

“What is ‘Cyberculture’?: Digital Culture and Critical Information Theory”

Ronald E. Day

“Critical Cyberculture Studies Conference,” University of Maryland, April 26-27, 2002

ABSTRACT

This talk discusses the status of the term “cyberculture” as a historicist category within modernity, and the relation of critical theory to such a term. It advocates a materialist critique of such terms as “cyberculture,” “the information age,” and “the information society.” It discusses the psychological and social affects and effects of a “textualization of sociality” vis-à-vis recent information and communication technologies. And it suggests, through a reassertion of the Enlightenment notion of freedom as a historical event (as theorized in the 20th century in the works of Heidegger, Nancy, and Negri), similarities between current experiences of the technological sublime in regard to the Internet, and Enlightenment, premodernist, experiences of the technological sublime in regard to manufacturing production and commodities.

I.

Reading through a somewhat misrepresented classic in the area of information technology and culture, Shoshana Zuboff’s *In The Age of the Smart Machine*, I came across a phrase that echoed the Foucauldian, and more generally, the French post-structuralist sources for her worries concerning the proliferation of computer mediated communication in the workplace, and in culture in general. In that text, Zuboff expresses concerns for what she calls the “textualization of sociality.” I think that this is a key concept in exploring what we might mean when we say that we exist in a “digital culture.” It is also a key term, of course, for understanding the function of critical theory in such a culture, since the tradition of critical theory is one of intervening in social representations of existence, particularly as such representations are tied to economic production and historical reproduction. I believe that the intersection of critical theory and the concept of the “textualization of sociality” by means of digital communication and information technologies gives rise to a study that I will term, with a slight deviation to the conference title (a deviation whose reasons will be indicated later), “critical information studies.”

As Zuboff indicates in her book, if the advent of the mass introduction of digital computational devices and telecommunicational equipment into social space and human organizations of all sorts are to be seen as having produced any genuine

cultural changes and social ramifications, certainly we must recognize that such introductions have resulted in the broad mediation of social spaces by textual objects. This is no small point, and it suggests an increase in scale whereby the effects of such 'real subsumptions' by textual—and broadly—signifying sources has produced noticeable social and psychological effects. We needn't engage in analogizing "digital culture" along lines of post-structuralism in order to see that the social, and with it, sociality (that is, affects) are increasingly textualized, creating a real life "écriture générale," with all the problems of logocentrism and what Derrida read as the hidden life of *différance* within that social writing. Indeed, as I will suggest throughout this paper (and as I suggested in my book, *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power*), the history of information in modernity is precisely the struggle between information as fact, as mind, as totality, ("information") and, information as spacing, as affect, as *différance* ("information," or better, as Paul Otlet wrote, "in-formé"). In this, our contemporary concepts of "information" and the "information age" suggest the most recent moment of a history of forgetting the power of what we might term, "cultural metaphysics," and along with that forgetting, the subsumption or culmination of those previous ages and technologies in an even greater event of presence, though of course with such presence (whether in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of "multimedia" or within the "global village" of the Internet), there is also the hidden *différance* that haunts it.

II.

Historically speaking, within the critical application of Derrida's notion of *écriture générale* in textual engagements that came to be known as "deconstruction," there were, of course, whole series of conceptual, and thus, historical and social displacements, largely engaging historical assumptions, epistemic conceptualizations, and rhetorical tropes of "inside" and "outside." Now, the irony is that in the post-Fordist conditions that Zuboff and many others since have described, capital has, as Baudillard has indicated, subsumed even dialectics. At least in terms of private/public distinctions, economic production now occupies many of our lives 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We need only think of our email access (that is, our email's access to us), to realize that capital has overcome the crisis of the personal life, shifting it onto the symbolic plane of production, 24/7. If existentialist crises now look like moments of teenage angst it is because they are moments that, historically, are seen as immature, something to be gotten over toward greater productivity. Many of us, I'm sure, will exhale a breath of relief in shedding this burden of Heideggerian or worse, Sartrean angst; capital's subsumption of experience, knowledge, and life onto a plane of the reproduction of the formally same is never simply cooptive, but involves some degree of individual choice and desire. In psychology's discourse of Terror Management Theory, following Freud, such an escape from a direct awareness of death is read in terms of the rites and rituals of culture, foremost self-identity. I would prefer to read this

reaction-formation to the utmost certain uncertainty in terms of a totality, that is an “age” or “society” of “information.”

