

(The Italian short version appeared in l'Unità, November 7, 2012, and here is the full version, in English /geert)

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Teresa Numerico: One of the most interesting ideas that you suggest in your book, and I completely agree with you, is that the virtual is becoming more and more real, in the sense of a steady colonization of the virtual from the point of view of real lives. Can you discuss this colonization effect and its consequences (data mining etc.)?

Geert Lovink: Let's start with saying that I am not a Deleuzian. In our context of the internet the virtual is not a general philosophical category. The virtual is not becoming. It is real, and it is often boring too. It crashes and breaks down. In short, it is not all too romantic, post-Fordist sphere of labour. There is nothing potential about it. Maybe this is the biggest difference between these days and the roaring mid-nineties. There is no alternative in the virtual, it is not a place for escape, even though in the Italian context, at the time of the media monopoly of Berlusconi, internet culture was seen as a promised land. The cyber counterculture was always taken more serious here than in other countries. It is a question if we can at all speak about the virtual as a space of collective imagination. For me the virtual is first and foremost a military-corporate battle ground, an abstract information space which is in the making, where large political-economic interests and concepts are clashing. It is exciting to take part in debates over protocols, software, interfaces and network cultures but, to be honest, there is not much utopia to be found out there. But yes, it is an interesting question if the everyday lives are being colonized by smart phones, wifi etc. as this also implies a possible anti-colonial struggle for liberation.

TN: In your book you hypothesize that "an important aspect of media literacy is the ability to walk away from the screen" and the "slow communication" ideal. Can you explain how is it possible to teach people to understand when it is time to walk away, and why do you think that this is a crucial capability?

GL: Where are our bodily and mental limits in this virtual place? We don't always know thus and each of us will have to found out about it by experience. We all have to learn it the hard way that you have work on your posture, weight, eyes and so on if you spend longer periods of time on the computer. In that sense there is a revenge of the body on all this unearthly clicking and typing, in particular when you add stress and age. Walking

away is also good to create distance from what you just created (a text, image, service). Distance is essential for reflection; this is what Paul Virilio has always taught me. You also interrupt the speed regime. However, it is not always possible to walk away from the jobs. A friend of mine just quit working at a call centre, after having worked there for two weeks. He couldn't deal with it much longer. He said the people were nice but he could not deal with the constant typing and talking you have to do. He is my age and we all know that Asian young women with smaller hands can do this type of work much better. The older Western male is anyway written off, there is so much evidence for that.

TN: You affirm that “what we need to defend is the very principle of decentralized, distributed networks”, but do you really think that the Internet is founded on this ‘democratic’ principle? And even if this were the case at the beginning, (but you remind us the political origin of the computer and of the networks, that shows the lack of innocence of the device) how do you think is it possible to defend it now, considering the neo-liberal subjectivity at work within the network?

GL: I do not equalize decentralized, federated networks with democracy, which to me is a political decision model. Decentralization is specific network architecture and in fact there are many of them. Distributed systems are precisely not focused on a central point where it eventually all comes together when a decision is made. This is, in a way, one of the key problems of internet culture: there is no visible centre. Networks potentially dissolve centralized power (and along the way create new forms of power, of course). Networks could be called anti-democratic as they shift the attention away from the Collective Moment of Decision Making towards the noise on the fringes. We all know that networked processes destroy attention. They fragment tidily organized discourses and conversations. What happens with Google, Facebook and Twitter is that they recentralized power behind the back of the users through software and data capture. But this new centre remains invisible and empty. We feel it is there but cannot really grasp its political program. These companies create filters, structure search outcomes and manipulate users to by suggesting products they can buy, new friends they can add etc. with the overall aim to rebuild the centre (which is them). The technical potential of networks to create social structure and to collaborate and the centralized social media reality inside the walled garden is getting bigger by the day. Where will this take us?

TN: At the beginning of the book you discuss the necessity that the internet should not be medicalized or moralized, and you position yourself against the Frankfurt Critical school, however you still underline a critical attitude towards the networks studies. Can you explain us your critical positioning?

