>From Speculative Media Theory To Net Criticism
By Geert Lovink
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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'.

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 is 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

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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 the 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

starts to float (and becomes 'immaterial'), it first of all has to cut
all references to journalism, social sciences, ideas of progress and
enlightment, 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 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 speculative about the future possibilities of new media, combining etymology with technological forecasts. But it can also go into the direction of the historical antropology (Dietmar Kamper, Peter Sloterdijk, etc.) or stay within the academic boarders 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.

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 year 1989 was more important because of the introduction of virtual

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'.

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, is 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 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 Ailkno'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.

Nettime: http://www.desk.nl/~nettime
Adilkno: http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet
Adilkno, Cracking the Movement, Autonomedia, New York, 1994
Adilkno, The Media Archive, Autonomedia, New York, 1997
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