



# ***Something is out there!***

Networked encounters of the  $n^{\text{th}}$  kind or:  
the art of conspiracy

# Something Is Out There!

The Art of Conspiracy: Networked  
Encounters of the  $n_{\text{th}}$  Kind

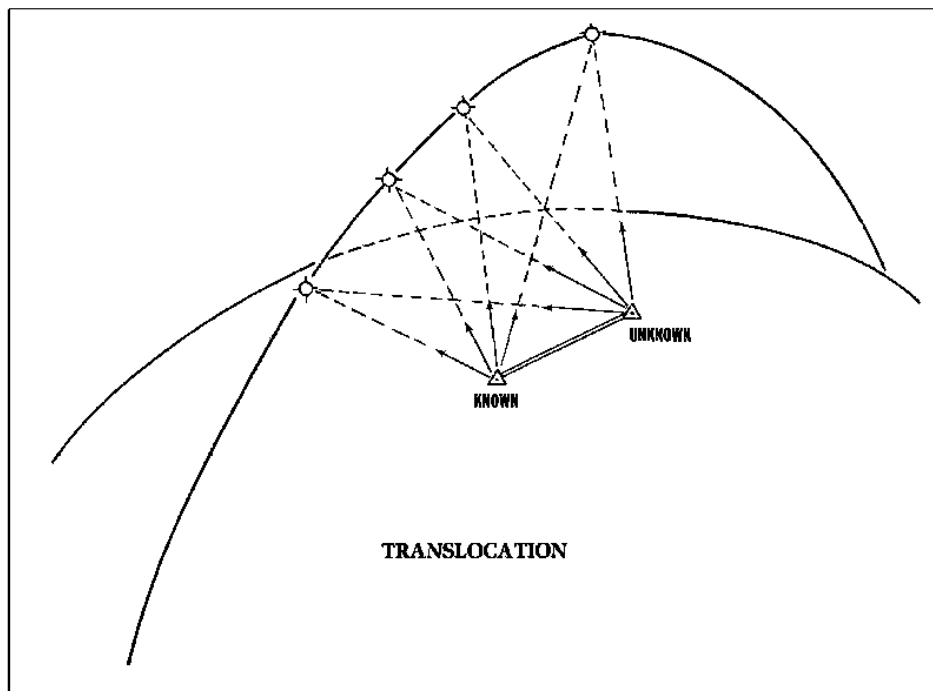


Figure 29

**ID-UM End Exam Thesis**

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## Preface

In 1998, when I was twelve years old, my parents bought a computer with an ISDN modem. I was no stranger to computing, there already had been a computer for some years in my parents' home office. But it had been offline the whole time, the poor thing. It was literally still merely a *thing*; we entertained a purely symmetrical relation of being-together, a thing, or 'think,' like me, a buddy to play with, in the compactness of the home. But the ISDN connection, as it were, 'un-thinged the thing', becoming more of a gateway, a windowless window(s®). In the following months, my classmates and I discovered the World Wide Web, getting familiar with the omnipresence of Sp@m, She-Males and other rarities, a total freak show - observed with semi-pornographic curiosity and excitement. It skyrocketed us out of our quite tiring 'local situation' into a vast alien world of signs and virtual agents (whether human or *humanesque*). We clicked on everything blue and underlined, tiny GIF animations of car-hitting-rabbit, police-chasing-car, girl-swallowing-microphone, only the clashing of pixels and the joy in sharing misfortune in an immediate but harmless intensity, we developed more and more an intuitive sense of the possibilities of the new type of encounters with others in the networks, for whom we did not care one bit (well, at least several bits).

Being a twelve year old, one of my first encounters with digital Networks had to do with computer games. At school, a rumor circulated about the monthly release of a mysterious CD-ROM, called TWILIGHT, which was said to contain the latest cracked videogames that were officially released that month. It was said that some guy in the second year had over a hundred of them, copies of which he distributed in and around school, for exorbitantly high prices. From the profit he would acquire the latest and fastest CD-ROM toaster, giving him the ultimate and uncontestable monopoly over the market (let's say he had an intuitive grasp of capitalism). Where *he* got them from, we didn't know, a friend of a friend, he proclaimed. I never met him.

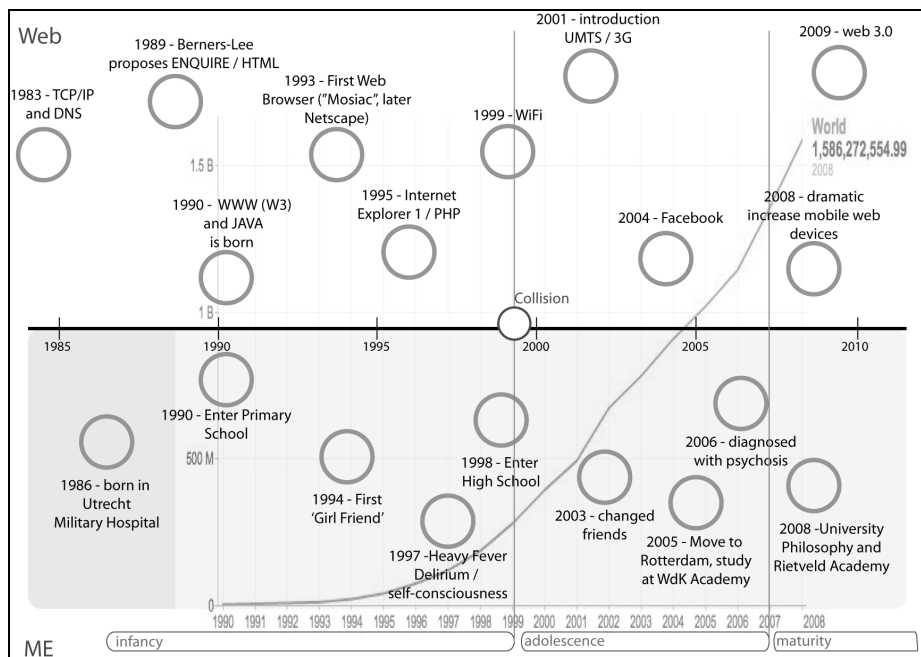
The WWW was (paradoxically) still pretty much a closed and unmanageable sphere. Search engines produced the strangest of results, files larger than a couple of megabytes would take days to download or were simply not available. Still, we had a notion of the enormity of it, the hidden depths that must have been 'out there', accessible only to the Informed. Nevertheless, the distribution of TWILIGHTS mostly took place through physical exchange or mail, by trading and burning disks, using the Internet only for communication (that slowest of monsters; with ISDN it literally roared when you tried to connect, probably one of the last physical symptoms of technology). The TWILIGHT Network operated worldwide, it seemed. I knew I existed merely on the periphery of it, that it could not have any notion whatsoever of my rather modest complicity, being only an end-user, a consumer, a foot soldier. Did it even have an origin, a center?

(Did it matter? We certainly didn't care). But then this couldn't be the case for everyone in the network? Mustn't there have existed some perhaps loosely assembled center somewhere, or at least a group of soft-ware die-hards, the Designers and Interfacers, the First Distributors, the Hackers and Crackers? Who were these people, who had wholly dedicated their lives to the distribution of games for our happiness, who let us share in their illegality? For that it was illegal was explicitly clear from the start; and to participate in this illegality was part of the pleasure of playing these games, which did not always execute in the way you would expect. Hence the sublimity of the first start-up screen! So in a way, the puberty of the internet coincided with my puberty – the cliché being of course, that of being in a state of ambiguity, insecurity, clumsiness, anxiety, not only parallel in time, but also in content and interest. So when two such newborns, two such anxieties collide, new psychic universes open up. Paranoia raged; I would fool people in intricate ways, setting up elaborate digital traps (pretending to be someone else, launching email-bombs, changing identities), i.e. using my newly acquired anonymity, but always with a consciousness of being fooled by the others at the same time. Users were reduced to mere variables, at a distance, and using tools that I could not oversee nor control: new discoveries in IP tracking or other surveillance techniques, always one step ahead of me.

Although it would be grotesque to *causally* connect these biographical events to the main topics of this text, or to deduce from them some justification of the latter, I tend to believe in *some* relation at least, diffused and disintegrated as it has become over the years through the vicissitudes of memory, but still somewhat alive in that never quite accessible and hardly recognizable idiosyncrasies of my personality. The trajectory of this paper will try to establish a chain of associations, ranging from the intimately personal to more generic and global socio-economic, as well as artistic domains, and back again, to set up a certain niche where all these things can acquire significance in relation to each other, or: so that they may conspire.



Cover of a Twilight DVD



Me, Myself & the Web



## Introduction

Everybody's a squealer. We're in th' Info Revolution here. Anytime you use a credit card you're tellin' the Man more than you meant to. Don't matter if it's big or small, he can use it all. (Pynchon, 1990: 74)

There is a long-standing tradition of a type of art which continuously questions its own conditions of possibility, and which theoretically and practically justifies itself through this questioning, becoming a purely reflexive meta-art.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this thesis cannot but partake in this tradition, on the other hand it intends to go beyond it. Its 'problematic' emanates from the hypothesis that art and everyday reality are in the process of cancelling each other out, i.e. are moving formally and socio-economically towards each other, as well as a refusal of seeing in this development the annulment or impotence of either reality or art, but to see it as an interesting tension in need of critical exploration. Without having to go through the trouble of positing some all-encompassing *Zeitgeist*, the parallels between the development of artistic practices and 'the new economy' are obvious, art being even more 'open to infection', but also often more naive than other disciplines. In the case of 'media art' this transgression of borders and reciprocal 'exchange of goods' (technical, visual etc.), must be - but unfortunately still not always is - quite clear, and resurfaces in the question regarding the distinction between 'art' and 'design', the omnipresence of 'the social' and 'public participation' in artistic projects, as well as the 'need for creativity' in the 'knowledge economy.' Media art excutes itself through, and feeds off, the tension between itself and a society already saturated by media-objects, of which it is at the same time a part, and whos strategies and tools it appropriates. A tension also, which it produces out of itself, by positioning itself *as art* vis-à-vis those other types of mediation, as a place from where to reflect upon and experiment with the latter. Still there seems to be a rather stubborn persistence of a kind of media art that appears perversely self-conscious, sometimes even narcissistic (to which I will subsequently refer to as the *conspiracy of art* - a typically 'modernist' expression of the 'media art project'). But there has also arisen a kind of media art who's reflexivity is produced more through a consciousness of what is *not* art, by relating itself to its outside, as ideal, as real, as arena, or merely as subject, politicizing itself in or out of this opposition (an *art of conspiracy*). Because unlike 'old' artistic media (like painting and sculpture), which had no formal or practical correlate in reality, no real art-ificial counterpart (their vehicles of expression were artistic *per se*), media art was from the start merely a small part of an enormous media-apparatus that covers the globe with a secondary technological skin. Logically the boundary here can only be maintained by a fetishizing of art *qua* aesthetic tradition: by continuously reiterating its set of stylistic or conceptual conventions,

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps now there is *only* meta-art, the reflexivity a trick in order to secure its status as art, by continously restating the question: "is it art?"

by smuggling in enigmatic forms whose function is merely *to hint at an idea of itself as art*, and produce itself out of this idea. This is the *conspiracy of art*. Thus, in the case of new media art, the set of tools and methods it employs is *basically* the same for all media-activities, whether commercial, political, personal, social, etcetera. Hence to 'do media art' means to derive a strategy from *and* against the essential characteristics of new media in their everyday operationality. To play along this border-line, or perhaps doing away with it altogether - the utopian event of what Ranciere calls the 'Aesthetic Regime.' One of the first questions will therefore be what this operationality consists of, its function and its effects, i.e. *to what* and *how* media art is able to relate to it, and whether the latter can draw in a direct way from the former's apparatuses of information and communication, so as to plant within it the seed of other cycles of re-revolution.