GL: Sure, this position goes back to 1994-1995 when Pit Schultz and I founded the nettime list, an international 'net criticism' movement of artists, activists, programmer, researchers and designers. We demanded a knowledgeable critique from inside. This was, and still is, our main objection to the Frankfurt School type of complaints, mainly voiced by 1968-generation public intellectuals with little or no internet expertise itself. They mainly appear on TV and in daily newspapers. The academic equivalent is the scholar who only publishes in peer-review journals that no one reads and no one can access anyway. This is not the way to go if we want to build up an engaged and critical networked discourse. We expect that critic has read the book and seen the concert or theatre play, and that this person is an expert in literature etc. The same should be the case with new media (internet, smart phones, games). We should not delegate that to the business pages (even though there is a huge economic component to the networks, which I do not want to neglect at all). What is needed is a new 'virtual intellectual' with technical knowledge and a humanities background. This is more than knowing how to operate the iPad. We're working on it and the signs are good that a new generation is growing up that looks down on Google and Apple and circumvents the traps of cool gadgets and apps. This is a new form of critique which Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht already foresaw and practiced in which the critical users becomes a producer. Critical is not merely a point of view; it is first and foremost an (informed) activity.

TN: In your book you often talk about the necessity of creating a new field of study dedicated to the network culture. Why do you think that this object of research should be considered different from the general media study field? This is very interesting because in Italy we still lack a media study field.

GL: Perhaps one day it will all fit together into one overall Digital Media Discipline, but we're not there yet. Before we start to synthesize and bring together all platforms and historical broadcast and print media with one method and history, it is important to give some autonomy to digital culture research and network theory because it is really a different paradigm in comparison to the top-down broadcast logic. It is too easy for me to say it is all 'cross-media' because that's again a top-down approach coming from the

PR and communication business that wants to push its products through these new channels. It remains important to make a hard cut with the broadcasting paradigm (and related industries) and emphasize the user approach (the community approach, emphasis on feedback and comments, public interface issues, free software and open source principles, using peer-to-peer architectures). We need first of all get a better understanding of the history of cybernetics and the computer. We all carry a computer on our body, spend years on end with these machines but how much do we know where they come from?

TN: Can you describe the objective of the Network Cultures Institute that you founded in Amsterdam in 2004? In particular I am interested in your definition according to which network culture will produce a redefinition of power itself and it could be a “resonating concept that can be used for research and action”.

GL: I have chosen not to work in the direction of a general network theory or a society approach a la Manuel Castells. Our institute is based inside a large polytechnic university of applied sciences (HvA). It is neither pure academic nor an art school for that matter. The approach needs to be focused and pragmatic. It is very Dutch in that sense (not German). So far the school has given us a lot of freedom to develop what we call ‘decentralized research networks that work on emerging topics’: aesthetics of online video, critique of creative industries, net porn research, cultures of search, Wikipedia and now, of course, social media.

TN: Your book resonates with a deep critic on the academic culture relative to the network, but I would suggest that the whole academic culture seems to fall short in understanding the present. You incite us “to open up collective imagination”. Do you think that the academic culture is, or can be open to the fertilization of the outside world? and if yes, how?

GL: I have worked outside of academia for 20 years and that more or less ruined my academic career in terms of grants etc. I was 44 when I received my PhD. The last years I tried a few things but none have been successful. I am an activist outsider, new media is a new and unstable discipline in the process of both growing and disappearing. And on top of that I am a theorist and critic with an interest in art and design, dedicated to the essay form of writing, which, in the current so-called peer review culture of journals are not appreciated. Maybe I am not the right person to ask what ordinary academics should or should not do. To young people I always say: don’t do

what I have done, and do not listen to me.

TN: In the English title of your book you paraphrase the title of a very famous American movie, *Rebels without a cause*, to discuss about the effects of the time-consuming networks that catch us inside, however your position on the networks role in counter-power activities doesn't seem to be so negative. Can you explain the possible paradoxical effects of social networks for a reassessment of an antagonist political what strategy?

GL: I am an autonomous anarchist with organizational inspirations. I read enough Lenin, Bakunin (and also Gramsci) and have confronted myself with the harsh realities of actual communism in Eastern Europe ever since the late 1970s. I believe in the power of social movements and I have been part of many (squatting, anti-nuclear, no borders) but also understand how wasteful the energies can be once a movement goes downhill. In potential social media can become incredible powerful tools for mobilization but right now the movements are simply not there to make a long lasting sustainable use of them. Just try to imagine what the 1930s would have been with social media. You think it was dark and messy then? Then prepare for worse in the decades to come. Italy is the perfect example of messy politics but can still learn a lot from other places where the *mélange* of left and right and no wing is even more pronounced. What Italy is lacking yet the pragmatics of the post-ideological, but that's coming.