Now, I would like to digress for a moment. It is interesting to think about the term “cyberculture,” as in the title of this conference. This term, in my opinion, cannot help but inscribe itself in the etymology that Norbert Wiener gives in his book *Cybernetics* to this neologism that he coined. There, you may recall, Wiener describes how the term came out of the Ancient Greek word “kubernotos” or as Wiener renders this, “steersman.” What is important, here, is that Wiener chose this term in order to describe his attempt to steer human agency according to systems theories, driven by feedback and probabilistic statistics. As we know, statistics are retrogressive, and it is for this very reason that they are seen as having power in planned production. Some authors, such as Marazzi and Di Giorgi, have attempted to read the State’s policing of contemporary society as largely conducted by actuarial norms, and this certainly corresponds to both Wiener’s liberal, Cold War sense of a just society and, also, Warren Weaver’s notion of a language made up of what is statistically possible to say. The term, “cyberculture,” within the history of cybernetics and information theory, thus implies what Deleuze, in a misreading of Foucault’s “disciplinary” society, termed the “control society.” Such a control society, constituted by statistical norms, and feedback and control in relation to those norms, is exactly what Wiener had in mind with his book title: *The Human Use of Human Beings*.

Now let us return to our main theme. If “cyberculture” or the control society signifies a system or interlinking systems of symbolic capital into which the private sphere is now emptied, and this symbolic system or systems is totalizing or in Marx’s phrase for the last phase of capitalist subsumption, the symbolic becomes “real,” where then can we posit what Heidegger, and what Jean-Luc Nancy after him has referred to as the “event of freedom,” or even, in the words of the French writers of ’68, simply “events” in general? And can the event (of freedom) be posited, at all, along the lines of contemporary information and communication technologies?

If we follow the history of critical theory, the possibilities offered are not promising. Traditional Marxist dialects have been cancelled out via the subsumption of crisis or interruption within terms of the very ontology of desire and capital itself (but only in so far as desire has fled the ultimate crisis of death and has made its home on the much more comfortable plane of symbolic or commodity production). And, the individual of existentialism, as I have indicated earlier, has been subsumed, or more probably, has fled with good reason to the relative comfort of products or formally normative production routines. These days, traditional dialectical revolution and existential holding out don’t seem very good options for locating freedom.

In the 1990s some writers, such as Rheingold and Grossman, literally or ideologically associated with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, attempted to posit freedom via the construction of an electronic commons. This vision of the Internet

as a place of political, aesthetic, social, or even, psychological liberation was naïve not simply because of the commercialization of the Internet, but more determinately, because of the simple problem of population or information overload. Social spaces become formally organized, and eventually hierarchical, as they increase in the number of participants, the amount of information and/or the time pressures pushed upon them. Subsequently, the Internet now more resembles a 'community' of micro-groups, rather than the earlier projections of resembling a 'world-mind' or even a global Jeffersonian direct democracy.

The notion of the "commons," has not, however, been abandoned by the digital Left. Negri and Hardt in their book, *Empire*, and Negri in *Kairós*, *Alma Venus*, *Multitudo*, understands the term "commons" in terms of the construction of a common name or concept out of the in-common attributes that the multitude share with one another (following Spinoza's understanding that substance is understood by human beings according to two of substance's attributes, namely, extension (i.e., bodies) and intellect (i.e., thought)). For Negri, electronic communication devices are one means through which the in-common may express itself via the construction of common names or concepts.

But with such arguments as Negri's, we have something more or less than "digital culture." If the term "the digital" may be understood as a symbol of a general economy, we may see in Negri's two Spinozian attributes a sort of expressionist deconstruction of the binary duality and the *Aufhebung* of individual bodies and minds that the term "cyber" sometimes embraces (though often this term acts as a synonym for an equally reifying and historicist term, namely, "the virtual" (as in Pierre Lévy's works)). Negri's withdrawal from the rhetoric of liberation, progress, and the modernist new that often surrounded the Internet during the 1990s (which his writing, too, seemed to embrace at one time (see his 1989 book, *The Politics of Subversion*)), may be best expressed by Franco ("Bifo") Berardi's comment in his book on the 1960s and 70s Italian workerist movement, *Potere Operaio*, that what interests Berardi more than the Internet itself is its basis in the social net. The vision that Negri expresses, particularly in his recent book, *Kairós*, *Alma Venus*, *Multitudo*, even above his coauthored works with Hardt, is one where the body is neither subsumed nor forgotten with the Internet. In Spinoza we may remember, body and thought are simply two different perceived attributes of substance, not two different components of substance nor the one being a concrete actualization of self and the other being an abstract actualization of self (a Hegelianism that Lévy's work fully enjoys). The body, here, is not one signal of a binary code, as it were, but rather, it constitutes a weight within the Internet that cannot be forgotten.

