

## No More Pirate Islands! Media Ecology & Autonomy

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*Is there autonomy in the 'technological epoch'? Various narratives of philosophy and political theory have long attributed to technology a function of collapse that flattens time and space and reduces the world and its inhabitants to functionaries of an impoverished ontology. Autonomy appears to disappear at this moment. Media ecology proposes that the temporal matter and beings of the world are interlinked in ways that suggest a 'natural technics', suggesting new possibilities for an autonomy that shapes itself in the folds of a mediatized planet.*

Modern technology, culminating in the spy satellite, makes this kind of *autonomy* a romantic dream. No more pirate islands! [...]

Are we to live in the present doomed never to experience autonomy, never to stand for one moment on a bit of land ruled only by freedom? Are we reduced either to nostalgia for the past or nostalgia for the future? - Hakim Bey (TAZ 99)

With Hakim Bey we approach perhaps *the* question of the 'technological epoch': can there *be* autonomy in an era of highly mediated existence? What does autonomy come to mean in an era of continuous surveillance? Is autonomy irrevocably tied to colonial ideas of the unknown territories? Can there be a *new*

autonomy, and if so, what shapes can it take? To delve into this question of *autonomy* in the 21st century, it would seem, means to rewrite something of the concept of autonomy in view of a world interlinked by technology. *Autonomy* stems from its two Greek components: the law (*nomos*) of that which folds upon itself (*autos*). *Autonomia* in Greek is often translated as 'independence', and often interpreted, as Bookchin writes, as "a self-managing ego" (12). The task set before us is to rewrite the heterogeneous make-up of a mediated world into a concept of autonomy that more often than not has been taken to mean a closed, self-managing individuality. Yet it is this distinction itself, of autonomy marking itself off as distinct or separate, the apparently indivisible (*individuus*), that grants autonomy not only its peculiar force, but its attractiveness. And it is this force, marked by separation, difference, and individuation, that allows autonomy to *be* that heterogeneous element. The argument, then, is to grasp how the autonomous, as that which seemingly acts alone, is not internally homogeneous but rather contains within itself the antinomic stance it exhibits. But all of this is to assume something of *media ecology*.

Thus the second part of this task is perhaps where to begin: to lay out the parameters of a thinking that reads the way in which all things, whether classified as natural or unnatural, interlink and overlap in not only their relation but in their constitution, while, at the same time, retaining their antinomy. In short, the question of autonomy in the 21st century assumes the question of a *media ecology*. First, what is meant by *media ecology* will have to be reiterated at different scales of its structure (technology, concept, analytic, politic). Second, we will have to approach *autonomy* through a genealogy of the concept of *collapse*. *Collapse* has dominated 20th century thought as the persistent effect of technology, from the 'collapse' of media to the 'collapse' of time and space. Hakim Bey begins precisely with this problem of collapse, for once the satellite orbits above, autonomy itself appears to collapse under the strain of the orbital eye.

### *The Collapse of the World That Is No Longer (And Has Never Been)*

The conditions of collapse are demonstrable, for once technology is in orbit, sees all and envelops the world in a network of technics, the possibility of unfound geography and hidden space – at least on the surface of the planet – tends toward the improbable. True, the possibilities of camouflage, subterfuge, and geographic inaccessibility remain (the latter an intriguing possibility given economic and ecological collapse; we can imagine a world that we can see but not touch). These possibilities will be leveraged by Bey to 'dowse' autonomous space (*TAZ* 103). Yet this hypothesis – the 'collapse' of the world as the space of the uncharted and the time of the unknown – remains prevalent in 20th century studies of technology. From this factual dimension of enveloping technology, the hypothesis has been extended: once satellites envelop the planet in a web of interlinked contact zones, the dimensions of the world *itself* begin to collapse. The collapse of the 'world' as such can thus be dated; Sputnik was launched 4th October 1957. By June 1961, the United States Air Force had in place the United

States Space System Network to catalogue orbiting satellites. The USSSN watched the eyes that now watched the Earth. GoogleMaps, launched February 8th, 2005, marks the second iteration of collapse from above. Now all the watched that are able to overcome the increasingly porous digital divide can play at being the watcher. Though certainly not equal between private (including military) and public iterations, access to the satellite imagery inaugurated 48 years prior is made public on the internet through a private search engine portal. The world is collapsed to the computer screen. And yet pirates continue to roam off the coast of Somalia...

In this recursive gaze of the world upon itself, time and space as such appear to *collapse*. Harold Innis, James Carey, John Zerzan and Paul Virilio have all investigated how the 'collapse' of time and space is a recurring function of communication technologies. The alphabet was the first game in town: "An alphabet became the basis of political organization through efficient control of territorial space and of religious organization through efficient control over time in the establishment of monotheism" (Innis 77). Certainly it was also religious and political control that Socrates contested when he warned of writing. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates recounts Egyptian King Thamus' rejection of the death-god Theuth's gift of writing. If writing "create[s] forgetfulness in the learner's souls, because they will not use their memories," coming instead to trust "external written characters and not remember of themselves" (Plato 87-88), Socrates is also recounting a tale in which a King turns down an 'old god', in which the law (*nomos*) of memory triumphs over writing, simulation and death. In the *Symposium* and *Republic* Socrates establishes philosopher kings and the law of the soul over not only scripture but controls if not excludes from his Republic all 'derivative' forms of re-presentation (painting, theatre, writing). *The alphabet and writing are contested technics of control*. John Zerzan puts a twist on neo-Platonism by pinpointing "the wrong turn we took as a species" to the "milestone in our evolution" that is "symbolic thought." For Zerzan and Plato, the technics of re-presented symbols amount to immemorial loss and the devaluation of the human species or soul.

