

Interview with Geert Lovink by Marcello Faletra for Cyberzone Magazine
(Italy)

(This email interview was conducted in July 2019 and turned out to be one of my favorites. I never met Marcello in person but we're connected through Franco Berardi and various others of the Italian Connection. I have been patiently waiting for the printed version of the latest issue to come out but nothing happened. Marcello moved to Southern Italy, he wrote to me, and then the corona crisis broke out. "Unfortunately for Cyberzone," he wrote, "the sponsor, who is a restaurant entrepreneur, had to close at the moment." Together we decided to publish the interview, awaiting better times ahead.
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Marcello Faletra: In *Sad by Design-On Platform Nihilism* you write: "The mania of social media is not a clinical condition of few people: it is the human condition." Once the network was an extraordinary opportunity for the utopian elaboration of a combination of subjectivity in a horizontal, non-hierarchical way. However, the idea that the web could reterritorialize democracy bottom-up, turned out to be an illusion. Current platforms are producing a new type of individual, exploited by the primary material of the psyche, subjected to interactive centrifuges, resulting in a dramatic loss of memory, attention and will.

Geert Lovink: This is what happens when we can no longer distinguish between telephone and society. We're using apps 24/7, sucked further into the vortex by behavioural science techniques. Try walking through a strange town without Google Maps. In line with the AIDS essay of Susan Sontag I would like to know more about 'Internet Addiction as a Metaphor'. Why is this medical motive so popular? Are we indeed addicted or is this an inadequate description of the situation? The slogan I use in context says: We are not Sick. As you say, the platforms are producing a new type of subjectivity that is neither passive in a classic sense of an audience that merely interprets what is offered to them as a narrative nor active or social in a classic community sense. The subject-as-user has no sovereign power over its own communication devices.

Social media offer a smooth form of quasi-interactivity that creates ideal conditions for subliminal data extraction. Most of our choices and responses are repetitive and non-conscious (to use the term of Katherine Hayles). Think of the way we like, swipe, scroll and follow. Can anyone seriously reconstruct afterward what they have done once a session on Tinder,

Instagram and Whatsapp is over? Internet has become a dreamy yet claustrophobic environment, and what we should do is redesign it, reverse engineer it, if you like, and turn it again into a tool. For me this is important to state as our critique should be paired with alternatives. Otherwise, our 'complaints' run the danger of fueling resentments.

ML: The "generation me" of which you speak, encapsulated by an augmented reality of narcissism, suffers from a quantity (of followers, clicks, likes) obsession that gratifies the cyber self. In this context, you talk about narcissistic inflation, which arises after the internet reached its critical mass.

GL: Diagnosis is one, empathy another. I would not summarize my thesis in the way you do here. Let's instead talk about social narcissism. This term is an apparent contradiction. We are alone together. The 'virtual community' is no longer an additional layer but a hybrid that is increasingly taking over the direction of our busy lives. Smartphones are producing a different form the social but we do not have the right terms for it yet. Systematic thinking about this is not appreciated, especially not in academia and the art world, that would rather like to forget about all things digital and return to the 'real' things that matter in life. The last thing we should do in such a situation is to present our radical critiques as a moralistic judgment. We should not patronize and fire up guilt and resentment but build alternative bonds that are part of new forms of sustainable organization, aimed to counter short-term solutions and empty gestures.

MF: The cult of connection, which implies a regime of submission to invisible forms of control, generates an a-historical condition. Everything ends in an instant. Responding and linking are, in their interactive paralysis, subjugation strategies, leveling differences, homogenizing all singularities, distracting them from potential critical analysis of virtual environments. Peter Sloterdijk speaks of the right to disconnect. Do you think this would be enough to take back the private sphere?