For the fact is that the Internet is both more or less than it is said to be. If substance in the form of the "individual" experiences itself, today, pushed beyond its own personal limits by the Internet, then it experiences itself falling back upon itself as the common body, because of the very conditions of overload that the Internet pushes it through.. (The experience of the common body was, after all, the result of

the experience of the sublime, as expressed from Kant to Wordsworth, and it was no less the experience of the factory worker or the city dweller in the 19th century, as well.)

What so-called “knowledge worker,” today, does not know the experience of overload, courtesy of the Internet? In Berardi’s words, global cyberspace may be infinite, but cybertime, namely, not only the attention capacity of the individual body, but also, his or her very capacity for attention are, today, often exhausted by the Internet. This overload of material and the exhaustion of attention is the real reason behind the collapse of the information highway and the dot.com economy and society. What haunts the Idea of the Internet is, precisely, the Internet, or rather, human bodies in relation to the Internet. We are experiencing the limits of our ability—not to mention our want or need—to be infinitely available and affected. Information-as-fact is haunted by too many “facts,” and the necessity that such “facts” do, indeed, need to be interpreted, and thus, requires our attention and understanding. The commons is, in a sense, too common; it is not the ‘world mind’ that such early modernists as Paul Otlet and H.G. Wells saw as reducible to a set—or even a virtual library—of facts, but instead, the commons is a spacing of meaning, that is, of affects, that demand our listening and our understanding, but in so doing, spread us out and exhaust through this technology. This is true even of more diversionary informational devices, such as games. We are driven to overload, and in that, knowledge becomes information, information becomes diversion and distraction, and even diversion and distraction lead to a breakdown in the sensory apparatus, not to mention cognition and understanding. In short, we are driven to distraction and breakdown by the bewildering multiplicity of our commonness, and this naturally, produces a demand for order. Wordsworth could not imagine how much “the world is too much with us” today. Cyberculture is paranoia, not because it is rooted in control, but because it demands control out of its infinite difference. “Information,” in other words, is a demand brought about by an uncertainty rooted in a globalized vision of knowledge that we call in modernity, “information.” This is to say that information breeds the demand for more information—a greater formation—to contain an “it” that then becomes more multiple. The totalitarian vision that Otlet and Well had of information as leading to a “world mind” is a logical consequence of the proliferation of knowledge and information. One must remember that the great European documentalist Paul Otlet was a bibliographer working to control the proliferation of knowledge that he himself encouraged and added to.

III.

If there is any hope in “escaping” this hyper-extension, and then reification and collapse of episteme and affect in modernity, it will lie, as it always did, in the experiences of affects at the position of ‘the body’ and in the local contradictions that thought finds itself in as it collapses back to the body and to its affects and

finitude, including those embodied in language. But this “naked life” that I read the body here as, has neither the saintly form of Negri and Hardt’s figure of St. Francis of Assisi nor is it the complexity and the positive potentiality of Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs.” Rather, it is a body of irreducible differences vis-à-vis its always already constituted relations with others. Cyberspace is then part of this, but it can also be a narrowing of this, however interesting and engaging for desire, onto a symbolic plane. At its worse, exchanges become linkages, knowledge becomes information, needs and the affects of passion are turned or turn themselves into the machinery of desire. Information, as librarians are fond of saying, is a good thing, but sometimes too much of this ‘good thing’ leads to, in the words of one of the works of the 1960s conceptual artist, Robert Smithson, a “heap of language.” At the end of the hyper-links lies an ecstasy of information, and there we awake to exhaustion and sameness; we have run a good race chasing the hare of the links, but where are we? In other words, can we name what is valuable in this ecstasy that is now--or since the Internet is always expanding—was, the “Internet” when we were on “it”? What is the result of an ek-static being so overwhelmingly (both in weight and duration) symbolic?

But like Heidegger’s aping of Hölderlin, I would say that here, at the end of what can turn out to be a run with techne, lies the “saving grace.” The saving grace lies in an irreducible mixture of affects that start our notion of “in-formation,” only to see it possibly turn into the paranoia and exhaustion of “information” and its overload upon us. “Cyber,” here, then must be understood as only another part of space; a certain technologies in the spaces of meaning that make up a life and make up a world. And a technology, I might add, whose history is still, very much, to be written and critically thought.