First, in this narrative of the collapse, the human dimension of true knowledge and the good life 'collapse' with the onset of a writing that carries within its sign pure forgetfulness, or death, itself – a necrotechnics. Second, the very world 'collapses' in its time and space. With the acceleration of technics in general the world is subject to what Virilio calls "geographic contraction" (*Speed* 133). With the supersonic vector of rockets, airplanes and airwaves "penetration and destruction become one." As technics approach the supersonic, geographic distance – and the time taken to traverse it – succumbs to the point of collapse. For Virilio, accelerating technics culminates in the satellite-guided missile. While accelerating technics leads to the collapse of the 'world' as such, the 'instantaneous' speed of communication also, paradoxically, leads to the collapse of communication itself. The 'great catastrophe' for Virilio is the tower of Babel, as prototype of the 'infernal Tower' without 'communication', the modern skyscraper (*Crepuscular* 34-35). Vertical architecture embodies the dimension of

collapse in its upwards superstructure; the 'bunker architecture' Virilio calls for is designed to facilitate a social level of communication apparently lost in the vertical climb toward the heavens.

In all of these contesting narratives that hypothesize the collapse of the space and time, the 'immemorial loss' of the soul that is condition to 'technical' communication, we find a general appreciation of Innis' insight concerning the use of standardized linguistic forms to establish monotheistic or otherwise forms of political power. The way in which this insight is translated into an ethico-political judgement takes place by way of a theological or political 'collapse' of sorts that reduces technics to negativity, immorality, or the *raison d'être* for the devolution of the species. Technics is reduced to erasure and irrecoverable loss – a threatening necrotechnics that must be resisted. As David Wills observes, the "technological disruption of temporality is what conditions the political as motor of change, and what provides the terms of reference and argues for a type of retro- or controversion of as political strategy" (11).

We may pull back from this narrative to observe a genealogy of collapse that persists from Plato through the postmodern. In this genealogy, technics plays the carrier of death, the necrotechnic god that befalls humanity and the natural world and robs all of time and space.<sup>1</sup> *Technics at the level of the symbol*

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<sup>1</sup> In their introduction to the 1995 issue of Mosaic entitled "Media Matters: Technologies of Literary Production," Joseph Donatelli and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young note that "the use of binary distinctions seems to operate in accordance with an underlying narrative which conceives of the history of media technology as a tale of fall and redemption" (xv). In one remarkable page, Donatelli and Winthrop-Young chart the favoured media of notable theorists by revealing – speaking of McLuhan and Ong – a 'theology of media change'. The phrase is prescient. That theology grows ever more persuasive in light of a complex world of technics demonstrates its (essential) entwinement with media (which is to say, the technics of re-presentation). As Winthrop-Young and Donatelli demonstrate, 'critiques' of media are often grounded in a telothology of the fall found in Virilio, McLuhan and Ong. Or, in what amounts to the same, complex studies of communication media tend toward a teleology of technological progress to be found in Kittler and Eisenstein (in Kittler's case, this claim is perhaps more complex than it appears *prima facie*). Thus, in Winthrop-Young and Donatelli's text, "[Elizabeth] Eisenstein's bias in favor of print is almost as obvious as [Marshall] McLuhan's bias in favor of its current effacement." Thus McLuhan (and Ong) write a technotheology in which the "old communal world will be retrieved by means of post-print communications technologies." Winthrop-Young and Donatelli note how Kittler notes as much in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Kittler tends to view digital technology as "finally allowing technology to come to itself" – and in a synthesis not unlike Hegel's dialectic of history – "in which a positively charged media technology takes the place of the absolute spirit." This is all page xv. Later, in a conclusion that touches upon the persistent materiality of the body despite the rhetoric of 'virtual reality', Winthrop-Young and Donatelli write that "It is significant that in studies of orality, voice and bodily gesture are now regarded as technologies rather than as natural physical attributes, though there remains a strong tradition of viewing technology as disruptive to these natural (read face-to-face) modes of expression" (xx). The boundary of *techne/physis* remains, inscribed here again in the mere shift of its inscription, at the point of amputation in which appendages and their muscular movement become *techne* to the mute and immobile body – or the (Levinasian) ethics of the face-to-face or the (Sufi) breast-to-breast. The natural, *physis*, is it not that which is without limbs, unable to speak, yet the consistent mover and ground, final and first cause of all things? At last, here is the unmoved

remains a contested site between competing articulations of a world that once was but never has been and the world that is coming to be without being so. But what is at stake in proclaiming the collapse of the world, space and time? What is the 'world'? What is 'technology'? How is the world constructed by technics at the very level of its perception in a technological era? The common genealogy of this narrative of 'collapse' is one of a technics that comes to intervene upon a (pure, ideal, innocent) 'state of nature'. Technics is (*unfortunately*) summoned by the evolution of humanity itself (Zerzan), gifted by a death-god (Socrates), and thus leads to the Babel of Man (Virilio).<sup>2</sup> Technics *befalls* humanity and the world. As part of the enduring myth of the Fall of humanity and the world, I propose this narrative of technics be read as (essential to) the general structure of metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> But first –

### *Genealogy of the 'Geographic Contraction'*

In its way, the narrative of 'collapse' has resided in the heart of the critique of technology, in particular the field of communication studies. Let us trace its genealogy by way of briefly explicating a few different readings of collapse; for there are different views of collapse that challenge technology as necrotechnics.

Thus does the alphabet become disseminated through the mechanics of technology; thus does 'collapse' become synonymous with the written word. The narrative of communication 'advances' – or, for some, regresses – from the alphabet to Gutenberg's printing press, but in particular it was the telegraph that severed 'communication' from 'transportation' and accelerated technics toward the coming satellite. Symbols could now move independent of geography and faster than the transport of goods and bodies (Carey 213). Carey attributes the telegraph with institutionalizing standardized time, developing commodity markets, modern gambling and the business of credit, providing the infrastructure for the control of information (itself a new commodity for the new 'news media'), and laying the groundwork for 19th century imperialism. The perception of time 'rigidified' as the introduction of 'time zones' eliminated local variance. It now mattered what time the market opened in New York. The edges of empire could

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mover, or, Aristotle's definition of the god (*Physics*, Book 8): how much more is the metaphysics of *entelecheia* embedded in the 'critical' discourse of technics?