GL: The real-time regime is a reality, yet we do not know what price we pay when there are no more delays and no time to reflect on what we are going to answer. We wait for the Other but in fact have unlearned to wait—until it becomes unbearable and throw the phone away. The unavailable Other has become unacceptable. Unavailability has become a tactic, both at work and in relationships, with the intent to protect one's dignity and stress independence. Silence is power. The 'right to disconnect' sounds like a good

idea—but it is not doable. Digital detox is yet another good intention that we cannot afford. Life on the acceleration lane is too short, we told everywhere it is now or nothing. Many of us experience life as part lottery, part Hunger Games. The Sloterdijk version of Nietzsche's mastery motive is economically naïve and presumes that we are better off taking a break. But life as a never-ending contest is not about skills, your CV and personality but a weird combination of connections and sheer luck (hence the rising belief in astrology and superstition). The system requires you to be online all the time to grab the few chances that suddenly show up. Welcome to the culture of updates and alerts. If you happen to be offline for a moment, sorry, you've missed out.

ML: You mention the fatal "big disconnection" between digital technologies and Marxism. You propose a "digital Marxism" freed from historical conditioning. I understand that, for example, the concept of "hegemony" of Gramsci, which is articulated as a domain and as an extorted consensus, might be suited to counter the growing dominance of platforms. We will thus go from the internet user "in itself" to the internet user "for itself. Do we need to resume the work of emancipation?

GL: I would say, yes. However, we're no longer living in the Age of Empire 19th century, even though there are some similarities. I am not sure if awareness campaigns, to educate the Facebook masses, will be effective. What we need are new forms of organization. There is enough education, materials, videos, arguments, debates. The problem is that we are no longer capable to translate information into (collective) action. This is not just because we are bored, depressed, distracted, lonely and tired. The whole system is designed to no longer bring us neo-liberal subjects together. This is the price we pay for the (liberating) side of the self and is fully exposed to ups and downs of the market in which we imagine to compete with countless others that we perceive are so much better than we are. Your ranking is low... and this is what makes you sad.

In Gramsci's case, hegemony is a desperate 'last' strategy of the Communist Party, the trade unions, and the industrial working class in times of repression and war. It is a concept that was developed in the darkest of hours for the Left, in the thirties, written in prison, when both Stalinism and fascism ruled and vitalist (mostly anarchist) elements of self-organization were crushed. The left never recovered from this defeat. After the war, the diminished left settled down inside large top-down organizations that

managed the welfare state class compromise until neo-liberalism and the decline of the 20th century industries also demolished those institutions. Fifty years later the revival of Gramsci's ideas played a strange role in the opening up the Communist parties in Western Europe—a 'renaissance' that directly resulted into their disappearance.

The question then becomes what 'hegemony' could mean our social media age, without party, without an identifiable social body. We are all dispersed users and the smart phone's superstructure is not our superstructure. Without a political organization or a social subject, it starts to become questionable what majority, what 21st-century compromise we should try to achieve. My proposal therefore is to go back to the drawing board and not start at the very end, as if we're close to obtain political power.

ML: The internet globo-sphere has established itself as a second nature; it is the technological paradigm of our contemporary age. You are hoping for a political economy of the internet. In the wake of Camus you ask: "How can disenchantment turn into revolt?" Recently, the American collective Critical Art Ensemble incited a strategy of occupation by taking the data hostage. But not everyone is able to practice such an antagonistic position. The colonization of desire is at stake. The "infinite" world of cyberspace suddenly has turned into a field of subjective self-confinement, which has certain analogies with the slave trade of past cultures. Franco Berardi synthesizes all this in the expression "neuro-proletarians", referring to cognitive workers. You refer to the activism of Anonymous. How can internet users become part of Anonymous? You define this phenomenon as "a collective work of art" which we should all aspire to. But Anonymous was made of geeks and computer specialists, who should at least know how to attack without leaving traces. This requires thorough preparation and knowledge about information technology—time that few have available. Do you think that this strategy is restricted to tech elites?

GL: Anonymous is a decade old organization concept that never reappeared since its 2012 decline. You are right about expert knowledge. Hackers have run into this problem, but have thus far, to my knowledge, failed to discuss this in public. What they admit is that they have lost the 'privacy' battle. The hacker class still has not dealt with the rise of social media platforms over the past decade. Do they consider this a non-issue, that part of the internet to them is a grey area where the ignorant majority is kept busy with liking and clicking and swiping? Are they too much involved in those large firms?