I have chosen the term 'conspiracy' because, as a concept, it is able to draw together and associate the multiple and complex axes along which (new) media art necessarily travels, being always both technical and political at the same time. My goal was to think in a way that does justice to the fundamental paradox that arises from media art's complicity with media themselves, a paradox more generally expressed in Negri and Hardt's book *Empire*, when they state that:

Being republican today, then, means first of all struggling within and constructing against empire, on its hybrid, modulating terrains. And here we should add, against all moralisms and all positions of resentment and nostalgia, that this new imperial terrain provides greater possibilities for creation and liberation. (Negri & Hardt: 2001: 218)

The paradoxical or ambiguous attitude with which Negri and Hardt approach Modernity, as a process of self-struggle, i.e. as being potentially and simultaneously both absolute domination as well as precondition of the multitude and its self-organisation, can be mapped onto the attitude of new media art's intimate involvement with new media technologies. One of the questions that is to be addressed in this thesis is thus: how to found a niche within this paradoxical situation, i.e. to construct against, while being within and on the terrains of; the art of navigating beyond good and evil, to envision how it would be like to 'come out the other end,' especially when older models of artistic critique ran against the fact that *"the media culture has absorbed its own strongest critiques, frustrating any direct resistance grounded in traditionalist conceptions of realism and existential authenticity."* (Tabbi, 1996: 10)

Media art thus always balances a tight rope, in danger of a regressions of the worst kind. It can regress to the traditional tools and contexts of art and fetishize them vis-à-vis mass-medial representations of reality, as well as to a fetishism of the evolution of technological objects, their 'gadgetness' (*"Oh look! My movements trigger a video! Wow!"* with some conceptual *blah blah* to cover it up). This is the price it pays for participating in these technological practices, but also its potential.

The associations and problems hinted at above are to be approached indirectly, through a phenomenon that has on first sight nothing to do with art, and which is powerful precisely in so far as it transcends the academic or artistic context: conspiracies and conspiracy theories.<sup>2</sup> Why talk about media and media art in terms of conspiracies? First, very generally speaking, because there is a methodological importance in describing things or events in terms that do not belong to the established discourses of their explication. After a certain time, the terms and the things become too attached to each other, too obvious, too self-validating. This is also true for the discourses in which new media art is described – and without which it would not exist as such. The discussion concerning the ‘politicality’ of media has done its job well – politics as the conspiracy of media, of everything, the concealed manipulation – but no longer adds to a critical understanding. This thesis intends to look at the role of media, in society at large and in art, through the notion of *conspiracy* and its paranoid refractions, conceived as a certain structural logic of forms at work in new media and their effects, as well as the ways these strategies can be or are being appropriated by artistic practices. The methodological difficulty lies in the problem of how to ‘come to terms’ with things of which one has the intuition that they are somehow connected, but show no outer signs of this connection, neither out of themselves nor through others. What if there is neither discourse nor praxis already in place to ease the task at hand? This is precisely the problem with which the paranoid conspiracy theorist is faced.

In the first chapter I will try to establish a position with regard to the theoretical debates surrounding conspiracy culture, going against a ‘pathological’ explanation of conspiracy culture. In the second chapter I will focus on the relation of conspiracy culture to the rise of a ‘network episteme,’ a rise that signifies a certain paradigmatic shift in thinking about reality both cause and effect of the practical consequences and implementations of the Network Ideal.<sup>3</sup> The goal is to conceptualize conspiracy theory and paranoia as necessary by-products or even the ‘return of the repressed’ of the ‘neo-liberal project,’ justified by stories about democracy, transparency and freedom (especially in the context of new media). Or, to put it even stronger, signifying the failure of this myth, inherent to the evolution of the Internet and participatory media in general. The focus is on their concrete material effects, the specific subjectivation of, and interrelation between, users as they are mediated by network-architectures, interaction designs, operating systems with higher level interfaces and databases, which disclose and produce digital objects like images, texts, users, videos and so on. The third chapter will discuss new media as paranoid structures, i.e. as being conspiratorial in form and function, from a more technical point of view.

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<sup>2</sup> The *conspiracy of art* is precisely this: an implicit agreement among artists and art-connoisseurs not to acknowledge this transcendence, which has already taken place, a fundamental *mauvaise-foi*.

<sup>3</sup> This means that it is also always more of a *dispositive*, i.e. something constructed in four dimensions, practically oriented and executed through technology.



Hopefully, this thematic is able to generate a perspective from which to critically assess 'media culture' and the connection to artistic practices in the second part of this text.

The second part will contrast two possible strategies and forms of new media art which either already prevail, or perhaps need to be invented, and will discuss several examples, as well as my own take on the matter. In the fourth chapter I will try to provide a rather broad contextualization of the socio-economic and techno-ideological axes and their historical transformations, along or against which new media art necessarily has to position and construct itself, off which it feeds like a parasite (being dependent on it for its own existence), and with which it always entertains some level of formal complicity. The last part of this chapter will attempt to generate a perspective from which to criticize what I refer to as the *conspiracy of art*. This part will lay the foundation for a more positive approach to possible strategies for dealing with and exploiting this complicity, in the last chapter, i.e. what an *art of conspiracy* could look like.

If I would be forced to draw a definite conclusion from this text, I would say that the function and specificity of media – as being many edged, nomadic and inclined to infiltrate all spheres of life – should not be too easily bypassed in media art, but should be explored, practically and theoretically, for what it really is: an infectious wound that has to stay open no matter what. This isn't possible by reflexively reproducing and displacing media as if they are an autonomous collection of visual or informatic formats, i.e. by extending an art typical of modernism, at the same attracted to but also highly allergic to and afraid of *common sense*. Rather, we must go all the way to confront and exploit the collision induced by a paranoia and subsequent 'overflowing' of art on the one hand and the *Network Imaginary*, the production, reproduction and distribution of which the Internet has come to facilitate. An *art of conspiracy* is perhaps better equipped to take on such a challenge than a *conspiracy of art*.

## The Conspiracy of Design

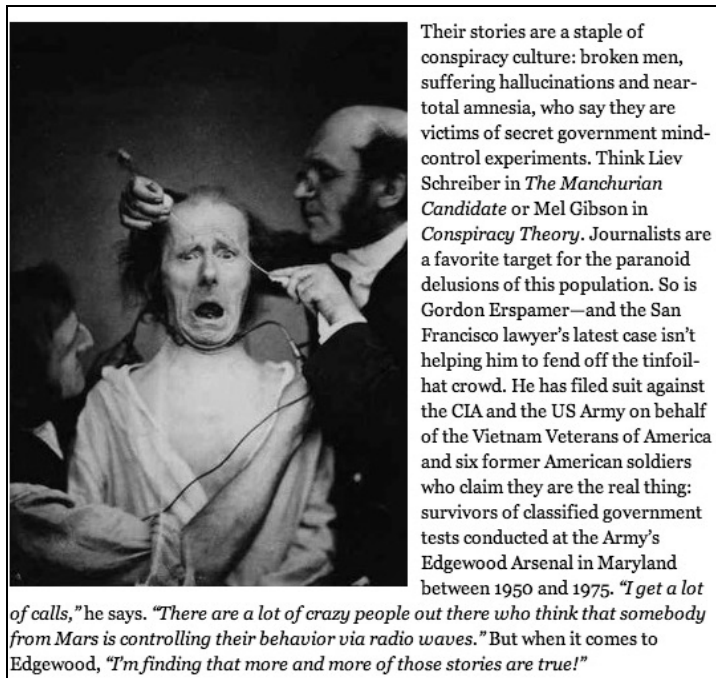
O son, how many bodies we have to pass through, how many bands of demons, through how many series of repetitions and cycles of the stars, before we hasten to the One alone? (Hermes, 2004: 33)

These two ideas, that things are not as they seem and everything is connected, are primary components of how we think about and experience the information age. They are also the guiding impulses of conspiracy theory. (Dean, 2000: online)

When discussing my interest in conspiracy theories with others around me, a certain *type* of reaction often seems to prevail. This 'conventional' response as to what the proliferation of conspiracy theories on the Net is supposed to signify (with regard to what they so self-assertively call 'our current condition') is twofold. The first type of reaction outright dismisses conspiracy theories as the paranoid delusions of specific individuals unable to cope with the world and with their own position in it (exhibiting a misplaced 'nostalgia for the intentional'). In this view, conspiracy theories are erroneous explanations caused by personal forms of *pathos*. The second reaction shares the former basic premises, but is a little more sophisticated, or: pseudo-philosophical. They would say something like the following: "yes, it is a very interesting phenomenon, because it shows how it is in the nature of the human being to attribute meaning to and narrate his surroundings, to make sense of it all, especially in a world which seems increasingly meaningless and complex. By positing an all-encompassing explanation (the conspirers' intentions), he fulfills his desire for stability and security." This set of responses I will call the *pathological* explanation of the rise of conspiracy theories (if there is indeed such an increase, and not merely an increase in *visibility*. But then again, does it even make sense to make this distinction?).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A conspiracy theory *qua form* lends itself quite nicely for 'becoming viral', given that the necessary conditions of its reception are also fulfilled (which is easy in a media environment already based on slick advertising slogans and spectacularized news reports). But it pushes itself towards the limit of this logic (which precisely therefore *excludes* it from most mainstream media). And it is precisely because of this 'extremity' or 'consistency' that it is able to *show* this logic in its 'ideal-typical' form.



Screenshot taken from <http://bit.ly/ljbrTD>

This response seems quite 'understanding' at first, and in all fairness containing some amount of truth, apart from reifying consciousness by positing some natural pathological impulse on the level of the individual *psyche* alone, establishes right away a scientific or transcendent position of pure opposition and 'otherness' with regard to the specific *Weltanschauung* of conspiracy theorists, blocking in advance every empathic or lived understanding of its conditions of possibility and self-perceived necessity.<sup>5</sup> This is because the underlying ontological and epistemological presuppositions of these responses are the exact opposite of those of conspiracy theorists - who posit the inherent meaningfulness and interconnectedness of the world itself, the obverse and bad conscience of today's utopias of global inter-connectedness. These opposite presuppositions are part and parcel of a popularized form of 'positivism', or 'cynical reason': meaning, cause and effect, totality, are all properties or functions of subjective reason, *projected* upon the external world which is intrinsically senseless, perhaps not completely random, but blindly following natural laws which are too complex to grasp.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Thus it is not my intention to show *that* or *how* 'society' causes paranoia in its 'subjects,' or that paranoia is the essential mental state of 'postmodern man.' Nor do I want to use the current state of 'society' to *explain* paranoia and the proliferation of conspiracy theories. We can leave this task to the Heideggerians as well as the science of statistics and psychiatry - the latter seem to conceive of paranoia as some spontaneous malfunction in neural apparatuses, leaving psycho-social factors out of the equation altogether, while the former looks for an explanation in an existential analysis of the 'crisis of Dasein.'

<sup>6</sup> This mode of explanation paradoxically "*oscillates between accusations that conspiracy thinking is excessively rational, over-interpretive, and too preoccupied with evidence, on the one hand, and that it is*

However, on a deeper level, these presuppositions are not as contrary to the paranoid presuppositions of conspiracy culture as they may appear. The instrumental and cynical distinction of positivist science - between the constructed character of discourse and the material world (whether it is conceived as physical or social), and which forms the former's playing ground - is actually the normalized or institutionalized form of paranoia in the modern age.<sup>7</sup> Conspiracy theories are merely the cancerous extension of typical 'enlightened' forms of rationality:<sup>8</sup>

On their face, these two attitudes - that of savvy skepticism and of naïve positivism - seem to represent opposite poles, but in the register of a generalized skepticism they function as the obverse of one another: two sides to the same false coin. (Andrejevic, 2005: 480)

Thus conspiracy culture merely exhibits the explosive and therefore *manifest* form of a set of forms of perception and hermeneutic formations in popular culture as well as in science - forms of perception and imagination of which one can ask if perhaps they are possible only with the advent of their technical mediation or (re)presentation through media, as the latter seems to facilitate and produce a kind of generalized skepticism and suspicion.