<sup>2</sup> John Zerzan ends his essay "Too Marvelous For Words (Language Revisited)" with the same metaphor (?) of the tower of Babel as Virilio: "The Tower of Babel, now built into cyberspace, has never been taller-but quite possibly never so weakly supported. Easier to bring down?"

<sup>3</sup> Insofar as metaphysics is logocentrism, "Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 12). More specific to our tastes, "The epoch of the logos thus debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning" (13). The connection between logos and techne is made throughout *Of Grammatology*, for example p. 85 when discussing the impossible retrieval of the origin, and how the "constitution of electronic card-indexes and reading machines, enlarges difference and the possibility of putting in reserve" (84).

now telegram central control of immanent uprising, thereby allowing the military to strategize and respond with devastating speed while the markets calculated accordingly. 'Pre-emptive' strikes became possible as, like the stock market, futures could be traded either as commodities or as deaths. The two were never far apart. Here, the collapse of distance through communicative speed supposes the *calculation* of time, but it also brings vast entities into focus through their use of a specific technology. The economy, military, capitalism, imperialism – these always ambiguous concepts are now strung together as technical apparatuses that rely upon the telegraph to maintain control over time and space. The space of intervention within these controlling networks now becomes more clear: cut the lines. Block the rails.

As Carey points out, "that information moved independently of and faster than products" is a condition of Marx's analysis of the commodity fetish (221). With the accelerating technics of circulation, the ghostly exchange value of the thing runs away from its useful body. The assessment of the situation typically is either that (a) the fetishized table-as-commodity, by "transcending sensuousness... stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas" (Marx 163), and like Marx we condemn exchange value for its grotesque distortion of the real, or (b) we welcome the table that stands on its head and begins to think for itself. Technics has become autonomous. Evidently for Marx such grotesque spectrality need be overthrown. Derrida argues that the spectrality of exchange and supplement has been there from the get-go and can only be exorcised (ultimately, futilely) at the pain of a repetitive, recursive violence. "The commodity thus haunts the thing, its specter is at work in use-value" (Derrida, *Specters* 151). Which isn't to say that acceleration and change are lost on Derrida. What 'we' are 'witnessing' circa 1971 is "the increasingly powerful historical expansion of a general writing" (Derrida, *Signature* 20). Specific technologies are part of a broader writing which is *historical, expanding and increasingly powerful*. To analyze it would be to unpick its general conditions. Unlike Zerzan, and perhaps a certain Marx, Derrida does not advocate a return to an apparently "more subtle, unmediated and sensual" presymbolic existence but rather argues for the ethico-political *necessity* of 'learning to live with ghosts' (Zerzan; Derrida, *Specters* 176). The latter would entail an affirmative yet precise questioning of technics and "the spectral spiritualization that is at work in any *tekhne*" (Derrida, *Specters* 97). In particular, it would mean diving into the delay, deferral and differences inherent to apparently pure immediatism or speed. Derrida demonstrates the ineradicability of general operations of supplement and substitution that constitute the one and the whole in their hindsight; that is, Derrida demonstrates that spectrality, spiritualization, exchange, general writing and technics remain as irreducible as they are 'contaminants' of that to which they are often opposed. Nor can a pure origin be retrieved (at least not without risking *catastrophic* violence in the attempt to eradicate or exorcise the unwanted). Derrida's deconstructive approach is essential for the heterogeneous analytic proposed by a media ecology; deconstructive strategy unpicks the eschatology of collapse to reveal a

complicity between human, world and technics that remains the necessary condition for a media ecology.

Communication studies has thus gestured towards media ecology without necessarily tending toward the eschatological dimensions of collapse (whether viewed in light of 'progress' or of the 'fall'). Carey's analysis demonstrates the complex of economy, military, technology, phenomenology, society and politics in the *scaling* of technics. *Scaling* here means a decisive shift in a particular technology that in turn changes the conditions upon which the world is constructed and thus perceived. Here, 'media ecology' as concept and practice attempts to specify (a) not only the 'technical' relations of technologies to the change in form, function and perception of the world, but (b) the way in which ethico-political 'judgements' are inscribed in the invention, perception and implementation of technologies and their technical relations, from general operations to particulars. To grasp what a media ecology means as a concept, and as a strategy, we will first get abstract before we get real. Fear not; I will wrap up by discussing concrete possibilities for autonomy in a collapsed world.

### *1. Media Ecology as Contamination of Metaphysics*

In a media ecology, collapse is viewed not as a techno-pathology, nor as the *loss* of difference, the soul, the essence of the human or the natural, etc. Technics does not *befall* the world. If it does not, we must grasp how with metaphysics technics is kept at a distance by human culture precisely because it is so intimate to humanity itself. This strange dynamic of repulsion of that which is most intimate, if not sacred, inhabits the core of that violence which is attributed to technology in-itself *by* metaphysics (metaphysics, and the narrative of collapse, constitute the metanarrative of this 'violence that befalls the world'). Here we broach what is precisely at stake in the metaphysical attempt to read collapse as eschatology. But what here is *metaphysics*?

We must take a shortcut. The structure of metaphysics has been interrogated at length in the work of Derrida. This general operation that attempts to exclude the 'contaminant' necessary for its own being articulates metaphysics itself. This process of exteriorization is one of a violent repulsion or exclusion of that which is condition of possibility for the self. Bernard Stiegler has taken up this investigation of the exclusionary operations of metaphysics in regards to technics in his 3 part volume, *La technique et le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1994). In brief, the metaphysical myth which inaugurates universal or 'transcendental' truth nonetheless cannot admit that its anamnesis (or intuition of *a priori* knowledge) requires the sign to recall the non-present to itself and to which it is necessarily in relation (Derrida, *Dissemination* 109-10). The metaphysical suppression of the sign in *mneme* is thought by Stiegler as the exclusion of technics *in general* (*Technics* 216). Metaphysics attempts to erase the *zootechnological* species of the (non)human. And once metaphysics rediscovers technics at the heart of things, it declares the end of the world as we know it.