Is the secret alliance with capitalism (and privatization) the real issue here? The old inability of 'serving' engineers to make a political and economic analysis and decide on which side they're on? There is an inability to identify the social class (or revolutionary subject) the hackers should work for, as tech avant-garde. Should they start a cyber war without a cause? ISIS social media marketers at least know who they're working for. Do hackers devote their cause for the shrinking enlightened middle class of the global West? How do they relate to 4Chan, alt-right and the libertarian anarcho-capitalist ideologies that circulate in crypto-currency circles? And how can we overcome the apparent ambiguity?

What do Western hackers think of their Russian and Chinese counterparts? How do we deal with the rise of geopolitics? Are we still living in our global bubble? Take the case of cybercrime. Since day one Western hackers are for hire to fight this type of mafia practice but when it comes to presumed Russian manipulations by Putin, the 'global' hacker class is divided (without taking a clear position in the public debate). Max Keiser and Jaromil can be seen on RT. What do we make of Huawei, knowing how deeply the NSA is involved in Android (Google), Facebook, Apple and other American tech firms.

ML: Looking back, the digital universe seems a conquest of a collective, almost Dionysian dimension: from the eccentricity of the subject-object relationship to the osmotic a-centrism of the network. Today, we find ourselves locked inside a global bubble. A centrifuge of "digital dementias" according to Nicholas Carr, where you suddenly discover you're part of an army carrying "prefabricated sadness" (to quote you). Is there a "pharmacology", as Bernard Stiegler insists, that we can dispose of?

GL: I subscribe to Bernard Stiegler's thesis of technology as pharmakon: it is both decease and medicine. Unfortunately, we will remain stuck in our culture of indifference for quite some time. This means we have little room to manoeuvre. There is no 'right to forget' your smartphone. Around 2010 I still hoped people would either move on from Facebook to more sophisticated apps or forget the platforms altogether, in the same way as we forgot telex (which I still used in 1985 to wire my copy to the alternative *Tageszeitung* newspaper in West-Berlin), cassettes (that seem to make a return) and analog black and white television (there is no b/w option on current 4K or 8K screens).

ML: The forms of control have become totalitarian and invisible, such as that

of the temporal adaptation of the user of the networks to the functioning of the markets that act invisibly with the platforms: “It’s too late for private life,” as Paul Virilio stated...

GL: Unless we unleash a range of digital resistance movements that demand the dismantling of the surveillance technologies. We can still do. The example could be the worldwide struggle against nuclear weapons and the earlier ban on poison gas. A positive signal in this direction could be the local ban of face recognition software that San Francisco recently introduced. The fact that we know how to develop and employ a technology doesn’t necessarily mean we install it. Even if it is there, and widespread, doesn’t mean we’re stuck with it forever. The philosopher who theorized this is Günter Anders, who I read in the same period as I discovered Paul Virilio, in 1983-84, at the height of the cruise missile crisis, the last phase of the Cold War. However, we’re not there yet. In the meantime people will suffer from a range of consequences that come with the loss of ‘privacy’. The costs are felt in the form of real-existing mediocrity, conformist behavior, and a Leo Straussian division between private and public opinion. Why should citizens express the resentments they feel towards others?

Tijmen Schep coined the term ‘social cooling’: ‘if you feel you are being watched, you change your behaviour.’ (<https://www.socialcooling.com/>). The intended feeling of safety flips into waves of paranoia. Another effect is the rise of cybercrime such as identity theft. The authoritarian surveillance apparatus does not make us feel safer, in fact, we are not safe at all. The 2013 Snowden revelations have only further confused the situation. Instead of awareness we have witnessed shocking forms of mass ignorance. This is not Snowden’s mistake, don’t get me wrong, but it is something we need to address. Apart from some pockets in Germany, European citizens remain lame, if not straight-out cynical. As a result, education and awareness are all but absent. Against earlier expectations, both generation Z and millennials have declining technical skills. Most of the current solutions require individual users to take action: we are the ones that need to install software, change passwords Security is no longer one’s personal responsibility. Privacy should be the default. As governments are themselves massively involved in surveillance of their ‘clients’ there is little we can expect from the state.

