's another story.

A crucial term, if we want to study this media theory, seems to me the definition of aesthetics. Media theory rejects the classical definition of aesthetics used by art historians (a set of rules to judge the artwork) and comes up with a new one, focussing on the technical determination of perception. We can no longer speak about a pure aesthetics which is just an expression of visual pleasure. This kind of aesthetics is almost military. It is technical because it is defined by all the tools we are using. There is no aesthetics anymore besides or beyond the technical.

All these thinkers were relatively unknown until the late 80s. But this all changed when the Western societies went through a narcotic period of intense speculation -- in bonds and currencies, real estate, the arts and... theory. This happened exactly around the crucial year of 1989. We see the academic theory bursting out of its small circle, making an alliance with the visual art scene and the emerging media-art scene, which was by then still mainly video art.

advertising strategies

It is also exactly in this period, dominated by speculation, that we see the growth of cyberculture, virtual reality, multimedia and computer networks. Until the late 80s there were only the rumours one could read in the books of William Gibson and other cyberpunk writers. But this suddenly changed in 1989 with the appearance of visionaries like Steward Brand, Timothy Leary, Jaron Lanier and Howard Rheingold. After a certain delay, their concepts and buzzwords also reached Europe and in the early 90s we see media theory becoming more and more popular. Historians and philosophy professors overnight became art world celebrities, then marketing advisers -- praised for their in depth view of the 'essence' of digital technology.

A good example might be the German media philosopher Norbert Bolz. In the early 80s he was a professor at the Free University in West-Berlin, giving classes about Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno or Carl Schmitt. He was especially interested in the history of religion, working together with Professor Jacob Taubes. This was his period of the discourse, one could say. After he met Friedrich Kittler, he joined the Kassel research group that shaped German media theory. This resulted in his book 'Theory of the New Media', in which he linked Richard Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, Walter Benjamin's media theory with the writings of Marshall McLuhan. This is still within the framework of a rather academic way of working: combining the two elements I described before, media archaeology on the one hand; the philosophical, hermeneutical approach on the other hand. But then he changed. He started to write about chaos theory, hypertext and multimedia. He headed off in the direction of a truly speculative media theory. Finally, Norbert Bolz accepted a post as a professor of design in Essen and is presently publishing about design, advertisement and

marketing strategies.

This is of course only one example. But we are speaking here about a general trend in society, connected to the 'emancipation' or 'coming out' of the media realm. It is related to the rise of the conceptual aspects of electronic space, called cyberspace, in which concepts are absolutely crucial as a first stage, in order to develop products out of it later. So we cannot judge this speculative media theory on a merely scientific level. We have to study its impacts on information capitalism in an early stage, when cyberspace is not anymore a rumour, good for literary phantasies, but still has not yet been implemented fully into society. For the developers of software and computer systems and multimedia products, it seems essential to work with the proper metaphors. And these metaphors are not given by the technology, by the hardware as such. It is up to creative intellectuals to develop those metaphors. This is where speculative theory plays such a decisive role.

It is all too easy to accuse some authors for having sold out to the industry, and make a quick analysis of a period which is really only five or ten years ago. I myself was also involved in speculative media theory, perhaps not as an academic, but more as a free floating intellectual. I was unemployed at the time, being an editor of the magazine _Mediamatic and a member of the Adilkno group, the 'Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge'. We had a lot of fun writing numerous so-called Unidentified Theory Objects, the UTOs, brought together in the book 'The Media Archive', which was originally published in 1992. One could call this the period of Gay Media Science, in which we developed concepts like 'wetware', the 'data dandy', 'sovereign media' or the 'extra medial', being a space or condition outside of the media realm. Perhaps Adilkno is embodying the most pure and extreme form of speculative thinking, not being hindered or censored by any academic or journalistic rule.

the new beginning

The year 1989 was more important because of the introduction of virtual reality than for the fact that the Berlin Wall came down.

[a somewhat unreal claim! I don't think it adds much to your argument. I'd delete it.]

The Gulf War in early 91 was a first sign that this particular media theory had come to an end. The ideas of William Gibson, which were science fiction at the time, were becoming all too real. 'The future is now' and we had from now on to (re)read those books as conceptual computer manuals, no longer just as fictional stories about a possible future.

It was shocking to see that theories can indeed come true. The crisis of intellectuals, the end of ideology and the end of the big stories had questioned indirectly the power of discourse. Highly successful export products from Paris, nothing more. But the power of writing had not (yet?) vanished. Ideals can be

implemented in society, despite the final 'defeat of the intellectuals' and their political power after 1989. Currently, we are facing the triumph of the new conceptual engineer ('the philosopher with the mouse'), who is working with all the various existing intellectual tools, all the available creativity and personal fantasies, on the forefront of the technology. At the same time, the old-style intellectuals are in deep crisis over their loss of power over the global society and its media.

During the Gulf War, two of our heroes, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virillio, suddenly appeared everywhere in the media. It seemed that their whole program, their whole way of thinking finally came to the surface, becoming instant reality. But this reality was a very disturbing one. So what is the epiphany of speed and simulation, their true essence? Was this live television at its best? It was a shock for them also and the Gulf War became a turning point for both of them in their writing.

While some of the thinkers became commercial and conceptual, others, like Baudrillard and Virilio, became more and less pessimistic, one could even say melancholic. A shift appeared: while some media theorist metamorphosed into professional 'cultural optimists', others, with the same background, showed they truly desperate, sometimes cynical face, becoming old-style 'cultural pessimists'. Some even rewrote the leftist Frankfurt School writings and incorporated them into a deeply resentful, anti-media, anti-computer philosophy. Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the 'culture industry' gradually became a programmatic text of all those who look down on pop culture, being trash, junk and pulp. This resulted in an open conflict between experimental media aesthetics and High Art.