This is all very abstract. Yet here we encounter the structure of what guides the emergence of media ecology as formidable:

1. The first point here is to counter eschatology, or the narrative of final ends, for such narratives risk self-fulfilment. Why is it that humans are a violent, self-destructive species? Perhaps this is, after all, why the trope of collapse has persisted for so long. As Michel Serres has reminded us, since the atom bomb we now as a species have the means to enact the planetary *eschaton*. Collapse can thus be read by way of either (a) the metaphysical perspective, a kind of elegy to the world, by cataloguing the inevitable loss of difference as all things accelerate toward the end of all ends; or (b) the perspective from a media ecology, whereby collapse is a process of differentiation in the ongoing technics of the world. Precisely put, a media ecology views collapse as the contraction of a manifold that draws within itself that which was previously exteriorized by violence (precisely, the above binary is thus complicated by media ecology as conceptual framework). This violence we call the operational effect of metaphysics. The ethico-political task is to reduce its scale (for violence remains *irreducible*, as essential to all difference). Thus media ecology views collapse as the contraction of the manifold (which is to say a shift in *scale*), the world itself in its worlding, so that all those things that 'appear' exterior, foreign and outside now 'appear' inside, intimate and interior. This shift of appearances is a *scalar* operation. *Media ecology thus has an ethico-political thrust: to scale down violence, to connect what appears impossibly opposed, and yet, at the same time, to affirm the differentiation of the individuated and to foster the autonomous.* Media ecology, in this view, assumes a Kantian respect of the irreducible antinomy without synthesis. It is this irreducible antinomy which opens the gap of autonomy in the midst of interconnected existence.

Where metaphysics scales up violence, media ecology seeks to scale it down. The question is one of *scale*. Hence, a proposition: if the telegraph revealed the lifeline of a few hitherto ambiguous, if not hegemonic concepts that were all too concrete to those suffering under them – colonial imperialism, for example – might there not be technologies that reveal something of the operative infrastructure of a concept so nebulous as *metaphysics*, a concept that nonetheless contains under its umbrella phallogocentrism, ethnocentrism, and exclusionary violence? And if so, might not possibilities for intervention take on a *technical* form? A 'strategy'?

As the focus on technics as 'other' has occupied our vision for so long, now that it becomes intimate we forget how close to us it has been. This crossing of inside/outside is read by metaphysics as a sign of the eschaton, as the contamination of the transcendental by finitude in the shape of necrotechnics. Technics is thus thought as that which is foreign to the world and the human. At the same time – and this is the paradox of metaphysics – metaphysics advances the most deadly of technologies, as weapons against the foreign and excluded. By contrast, a contrast that I wish to amplify, media ecology grasps technics and its movement across inside/outside as part of the worlding of the world, as part of its ongoing hybridization in which antinomy is condition of autonomy. This means that there is a difference between metaphysics and media ecology in not only the

perception of the world, but a difference in the phenomenology of the world, the very way in which technics is either (a) excluded from the construction of the world in its space and time, yet included for use as mere 'tools', usually of destruction (metaphysics); or (b) read as necessarily constitutive of spatio-temporalization itself, and thus inherent to the world's worlding (media ecology).<sup>4</sup>

2. The second point here: exteriorization is a necessary part of the work of difference, of autonomy itself. It cannot be eliminated (to do so would be to propose the absolute erasure of difference itself). But this work of *technical* difference has shifted in scale. The consequences with certain technologies are that much greater, if not on the level of the catastrophe. For certainly the 20th century bears witness to a shift in the scale of technics. Still, this shift in scale need not demand an eschatological reading of collapse. Collapse is certainly a *phenomenon* of a world in which technics plays an increasing role. Yet so is the expansion of a 'general writing', a technics in general, that diversifies the field of technicization. We may turn to deconstructive psychoanalysis to read this process of collapse as one of *incorporation* rather than catastrophe. Incorporation suggests that the object is not assimilated – collapsed and thus lost – but rather maintained within a *topoi* in its alterity. This *topoi* – in psychoanalysis, that of the Ego – admits into its interiority the limits of its otherness as condition of its separation from Id and from other (see Derrida, *Fors*; Abraham and Torok; Castricano).<sup>5</sup> Technics holds the place for that otherness that is condition to our very being; and the shift in scale witnessed since the 20th century is one of coming to terms not with the 'ghost in the shell', as the romanticization has it of the machinic undead, but the shell held within the human ghost.

Let us thus propose a few hypotheses concerning *media ecology*:

1. Media ecology grasps the malleability of time, space, the 'natural' and the 'human' as essential to their natural plasticity. This plasticity is moreover nowhere isolated but always interdependent. Each singularity of a general plasticity is composed of various 'media' in a series of relationships which form a general 'ecology'. To Zerzan and Socrates media ecology counters that language and symbols are neither in their multiplicity the great dissolution of meaning nor the downfall of humanity – rather, symbols and language are the formative matter of 'a media ecology' (Fuller 1). To Virilio media ecology wishes to deconstruct the eschatology which overdetermines his otherwise critical readings of military

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<sup>4</sup> The degree to which *tekhne* inhabits *différance* is debated between Stiegler and Derrida. The question which Stiegler, in so many words, will pose to Derrida: is the quasi-transcendental *technical*? At this point I suggest only my own undecideability. See Stiegler, Bernard and Jacques Derrida, *Echographies of Television*, Trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> The collapse of the world is the outflowing of an incorporation of a technics held exterior by the eschatology of metaphysics. Whether ethico-political or theological. The mind reels.

technics and pure war. Catastrophe is not the necessary or only outcome of speed. Speed is also the movement of thought, subversion, technics, resistance – which is to say, a scaling of delay, differal, deferral, *différance*. The speed of this essay is (a) a genealogy of 'media ecology' by way of questioning the violence at work in the attempt to control the technics of perception, and thus the shaping, of the world and (b) an attempt to raise the question of *autonomy* within the network of technics. Can there be a 'media ecology' of autonomy? – & one that seeks to affirm the prospect for autonomous existence, even in an era of surveillance and geographic contraction, *by way of* an alternative network of technics that values the ecology of all over the raw subsistence of the few?

