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https://bluelabyrinths.com/2023/01/02/the-end-of-the-internet-an-interview-with-geert-lovink/)

In this interview, I talked with Geert Lovink about his latest essay *Extinction Internet*, Mark Fisher's hauntology, the memory of Bernard Stiegler, the XR movement, and the phantoms of accelerationism.

Alessandro Sbordoni: Today, platform realism makes us feel like another Internet is no longer possible. In your essay, *Extinction Internet,* you argue that the Internet is ending and that it is time for theorists, artists, activists, designers, and developers to imagine what is after the end of the Internet as we know it. What can we do as Internet users?

Geert Lovink: In a situation like this, defined by cultural and economic forms of stagnation and regression, the revolution of the younger generations is not very likely. Today, underground culture cannot develop in opposition to the mainstream. This is the fundamental reason why we are in this situation. With regard to the Internet, we have seen the concentration of power, centralisation, and monopolisation that comes from both the state and the corporations. But similar to climate change, all the warnings fell on deaf ears. The Internet today is a weird combination of platform dependency and state surveillance. All of this creates a feeling that there is no exit and we do not know where to go. In the meantime, we have all been *stuck on the platform*.

AS: This brings to mind what Mark Fisher says about the disappearance of the conditions that made popular modernism possible. In *Ghosts of My Life*, for example, Mark Fisher talks about the disconnection of the circuit between experimental and popular music.

You are also a music-theory performer. In 2020 you released an album together with John Longwalker (www.wearenotsick.com), inspired by your book *Sad by Design*, whose sound is a mix of acid house, ambient music, and apocalyptical soundscapes. Do you think music today can still fuel changes in society? I am thinking of what you write in your 2020 article *Extinction Bauhaus*: "The arts can […] play a major role in 'societal challenges'—as problem accelerator." If punk music was an excellent example of this in the 1970s, what is its counterpart in the twenty-first century? Or do you agree with Mark Fisher when he affirms that the circuit between underground and popular culture has been disconnected?

GL: I very much agree with Mark Fisher. I also believe that Mark Fisher was a unique person who went through a lot of unpleasant soul-searching. Young people are certainly attracted to him also because of this; he was one of the few cultural theorists, together with Franco Berardi, who has done that. Others were not capable of admitting that they were stuck; they could not or did not want to acknowledge that traditional forms of protest and resistance were no longer meaningful. The truth is that the capacity of the individual to embody change has run out. Advanced forms of stagnation have also proven to be really dangerous. Depressive states of mind leading to anger and anxiety can produce irreversible damage to individuals—and ultimately also to society.

In my recent work, I have, indirectly, attempted to answer the question: Why did Mark Fisher commit suicide? And similarly, why did Bernard Stiegler take his life? Here, I want to talk about suicide as a metaphor. Let's ask: What happens when you gaze deep into the abyss? To be honest, not many people are eager to talk about this openly. They want to make radical changes and rush to come up with positive solutions, sure. But what happens if the process stagnates? And, what happens when collective hedonism such as parties, drugs etc. are not an option, as was the case during the long and dark Covid lockdowns? Music and dancing is no doubt a way to deal, to overcome the dark states of mind and overcome them with poetry, rapping and exstatic bodily experiences. But there's also another side to this: the intake of theory and ideas through audio, music and video, not just the classic disciplined way of concentrated reading. Distraction and restlessness are real, neuroscientific realities: body realism.

Another question I asked myself lately is about the identification with this dark state. As psychoanalysis has taught us, we need to understand the situation in order to be able to change it — this is a principle of Marxism, too: unless we study the present situation, how can we change it? But the study itself might also lead us to a dangerous state of mind, one which will not lead us out. I think this is the point where we are right now.

AS: It seems like you are talking about a sort of delusion, which is also relevant to a specific reading of Mark Fisher's capitalist realism. In his writings, Mark Fisher outlined a psychopathological analysis of late capitalism, to which you further contributed with your book *Sad by Design*. However, in your interview with Franco Berardi from May 2022, and, later, in *Extinction Internet,* you are sceptical about the potential of this method of

analysis to produce any political changes in society.

In addition to Mark Fisher and Franco Berardi, your work has been influenced by the philosophy of Bernard Stiegler. Following Bernard Stiegler, you speak about the Internet as a *pharmakon*: at the same time cure and poison. Can you expand on the concept of the pharmakon and how it applies to your theories?

GL: To put it in more traditional terms, we are dealing with both the problem and the solution. Fifteen years ago, we thought that the Internet would have been the solution to many issues, for example, with regard to the centralised media question, which is all about decentralised infrastructures and logistics, distribution systems, and so on. It took a long time to realise that the Internet itself had become part of the problem—also thanks to Evgeny Morozov, Sherry Turkle, Douglas Rushkoff, Andrew Keen and many other internet critics.

From the pharmakon's viewpoint, problem and solution are intertwined. It is necessary to understand that as soon as we see the problem, we can see the solution on the horizon.