ML: “Digital nihilism” distorts the modern distinction between “normal” and “pathological”: the psychic impulse generated by the subjection to the

psycho-technological power turns all to the advantage of a generalized pathology: social media contaminate us all. According to Baudrillard during the golden season of the consumer society of the 1960s and 70s it was the object that looked at us, and then it became the image. Today, it is as if we no longer have the right to our own image, only to an ephemeral and instantaneous recording in real-time: interactivity. Is it the internet that sees and thinks for us today?

GL: If only software could stare at us. The invisibility of today's surveillance makes it hard to continue Baudrillard's tropes. The miniaturization is now so advanced that we can no longer spot the cameras. You Tube's recommendations are primitive in comparison to AI that runs through databases, which decision we're only confronted with much later, in other contexts. We need to remark that the rumour about algorithms that discriminate spread remarkably fast. The same can be said of alarming debates about the possible disasters created by AI. Hidden in black boxes, run somewhere else, likely offline, in the background, there is remarkably little known how such code actually works. In stagnant and regressive Europe this only further fuels paranoia. As a result, there is no outrage about automated selection. Without political organization the result is a diffuse form of techno-phobia and disengagement. This is not quite the 'post-digital' condition some of us proclaimed.

ML: Has the Software Empire replaced the Logos Empire, as Derrida once denounced? For the first time in history, technology tends to impose itself according to an endogenous mode, which operates a historical passage of consciousness: its destruction, which implies the annihilation of every perspective of otherness or singularity. A progressive and unstoppable colonization of the psyche has been underway for the past twenty years.

GL: Code is the epiphany of logos and language. The one does not replace the other. Software makes language computable and makes it possible to run machines. Let's not run a doom scenario here where robots and AI take over the world. I don't believe in such cheap stories. Machines are super vulnerable and cannot repair themselves, take care of their own electricity, dig up precious metals used in chip manufacturing and so on. The Rage against the Machine, that I believe is coming, is ultimately one against other humans. It is a revolt of the resourceful few that employ machines to defend their interest against the multitudes that will employ their own knowledge, will and desire to overcome evil, programmed by the powerful. I am not

stating anything new here; science fiction writers have narrated my position ten times better than I am doing here. If we forget the dark metal ruin aesthetics for a while, we can see that we're rapidly moving into SF territory—both in terms of high tech employment against 'team human' (as Rushkoff coined it) and the social and environment collapse. Think of Spoleto or Orvieto. These dreamy medaeval towns are ideal settings for 21st-century nightmares. Everything seems ancient and pretty, on a human scale (read Camillo Sitte why this is the case). Then install an invisible 5G urban surveillance regime, packed with evil algorithms, and there you go. Forget the Stalinist Soviet Bloc, the East-Berlin Stasi; think of something radically more subtle, pedagogical, legal and 'correct', all of it aimed at selection (who has access to what), who can have access to the pleasures of life (please go post-Catholic, forget the church). In short, who is a slave and who's not.

ML: Referring to Habermas you use an ironic expression and speak of "an elephant in the room." Has the liquid sphere of networks supplanted the bourgeois public sphere?

GL: If you visit the rich capitals of central Europe, say Vienna, Munich, Stuttgart but also Milan and observe the glamorous, well-dressed ruling class, you get a sense that they have built a phantasmagorical armor around their deeply conservative culture. Part this is fashion and custom, and the 20th-century media are a part of this. Habermas embodies this ideology. It is the opposite of a lively public sphere that is able to address the real issues. This is the impression you get when you read the FAZ, look at ZDF, go to the opera, sit in the café: nothing has changed in the past 50-100 years. It is this bourgeois elite that continues to look down on internet and social media, the bread and circuses for the plebs. We can have a laugh about Old Europe but when you're trying to build up alternatives to Silicon Valley monopolies, and happen to live in Europe, it is this aristocratic class that turns out to be your enemy—not the neo-liberal entrepreneurs. They will vote down your application, in favor of 'real' culture or science, they will evict the squats in favor of law and order. Europe's public sphere has become a regressive environment that indulges itself into 'collapsology', as the latest French craze is called, a dull lifestyle spectacle without consequences.