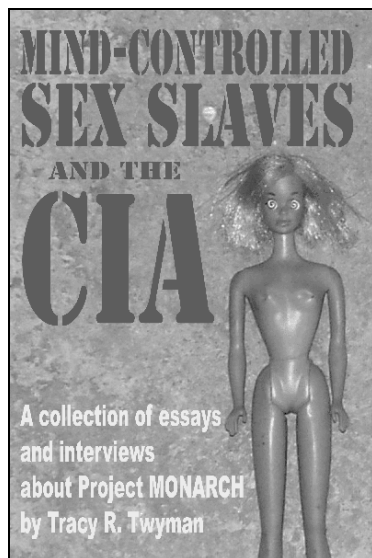


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*irrational, locked into a rigid interpretive framework, and pays little attention to the facts, on the other hand.*" (Dean, 2000: online)

<sup>7</sup> It is this form of paranoia *constitutive* of the Enlightenment, that reminds of Adorno and Horkheimer's parable of Odysseus in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the modern subject is the result of playing a trick on the Gods and on nature; but this trick backfires and thereby founds the subject of instrumental reason: the subject is retro-actively constituted as the result of a trick that backfires in the form of guilt. The modern subject is indeed a trickster.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Sloterdijk describes the enlightened man as someone who "*wants to know everything there is to know about what exists in the background, what is folded up, what hasn't come to light yet, what untill now has been hidden from view*" (Sloterdijk: 2009, 61, my translation)

More importantly though, the pathological explanations of conspiracy theories are unable to attain a critical understanding of the socio-economic and technical conditions from which these theories spring and how come these conditions seem to create such a 'fertile nexus' for their explication and distribution:

The problem is not that ufologists and conspiracy theorists regress to a paranoid attitude unable to accept (social) reality; the problem is that this reality itself is becoming paranoid. (Žižek, 2008, 250)<sup>9</sup>

By denouncing conspiracy theories in the pathological manner - rightly criticized by Žižek in the quote above - they simultaneously legitimate these conditions,<sup>10</sup> in the sense that they express a dogmatic reliance on the model of the 'normal' perception of social reality, and thus does not take into account how it is precisely this notion of reality that is undermined today.<sup>11</sup> (Žižek: 2008, 250)

This shows how the term 'conspiracy theory' itself must become an object of suspicion, i.e. as to how the *wording* itself already executes the normalization hinted at above. In his book *Parapolitics: Conspiracy in Contemporary America*, Kenn Thomas, in order to conceptualize conspiracy theories as part of a broader spectrum of bottom-up alternative political practices, proposes to replace the term 'conspiracy theories' with that of 'parapolitics'. Borrowing the term from Peter Dale Scott, who defined it as "*a system or practice of politics in which accountability is consciously diminished*," he refers to parapolitics as:

all those political practices and arrangements, deliberate or not, which are usually repressed rather than acknowledged. The prefix 'para' means 'alongside' - and activity that happens concurrently with visible politics. (Thomas, 2006, 1)<sup>12</sup>

What resounds in this quote is the idea of the Internet as a space that would fulfill the ideal of a truly open and participatory democracy, a place for alternative and self-organising political practices. Conspiracy culture is one of the few sites where this ideal is still radically executed, although at the same time they are the

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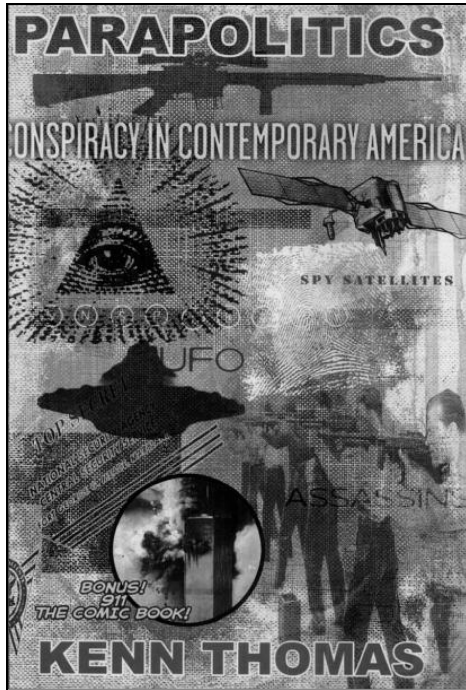
<sup>9</sup> It's clear that within the subject-object episteme described above, something like a 'paranoid reality' is utterly unthinkable. This is a very important point, to which I will return later on in relation to computerized media.

<sup>10</sup> They tend to exhibit a certain form of defeatism, similar to the advice Machiavelli gives the 'private person': instead of conspiring against their prince, they better learn "*to be content with life under the regime which fate has placed over them*." (Machiavelli: 2010, 1)

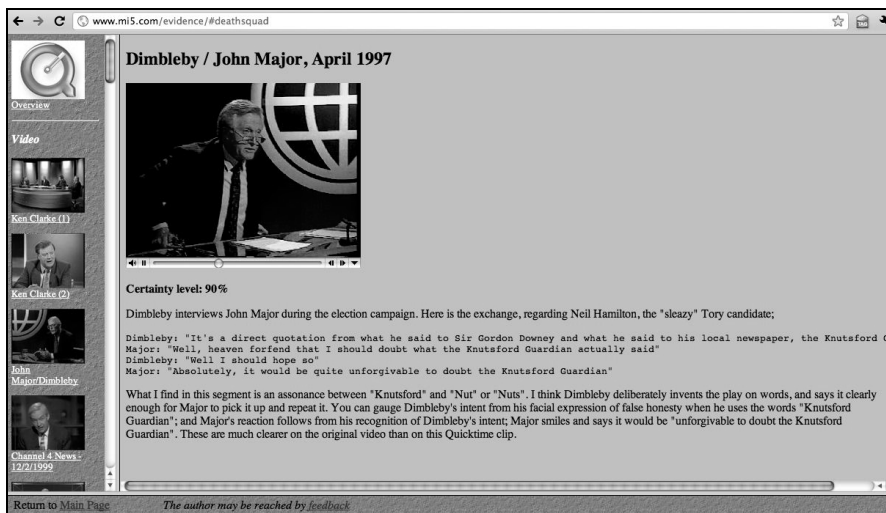
<sup>11</sup> In *The Paranoid Style*, Richard Hofstadter's ground-breaking work on the dissensual role of conspiracy theories in American politics, he proceeds in much the same fashion, when he opposes conspiracy theories to politics proper, a modest striving for consensus within the framework of liberal democracy. This is the approach typical of the regent and his or her fear of 'chaos': conspiracy theories, by radicalizing political discourse and its 'ontology of the enemy,' introduce too much risk and instability in the political sphere and its management of everyday life (the workings of government and business). For example, the anti-communist campaign of senator McCarthy was criticized as inappropriate to the spirit of 'true conservatism.'

<sup>12</sup> For the sake of clarity I will continue using the term 'conspiracy theory', although I do not adhere to the pejorative aspect of the term, and acknowledge it as a specific sub-system of a broader 'parapolitics' as described above.

desublimated effect of the 'dark forces' inherent to the New World Order – the secret agendas inherent to the new media project, and the construction of participatory panopticons – operative in the neo-liberal 'Free World', a world that is increasingly controlled by a technocratic elite and their Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).



Cover of the book *Parapolitics: Conspiracy in Contemporary America*.



Here is a site of someone who videotaped parts where he thought the people on television were talking about him, because he believes that they can see him through the television as well. Through this, it seems that he is able to reconcile with the asymmetrical relations of seeing and being seen typical of television.

## Beyond pathos

Fredric Jameson's influential reflections on conspiracy theory (Jameson: 1981, 1991) occupy a somewhat ambiguous position in relation to the pathological model for understanding conspiracy culture outlined above. On the one hand, he shares with this perspective the idea that conspiracy theories are erroneous mappings of the world-system by powerless minorities, who have no significant influence on the determination of the common sense. Conspiracy theories "*must be seen as a degraded attempt [...] to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.*" (Jameson, 1991: 37,38)

But because of his historical-materialist hermeneutic, he is able to reconstruct these phenomena not as a delusional regression from the political status quo, but as in some sense 'healthy,' 'normal' and even 'necessary' symptom, given their position within late capitalist forms of socio-economic organization and perception. The truth-value of conspiracy theories lies not so much in their propositional content (as for example the existence of a New World Order) but in the fact that the suspicion that produces such totalizing perspectives is felt as somehow needed, perhaps as some kind of counterbalance to our 'synchronic despair,' i.e. our imaginary relations to the objective conditions of our existence. Conspiracy theories positively represent the utopian drive to arrive at what he calls a 'cognitive mapping' of the totality of the capitalist world-system, , who's failure is due not to a personal pathos, but to a crisis of representation, both politically and 'aesthetically.' Contrary to earlier forms of socio-economic organization (such as feudalism, or the presence of clear class distinctions), late capitalist commodity and communication networks blur oppressor and oppressed, skyrocket cause, effect and complicity into a fractal space of undecidability, beyond any scope where they can be adequately understood and acted upon, beyond the 'event horizon' of representation. This already closes the gap between a 'normal' and a 'pathological' relation to the 'mediate' surroundings:

The conspiracy theorist may be no closer to interpreting political phenomena correctly by connecting them within a rigid framework than the average citizen who views such phenomena as a series of unconnected events or who willfully remains ignorant of the political world in which she lives. (Fenster, 1999: 109)





According to Jameson, conspiracy theories form the clearest manifestation of a broader crisis of representation, causing a fatal reduction of the possible uses of representation as a tool for a (re)appropriation of the public or political sphere that seem more and more 'beyond' representation:

Networks have become the dominant structures of cultural, economic and military power. Yet that power remains largely invisible. How can the networked society be represented? And how can it be navigated, appropriated, reshaped in its turn? (Holmes, online)


The last part of the above quote already points to the weaknesses of the idea of a 'cognitive mapping,' because since it starts from the individual or groups' *representation* of his surroundings, it can only find the solution in an agent's (cognitive) ability to adequately map the 'world-system.' It seems that if only the subject or minority acquires a correct mapping of his surroundings or of society as a whole, an adequate and critical practice of resistance will subsequently also arise. But the relation between knowledge and action is precisely what is displaced and fragmented in networked environments. Perhaps the *factum* of the individuals' intricate entanglements within a range of networks (labour, social, commercial, bureaucratic, etc.) calls for a re-thinking of the practical relation between contemporary 'spaces and parameters of action,' 'representation' and 'subjectivity', from which obviously follow other protocols for action, and to which I shall return later on.

## Urgent: The Obama New World Order Threat?

**"The Evidence Provided Below on Obama's Frightening Involvement with the New World Agenda is Under a threat of Being Taken Offline. You Must Act Now to Receive it...Fast"**



**WARNING:** This Report is under threat of being taken offline due to its content. It is important that you read below to know how to access the rest of the information before we are forced to take the Report offline.



Evidence observed across the worlds major media organizations regarding some of the content in this report.

### Chaos In A Major Christian Denomination Regarding Obama!

My name is Mel Sanger, an international political researcher. In February 2009 I and my group of 5 political research analysts were asked by a **Major American Christian Church** (can't name it for obvious reasons) to investigate whether Barack Obama had any involvement with the freemason new world order.

*Conspiracy theories both despise and mistrust mainstream media, but also use the latter's authoritative power.*

Another challenge for this cognitivist solution is the problem of 'cynicism' (Sloterdijk, 1987; Zizek, 2008).<sup>13</sup> The great humanist projects of liberation, such as those of the Frankfurter Schule, aimed at transforming subjectivity, saving it from alienation, lifting the 'veil of ignorance.' Here it is a question of teaching the members of the dominated as well as the dominating class that and why "they know not what they do" - an idea conditioned by a specific notion of ideology as

<sup>13</sup> The problem of cynicism will be elaborated on more in the appendix on Wikileaks.



the manipulation of systems of belief. According to Sloterdijk and Žižek's analysis of 'postmodern' subjectivity, the adequate slogan would now be: "they know very well what they do, but they do it anyway."