When I met Bernard Stiegler the situation was similar to the one we are in again, right now. It was 2013, and we were running the Unlike Us network, an initiative created in the context of social media critique and the development of alternatives to Facebook and Twitter, founded in 2011. Around that time, I also worked with Harry Halpin and Yuk Hui to document Bernard Stiegler's social media critique and his involvement in the development of alternatives in the period 2012-2013. This part of his career is not well known, unfortunately, but he worked a lot on these alternatives. In the end, we know Bernard Stiegler from his writings and books. He did not leave too much space there for all the developments he was deeply involved in on the side of alternatives. Nowadays, I am convinced that we will get to know another Bernard Stiegler within the next 5 to 10 years, as relatively very little is still known about all of this. He was working on new forms of organisation; he organised a summer school in the middle of France, which I also attended; not to forget the work of the IRI at the Pompidou Center, based in a small office in the heart of Paris.

Then in 2014, the invasion of Ukraine happened, followed by the downing of the MH17, the war in Syria, the European refugee crisis, culminating in Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. And finally, of course, the

COVID-19 outbreak. Bernard Stiegler died in August 2020.

I believe there are always times when it is possible to develop solutions to avoid collapse. We have to study the crisis. This is collapsology — or the teachings of the collapse. Let's analyse the breakdown. But what does that do to us? Will it lead us to liberation or our own breakdown?

AS: In your last essay, you describe an analogy between Extinction Internet and Extinction Rebellion. The premise of this relationship looks to be the absence of a difference between digital and analogue, something you have argued in *Extinction Internet* and earlier in your 2020 essay *Extinction Bauhaus*. What is the significance of this proposition?

GL: Having been involved with these social movements for many decades, the answer comes by itself. The importance of direct involvement is something that I also share very much with Franco Berardi. But also, the question about which kind of strategies should be developed is important too. It is relevant to mention Black Lives Matter here, or the movements against housing shortage, high rents and the sharp rise of social inequality.

In regards to Extinction Rebellion, there is a link to what in France is called 'collapsology' and what I have called the *stack of crises*, which — I must admit it — is a perverted form of Benjamin Bratton's concept of the stack. I no longer believe that the way Benjamin Bratton defined the stack is of much use today. Nor, for that matter, the technical engineering version of that stack, which has been around for the past forty years and which Benjamin Bratton developed further: from the down levels of cables and data centres, all the way up to the desktop and the smartphone screen to the interface, the profile and the user. But in addition to the software version of the stack, there is also a *stack of prices* and a *stack of racism* (including the legacy of slavery and colonialism). Of course, the latter is very relevant to the Black Lives Matter movement. The question is more difficult when talking about Extinction Rebellion because it is a movement in the formative period. We will be able to see more of that only in the coming years, if not decades.

What is necessary for all these emerging social movements is to come together and gain experience in the forms of organisation, informed debate, and create cultures that will foster radical change.

AS: In a footnote of *Extinction Internet*, you sketch a parallel between Mark Fisher's hauntology and the reclamation of the Internet, for example, by the

Institute of Network Culture. In light of this, I wanted to ask: what are your thoughts about network nostalgia?

GL: I am convinced that it is always possible to create new communities. I also agree with Tiziana Terranova that the techno-social exists and is going to be increasingly relevant in the future. In the case of network nostalgia, we should understand that the nostalgia of Internet communities in the 1990s is about something which *really existed* at the time. These communities were not phantoms.
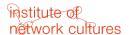
Additionally, there is another form of nostalgia that is related to the software, the tools, and the platforms that were used in the past. Nostalgia is something about a world that is lost and is no longer there. Of course, we can always try to recreate that and create substitutes for the past. We can always build monuments to commemorate their history. For example, I am doing this at the moment, as I am writing my personal history of the 1990s.

At the same time, we know that Internet nostalgia already exists for millennials. Whether it is about Tumblr, MySpace, or the whole universe of blogs interconnected through RSS feeds. All of that no longer exists. Today, we may as well talk about a sort of Twitter nostalgia.

AS: The 1990s were defined by a kind of Internet euphoria. Also, a philosophical approach known as accelerationism developed in that era. Today, accelerationism is often identified with the work of Nick Srnicek, which you also reference in your works. What are your thoughts on accelerationism?

GL: These are debates did happen but somehow also not really. At the same time, I think that we have not taken them seriously enough. Where can the accelerationist debate be found? Blogs? Mailing lists? Social media? Good luck reconstructing it; this is a serious issue. There are some key texts here and there but where is the debate? The accelerationist debate is something that future generations will find very hard to understand because they have not been properly documented — let alone centralised and staged. Luckily, these days we can find more about 'digital socialism' and socialist planning in the age of large-scale logistics a la Amazon and data centres.

Of course, we would have to modify and restage, or even stage for the first time, the accelerationist debate. That would mean dealing with geopolitical complexity, where accelerationist interventions could be implemented, for

example, with regard to the takeover of infrastructure, logistics, and the role of centralised planning. Maybe one way of looking at this is to say that the real accelerationist debates are the ones that are still ahead of us.

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