

Seduction of the Cyber Zombies

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(For Konrad and Marie)

For a start, it would help if we could speak about nets rather than The Net. Only the most extropian true believers in the Net still dream of it as the final solution. More realistic thinkers have rejected cyber-soteriology, but accept the Net as a viable tool (or weapon). They would agree that other nets must be set up and maintained simultaneously with “the” Net—otherwise it becomes just another medium of alienation, more engrossing than TV, maybe, but thereby even more total in entrancement.

The other nets of course include—first and foremost—patterns of conviviality and of communicativeness. I borrow this word from 19th-century phrenology—apparently there’s a bump of communicativeness somewhere on the skull—but I use it to mean something like Bakhtin’s “dialogue” transposed to the register of the social; whereas conviviality implies physical presence, communicativeness can also include other media as well. But—as hermeticism teaches us—the positive act of communicating meaning, whether face-to-face (and even without speech), or symbolically mediated (by text, image, etc.), is always confronted by its negativity. Not all “communication” communicates, map is not territory, and so on. “Interactive programs” in themselves convey no meaning between living beings but, in fact, no medium is privileged or completely open. As Blake might have said, every medium has its form and its spectre.

What we need, then, is a Blakean “spectral analysis” of the Net. A “Fourier analysis” would also be useful (not Fourier the mathematician, Fourier the Utopian Socialist). But these philosophers were true hermeticists, while we can only heap up a few shards against the whatever.

The implied question:—does the Net further the purpose of communicativeness, and can it be used as a tool to “maximize the potential of the emergence” of convivial situations? Or does there exist a “paradoxical counterproductive effect” (as Illich would say)? In other words: the sociology of institutions shows that certain systems (e.g. education, medicine) attain a monopolistic rigidity and begin to produce the opposite of their intended effect (education stupefies, medicine sickens). Media can also be analyzed in this way. The mass media, considered as a paradoxical entity, has approached the limit of total image-enclosure—a crisis of the stasis of the image—and of the complete disappearance of communicativeness. The unique structure of the InterNet was considered to be its “many-to-many” patterns, the implication being the possibility of an electronic popular democracy. The Net is an institution, at least in the loose sense of the word. Does it serve its “original” purpose, or is there a paradoxical counter-effect?

Another original pattern within the Net is its centerlessness (its “military” heritage); this has launched the Net into a kind of war with governments. The Net “crosses borders” like a virus. But in this way the Net shares certain qualities with, say, transnational corporations (“zaibatsus”)—and with nomadic Capital itself. “Nomadism” has its own form and spectre. As the Five Per Cent Nation of Islam puts it, “not every brother is a brother.” Molecularity is a tactic that can be used for or against our autonomy. It pays to be informed. And we can be sure that Global Intelligence pays well for its information;—certainly the Net is by now completely penetrated by surveillance...every bit of E-mail is a postcard to God....

Everyone’s favorite examples of imaginative insurrectionary use of the Net—the McLibel Case, the Scientology Case, and above all the Zapatistas—prove that the centerless many-to-many structure has real potential. [McDonald’s won the battle but seems to be losing the war—franchises are down 50%!] Luddites who deny this are simply making themselves look uninformed—and badly disposed toward good causes. The original Luddites were no indiscriminate machine-smashers—they intended to defend their hand-looms and home labor against mechanization and factory centralization. Everything depends on situation, and technology is only one factor in a complex and many-valued situation. Exactly what is it here that needs to be smashed?

Global Capital openly embraces the Net because the Net seems to have the same structure as Global Capital. It proclaims the Net as the Future Now, and protects the netizens from these bad old governments. Why, the Net is the very paradigm of a Free Market, no? A Libertarian’s dream. But secretly Global Capital [pardon the pathetic fallacy—gosh, I just can’t help reifying Capital...]... secretly, Global Capital must be worried sick. Billions of “start up” dollars have been sunk into the Net, but the Net seems to act like an eclipsed body:—there’s some penumbral effect, but the planet is black. Or even a black hole. After all, Hawking proved that even black holes produce a tiny bit of energy—a few million bucks maybe. But essentially there is no money in the Net, and no money coming out of it. It seems the Net can act metaphorically as a “street market” to some extent (possibly to a much greater extent that it does)—but it has failed to develop into a Big Market. The WWW doesn’t seem to help much in this respect. “Virtual Reality” is beginning to look like yet another lost future. IntraNets, point-casting (push), and “interactive television” are the strategies proposed by the Zaibatsus for colonizing what’s left of the Net. E-cash doesn’t seem to be catching on.