This apparent contradiction or 'inter-passivity' is due to the explosion of 'environmental explication' (or: design), in the broadest sense of the terms. Almost all possible action (especially on the WWW, a type of environmental design which seems 'total,' freed from all material limitations), is premediated and often even *premeditated* by protocological systems, whose genesis, function or *telos* escape us or whose function some of us know well to be contrary to our own convictions, but 'which we use anyway.' The objective sedimentation of action-models that (pre)mediate behavior produce the discrepancy between action and conviction, and seem to make the latter altogether redundant. In networks of any kind, it

is less the character of the individual nodes than the topological space within which and through which they operate as nodes. To be a node is not solely a causal affair; it is not to "do" this or "do" that. To be a node is to exist inseparably from a set of possibilities and parameters—to function within a topology of control. (Galloway, 2007: 40)

Thus the *focus* of the emancipatory project of modernity shifts from the modulation of the individual's belief-system or class-consciousness, to the (transformation of the) objective structures of everyday life in which the subject is embedded, as well as the way it practically engages with and is produced through these structures.<sup>14</sup> Politicians become risk managers of objective contingencies. So, ideologies no longer function exclusively by a masking of interests through the manipulation of subjective belief-structures, but are also and at the same time tacitly enforced through the objective parameters and mediations of existence. This is the conspiracy of *Design*.<sup>15</sup> The narrative construction of a conspiracy theory typical of this transformation is not so much inter-subjective, (for example a personal persecution), but the anonymous and non-human *effects* generated by (often machinic-visual) parameters through which action and communication is interfaced:

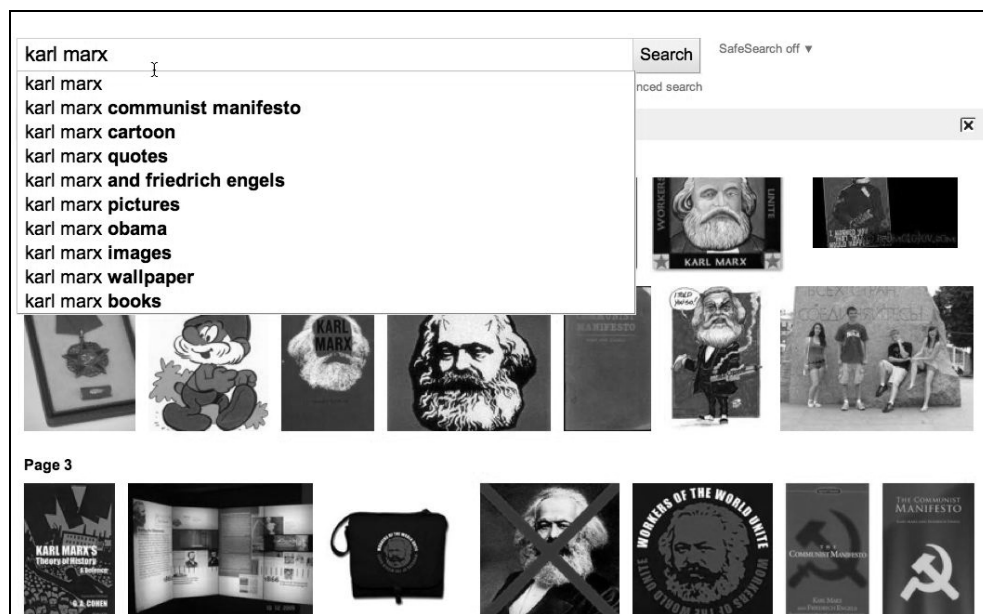
With the multiplication of technical environments [...] our perceptions are constantly mediated, subject to inflection by preprogrammed flows of language and aesthetic stimulus. Before any reflection, perception itself is constructed by the mediated environment in which it takes place, displacing the moment of radicality from the perceiver to the builder of the system, or even more, to the shaper of its underlying models. (Holmes, 2009: online)

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the whole idea of a 'methodological primacy of structure' typical of late 20<sup>th</sup> century French thought as well as the Situationist movement in art is conceivable only by the *actual* prevalence of 'structure' in everyday life. Philosophy and art always come too late.

<sup>15</sup> Thus the constructivists were not far off when they stated: "*we declare the genius of our times to be: pants, jackets, tramlines, busses, airplanes, railways, illustrious ships...*" (Kousbroek, 1990: my translation). Shakespeare's Shylock is as up to date as ever, when he says that: "*you take my life, when you do take the means whereby I live.*" (Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice)

Neither the pathological model for understanding conspiracy culture nor its progressive iteration as ‘cognitive mapping’ facilitate an adequate theory of action following from the transformation of the web of objective relations and machinations through which subjects, and their representations of the world are ‘cybernetically’ produced in today’s networks, i.e. via semi-autonomous technical apparatuses of perception and feedback. We need an *art of conspiracy* in order to inhabit and critique the different networks that mute and invalidate a signifying politics of conviction.



Screenshot of a Google Image search query on karl marx

## Semiotic excess

It is the basic humanist project mentioned above, notwithstanding Jameson’s ‘materialist’ or ‘structuralist’ sensitivity or even *practical* and *communal* outlook, that he leaves partly intact, or fails to problematize adequately.<sup>16</sup> A project that, because it locates domination in the symbolic modulation of belief-structures, is ill adapted to the rising importance in everyday life of what Lazzarato, following Guattari, calls a ‘second semiotic register,’ organized by an *a*-signifying semiotics, that “*have a machinic rather than a symbolic or signifying effects in the way they actually function*” (Lazzarato, 2011: 1). Here, the notion of para-noia, as being ‘beyond’ or ‘alongside’ (para-) the mind (-noos), alludes to the way in which media culture, temporarily culminated in the WWW, can be conceived as being ‘para-noid’ itself. These networks are indeed beyond and alongside any ‘representational’ or

<sup>16</sup> A similar cognitivist approach can be seen in the rise of ‘infosthetics,’ or ‘data-visualization,’ which creates a sterile and fatalistic illusion of unity that eradicates all traces of conflict that are necessarily generated in human-machine interaction, their ‘material effects.’

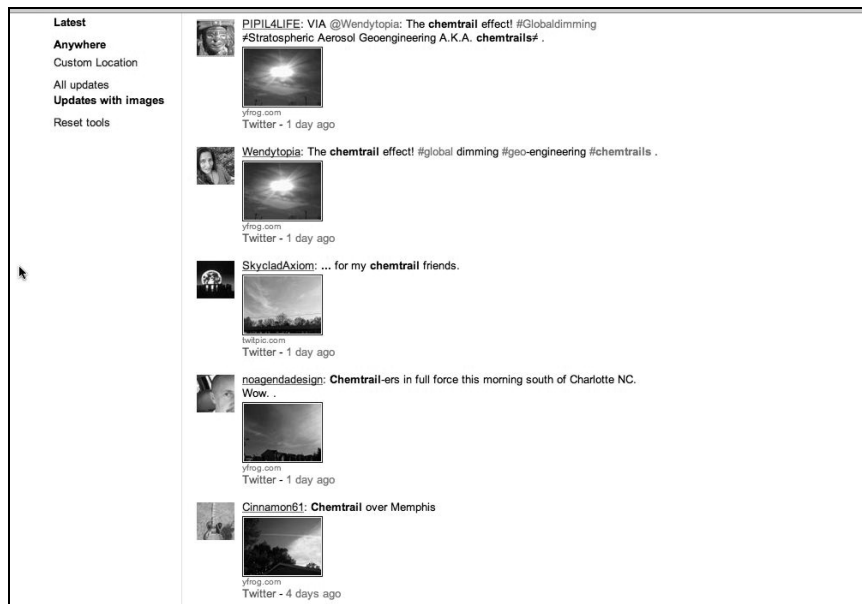
anthropocentric mapping, to a point where for example even the most brilliant mathematicians have no clue when presented with the algorithms of the stock markets' 'black boxes,' acting through unprecedented levels of complexity. It is indeed reminiscent of the famous 'narrative' of Marx, the history of man as man's alienation from *his own* products, the story of man's pre-history.

If the 'a-signifying' or 'machinic' effects are indeed fundamental to the operability of and (inter)action in networks, this problematizes the idea of symbolic re-appropriation ('cognitive mapping') as a critical practice, a solution that Jameson seems to propose. One could thus ask:

Should we keep the semiotic productions of the mass media, informatics, telematics and robotics separate from psychological subjectivity? I don't think so. Just as social machines can be grouped under the general title of Collective Equipment, technological machines of information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity, not only within its memory and intelligence, but within its sensibility, affects and unconscious fantasies. (Guattari, 1995: 4)

Similarly, whilst pondering possible action-strategies adequate to network environments, Galloway and Thacker state that perhaps "*if we are to take seriously the networked view of power relations, then individuals would need to be considered not as individuals but as what Deleuze calls "dividuals"*" (Galloway, 2007: 39).

Parapoliticians are completely entangled in the circulatory networks of suspicion and rumor, but – through paranoia – they are able to find a way of immunizing themselves from the 'dividuations' typical of networked environments. By implementing a paranoid shield, they are able to cut out a niche or identity vis-à-vis the all-engulfing synergy of everyone and everything that is 'normally' suppressed by secretly gullible, defeatist forms cynicism. Conspiracy theorists exploit the subliminal excesses of networks, just as multinational corporations, para- or 'alongside' democratic politics; parasiting their viral potentialities, as self-restrictions and self-immunizations that attempt to tamper with this virality in the name of security (governments) or profit (web 2.0 companies) that are on the increase: "*Only by recognizing the semiotic excess and lack of political significance represented in conspiracy theory can we begin to understand its implications*" (Fenster, 1999: 109). This semiotic excess, the intersection between technical networks and the imagining multitude, more than a formalist cognitive mapping, is essential to what I refer to as an *art of conspiracy*.



*We are among a million amateur cosmologies: "A desiring mind seeks infinity, and finds it today in a proliferation of signals: electromagnetic waves beaming down from the skies, fiber-optic cables emerging from the seas, copper wires woven across the continents." (Holmes, 2009: online)*



*Two pictures taken at a protest against aerosol spraying. All the fears and phantasies become condensed into these condensation trails. As they look up at the sky and see the white traces of global logistic networks, they come to suspect that in some way they are being screwed with.*

## The Rise of the Network Episteme, or: the Infinite Regress of Suspicion

I've been lookin' for freedom  
I've been lookin' so long  
I've been lookin' for freedom  
Still the search goes on  
I've been lookin' for freedom  
Since I left my home town  
I've been lookin' for freedom  
Still it can't be found

(David Hasselhoff, Looking for Freedom, Live  
in Berlin, New Year's eve 1989)

Countless people will hate the New World Order, be rendered unhappy by the frustration of their passions and ambitions through its advent and will die protesting against it. When we attempt to evaluate its promise, we have to bear in mind the distress of a generation or so of malcontents, many of them quite gallant and graceful-looking people. (Wells, 2007)

There is something to be said for the idea that the leading metaphors we employ to describe our surroundings are often conditioned by the (historically specific) technological mediations and reproductions of those surroundings - the way they present themselves by means or despite of us. But at the same time these technological developments are always also the expression of a certain cultural logic - in the sense that they are also the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is certainly true for the WWW, as it is rooted in a weird brew of military technology, science, perhaps a little magic, and a lot of wishful thinking - in no particular order.

In the last decades there has been a tremendous increase in the use of the term 'network' to describe reality, from the micro to the macro and all the in-betweens. It has established a foothold in a broad spectrum of disciplines, ranging from neurology, biology and ecology to economics and management theory, sociology and philosophy. Again, this increase is both cause and effect of ICT, performing this notion of network as their pragmatic basis, in four dimensions, infiltrating the social fabric, or: *lifeworld* (Habermas, 1987). However, its precise meaning remains unclear, largely implicit, 'ontologically fuzzy': it is still hard to imagine *how* a network or relation *is*, i.e. what amount or *kind* of 'being' we can attribute to it. The notion of 'network' thus poses a representational problem - a problem that is all too readily ignored by the boys and girls of 'data visualization.' Nevertheless, the basic premises of what I will call the 'network episteme,' or 'network positivism' are:

- Everything is/should be connected.
- Everything is/should be (reducible to, describable as) information.