We see a clear shift here between people who are getting involved in these new technologies and others, who are criticising the consequences of these technologies from the outside and warn us for the upcoming apocalypse (from the fatal crash on Wall Street to real time dictatorships of the New Dark Age). A true fight has not yet taken place. All attention is (still) focussed on Paris. Many of our heroes have died. The defensive climate amongst intellectuals nowadays seems to make a productive debate on the nature of media and technology highly unlikely to take place. There seems to be a growing critique on Virilio and Baudrillard for the pessimistic stand they take. On the other hand, Pierre Levy takes the opposite position, coming up with unprecedented sales talk, presenting the digital technologies as a solution for all our problems.

The same can be said about the role of media art. One could make a similar chronology, from the underground, through a phase of experiments towards a close link with the commercial sector. Places like Ars Electronica in Linz, The InterCommunication Center in Tokyo and ZKM in Karlsruhe have become true institutions with huge budgets and buildings, defining themselves as 'Museums of the Future'. These are some of the many signs that the phase of speculation

and introduction is coming to a close. Now that they no longer hidden in the margins of an avant-garde, new media are now entering society and coming face-to-face with all the current political and cultural conflicts. It is within this change that we have to position the rise of 'net criticism'.

critisizing everything

Net criticism, as Pit Schultz and I have defined it, does not want to take the outsider's point of view. It positions itself within the Net, inside the software and wires. On the other hand, it isn't a promo for any of the technologies or their visionaries. It is part of a wider movement for public access to all media and their content. Net criticism tries to formulate criteria about the politics, aesthetics, economics and architecture of multimedia and computer networks. This is necessary if we want to go beyond the stage of hype and do not want to fall back into a state of scepticism. Most of all, we have to clarify the terms many of us use. Of course there might be some parallels with genres that deal with old media, like literary criticism, book reviews, film critique, following the developments within its own medium.

We should increase the quality of cyber discourse, beyond sales talk, beyond easy complaints and of course beyond earlier speculations. One of the places for this is the nettime mailing list, which is also a social network where media activists, theorists, programmers and net.artists meet. This group was created in the spring of 95 and held its first meeting during the Biennale in Venice. It combines radical criticism with the building up of independent computer networks and net projects. But we could also mention the magazine Mute from London, which is taking a similar stand. Important sources are the book *_Data Trash*, by Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein (in which they developed the notion of the 'virtual class'), Hakim Bey's 'Temporary Autonomous Zone', the works of Critical Art Ensemble and Mark Dery's *_Escape Velocity*. The most controversial contribution so far has been the essay 'Californian Ideology', written by Andy Cameron and Richard Barbrook, a true European (or British?) critique of the Wired magazine from a radical, though social-democratic point of view.

These are all first attempts to describe the hidden ideological premises of the virtual class, gathered around the magazine Wired. But it quickly became clear that we should do more than just criticise the neo-liberal hippie capitalism. We should try to analyse why they appeal to a worldwide group of young white males,. We should examine their fascination with the technology. What is this "desire to be wired"? Of course it is way too easy project this on others, take an anti-American stand and come up with some antique European truth or moral. This should be an American-European dialogue and we are trying to involve as many people from as many countries as possible, without pretending that we are 'global'. There is no European alternative to American cyberculture, and we hope there never will be. It is unwise to project all the evil on California, or even the Californians. Instead, it seems more important to study one's own virtual

class, everywhere, the nearby monopolies and various attempts by all state authorities to regulate and censor the Net.

at last: nettime!

At the moment, nettime is debating the framework for a 'political economy of the Net', once we move into the new stage of brutal commercialisation, state regulation, which will lay the groundwork for a true massification of the Net. Like Adilkno's saying, 'It cannot be the future everyday', net criticism is not predicting some future, but trying to formulate diverse critiques of the present. Its aim is to come up with working models and implement them, before others will take over. It seems important not to repeat the failures of past generations. Politics and aesthetics can no longer go separate ways. Many political activists are looking for ways to include digital aesthetics, while at the same time many artists are very unhappy with the isolated position of this very experimental media art.

It is very tempting and dangerous to describe net criticism as a global affair. Most of us are Europeans. It is hard enough establishing some independent channels for exchange between the East Europe and the West. Unlike the still very western media theory, we are trying explicitly to include people and projects from East Europe. Hence projects like the Next Five Minutes conferences, Press Now and the network V2_East. Despite the fact that the Internet might be a global medium, the cultures on it are still very much based on different languages and separate user groups.

It is not enough to speak about copyright and censorship. It is not enough to complain about the rise of power of big telecommunication companies. It is not even enough to charge the rising gap between the information poor and the information rich. Most important for me now is to come up with working models, truly utopian, root level projects that can be realised on the spot. For example: public access to the Net, your own domain name, free content, or the inclusion of unwired countries. Net criticism also means fun, specially if it comes through our own desires to be wired, if it comes through our own will to connect to other people and cultures and to ultimately meet each other, face to face, 'breast to breast' as Hakim Bey uses to say. Net criticism should not end up as an ideology or belief system. Or to put it more accurately for these times: net criticism should not end up as an identity lifestyle or fashion. Then it is time again to disappear, into the darkness of cyberspace, speeding up, slowing down, into multiple, hybrid realities.