2. Technology shapes the world. But, what is the 'world'? What is 'technology'? And as the process is recursive insofar as the world shapes technics in its worlding, it is precisely an *ecology* that is at work. Media ecology gestures toward a phenomenology of a 'world' in which a kaleidoscope of perceptions of time and space are (re)constructed by technics. In this narrative, technics would attain the level of the new real: to dissect technics would be to dissect the framework of alterity. The 'world' would be the relief against which irreducible events attain their singularity by impossible comparison. Technics would be the apparatus of this 'comparison' (which is to say, antinomy). Technics would thus be something of an impossibility insofar as communication is ever achieved between singularities. These hypotheses are prototypical; it is the work of media ecology to connect what appears impossible regardless. A connection might take the form of a rupture – here we have the gap of antinomy in which autonomy takes its shape. This work of connection ties into an ethico-political stake – to not exclude but rather to discern the moment of decisiveness in which any *particular* ecology must be abandoned as provisionally complete. Media ecology can never assume a total reading of the world. Media ecology means something of a change in concept *of* the world. At least from what Virilio means when he writes that: "The instantaneous of action at a distance corresponds to the defeat of the unprepared adversary, but also, and especially, to the defeat of the world as a field, as distance, as matter" (Virilio, *Speed* 133). The world as such is not defeated for it has no adversary – though the worlding(s) of the world may indeed see its destruction (and this is the risk, of catastrophe, of a certain reading of 'collapse'). A particular world as perception of geotemporal distance has 'collapsed', yes, and this is its difference, and by a new world of informatics, unfortunately subject to violent deployment. But this need not take on the shape of a lament; rather these differences between worlds form the media ecology of the worlding of the world, and open up the ability to discern ethico-political intervention in the gap. This is the move Hakim Bey proposes in regards to autonomy: can autonomy be achieved by *dowsing* this gap? Are there not, and can there still be, pirate islands?

3. Large geographies of control can only be maintained with sufficiently fast communication networks. Carey outlines the particular technologies that lead to

particular though often general formations of military and economic power. Zerzan traces their arrival to 'symbolic thought' itself. Between Zerzan and Carey lies a gulf of difference, analytic and conceptual, between outlining the ethico-political contours in which technics reassembles the perception of, and conceptual creation of, time and space, and coming to value judgements concerning technics and ultimately human existence. Zerzan serves nonetheless as an exemplary moment in specifying ethico-political stakes in the scaling of technics. Zerzan is not far from anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan, who sees tools as completely integrated with the human species: "chopper and biface [tools] seem to form part of the skeleton, to be literally 'incorporated' in the living organism" (106).<sup>6</sup> David Wills furthers the 'retro' integration of technics in his concept of *dorsality*, proposing that technics is that which is always behind us, spinal, from the moment of becoming bipedal creatures: "a fundamental realignment of the human in its relation to technology occurs with the upright stance. The anthropoid 'chooses' to give itself the prospect of tools and at the same time turns its back in a radical way on whatever is behind it" (8). What Wills seems to suggest is that what is 'behind' the anthropoid is technics itself; a technics forgotten in the forward-vision of a new tool-based knowledge. This forward-vision, the '*fore-seen* or *fore-seeable*', as Wills writes, is the structure of the metaphysics of presence: "What is produced by that anthropoid, the technologies of tool use on the one hand, and language on the other, is henceforth presumed to occur within that frontal visual perspective of the knowable" (9). Again, what Wills appears to be proposing is nothing less than the bodily technics of metaphysics which erases its technical origin of the upright body. While Leroi-Gourhan seeks to study the technicity of the anthropoid, and Wills seeks to deconstruct the problematic of dorsality, Zerzan demands a judgement: the moment of symbolic thought – perhaps the very moment of the upright anthropoid? – is to be condemned as the downfall of the species. Whether a judgement, or even the concept of the good life, can take place without the symbolic order we will leave Zerzan to ponder – without "symbolic thought." The world, surely, demands more than what amounts to the violent silencing of the spoken and the destructive censure of the writ – if not the catastrophic immolation of thought itself.

## *II. Down to Earth with the Technics of Disappearance*

With the satellite, 'collapse' came from above. The collapse of a transcendent, unchanging temporality of absolute distance had been underway for some time, but with the satellite, a certain technical materiality now substantiated Nietzsche. The transcendent figure of a heavenly, immaterial God, able to see with penetrating vision the sins of flesh and soul, was replaced by the

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<sup>6</sup> As David Wills notes in his book *Dorsality* (p. 245 f. 2), Bernard Stiegler discusses Leroi-Gourhan at length in *Technics and Time*, vol. 1. Derrida discusses Leroi-Gourhan in *Of Grammatology*, where he employs to great use Leroi-Gourhan's use of 'ethnocentrism' to critique the anthropologist dismissal of peoples 'without writing'. Much of Derrida's deconstruction of Levi Strauss appears indebted to the work of Leroi-Gourhan. See pp. 82-87 in *Of Grammatology*.

multiple viewpoints of an industrial-military surveillance system able to detail within a metric the goings-on of visible life. Given the weather co-operated, the possibility of the Earth to yield up uninhabited or at least peacefully obscure territories for the exiled or the self-exiled social outcast came to be obliterated come the middle of the twentieth century. The problem of an overarching system of technological eyeballs is not only the collapse of a 'world' in which mystery and surprise previously relied upon the obscure recesses of geography, and in which space and time guaranteed a modicum of security from the conquest-bent – it is properly a problem of the 'collapse' of the autonomous itself. Or at least the autonomous as a space free from the eyes and ears of surveillance technologies. The (human) being born to this brave new world moves about under the busy eyes of the orbit-bound gods capable of tracking and pinpointing the location of (future) transgression.