Meanwhile the Net takes on an aspect not only of disembodied street fair but also psychic slum. Predatory avatars—disinformationists—slave-labor data-entry in US prisons—cyberrape (violation of the data body)—invisible surveillance—waves of panic (K-porn, Nazis-on-the-Net, etc.)—massive invasion of privacy—advertisements—all manner of psychic pollution. Not to mention the possibility of bionic brainwashing, carpal tunnel syndrome, and the sinister all-gray-green presence of the machines themselves, like old sci-fi movie sets (future as bad design).

In fact, just as Gibson predicted, the Net is already virtually haunted. Web cemeteries for dead cyber-pets—false obituaries—Tim Leary still sending personal messages—ascended masters of Heaven’s Gate—not to mention the already vast lost archaeology of the Net, its ARPA levels, old BBSs, forgotten languages, abandoned Webpages. In fact, as someone said at the last NETTIME conference in Ljubljana, the Net has already become a kind of romantic ruin. And here, at the most “spectral” level of our analysis, suddenly, the Net begins to look...interesting again. A bit of gothic horror. Seduction of the Cyber Zombies. Fin-de-millennium, hothouse flowers, laudanum.

However.

We live in a country where 1% of the population controls half the money—in a world where fewer than 400 people control half the money—where 94.2% of all the money refers only to money, and not to production of any kind (except of money);—a country with the highest per capita prison population in the world, where “security” is the only growth-industry (except for entertainment), where an insane war on drugs and the environment is conceived as the last valid function of government;—a world of ecocide, agribusiness, deforestation, murder of indigenous peoples, bioengineering, forced labor—a world built on the assumption that maximum profit for 500 companies is the best plan for humanity—a world in which the total image has absorbed and suffocated the voices and minds of every speaker—in which the image of exchange has taken the place of all human relations.

Instead of bleating liberal platitudes about all this—or raising the disturbing question of “ethics”—let me simply comment as a Stirnerian anarchist (a point of view I still find useful after all these years):—since I presume to take the world as my oyster, I am personally at war with all the above “facts” because they violate my desires and deny me my pleasures. Therefore I seek alliances with other individuals (in a “union of self-owning-ones”) who share my goals. For the leftwing Stirnerites the favored tactic was always the General Strike (the Sorelian myth). In response to Global Capital we need a new version of this myth that can include syndicalist structures but not be limited by them. The old enemy of the anarchists was always the State. We still have the State to worry about (police in the universal Mall), but clearly the real enemies are the zaibatsus and banks. (The biggest mistake in revolutionary history was the failure to seize the Bank in Paris, 1871.) In the very near future there is going to be “war” against the WTO/IMF/GATT structure of Global Capital — a war of sheer desperation, waged by a worldfull of individuals and organic groups against corporations and “the money power” (i.e. money itself). Hopefully a peaceful war, like a big General Strike — but realistically one should prepare for the worst. And what we need to know is, what can the InterNet do for us?

Obviously a good revolt needs good communication systems. Right now however I’d prefer to transmit my conspiratorial secrets (if I had any) through the Post Office rather than the Net. A really successful conspiracy leaves no paper trail, like the Libyan Revolution of 1969 (but then, phone-tapping was still fairly primitive then). Moreover, how could we be sure that what we saw on the Net was information and not disinformation? Especially if our organization existed only on the Net? Speaking as a Stirnerite, I don’t want to banish spooks from my head only to find them again on my screen. Virtual street-fighter, virtual ruins. Sounds like a losing proposition.

Most disturbing for us would be the “gnostic” quality of the Net, its tendency toward exclusion of the body, its promise of technological transcendence of the flesh. Even if some people have “met through the Net”, the general movement is toward atomization—“slumped alone in front of the screen”. The “movement” today pays too much attention to media in general because power has virtually eluded us—and within the speculum of the Net its reflection mocks us. Net as substitute for conviviality and communicativeness. Net as bad religion. Part of the media-trance. The commodification of difference.

Aside from this criticism of the Net from the point of view of the Individual Sovereign we could also launch an analysis from a Fourierite position. Here instead of individuals we would consider the “series”, the basic Passional group without which the single human remains incomplete—and the Phalanstery, or complete Series of Series (minimum 1620 members). But the goal remains the same:—grouping occurs to maximize pleasures or “luxury” for the members of the group, Passion being the only viable force for social cohesion. (In fact on this basis we might con-

sider a “synthesis” of Stirner and Fourier, apparently polar opposites). For Fourier, Passion is by definition embodied; all “networking” is carried out via physical presence (although he allows carrier pigeons for communications between Phalansteries). As a number mystic, Fourier might well have enjoyed the computer—in fact he invented “computer dating” in a sense—but he would most certainly have disapproved of any technology that involved physical separation. (I believe it was Balzac who said that for Fourier the only sin was eating lunch alone.) Conviviality in the most literal sense—ideally, the orgy. “Passional Attraction” works because everyone has different Passions:—difference is already “luxury”. The data body, the screenal body, is only metaphorically a body. The space between us—the “medium”—is meant to be filled with Aromal Rays, zodiacs of brilliant light (new colors!), profusions of fruit and flowers, the aromas of gastrosophic cuisine—and ultimately that space is meant to be closed, healed.

