

**Introduction to Philippe Breton's *The Culture of the Internet and the Internet as Cult: Social Fears and Religious Fantasies*
(Translated by David Bade)
Litwin Books, 2011**

The rhetorical and financial speculative economy of the Internet that arose in the 1990s and crashed in the early 2000s is one of several information society/information ages that have occurred in the 20th century; though, arguably, none had the speculative financial and social power that this one did. As Philippe Breton (in this book) and others have chronicled, the rhetoric of the 'information society' and the 'information age' was linked to several other rhetorical-socio-cultural, economic, and even political assemblages—the British 'third way,' the American (and others') 'new economy,' regulation school post-Fordism, Knowledge Management, earlier post-industrialist discourses (Daniel Bell and others), and, overall, what became known as neo-liberal 'globalism.'

As Breton's book argues, this 'information age' rhetoric and discourse was a religious fervor whose main virtue—particularly in the eyes of those who profited from it—was to promote the infusion of computers and 'information' into all areas of life in the name of bettering the world. Not coincidentally, such a discourse in certain geographical areas (e.g., San Francisco's Bay Area) also was tied to hyper-inflation in property values, and, throughout the United States, to a stock market bubble and the social devaluation and neglect—following the Reagan era near-destruction—of the industrial, governmental, and service sector working classes. Technological and economic speculative determinisms often go hand in hand, particularly in a financial-led economy. The conditions for the last information age in the United States can be found in Reagan, Bush 1, and Clinton era deregulation and their attacks on the welfare state and unionization (i.e., upon the working body).

The appearance of Breton's book in English ten years after its publication in French in 2000 raises several issues. First, it has to be recognized that Breton's critique certainly seems to have been an attempt at a timely intervention into the hyper-speculative rhetoric regarding the Internet, linking American so-called 'neo-liberal' economic theory (itself politically rightist) and libertarian 'Californian Ideology' (critiqued by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron) with French language kin (foremost, Pierre

Lévy's works). Such interventions at the time were rare enough, particularly in the United States. In retrospect, the appearance of this book both charts the absolute absurdity, self-contradictions, and social violence that made such a discourse on 'the virtual' possible and popular, and it provokes questions regarding what remains of such and has come after.

Perhaps two of the most penetrating critiques that Breton cites belong, not surprisingly, to literary works that precede the information age/society rhetoric and discourses of the recent period. (As Breton points out, the speculative rhetoric of that period was the culmination of a long run up, and as I suggest, it has a long tail.) The examples belong to the sixth chapter of Breton's book and are those of Isaac Asimov's *Naked Sun*, and later in time, J.G. Ballard's short story, 'The Intensive Care Unit,' a short story in which family members whose relations have been only televisually established engage in patricide and matricide when they actually have a bodily meeting. Whereas the writings at the time of the bad philosophe Lévy and the self-serving Bill Gates explained the information society/age for the perceived masses, it required fiction writers—particularly, skilled and in some ways perverse science fiction writers—to describe, based on observations of recent past social psychologies, the psycho- and the 'psychotechno-pathologies' of the present and the future. Characteristically, the displaced Brit, Ballard, pushed to the then seeming limit a description of a society and world in which 'reason' and 'harmony' are expressions of paranoia and violence, all brought to fruition by the ubiquity of communication and capitalist libertarianism and economic 'liberalism.'

The crescendo of Breton's work thus appears in its last chapter in regard to the relation of ubiquitous computer mediated communication (CMC) to the social bond. In Lévy's works, as in so many others of the period, the 'Internet' is, simply, the means to the global village. Read retrospectively, however, CMC appears in some essential aspects nothing less than horrifying. For, technologies, especially information and communication technologies, don't determine futures, but rather, they allow the expression of what is essential to human beings at a period and place to be expressed in the short and long term. The utopian views of those technologies are nothing more than dreams, having reworked given social and personal drives into wish fulfillments. Over time, however, the traumas and violence work themselves out in the social deployment and use of the technologies. As Ballard showed in his book, *Crash*, cars, built for eased transportation, become the expression of desire, jouissance, and the destruction of persons and nature as they become faster and bigger. Airplanes that were meant to