- The different networks (biological, economic, social) are/should be *inter*-connected and *over*-lapping; they can be translated into each other, given (1) and (2).
- Because of (3) no causal model based on equivalence between cause and effect can be devised for any sub-system (this differs from the 'mechanical' notion of causality).
- Relational properties are more essential than object-properties; the relation 'defines' the objects 'in relation,' or preconditions how the latter can be apprehended, which in this episteme amounts to the same thing - understanding is but one relational quality among others. Ultimately, the object becomes methodologically and ontologically irrelevant.
- The quality of a quasi-object (quasi, because it is only 'a temporary accumulation of flow' or difference in relation to another quasi-object) is measured by its 'predilection for connection'. Accordingly, progress lies not in the qualitative transformation of the object or subject, but in a re-description and subsequent re-location of their relational properties, the manner in which the nodes relate to and are embedded in the larger network architecture.<sup>17</sup>

This episteme (and its self-fulfilling prophecy, its becoming-reality) is the result of the interaction between [1] technical developments (ICT), [2] social discontent that acquired theoretical expression in the 'postmodern' critique of modernity, associated with the '68' spirit,' (see fourth chapter) a process that lead to [3] a redefinition of a capitalism faced with [2], a post-colonial (and post-cold war) world, matured welfare states in the first world, as well as the proliferation of cheap products imported from the third world (i.e. the problem of increasing labour costs and over-production, respectively). Both concern the necessity of expanding surplus-generating spheres;<sup>18</sup> an intermingling which "*makes any attempt to trace a clear line of demarcation between a 'scientific' and an 'ideological' use of reticular themes hazardous*" (Boltanski, 2005: 139).

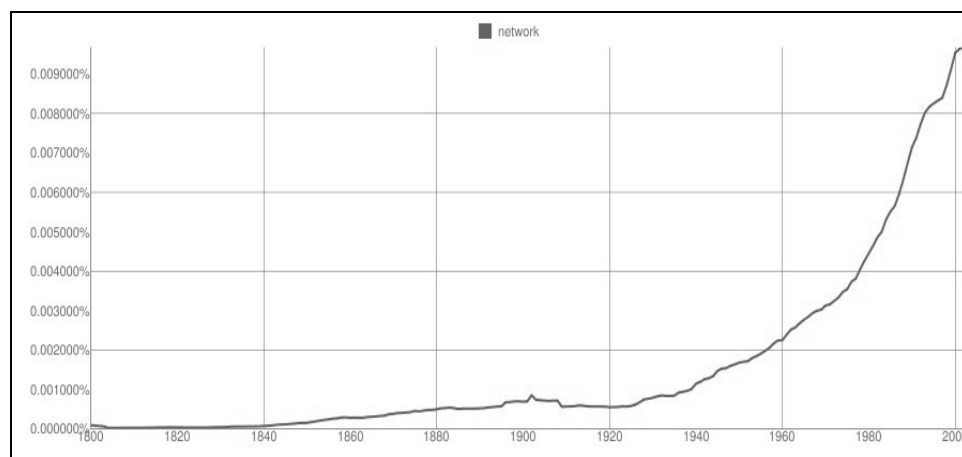
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<sup>17</sup> Google for example partly calculates the 'quality' of a website on the basis of the amount of other websites linking to it – it's algorithm is but a redistribution machine which feeds on the General Intellect.

<sup>18</sup> This can be seen in the commodification of social relations and 'intellectual work' – not through massification or manipulation, but precisely through difference and 'local autonomy'; relations that only thirty years ago were simply 'out there,' i.e. could not be capitalized upon, since they could not be framed or mediated by (interactive) networks.



*Picture of David Hasselhoff at the Berlin Wall.*



*Result of a query to the Google Books database, using the NGRAM viewer.*

The 'is' and the 'ought' thus always go together: the term 'network' cannot be disconnected from its normative or utopian content; it contrasts the ideal of a liberatory, 'open ended,' energetic and rhizomatic network with the hierarchical, instrumental and disciplinary forms of power of state apparatuses and industrial capitalism. Thus the Internet was welcomed as the ultimate (tool for the) realization of a genuinely democratic public sphere, indifferent to class.gender.ideology.power.money.com, where everyone and everything is equally equipped to express him- or herself, or – let's not omit bots – *itself*, in a global gift economy. Of course, even the most optimistic commentators had to admit that, specifically with the rise to power of the Web (to the detriment of IRC's, USENET's and LISTSERVS, etc.), the Internet was rapidly becoming a

shopping mall as well as a place for the circulation of rumor, suspicion, and crack pot conspiracy theories, paving the way for the proliferation of 'critical media theory,' that felt the responsibility to temper the all-too feverish expectations of Net culture. Today the 'fate of the Internet' is articulated more in terms of a *struggle for* the Internet, a struggle between total monopolization and total freedom, i.e. Big Media versus 'open source', creative commons, and so on. Google has been so successful by cleverly positioning itself in between those poles, or more precisely: by a dialectical *Aufhebung* of this opposition. Now, even old Dinosaurs like IBM are using Linux, blurring the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' uses of the Internet. The difficulty is thus that the (op)positions are entirely fuzzy (like a network). This makes the critical mind reluctant to join the cheerful 'open source' camp. A critique of centralization is necessary (Kleiner, 2010), but it fails to see how *decentralization* is increasingly taking over the formers social function.

### Do cyberneticians dream of anti-oedipi?

In Academia, one of the more influential formal expressions of *relational* thinking can be found in the linguistic theory of De Saussure: the idea that the meaning of a sign is primarily constituted by its distinction from and difference with proximate signs. This shows the (rather obvious) 'complicity' of structuralism and so-called post-structuralism on the one hand - loosely based on this idea of relationality and the primacy of objective conditions versus human agency - and the network episteme on the other: nothing is what it is *of or in itself*, but only *in mediation, in relation*.<sup>19</sup> Everything becomes interface, everything becomes context, everything becomes medium.<sup>20</sup> Notably, Deleuze's critique of the (essentialism or substantialization of the) subject, of any 'fixed point of reference' for that matter, and of hierarchy in general - replacing metaphysics with a 'plane of immanence' occupied by 'flows' - would not look out of place on a cybernetician's personal bookshelf.<sup>21</sup> Postmodernism and its 'politics of difference' was good for unmasking repressive, disciplinary, homogenizing, centralizing systems for what they were, but in the contemporary context:

This compulsion towards liquidity, flow and an accelerated circulation of what is psychic, sexual or pertaining to the body is the exact replica of the force which rules market value: capital must circulate: gravity and

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<sup>19</sup> In the context of feminism, most notably the work of Donna Haraway, Peter Galison concludes that: "*Postmodernism holds cybernetics in an uneasy embrace. As a postmodernist challenge to a fixed human, racial, or gendered nature, the cyborg presents an alter-native, a way out.*" (Galison, 1994: 261)

<sup>20</sup> So it is that one reads often in media theory something like: "*We have to shift our attention away from the 'within' on to the 'in-between'. Rather than asking what it is made out of, we have to ask, what does it interface to?*" (Stalder, 2002: 6)

<sup>21</sup> "There are no such things as universals, there's nothing transcendent, no Unity, subject (or object), Reason; there are only processes, sometimes unifying, subjectifying, rationalizing, but just processes all the same." (Deleuze, negotiations: 145)



any fixed point must disappear: the chain of investments and reinvestments must never stop.” (Baudrillard: 2007, 40)

However, the ‘radical moment’ inherent to Deleuze’s thought, rejecting the neo-liberal schizophrenic double pull between “free flow” (we’re talking commodities now!) and the management (Law & Order) of the desiring multitude, resists any clear-cut equivalence between these two expressions of the network episteme. Paradoxically then, only the radicalization of this way of thinking about reality can transcend the ideologically reactionary expressions of the network episteme as witnessed among the managerial elite. However the problem remains that, since post-structuralist thought rejects the so-called economic reductionism and philosophy of history inherent to more traditional forms of Marxism, it can still be easily integrated into neo-liberal (or hyper-individualist) vulgarizations of the post-Marxist perspectives it proposes:

In so doing, and in part unbeknownst to itself, this critique also lent itself to an interpretation in terms of liberation: not only from the personal and institutional loyalties, now experienced as unjustified servitude, [...] but also from all ‘hierarchies’ and ‘apparatuses’ which, like ‘trade-union’ apparatuses, had contributed to the creation of labour law, the recognition of social classes, and the process leading to their representation in the state (Boltanski, 2005: 146).

So there exist complex levels of complicity between the different expressions of the network episteme, especially in relation to its demented little brother, conspiracy theory:

‘Everything Is Connected’ could function as the operating principle not just for conspiracy theory, but also for epidemiology, ecology, risk theory, systems theory, complexity theory, theories of globalization, boosterism for the Internet, and even post-structuralist literary theories about inter-textuality. (Knight, 2000: 205)

Ironically, before the contemporary application of the term ‘network’, which has since become the *prima philosophia* of the technocratic elite, it was used mainly to refer to underground organizations:

Research into the uses of the word ‘network’ in dictionaries from earlier decades indicates that this term [...] was nearly always employed pejoratively to characterize clandestine, illegitimate and/or illegal forms of links. (Boltanski: 2005, 141)

The original connotation of the term network thus points to a close link between network environments in general and conspiracy culture, with its paranoid suspicions about what is going on ‘behind the screens’ and beyond the hyperlinks.

## A new network morality

The network episteme, and its first principle: that everything is/should be connected, has gradually trickled down to everyday models of understanding the world and one's position in it, founding a new morality, where rigid convictions, unwillingness to connect and engage in social relations, i.e. to remain LinkedOut, is considered a sign of bad taste, even a form of arrogance, and where an adherence to the traditional stories about rational and autonomous spheres of life (politics, media, business) is considered naive.<sup>22</sup> This 'knotting' of spheres and the role of ICT herein, changed the basic style of conspiracy culture accordingly: *"from a rigid conviction about a particular demonized entity, to a cynical and generalized sense of the ubiquity - and even the necessity - of clandestine, conspiring forces in a world in which everything is connected"* (Knight, 2000: 3).

Contemporary conspiracy culture provide us with the images and fears of a networked multitude, for whom any thing seem to lead to another, a space of total entanglement and involvement, and where indeed accountability is consciously reduced. Routers rattle, servers heat up, golden jets ascend the Shanghai and Singaporean skies, two New World Order believers meet in a deserted chat room, exchanging apocalyptic phantasies, whilst academics ponder the total implosion of democratic politics into paranoia and hype.

However unsublimated and farfetched most conspiracy theories may seem, they also point towards a form of network-politics that succesfully becomes 'parasitic on the parasite' (Pasquinelli, 2008), by radicalizing the spectacle, appropriating the viral potential of globalization, as well as creating sites of dissensus that aren't easily appropriated by neo-liberal celebrations of 'inter-connectedness', i.e. in laying bare the underlying antagonisms and paranoid stimuli of this particular form of socio-economic organization and its media:

Conspiracy theories may be misleading and misguided, but their residual attraction – half-serious, half-ironic- suggests that for many people the respectable, non-conspiratorial accounts are as yet equally inadequate. We are caught between two modes of representation, neither of which is fully convincing. (Knight, 2000: 216)

This tragic faith that has befallen the Internet in its role as the facilitator of a truly rational Habermasian public sphere, this regression into pure speculation about, and circulation of, signs of governmental and extra-governmental plots that reduces 'citizenship' to an endless reiteration of paranoid phantasies, an overly cognitive and practically inert skepticism. Sitting behind their screens, they can maintain a meaningful relation to the erratic outside only by distrusting everything, the "something's not right...if only I *knew*!" Weird creatures present

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<sup>22</sup> Latour mentions such a reversal between intellectual and uneducated worker: *"I am now the one who naively believes in some facts because I am educated, while the other guys are too unsophisticated to be gullible: "where have you been? Don't you know that the Mossad and the CIA did it?"*" (Latour, 2004: 228)

themselves, but nothing adds up. Although the truth may not be out there, something is! Everybody's a squealer, everybody's *in it*.