TN: You seem to be very interested in the relationships between networked technologies and political and cultural practices. But how can you reconcile the observation according to which "no social movement or cultural practice, however radical can escape the commodity logic" and your positive attitude toward the effect of technologies on political empowerment of dissent?

GL: Thousands of anarcho-communistic programmers educating the people in the use of save crypto p2p phones? Why not? Can we imagine a social media arms race? These days we have Tor, Wikileaks, Anonymous, but also IndyMedia, Global Voices and now perhaps Twitter. The problem here it is that we cannot walk into the trap to believe that technology will do the dirty job for us to organize people. We need to do that. At the same time we know that the tools that we use, shape us. That's why Ned Rossiter and I have emphasized to find out more how 'organized networks' could look like. We need to design and test future forms of political organization that are, for instance, both local and global (but not at the same level). What do you make of the semi-autonomous cells as a model? How would you orchestrate today's

strategic debates? Occupy Wall Street experimented with the model of the Greek chorus that collectively repeat the argument in a move to slow down, and embody the rhetoric of the Other. Could we translate that into this relentlessly real-time environment of the net? As far as we have been able to figure out social media only made an impact on the dozens of OWS camps that existed late 2011 in an indirect way.

TN: Why do you think that organization should have a new central role in a new start of political practice? Are you really convinced that the commons by Negri and Hardt that you suggested is the science of revolution can be supported with the new forms of organization? My feeling is that their approach is completely based on a spontaneous movement of the multitude, while I agree with your emphasis on the centrality of organization.

GL: Will the big change come in response to make events such as war or crises, natural catastrophes or will it be a result of decades of preparation and hard work of many small groups, individuals and campaigns? Right now we have lots of revolts with a lot disastrous use of social media as people are simply not prepared. They are drawn into the Event. Think of the London riots. The question that we have not yet touched is how we will eventually scale up from the grassroots level of networks and small groups. In the past this was clearly more different. That's why there was a need for organizational forms such as the political party, trade union and the church. Creative individuals can make amazing experiences with sudden shocks of media attention and fame (only to disappear soon after). The meme is the cultural form of the day. On a campaign level this works very well but in order to prepare for a political takeover we need a large social network that we can trust. Global media all the time draw us away from that laborious task.

TN: You suggest that networking logic is at odds with present democratic mechanisms and that networks start from a post-representational positioning. If this is the case how can you discuss the new forms of organization of dissent within the Internet network culture?

GL: There is clearly a democratic deficit in the networking paradigm and we need to address that problem. Networks are neither flat nor hierarchical; they are vague. It is a cloud and it is a real challenge to theorize a cloud! What does it mean to disperse? The answer to the democratic issue will, most likely, not be a technical one. We have to be open for that. The famous

Dutch hacker Rop Grongrijp always inspires me. I met him for the first time in 1989. He is the founder of the ISP xs4all, is involved in the Berlin Chaos Computer Club and at some point worked together with Julian Assange on the Collateral Murder video, early 2010. At some point Rop started a campaign against electronic voting machines. He has proved time and again that they are not safe and he is still working in many countries across the globe to support local campaign. Did you hear that Mitt Romney owns the voting machines in Ohio? I like the idea that technology assists us in on the informal level so that we can push the technology aside at the moment supreme, switch off the smart phones and have real life encounters. This requires a lot of training and wisdom

TN: You end the book with a very suggestive discussion on the Wikileaks effect, stating that it is the end of the content/carrier debate and that it is the end also of the debate between traditional journalism and hacker-citizen journalism. Croudsourced analysis does not happen automatically and Assange needed the help of well-known newspapers to obtain the great success. Do you think that Western democracies are ready for the transparency and openness that the Wikileaks model suggests or will they rebel against it?

GL: Wikileaks is a drama, an ongoing techno-activist disaster that I have been following on a daily basis since 2009. We can, of course, also look at it from the artistic-absurdist perspective and call it a Brechtian Lehrstück. There is a lot to be learned from this case study. First of all it tells us a lot what happens when you leave behind the NGO model of incorporation, do not set up national chapters (as Indymedia, Wikipedia and Global Voices have done) and try to do global politics from your laptop in a room with a bunch of friends who are most of time elsewhere. The dialectics between Assange and the mainstream press have never interested me. In that issue I am on his side. OK, you try and work with journalists and outlet to get the story out, giving others the possibility to do research on the vast material, but in the end the documents should be out there, in the public access, for everyone to read. The exclusivity aspect of news is there, but annoys me as well, as a net activist.