Another critique of the Net could be made from a Proudhonian perspective. (Proudhon was influenced by Fourier, though he pretended not to be. They were both from Bezançon, like Victor Hugo.) Proudhon was more “progressive” about technology than our other exemplars, and it would be interesting to see what kind of role he would design for the Net in his ideal future of Mutualism and anarcho-federation. For him “governance” was a matter of mere administration of production and exchange. Computers might prove to be useful tools under such conditions. But Proudhon as well as Marx would undoubtedly modify their optimistic view of technology if they could be channeled today for their opinion:—machine as social pollution, technology itself (and by implication Work) as alienation. This argument was of course made by libertarian Marxists, Green anarchists, etc.—legitimate descendants of Marx and Proudhon, such as Marcuse or Illich. The InterNet cannot be fairly considered outside this critique of technology. (Neither can bioengineering.) The work of Benjamin, Debord, and even Baudrillard (until he fell exhausted) makes it clear that the total image—“the media”—plays a central role in this critique. Proudhon would question the Net about justice, and about presence.

But I would prefer to focus more narrowly on the question of the image. Here we might return to Blake as our “philosophical hammer” (Nietzsche really meant a kind of tuning fork), since we are speaking of the idol, the image. I would argue that we are suffering from a crisis of overproduction of the image. We are, as Giordano Bruno put it, “in chains”, entranced by the image. In such a case we need either a healthy dose of iconoclasm, or else (or also) a more subtle kind of hermetic criticism, a liberation from the image by the image. Actually, Blake supplied both—he was both an idol-smasher and simultaneously a hermeticist who used images for liberation, both political and spiritual. Hermeticists understand that the “hieroglyph”, the image/text or mediated (symbolic) communication, has a “magical” effect, by-passing linear working rational consciousness and deeply influencing the psyche. This is why Blake says one must make one’s own system or else be a slave to someone else’s. The autonomy of the imagination is a high value for hermeticism—and the critique of the image is the defense of the imagination. The screen is an aspect of the image that cannot escape this “spectral analysis”—media as “satanic mills.”

Ultimately it seems there’s no escape from technology or alienation. Techné itself is prosthesis of consciousness, and thus inseparable from the human condition. (Language is included here as techné.) Technology as the obvious melding of techné and language (the ratio or “reason” of techné) has simply been a category of human existence since at least the Paleolithic. But—are we permitted to ask at what point the heart itself is to be replaced by an artificial limb? At what point does a given technology “flip” and begin producing paradoxical counterproductivity? If we could reach a consensus on this, would there still exist any reason to speak of technological deter-

minism, or the machinic as fate? In this sense, the oldtime Luddites deserve some consideration. Techné must serve the human, not define the human.

We must (apparently) accept the inevitability of consciousness, but only on the condition that is not to be the same consciousness. We suspect that rational, machinic, linear, aufklaerung, universal consciousness has enjoyed too long a tyranny—or “monopoly”. There’s nothing wrong with reason (in fact we could use a lot more of it) but rationalism feels like a passé ideology. Reason must share space with other forms of consciousness:—entheogenic consciousness, or shamanic consciousness (which has nothing to do with “religion” as commonly defined)—bioconsciousness, the systemic awareness of the hermetic ideal of the living earth—cultural or ethnic consciousness, different ways of seeing—indigenous peoples—or the Celts—or Islam—“identity” consciousness of all sorts—and trans-identity consciousness. Variety of consciousness would seem to be the only possible ground for our ethics.

Well then, what about InterNet consciousness? It has its non-linear aspects, doesn’t it? If there can exist a “rationality of the marvelous”, is there not a place for Net mind at the feast?

In the end we must be content with ambiguity. A “pure” answer is impossible here—it would stink of ideology. Yes and no.

But—“Between Yes and No, stars fall from heaven and heads fly off at the neck”, as the great sufi Shaykh Ibn Arabi told the Aristotelian philosopher Averöes.

A fitting image for a romantic ruin....

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