For Hakim Bey, thinking the problem of autonomy in the postmodern bound 1980s, a strategic reply to the problem of the possible loss of autonomy on the grand scale was to turn to the micro-level of collectivized life. Bey proposed the seeking or dowsing of what he called Temporary Autonomous Zones. One would escape into the cracks of the mediatized grid, forging out a submedial level of theoretically 'immediatist' events, growing into a collectivity capable of living in the *augenblick* of the great all-seeing, many-eyed gods. Henceforth one sought out the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). The TAZ became a highly successful viral concept capable of shaping itself into a multiplicity of events. Bey was attuned to the counter-cultures of the '80s and emerging '90s: punk, DiY, 'zines, pirate radio, rave culture, the early cusp of the Net and its hacktivist culture. As Bey claims, these counter-cultures provided the model for the TAZ as what had *already* been happening as well as the catalyst for proposing the TAZ as *a possible form of autonomy* (TAZ 99). With the circulation in 1991 of Bey's book, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia), the TAZ became widely influential among '90s technoculture, the alter-globalization movement and Reclaim the Streets 'protestivals'. Hakim Bey:

In short, we're not touting the TAZ as an exclusive end in itself, replacing all other forms of organization, tactics, and goals. We recommend it because it can provide the quality of enhancement associated with the uprising without necessarily leading to violence and martyrdom. The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere / elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can "occupy" these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes in relative peace. Perhaps certain small TAZs have lasted whole lifetimes because they went unnoticed, like hillbilly enclaves – because they never intersected with the Spectacle, never appeared outside that real life which is invisible to the agents

of Simulation. (Bey, TAZ 101).

This passage has been oft-quoted. In short, the TAZ became the buzzword for late twentieth-century subjects that sought collective autonomy in "laboratories for experimental discourse and practice and the forging of alternative lifeways" (St. John 169). As Graham St. John, Simon Reynolds, Hillegonda Rietveld, François Gauthier, Des Tramacchi and other cultural ethnographers have observed, the TAZ became the catch-all for festal 'neo-tribal' cultures and heterogeneous counter-culture.<sup>7</sup> "These festal realms were alternative cultural heterotopia, contextualizing the exploration of proliferating and sometimes conflicting alternatives to patriarchy, militarism, capitalism and 'monophasic' consciousness" (St. John 169). The way in which the TAZ was taken up by multiple groups to express heterogeneous yet often explicitly interlinked concerns demonstrated how the TAZ operated as a convergence point for multiple movements. Each movement re-shaped the TAZ using the media and technologies available at hand. In the '90s, the TAZ was particularly taken up by emergent 'technoculture' that would employ sound-systems and turntables as the sonic catalysts for its gatherings, using the Net to network and organise through user-generated content and open-format websites. Such collectives embraced media technologies by engaging with independent and pirate radio, 'zines and hacked voicemail to circulate participatory events to a broad range of groups. The shape of the TAZ at this moment was diverse; it could be an all-night occupation of a warehouse, beach or forest, somewhere in-between a rave and a squat; an intervention using sound-systems and festal ritual within urban territories, as with Reclaim the Streets; a 'protestival' explicitly linking the upside-down carnival of Bakhtinian festival culture with targeted political protest. In each case, the TAZ was reconstructed from existing conditions as a *place* in which various media were re-purposed in the creative invention of that space and time. A particular example of the TAZ in use in a specifically mediatized environment can be found in the Next Five Minutes gatherings<sup>8</sup> of tactical media held in Amsterdam, where the 'TAZ Room' took on an open-format, unprogrammed gathering place. The TAZ, then, has been reinterpreted and remixed within the possibilities of a broader culture that sees media, and mediation, not as an impediment to 'breast-to-breast' gathering – which, significantly, retains its value and force – but as a near-essential component to its realization. Bey, however, remains highly critical of all 'mediated' experience, categorizing it as 'Simulation' (TAZ 106, 109-16).

The "theoretical" point I am driving at here: *the TAZ is an event born among technics that undermines if not counters the eschatology of collapse for it demonstrates the possibility of heterotopic autonomy within a technical worlding.*

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, St. John's two edited volumes, *Rave Culture and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004) and *FreeNRG: Notes From The Edge of the Dancefloor* (Australia: Common Ground, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See [ <http://www.next5minutes.org/> ].

*It makes its way by way of a media ecology.* The TAZ as it was taken up and shaped by its participants repurposed, reappropriated and redeployed – hacked & pirated – technology to enhance a precise experience, within a specific *place*, in the very gaps of vision of all-seeing surveillance. Subterfuge and camouflage were deployed; the understanding of *scale* in the re-presentation of the event to surveillance apparatuses was crucial in avoiding and deflecting the attention of the overseers. In short, the TAZ is a concrete movement of a media ecology in-action. At times in its ethico-political formation. The TAZ is the scaling of technology to create a space of embrace, an opening of festivity and inclusion, within the often violent pains of a 'collapsed' world.