The logic of conspiracy theories - a paradoxical logic because it is at the same time absolutist and inert (dogmatic), as well as metonymically very unstable and infinitely open for new clues, new associations, and in the sense that it presents a totalizing plot but also *"disrupt complacent, consensual, transparent theories of politics with their suggestions that, insofar as power is at work, always present as well as elsewhere, things are not as they seem"* (Dean, online) – this logic coincides to a large extent with (the perception of) late capitalist society itself, a complex of disjunctive syntheses.<sup>23</sup> Take for example the dialectic between the inertia of 'sovereign' nations (as well as some international institutions such as the IMF) and the hyper-mobility of multinational corporations, venture capitalists, hedge funds, that reduce the role of politics and democratic representation to the short-term management of the explosive contradictions and de- or reterritorializations arising from vast flows of goods, people and information that pass through them, but which no state has any significant control over. But there is even a similarity in the way in which networks are *technically* organized, as simultaneously *robust* and *flexible*; the exchange of different elements is based on a framework of universal translation - the universality of which conditions the connection: The Conspiracy, the Internet Protocol, and so on (Galloway & Thacker, 2007: 29). This pertains to how subjects are produced through the various networks, which are able to translate their input into value:

Each subjectivity must become a subject that is ruled in the general network of control (in the early modern sense of the one who is subject [subdictus] to a sovereign power), and at the same time each must also be an independent agent of production and consumption within networks. (Negri & Hardt: 2001, 320)

The absent and invisible determination of local autonomy: never has there been such a paranoid synthesis of freedom and subjection. Labour is flexible, but precisely therefore it enters into all the pores of life. As mentioned above, a shift of focus can be located, from seeing conspiracies as centralized and localized plots of small groups of individuals, towards a notion of conspiracy that is executed through anonymous technologies, systems and networks. So when Galloway & Thacker state in the context of their theory of networks, that "the quandary is this: no one controls networks, but networks are controlled," this can be transformed into the following: "the quandary is this: no one is conspiring, but there is a conspiracy" (or, as someone on a forum said: "no need for conspiracy theories here!"). Perhaps indeed there is NO conspiracy at all, no secret to be

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<sup>23</sup> The paranoid is able to produce himself out of an idea of his importance for others, by radicalizing the disjunctive-synthetic form: "They are following me", means: I exist for Them (those who want to hurt me, and whom I do not know). It is precisely the one who is alien to and totally separate from him, who is closest to him. Paranoid phantasies can provide this urban wanderer with a sense of self, a sense of existential security that at least his enemies are watching his every move, an intimate attachment to others that can also function – if needed - as a stick and a shield.

discovered. Perhaps paranoia isn't so much due to a decline in transparency or political representation, but due to *too much* transparency, *too much* representation, caught in the bright headlights of inter-action, frozen in a mute "this should but can't be right."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, somewhat of an 'open conspiracy':

Unlike conspiracies in general this widening protest and conspiracy against established things would, by its very nature, go on in the daylight, and it would be willing to accept participation and help from every quarter. It would, in face, become an "Open Conspiracy." (Wells, 1933)

This 'open conspiracy' is the result of the paradoxical make-up of the society to which today's conspiracy theories relate, and who explode the spectacle by radicalizing it, a spectacle that Debord (again) describes as "both diffuse and integrated." It is in this sense that conspiracy theories are simultaneously true and false.

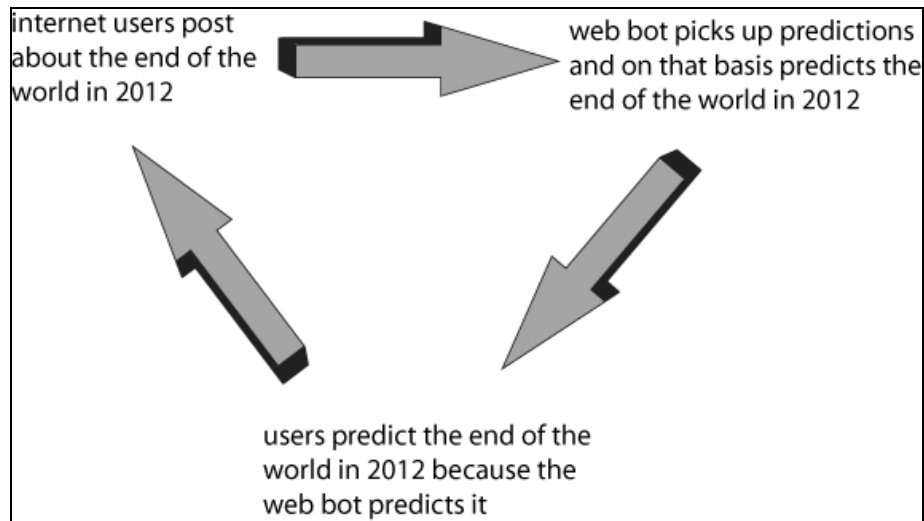


*Screenshot from YouTube video, showing smoking twin towers on a twenty-dollar bill*

So even if the conventional wisdom is that Everything-Is-Connected and is in a state of 'becoming transparent' - whether through Non-Duality, IEEE 802.x or Internet Protocol - there remains a residue of opacity, alienation and mistrust regarding neo-liberal stories of participatory democracy, transparent governance and 'corporate ethics': a fatal loop triggered by the very processes and technical advances that were supposed to finally eradicate it: a slow-cooking of suspicion and paranoia that - along with the viruses and the AIDS and the sweat and the dirt - keep sipping through the cracks of the 'Information Age.'

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<sup>24</sup> For an example of this, see the case-study on the release of Obama's birth certificate, in the appendix.



*Schema of a fatal 'rumor' loop, where a Web bot crawling the Internet for keyword patterns picks up the supposed 'end of the world' in 2012, which increases the rumors about it in turn and so ad infinitum.*

## Paranoid postscript

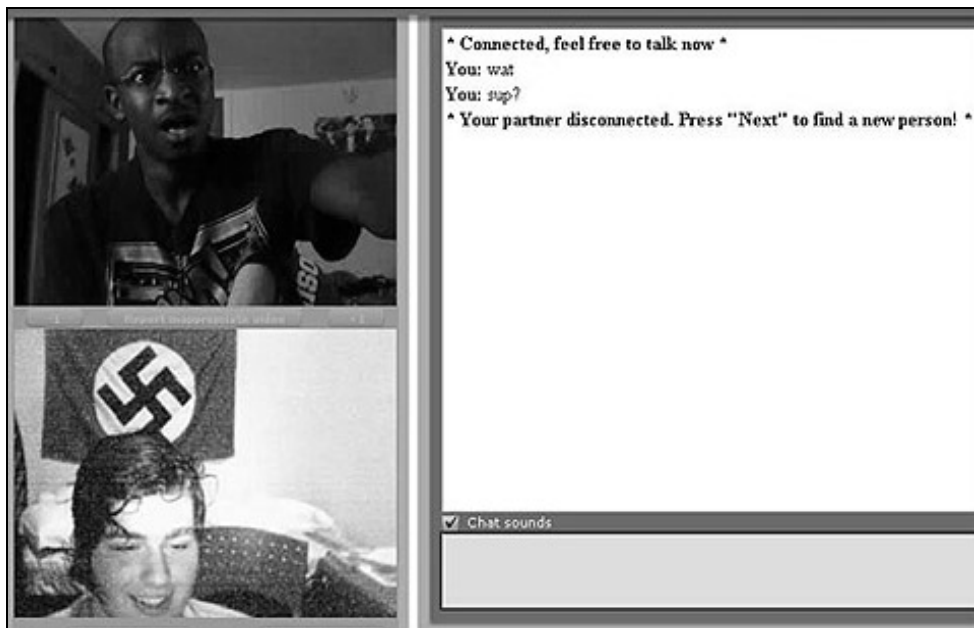
There is me, there are the others. You know, with the LSD, we're finding, the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are. (Pynchon, 2000: 111)

If there is anything like an 'art of conspiracy,' it consists of connecting the connectors to the political unconscious, of connecting them to the underlying taboos and structural conditions of the so-called 'global village,' and the price the unconnected have to pay for our temporary surplus-enjoyment of accumulated dead labour, made possible by centuries of sucking the life out of the rest of the world, i.e. of linking up the smiley-faces to the Dark Side of inter-connectedness. They want you to connect with your old school buddies, so that They can capitalize on your nostalgia, but don't connect the European weapons industry to Middle-East dictators! Or yes do that too, blog about it, who cares. Television had to be 'overcome' when it became clear that the combination of *mass-media* (reaching a lot of people at the same time) was too great a possibility for mass *revolt* against and exposure of, Law and Order and 'free' enterprise. Currently, as Facebook has almost acquired social network monopoly, the same problem begins to return, as well as the accompanying reactionary responses.<sup>25</sup> From Their perspective, it's better to have a million blogs distributed among some unconnected (and often unconcerned) users, than one blog connected to millions of users.

<sup>25</sup> Days before the Wedding of prince William and Kate, over fifty Facebook profiles belonging to English activist groups were temporarily suspended. In the US, government agencies are trying to acquire backdoor access to social network sites. For an example of the dangers mass-media, see the film *Network* (Lumet, 1976).



*Fireworks at the "Global Village" theme park in Dubai*



*Encounters of the nth kind on 'Chat Roulette.'*

They promised us a global village, invigorated by their CIA sponsored LSD dreams. Chat Roulette signifies the bankrupt of this ideology of cyborg Dalai Lama's:

Cyberspace was supposed to bring us all together in a global village; however, what effectively happens is that we are bombarded with the multitude of messages belonging to inconsistent and incompatible universes. (Zizek, 2008: 249)

There's a moment in every civilization that develops towards more and more rationalized standards, when stupidity and ignorance become the main virtues of a truly revolutionary conduct, a form of unintentional disobedience that no 'ideology' can accomplish without projecting itself 'inside out': acting stupid becomes significant as a political act. There is no dishonesty in, nor goal to, stupidity. Conspiracy theorists (and perhaps hooligans and artists as well) constitute the leftover heroes of 'the revolution without a cause', spasms of unborn revolutions, aborted - or yet to come. The Romanticists and Dadaists, with their endless love for 'random subversion' partly understood this deadlock of modern society; but their love was still too *focused*, too *goal-oriented*. Perhaps this paradox is still very much at the heart of contemporary artistic practice: always *too* rational, but never rational *enough*.

So the same questions pop up again and again: should we immunize ourselves for the memetic tricks played on us, or should we get 'out there', disperse ourselves into a thousand forms and traces, to become as noisy as our machines? Has the 'existential problematic' been boiled down to a choice between an apocalyptic *jouissance* and a gullible cynicism based on an 'end of history' attitude? Who knows! Perhaps these are questions imaginable only for someone utterly bored, with too much time on his hands. He! Writing is as paranoid as ever! It cannot but recognize the obvious fact that the stakes are always higher, elsewhere...in Syria perhaps? Or in the vengeful dreams of some yet 'Known Unknown' whistle-blower?

## The Suspicious Interface & the Invisible Web

The Internet was made for conspiracy theory: it *is* a conspiracy theory: one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into no thing and no place. (Stewart, 1999: 18)

It shall seem to men that they experience destructions in the sky and flames descending therefrom shall seem to fly away in terror; they shall hear creatures of every kind speaking human language; they shall travel in a moment to diverse parts of the world without movement; they shall see the most radiant splendors amidst darkness. (Critical Art Ensemble, 2009)

At some hypothetical moment in the history of culture, a new hybrid form of life emerges that brings with it a relation to the totality that is relatively new; this form implies the necessity for the subject of interfacing or mediating between its own existential data and the unlive abstractions of some (often technologically generated) totality that guides the formers conduct. For example: with the invention of the compass, sextant and theodolite comes the alignment of the subjects' position with geography, the position of the stars, latitude and longitude, and so on. The map is the representational but never quite satisfactory solution to this new relation, the transfiguration of absent totalities. These technological devices plug the subject into a geographic totality, a man-machine interface that transcends the immediate sense-apparatuses.<sup>26</sup> Navigation becomes a feedback circuit between the human being and its technologies of representation and calculation, but within the cracks of this circuit, paranoia lurks, waiting perhaps for the World Wide Web to provide it with the full expression and distribution that it deserves.