ferry us across the Atlantic and Pacific now often keep us for days in a steady state of anxiety as we wait to take off or land or even get on a plane because of the crowded air spaces of deregulated commercialized flight. Television and cinema began by transmitting images and now ends by transmitting overloaded multimedia affects and eventually immersive actions. Telephones start with a telephonic means of ‘reaching out and touching’ someone, and they end with our ‘hanging on the telephone’ all day long and now in whatever circumstances, longing to be touched. Technical devices, thanks to their relentless logic in key social and personal sites, turn into technologies of pathologies (which were originally the ‘unconscious’ of their desired invention).

Thus, too, the Internet well serves both the ‘long-tail’ of desire and memory (particularly in its commodity forms) and the ‘short-tail’ of paranoia and narcissism. Whereas the easy to read and elegiac futurisms of Gates, Lévy, and others assured us of the future, it is in the punctuated and even ranting critiques into the mass of elegiac, but self-contradictory, claims of these discourses that one finds the starting point to an awareness of the real. As Ballard’s short story indicates and as Breton’s piece leads up to in its culmination upon the problem of the social bond, not surprisingly the critical understanding of CMC is less purely technological and more psychological. (It is for this reason that rhetorical, financial, and technological economies were so tightly tied together during this most recent ‘information age’ and why these information ages tend to appear and disappear, erasing behind them their own historical traces.)

CMC has evolved and continues to evolve as a highly mobile, fragmented, means of forming and denying the social bond, across virtual or distant, and local relations, respectively. As Breton highlights, the ‘denial of the body’ and the celebration of the virtual and the ‘post-human’ in the discourses that he critiques are a continuing challenge to humanist notions of personal and social being. Indeed, perhaps in this ‘all too human’ picture, we see the traces of our own particular animality: CMC affords an unprecedented amount of dalliance and tribalism and a denial of the Sartrean ‘hell’ of other people in face to face contact. In CMC, ‘the representational animal’ of today has found a way to live with itself and others. Here, too, at least in the United States today—echoing the development and use of radio and television in the U.S. and Europe early in the 20th century (e.g., Weimar Germany)—, factionalism and extremisms become more powerful, though the governing ideology remains intact and actually drives these to greater

expressive force. The limits upon the ego are protected and released in the plethora and reach of CMC.

This, to my mind at least, is what Breton's book leads up to: the problem of the relation of CMC to a social logic of paranoia and narcissism that is at the core of the logic of capitalism. As Breton indicates, and as the entire discursive and practical social informatics (i.e., Knowledge Management, 'New Economy,' etc.) of the recent information age shows, CMC has developed along the lines of a social psychology of agony. That agony is the need for social touch within a moral logic, politics, and psychology of capitalism. The end result is a deferment of the social bond to the furthest regions of the networked earth, and as the popular info-lit suggests, to the ends of thought (even divorced from the body).

Certainly, the picture of the Internet here is neither utopian nor dystopian. It is a realist picture akin to those works of Ballard's compatriot, the painter Francis Bacon, where the body melts out through the pathological extension of certain materially leveraged all-too-human traits. The subject's liquefied flesh hangs off the body, thanks to the technology of communication—in Bacon's works, paint, in CMC, transmitted words.

All of this, of course, does not address the tremendous good that networked communication can provide for research communities, scholarship, learning, distant friendships and communities, and even—hopefully—for the continuation of us along with those non-human animals whose presence on the internet seems more than any other thing to be depictive. Such, however, is neither Breton's scope nor is it the scope of the psychological pathology of the 'information age' and the 'information society.' The demarcation of the limits of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary in regard to technologies is very difficult to do, not the least because such questions are further inflected through specific groups and individuals. In this way, there is in reality no 'Internet.' But, in modernity we have been and still are very much shaped and governed by larger ideological and economic tropes and mechanisms, as well. It is the critique of these that still very much escapes the 'positivism' of the age, in every sense of the term. It is into the psychological and ideological-technical 'bubble' of the recent past and still remaining present information age that Breton's book bravely dives and engages.

Ronald E. Day
University, Bloomington

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