### *Simulation and Substance*

Given Bey's aversion to mediation and the technics of media, which he critiques as Simulation, two critiques have followed Bey's central thesis, both of which emerge from a perspective that views the distinction between 'substance & Simulation' as not only erroneous, but a strategic error. The deconstruction of substance & Simulation remains a condition to furthering the emergence of 'media ecology' as both a concept and a practice. Both critiques, which we will address below, open toward a media ecology by refusing the easy separation of 'simulation' from 'substance'. Or, more precisely, both critiques deconstruct the ground upon which 'simulation' and 'substance' retain their politically and ethically valued meanings. The critique of Bey is twofold:

1. First, Bey is critiqued for dismissing the State as mere 'Simulation'. The State has revealed with plenty of force that it acts on the terrain of substance. The mark of this act is palpable in the case of violence, invasion and war, though certainly felt in more insidious ways through the disciplinary shaping of the body. First, Murray Bookchin, in his otherwise reactionary polemic that caricatures Bey as a 'lifestyle anarchist', has well-emphasized Bey's miscalculation of the 'firepower' of the State (20). Second, Foucault's many analyses of the conditioning of the subject demonstrate, at least in 'disciplinary' or 'sovereign' society, the way in which the 'simulation' of power through surveillance maintains a sufficient level of social discipline – at least for the State to function – while those who transgress are subject to substantive punitive and disciplinary measures. Despite citing Foucault, Bey seeks to separate Simulation from substance in the realization of the TAZ itself, as an attempt to flee Simulation and realize the place of substance. It would appear that Simulation has always been a necessarily *substantive* act of power. Simulation is the necessary fiction to uphold the substance of the real. This fiction can thus be tampered with and intervened within, even as disciplinary societies fade into history. The historical caesura in which sovereign, disciplinary modes secede to newer modes of control is advanced by Deleuze (*Postscript*). Deleuze outlines the shift from spaces of confinement, the 'analog' logic of the prison, hospital, asylum and school, to the *modulations* of control, a digital logic exerted as a "self-transmuting molding continually changing from one moment to the next" (179). Modular control is no

less substantive in the control over the 'codes' required for access, permission and information, whether that of education, finances, mobility or security. The threat of the disciplinary prison gives way to the anxiety of never escaping the born imprisonment of shantytown or ghetto. The inseparability of 'Simulation and substance' is to be found in the way in which the human itself, as an index of codes and database entries, is subsumed under the logic of the digital: "A man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt" (Deleuze 181).

A shortcut to contemporary autonomist theory is necessary here, by way of recognising the way in which technics is positioned by anticapitalist theorists as more or less 'internal'. Antonio Negri recognizes this 'digital' moment as the real subsumption of labour under capital by way of a "growing hegemony of immaterial labour that, in reality, irreversibly applies to the entire scenario of production" (*Porcelain* 64). If immaterial labour is the new totality of production, the new means of production are the subjects of cognitive labour themselves. Human labour in itself is nothing new; what is new is the 'incorporation of certain elements of fixed capital' in the subject herself (Negri 66). *The hitherto externalized machine – fixed capital – is now recognised as the internal properties of the human mind. This is cognitive labour.* Exterior technics transgresses the skin and is now to be found in the interiority of the subject herself: technics inside. Negri's analysis of cognitive labour identifies precisely the dynamics of a media ecology. With the internalization of fixed capital, variable labour – the labour force – can now circulate with a degree of autonomy. In short, humans are no longer tied to fixed machines as the machine has been interiorized 'in the brain'. The labour force has found, "ontologically, a space of autonomy" (Negri 66). With this new autonomy is "a new form of expression of subjectivities" to be found in the *common* of the multitude (67). For Negri, the possibility of autonomy follows from the incorporation of a technics that, as media ecology argues, has always been the case; yet it is in the movement of a certain genealogy of 'collapse' that it comes to the fore in the analysis of labour and mechanization.

There are two points of note here: (a) Negri has argued for a new space of autonomy by way of the interiorization of technics precisely where Bey seeks to refute its influence; and (b) Negri submits his thesis to *phenomenological verification* (66). What phenomenology is capable of the 'verification' of an internalized technics capable of 'actively creating' the *common* of the multitude? What kind of 'phenomenology' would be at stake here? At stake would be a phenomenology which first admits technics into its 'phenomenological reduction'. A future avenue opens here for 'media ecology' as a prospective technique that intersects mind and matter, technics and thing. Such a media ecology could work precisely from a deconstruction of phenomenology first advanced by Derrida, in which the sign is revealed to have been the condition of the very reduction which excludes it. Thus, "we are to consider 'normal' and preprimordial what Husserl believed he could isolate as a particular and accidental experience, something dependent and secondary – that is, the indefinite drift of signs, as errance and change of scene (*Verwandlung*), linking re-presentations (*Vergegenwärtigungen*)

one to another without beginning or end" (Derrida, *Speech* 103). Media ecology as the thinking of technics from general conditions to specific technologies engages in nothing less than the phenomenology of perception on its *technical* level (a further avenue – from this shortcut).

2. Second, Bey has been critiqued for arguing against the cultures of resistance that swept up the TAZ as organising principle, for they, for the most part, utterly ignored its ban on 'Simulation'. For rave culture, the alter-globalization movement, hacktivists, open source software and piracy advocates, and others immersed in the coming '90s technoculture, the TAZ provided the framework in which to stage events in the world of substance – the rave, the protestival, the occupation, clandestine or above-ground – only by virtue of learning to *manipulate* the world of Simulation. And to manipulate the world of Simulation, to *perpetuate* existing cracks in a mediatized, informatic, and surveilled world, required certain kinds of technics, certain kinds of counter-surveillance technologies as well as conceptual frameworks able to re-adapt, reinvent and repurpose technologies otherwise held captive by the 'agents of Simulation'. Simply, Simulation was the condition of possibility of the TAZ, from the recording and sound technologies required for electronic music and rave culture to the software and computer hardware required for Indymedia.org that, in turn, shifted the world's perception of the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organisation. Hand-in-hand with the TAZ, then, are both the conceptual frameworks and the re-purposed technologies of networking and intervention that compose something of the practice of a 'media ecology'.