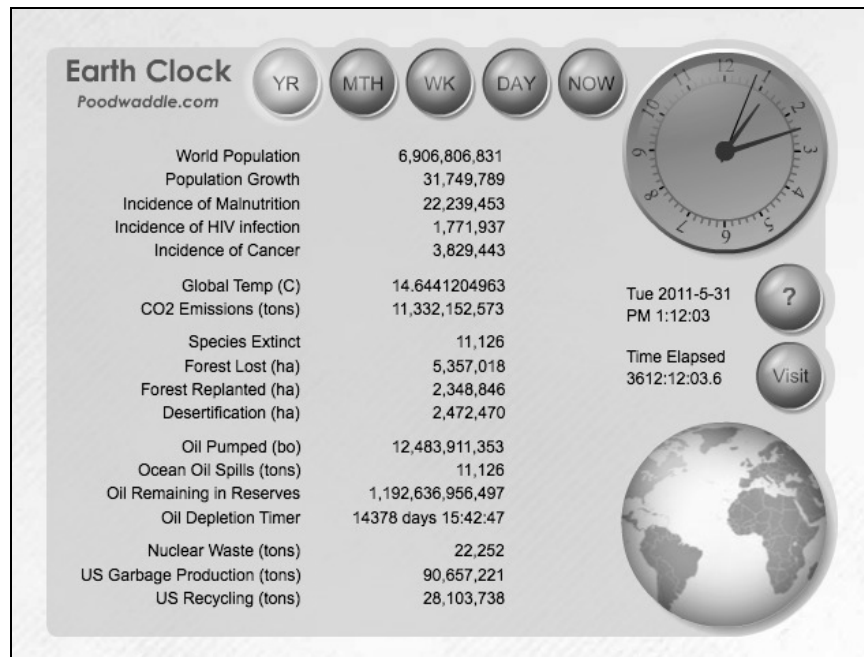


*Screenshot of a Flat Earth Society fan page.*

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<sup>26</sup> The *Flat Earth Society* still has still not been reconciled with this tension.



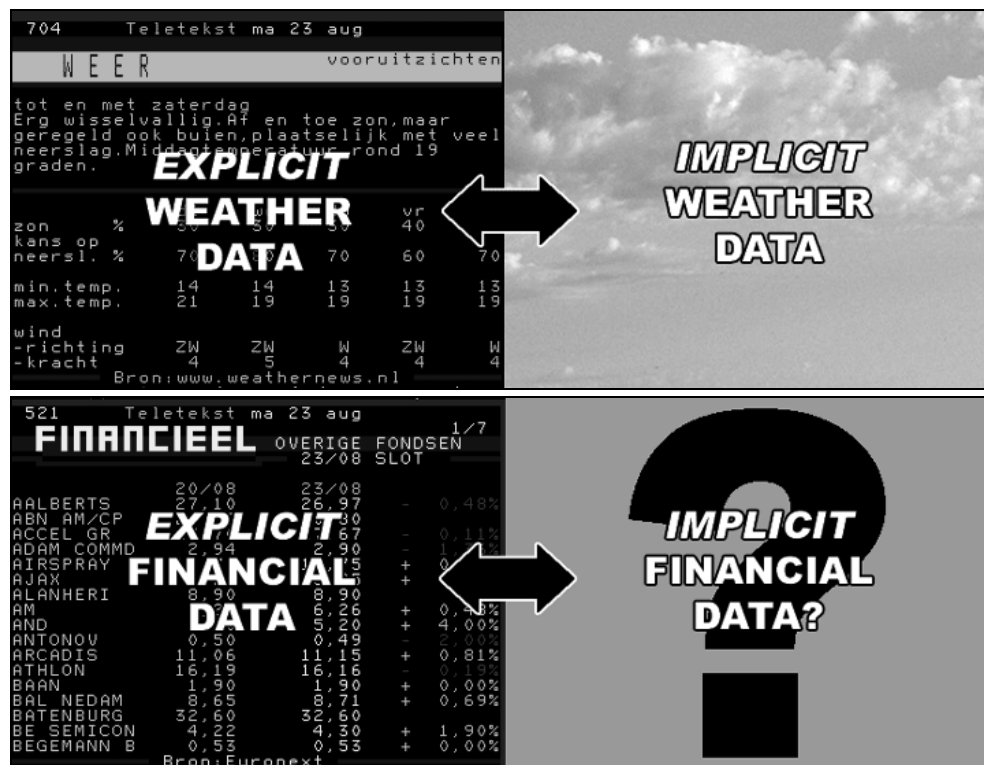


Screenshot of Earth clock, which shows the increase of several global trends

Once the set of possible mediations and representations of reality is multiplied and differentiated through technology that therefore become highly contingent, i.e. when *multiple* but never quite necessary or adequate points of access to reality appear equally viable, the notion of 'interface' or 'mediation' rises to the fore, as some(thing?) in-between, as *actor*, claiming autonomy on the socio-political stage of the 'distribution of the sensible' (Ranciere, 2004). For example, we are all more or less aware that 'news' is not *inherently* news, as if it could be discovered in the 'real world', but a narrative construction based on editorial selection (it only appears to be readymade because most news outlets gather their news from ANP).<sup>27</sup> Put dramatically, it is the result of a Hegelian movement of self-consciousness: the becoming-conscious of the inter-face through what McLuhan would call the objectification or externalization of men's sense organs.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In the case of representing links between web pages, which are obviously already of a highly mediated nature, this contingency of means of representation is even higher: they can be ordered spatially (by geographically mapping their IP addresses), temporally (their date of publication), semantically (matching terms), logically (based on search engine ranking, i.e. the amount of other web sites linking to it), etcetera.

<sup>28</sup> As was the case with the notion of 'network', the idea of an 'interface' challenges traditional ontological categories. Its status in this respect stays fuzzy and implicit as well.



Images taken from <http://www.koert.com/work/datafountain/>

The notion of 'interface' is inherently related to the notion of 'database,' or more generally: 'base of data' - defined as a collection of elements not immediately apt to operate *significantly*. Thus, the notion of an interface can only become fully conscious as a semi-autonomous reality - distinct from, and effect of, an indirect encounter between 'subject' and object' - once there are multiple means of access to a given collection of data, and when this relation becomes user-centered, i.e. based on the contingent choice of the user.<sup>29</sup> In the context of new media art, Lev Manovich states:

Historically, the artist made a unique work within a particular medium. Therefore the interface and the work were the same; in other words, the level of an interface did not exist. With new media, the content of the work and the interface are separated. It is therefore possible to create different interfaces to the same material. (Manovich, 2001: 227)

The history of technology is the history of inter-passivity, if the latter is understood to refer to the externalization of the interface, and the delegation of agency to, or through, ICT. Subjectivity itself has always been the primary

<sup>29</sup> When I want to inform myself about the weather here and now, I can look outside or check the online weather radar. When those produce contradictory results, I will still rely on the proof my own eyes provide. But what if I want to inform myself about the weather in Dubai? Or what about the stock market, or some extra-terrestrial event? Here contradictory results are not as easily reconciled, certainty not easily established. Suspicion as to the adequacy of these indirect representations or their rootedness in 'reality' is always just around the corner.

interface to reality.<sup>30</sup> For that reason, the *mediatory* character of the relation remained merely in-itself. It could not detach itself from the subject-object synthesis to constitute a semi-autonomous realm of a third (or  $n_{th}$ ) in-between.<sup>31</sup> Again: because of this immanency, it could not become conscious *as such*. Thus, the idea or consciousness of such an inter-mediate reality, the autonomization and automation of the interface, is itself the result of a technical differentiation between means of access, choice, and potentially accessible content, integrating human subjectivity into the machine.

When the interface and the interfaced are one, there is neither interface nor interfaced; it is just *one thing* (because the relation between the means of access and the accessible content appears as a necessary one). The interface, as all technologies of mediation, inject a paranoid feedback loop into the heart of the relation between the human being and his surroundings, by stretching and fragmenting the stage on which reality, its calculated double and users intersect. So it is that conspiracy theorists, as well as the more gullible among us:

far from passively consuming the virtually entertaining spectacles of vertically integrated media, have come to suspect that something is going on behind the screens. What we see is not what we get. The truth may not be out there, but something, or someone, is. (Dean, online)

My hypothesis is that this paranoid loop is both condition and effect of the technical operations of interactive environments, as they phantasmagorically ‘reconcile’ user and system. The interface implies a consciousness of the unretrieved but *potentially* retrieved data, or the half-dead, ghost-like part of the ‘base of data,’ just like “*every time a hypertext bifurcates presenting the reader with alternative options, she is made aware that she is following one possible trajectory among many others*” (Deseriis, online). In the same way, the search engine, as supposedly THE interface to THE Internet, implies an ‘absent totality’ of the Internet as a whole - which is only a regulative fiction, or, as William Gibson described Cyperspace, a ‘consensual hallucination’. This supposedly interconnected whole consists of millions of unattended, deep-linked webpages, more dead than alive, tucked away on dusty faraway servers:<sup>32</sup>

In the age of vast communication and commodity networks that seem to find their way even into the most obscure and forgotten corners of the world,<sup>33</sup> I somehow intuit – perhaps more than ever – the totality in which I am embedded, of which I feel I am a part, a kind of inverted

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<sup>30</sup> Of course for hundreds of thousands of years humans have externalized their interface: it is the history of technology and culture, beginning with stones, sticks, etcetera.

<sup>31</sup> There are obviously historical nuances; different cultures have placed emphasis on, and attributed distinct functions and meanings to, the different sense apparatuses.

<sup>32</sup> When it said that in the case of the Internet that ‘all information is available to everyone’, one uncritically conflates *potentiality* with *actuality*, and in so doing reducing the importance of actualizing the potential access.

<sup>33</sup> Although this is nearly not as successful and omnipotent as the apologists of this movement and their utopias of communicational rationality and transparency would like us to believe.

gestalt of my individual being. At this sublime moment of wonder, I myself now turn into the background of this other great thing, which momentarily swaps places with me, and leaves me with nothing but an abstract awareness of my own presence.<sup>34</sup> (Anonymous, 2010)

Although what we get is ultimately but one webpage or webchat at a time, and perhaps a growing stack of tabs. Indeed, Spinoza's famous proposition that 'every determination entails a negation' feels truer than ever.<sup>35</sup> The determination of a database, online data-sphere or computer entails a negation: there is a consciousness of this negativity surrounding it, and it is a paranoid negativity: the beyond or 'out there' becomes an integral part of the here and now. The hyper-linked webpage for instance, already incorporates its 'beyond', as it is build out of indexical elements:

Links are this Janus-faced, threshold elements forming an essential part of a webpage, but leading elsewhere – as if they were arrows frozen in flight, but still imbued with an overriding sense of being in flight, between here and there. (Shields, 2000: 152)

The text, image or video is located here as much as elsewhere. Everyone browsing the Web has experienced the seductive pull of hyper-linked assemblages, especially when attached to a visual snapshot (as on YouTube), as well as having the feeling of missing 'the important part,' or even forget what you were looking for. Conspiracy theorists are pattern-seekers; they follow these endless trails, in a serious attempt to link up the loose ends, to find the Ultimate Webpage, in order distribute what they think highly valuable information. It seems as if the Internet was made for them. (Cubitt, 2000: 128)

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<sup>34</sup> This feeling of connectedness, of everybody belonging to and being part of one world, where race, gender or wealth play no role, is especially clear in an MCI commercial (one of the first internet companies), which you can view at:

[http://criticalcommons.org/Members/JLipshin/clips/Anthem.mp4/clip\\_view](http://criticalcommons.org/Members/JLipshin/clips/Anthem.mp4/clip_view)

<sup>35</sup> In much the same way: "*computer programs can be seen as tactical constraints of the total possible uses of hardware*" (Cramer & Fuller: 2008, 149).