This may seem a rather ‘unpositive’ reading of freedom in cyberspace and a rather poor sketch of the revolutionary possibilities of critical theory in regard to cyberspace. Yes, I would agree. There is no freedom in cyberspace, because there is no cyberspace; there is political space, there is social space, and there are technologies that allow us to create extensions and additions within present notions of such spaces. As to critical theory, it can do nothing other than critically engage the productionist—psychological, social, and economic—epistemes and practices of modernity that have funneled the Enlightenment hope of freedom into those values of desire, exploitation, and profit that are held so dear today. Re-opening the relation between production and substance (i.e., body and intellect), and allowing something to grow there other than “progress,” a pseudo-revolutionary experience of ecstasy, and other values of modernist capitalization, however, seems to me to engage in a return to the Enlightenment hope of “freedom,” and this is the task that I read into critical theory throughout modernity. And this opening can only be local—whether with the Internet or not—that is, there can be no “hyper” linkage across freedom. There can be no reduction of freedom to information, and information alone (whatever that is) will never create freedom as an event (though it can help bring it about, as it acts according to the practice of in-forming). The event of freedom does not lie in the links or in their process, but in the spaces

between, where they are understood by a body as affects at this time, and toward another unforeseen, and still im-possible, time.

The purpose, here, of course, is to speak of the conditions through which history can be given back its time—namely, the time of what can be historical, a time that history never properly loses, but one which, however, can be denied to the agents of history. And to do this, we must free the historical from production narratives that see the values embodied by bodies and thought as products of systems, as products of “facts,” as products of the “proper management” of bodies and intellects, and as a product of a desire without passion, that is, without the base of local, material necessity. We must free it to the affective locations of the body and intellect on various, heterogenous levels, and we must resist the seduction of “cyber” narratives that promise a technological or social *Aufhebung*.

Paranoia (and eventually, from overload, boredom) is the result of panic, and panic is a result of a feeling of running out of time. The event of freedom is--and has been, not simply “since the dawn of the Enlightenment,” but as the Enlightenment as a dawn, that is, as a space of hope, as a state of being always already here and yet still to come, that is, as the hope for time itself—that of a struggle in reclaiming a sense of temporality that, in modernity, has been subsumed and sublimated into production. If critical information theory can act upon the ideology and historiography of modern concepts of information (what Maldonado has termed as a whole, “informatic reason”) and so, release events back into their material commonality, then it will have acted both to advance information and to deconstruct its reification as an “age” in progress, that is, as an age that gathers (*Aufhebung*) previous ages and previous events into a pre-established “information society.”

Is there, then, a “digital culture”? Perhaps, or perhaps we live within the vision of one, a vision that already exhausts itself (and us with it), in its intensifying repetitions. If so, then digital culture repeats that banging rhythm of the movie projector that Benjamin marked as the beginnings and the always already innate ends of modernity and its bustling life of busyness. (Information “ages” begin with technologies, pass through analogical or allegorical readings of technology in terms of social meanings, and then end with those readings being expressed by actual psychological and social affects, as those readings have been substantiated in organizational and social means of production and reproduction.) Critical agency thus, in part, shares the pen of Benjamin’s Baudelaire, stabbing his or her pen into the white paper—or computer screen—like a human dagger in the midst of a crowded (cyber) space, but also, now, dragging the crowd back into the movement of the hand, the importance of holding signifying trains in the affective gesture. The attempt, it seems to me, is similar, even if it is politics that must now be expressed aesthetically and no longer (as in mid-modernity) aesthetics that must be made political. Namely, to place the in-common of physiology in the midst of the symbolic. To never forget the physiological and material dimensions of the digital or “cyber” and to reclaim it again and again from its reproduction through modernity’s unity of technology and technique. And it seems to me that no subsuming transformation of

'the body' onto a reified plane of symbolic production will ever—or can ever—do that. Instead, it can only be done on multiple planes, grounded in the problem of time as a affective totality. And since we are still so very modern—and what else could we mean by saying that we live in the information age or that there is "cyberspace"?—this means that critical theory remains as the underside—or specter—of the modern. That is, as a means to the event of freedom and to the reality of historical agency and time in the midst of production and all of modernist production's resultant historiographical tropes and its psychological and social modes of being and affects.

The information age has come and has been forgotten before, and it will come and be forgotten again. It is known by its tropes, its psychological and social effects, and by its shaping of the modes of production according to epistemes of presence or accumulation. But with each return, its other seems to haunt it more and more deeply, stretching it to further contradictions and stretching us further to exhaustion. Panic is the result of overproduction, but only in so far that overproduction is not economically effective. The repetitions of the modern—that is, a certain sense of the postmodern—are the sounds of modernity's loose ends. It is in these loose ends (even in the midst of the boredom and distraction that their bundling in entertainment produces) that life breaths, as Benjamin saw, just below the dialectic of historical progress. It seems to me that in these loose ends--but only in so far as they act as caesuras pressing against the dictates of historicist progress--lie the hopes inherent in postmodernity.