### *Media Ecology & the TAZ*

Media ecology is not a term to be found in Bey, though Bey is occasionally to be found in those writing on media ecology. Bey's concern is to separate Simulation from substance, and to propose a life of substance incapable of being mediatized. As this argument retains a strong, if not seductive appeal, let us briefly revisit the way in which Bey proposes this distinction. In *TAZ*, Bey remains ambiguous concerning the role of media and technology in generating a TAZ. This ambiguity is no more felt than in the pages dealing with the emergence of the Net, where Bey sagely if not realistically advises that the "TAZ by its very nature seizes every available means to realize itself" (*TAZ* 111) – including the use of the Net and the computer. However, Bey distinguishes between the substance of what he calls the 'Web' – "word of mouth, mail, the marginal zine network, 'phone trees'... an information webwork" (110) – and the Simulation of the Net, which is dependent upon computer technology for its existence. In short, the Web is the support system for the sensuous TAZ which must remain 'face-to-face' or 'breast-to-breast'. The Net may be part of this support system but it cannot be a TAZ itself, for it occupies no actual *place* in space and time. Simply, though not without purpose, "*The TAZ is somewhere*" (111). Of all aspects retained by media ecology, perhaps this sense of staging an event, in time and space, remains: the TAZ *is* somewhere, it exists. Yet the language deployed here

and elsewhere – to *stage* the TAZ – demonstrates the degree to which the TAZ is already recognized as *only* generated through (technical) production. But the tendency to push the TAZ to a technologically-free zone is apparent in Bey's 1991 text. The TAZ itself might come into being through technology and mediatization (or 'mediation' in general), but it must not become experienced *through* them, and certainly not become dependent *upon* them. "The TAZ desires above all to avoid *mediation*, to experience its existence as *immediate*" (110).

The desire to exclude all forms of mediation progresses in two stages in Bey's later work. In *Immediatism* (1994), Bey argues that art as play, practiced in secret and without spectators may capture the 'immediatism' necessary for the TAZ (*Immediatism* 9-11). By 2003, in an article written for *The Fifth Estate*, Bey denounces the majority of contemporary performing and recording art – which would include rave culture and hacktivism – insofar as it utilizes technologies of apparent simulation. "We are buried and suffocated in so much lack of presence, so much unrealized desire, that art itself has taken on sickly and sinister airs" (Bey, *Tectum* 31). Bey calls for nothing less than a return of the (always absent) metaphysics of presence, of the ideal face-to-face purged of ghostly technics. Henceforth, what is needed is a 'form of Immediatism' called *Tectum Theatrum*, an essentially 'old-fashioned', 'media-free' 'art', held in secret, bound by its "active and conscious resistance to mediation and commodification" (31).

Bey's Immediatism is not to be mistaken for an avant-garde art movement; his proposal concerns the nature of resistance itself in a highly-mediatized world, and along with its evident prescriptive character Immediatism proscribes a dualist political philosophy that seeks to separate Simulation from substance. As a consequence, Bey's analysis of the mediatized environment of the 21st century shuns the possibilities of open source networks and the organising as well as creative potential of 'technoculture' that would be inherent to a more nuanced media ecology. The strength of Immediatism is its self-erasure from history... perhaps what cannot be seen cannot be harmed. Yet Immediatism is an exodus only in retreat. Burrowed away, cut-off from the world, Bey's attempt at Immediatist secrecy only plays at exodus insofar as its effects tend toward collective erasure. Or, more precisely, only the first stage of exodus is achieved (see Negri 103). Nothing appears to follow from the separatist journey save for a secret, ascetic life lived with (a) few others. The potential to transform subjectivity through repurposing technology and media, to rewrite, in short, the ecology of media, is excluded from the start. Through the disavowal of mediated strategies of resistance, Bey attempts to enact a separation from the existing networks of technology and mediatized society (and to separate, at the same time, *physis* from *tekhne*, representation from presence, mediation and mediatization from immediacy and immediatism, anarchism from technology, autonomy from technics). Bey's laboratory of the TAZ becomes an exclusive zone of purification from the 'contamination' of technics. While Negri has argued the importance of *exodus* as an often necessary condition to enable a "new social terrain on which to organize, through revolt and resistance, the very existence of subjectivities" (104), Bey's programme arrests itself at the moment of separation itself. The TAZ

disappears from the potential *network* of Zones. Consequently, the attempt to exclusively separate Simulation from substance tends toward a defeatist self-isolation by advocating a puritan separation from the network of collective effort.

### *Laboratories of Thought and Experimentation*

'Media ecology' has so far been explored – thought, in short – as an interventionist strategy to emphasize the entwinement of the concept with existing discourses in political philosophy and communication studies. Mathew Fuller, in laying out the coordinates in which media ecology has emerged as a concept and quasi-methodology, notes not only the classical analyses of communication studies theorists Marshal McLuhan, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Harold Innis and others, but also pauses to note the specific contribution of Félix Guattari. Fuller writes that "the stakes he [Guattari] assigns to media are rightly perceived as being profoundly political or ethico-aesthetic at all scales" (5). As Negri also emphasizes, media are fully integrated into "laboratories of thought and experimentation for future forms of subjectivation" (Guattari). The TAZ is a concrete form of such a laboratory. The way in which technicity is 'realized', inseparable from the condition of humanity, marks the ethico-political stakes in the ecology of media.

But what is meant here by *ecology*? What precisely, even, are *media*? These and other questions remains with the labour to be done. Labour cognitive as it is precarious. Technology is not an exterior Simulation from which the substance of pure humanity can be extracted. Technology, as the organising discourse (*logos*) of technics, is the condition of the world's plasticity to change and metamorphose. Media, as those technologies that re-present the world to ourselves, are neither a supplement to the real. Perhaps media are the necessary fictions from which the real is constructed. When we speak of media *ecology* we mean to signal the way in which apparatuses and technologies of representation are an integral part of the 'construction' of not only the human, 'artificial' sphere but the worlding of the world itself, the 'ecosphere' and the 'natural'. Which is why media ecology is not purely a 'constructivist' theory. Honing in on the specifics of media ecology, or more precisely, a media ecology, means taking into account the *scale* at hand, and the constitutive elements of scale by way of conscious or unconscious forces. The terrain of these forces that appear to determine scale, from the very large or seemingly abstract – the market, the environment, that surveillance system in low planetary orbit – to the very small – nanotechnology, that city's zoning laws, those particular street cameras – are what Fuller and Guattari call 'profoundly political'.

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