Still from the MCI 'Anthem' commercial

#### **The first Bilderberg meeting took place in 1954 organized by the Dutch Prins Bernhard of Lippe-Biesterfeld**

World's largest terrorist organization, the Dutch Council of State headed by Queen Beatrix as the most important member of the most powerful secret organization in the world, namely the Bilderberg Group, named after the Dutch hotel where the first meeting took place in 1954 regarding the poor relations between America and Europe caused by Beatrix her father Prince Bernhard of Lippe-Biesterfeld who organized the Bilderberg Group. The reason for this is that Indonesia declared independence in 1945 which would imply that Gemeenschappelijke Mijnbouw Maatschappij Billiton (GMB now Shell / Billiton) entered into liquidation, and the Dutch Royal Family into a bankruptcy. Prince Bernhard of Lippe-Biesterfeld was born June 29, 1911 in Jena (Germany). Bernard was a NAZI, a member of the SA in Berlin, the Sturmabteilung of Hitler's NSDAP. In 1935 he resigned his Master's degree and went to work for IG Farben, a large chemical company in Germany that sold Zyklon B to the Nazis for use in Auschwitz. He was a NAZI Spy and helped Nazis to escape with the Dutch Royal Air force (KLM) to Argentina where his grand-daughter-in-law Princess Maxima comes from. One of the points on which the corrupt and depraved Dutch pedo-monarchy with Belgian pedophile Bilderberg members the most vulnerable is, are the Bilderberg ties



involved in the Kennedy's assassination Gerald Ford, (video 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9), Richard M. Nixon and George-Herbert Walker - Bush all these Bilderberg members are directly or indirectly involved with J.F. Kennedy's assassination? So what are the interests of Belgian Bilderberg politicians and Dutch Bilderberg politicians concerned the Head of the Dutch Royalty and this criminal organization. A recently published French study shows Bilderberg is a criminal group of looters and murderers, a 100% creation of the Dutch royal family!



Example of how conspiracy theory web pages rely on hyperlinked references in order create their 'actor-network.'

Surfing the Web, one is both prosecutor and prosecuted, a job-loving bounty hunter with an electronic ankle bracelet and a reverse stockholm syndrome. This is one more reason why a pathological evaluation of conspiracy culture misses the point by overestimating the communicative rationality of the Web, as conspiracists merely live up or give in to the profound sublimity inherent to the Web's construction:

Conspiracy theorists' seemingly paranoid instinct is not any more pathological than the world in which they perceive themselves to be operating, which constantly places before them connections and other orders that they must try to understand and to which they must respond. (Fenster, 1999: 101)<sup>36</sup>

From the start the WWW has been promoted as realizing the dream of a truly democratic sphere. Al Gore celebrated the Web as the reappearance of the Greek Agora, on a global scale. The terms 'interactivity' and 'participation' are the usual suspects when it comes to describing these democratizing effects of the WWW and interactive systems in general. I will now shortly discuss those terms – terms that regularly pop up in new media art projects and discourses as well. 'Interactive art' is opposed to traditional art objects, and often implies a critique of the latter, as being 'closed systems,' that reduce the viewer's role to passive contemplation. However their understanding of interactivity, when you see how it actually operates in networks, seems a little oversimplified and naïve. In these works, the participant is more often than not merely a 'trigger mechanism,' simulating an involvement that is as intense as my involvement with the light switch, when I turn it on or off. Instead of a feeling of engagement, the visitor is more uneasy and confused as to what the work demands of them, humiliating them in the process. Furthermore, the breaking open of the work by relying on user input often leads to a 'ludic' relation between the participant and the work, also when this is contrary to the intended effect of the work. The fundamental form-problem of interactive art is precisely this balancing between the contingency of user choice and the unpredictability of its responses and impressions on the one hand, and the control over the desired intentionality and effects of the work on the other (the same form-problem Norbert Wiener must have experienced, when he was trying to design an anti-aircraft gun). The artist-function consists of designing the conditional parameters through which relations between input and output, material and viewer-user, production and consumption, are simultaneously restricted and enhanced.

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<sup>36</sup> You can call it a *phantasmagoria*. The dictionary describes it as "a fantastic sequence of haphazardly associative imagery, as seen in dreams or fever."

## Tricksters being tricked

In his analysis of 'postmodern cinema,' Fredric Jameson analyses conspiracy narratives fundamental to what he calls 'postmodern cinema', narratives that evolve around a hysterical destabilization of the distinction between the film's protagonist and the 'evil' – often technological or corporate - conspiracy he is fighting against. In these cases: "*the protagonist somehow manages to blunder into the collective web of the hidden social order*" (Jameson, 1995: 33). The narrative dynamic is based on the protagonists' sliding into a paralyzing uncertainty about his own motives and actions, i.e. whether his 'going against' the conspiracy had perhaps always been a premeditated part and even necessary condition of Their Master Plan.<sup>37</sup> But at the same time he is also *made* to believe by the conspiring company that this complicity is actually the case, i.e. to inject in him the existential insecurity and suspicion of his own double binded conduct, in order to completely make him give up and join them. When he becomes aware of this possibility, he then suffers from an insoluble 'meta-doubt', doubting his original doubt. It is this double destabilization of the autonomy, complicity and responsibility of the hero that is essential to today's network environments, its 'double bind,' where the user willingly (although sometimes hesitantly) blurs into the social machine, into the sticky webs of the interactive calculus. It always remains in the middle whether he is Master Manipulator or being duped by invisible machinations and manipulations that parasite on his megalomania.<sup>38</sup> Contrary to old forms of mass-media, whose ideological function was limited to a form of 'mass propaganda,' in interactive environments the user itself is implicated in a highly individualized process of selection and production, as he 'prosumes' a part of the data sphere.<sup>39</sup> He is made complicit with the 'discriminatory' activity of the interface without however being able to render this activity intelligible: not only because the technical conditions of these types of interaction resist appropriation by all-too-human schema's of perception and imagination, but also because their function and the big players behind them are rendered invisible. The user is no longer

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<sup>37</sup> In conspiracy culture there is such a thing as 'false flag operations': operations that are cover-ups for the actually important ones, or the actual execution of a secret operation that is presented as a 'test,' in order to exploit the cooperation from the people who are unaware of the conspiracy but are a necessary element of its execution. In the end of course every event is always merely a false flag operation; the Ultimate Event is never reached - the games must go on. But can't it be that most conspiracy theories are themselves false flag operations? This is the zero-degree of paranoia.

<sup>38</sup> The impossibility of accounting persons or institutions for what has taken place, became explicitly clear during the 2008 financial crisis. Bankers pointed to the irresponsible spending of consumers, the lack of government regulation, whilst the latter blamed both banker and consumer. This indecidability – a result of increasing deregulation and decentralization – is typical of multi-layered and globally entangled networks. Nobody's sure who exactly is responsible. Logically, one suspects big business to have created this opacity, simply because they have an interest in their own supposed innocence.

<sup>39</sup> Borrowing from the terminology of the airforce: mass-media are similar to carpet-bombing, using the same payload for a multi-target's environment. Interactive media are similar to 'smart bombs,' i.e. highly precise and adjusted to the properties of the intended target through 'existential' feedback (tapping phones, tracking credit cards, etc.)

merely invited to zapp through a set of preprogrammed content using his remote control, as in television; he is called upon to actually contribute, to 'get involved,' to act out the data sphere, to subjective himself out of the interface, to become part of a giant on-line cycle of life.



*Still from the film Videodrome (Cronenberg, 1983)*



## The media cover-up

Media cannot be addressed or analyzed as existing *in-themselves*; their essence is the *through-themselves*, or plainly: mediation: mediating some-thing *else*. Its autonomy is merely a freely giving up of autonomy (otherwise, they would not be media, i.e. they would not be able to mediate *any*-thing). Furthermore, its success is accompanied by its own apparent dissolution into that which it mediates. To single something out as a medium or interface, it somehow already malfunctions (I can either *simply watch* television, *or* contemplate it as a specific medium – but by doing the latter I necessarily miss its *pointe*, which is simply “to be *watched*”):<sup>40</sup>

The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it. (Weiser: 1991, 66)

New media force themselves upon things, without being itself clearly within that category of being (if they were, they would not work as well as they do). In other words, media want to be overlooked:

Any mediating technology is obliged to erase itself to the highest degree possible in the name of unfettered communication, but in so doing it proves its own virtuosic presence as technology, thereby undoing the original erasure. (Galloway: 2006, 320)

In the above quotes one can easily replace the term ‘technology’ with that of ‘conspiracy’. It follows that all mediating technology operate *conspiratorially*: the more it is able to integrate and erase itself, the stronger its effects. The more realistic the graphics, the more complex the underlying calculations. This unstable and membranous quality of media forms the basis from which to construe critique the *conspiracy of art*, in the second part of this text.

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<sup>40</sup> Maybe this is the reason why the scene of an unwatched television broadcast is often used in horror films to trigger a sense of disaster or unease.

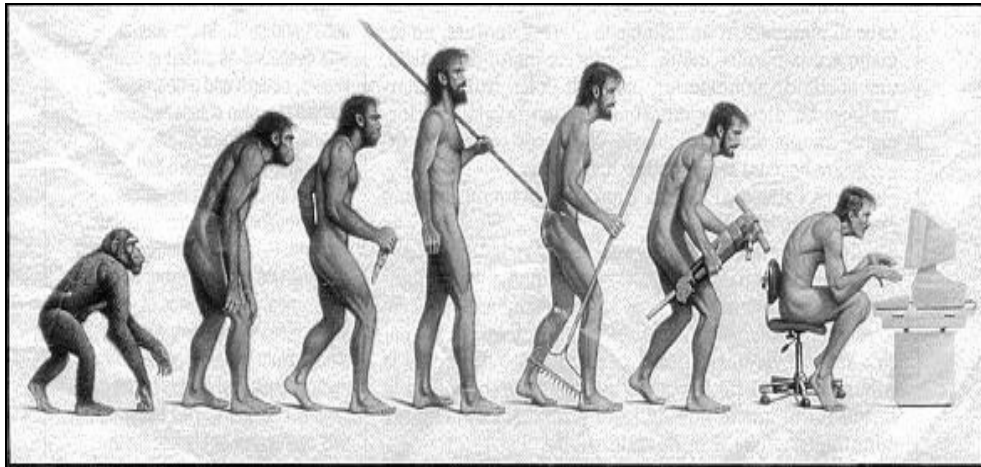
## ***Interlude: Discourse Against & Beyond Itself***

Parallel to the destabilization of the relation between man and his environment through media, philosophy became paranoid, in that it could no longer rely on the omnipotence of the Idea. From then on, it could only point beyond itself toward a vast socio-economic and non-discursive machine that in some obscure way conditioned its own activities, an unintelligible flow of people, goods, life and death, a spectator to the unsynthesizable mumblings and fractal proceedings of the everyday, as the primary 'agent' of history. No longer could science rest assuredly about its self-perceived role as managers of truth and justice. Its function became limited to a continuous contemplation and reiteration of its own impossibility, or at least inadequacy, by working out its carefully concealed social function (by whom? By what?). So it became haunted by the spectre of some enormous non-discursive totality of inorganic, organic and technological processes that it itself had discovered and produced to some extent, its beloved super-ego. Speaking of which, through psychoanalysis, consciousness became paranoid of the most intimate conspiracy devouring it, manipulating its every gesture both 'from within and without', the blocking of which was raised to a principle: the Unconscious. Through Darwinism and biology, the subject became paranoid of its own body, its invisible fate in the form of codified strings, being but a link in the chain of a species who privileges 'the strongest,' sandwiched between the micro and the macro; a monkey at the center of its seemingly art-istic endeavors. Through structural sociology, the social agent became paranoid of the inescapable laws and rules determining its social existence, automatons of the social.<sup>41</sup> In philosophy (most notably through Nietzsche) truth became paranoid; what is truth but its self-negation, Illusion, Will, Power - the Philosopher said. In 20th century art, the artist became paranoid of art itself, through its unavoidable discrepancy with its revolutionary Idea, its telos, but nevertheless hesitating to abandon art or life, and become either life itself, utopia, praxis; or total artificiality. Paranoid also of its own origin in bourgeois leisure, of its own impotent autonomy and isolation within the division of labor and knowledge, always hinting at more than it could actually deliver. Inversely, the masses became paranoid of art, suspecting their reduction to the status of either idealized subject or manipulated ignoramus in need of moral cleansing, executed through means unavailable to them. Together, being Consumers, we all became paranoid of the elaborate statistics of advertising guru's with their flawless algorithms,

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<sup>41</sup> Latour, among others, points out the methodological similarities between conspiracy theories and the 'Critique of Power' prevailing in academic and artistic cultures: *"Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes - society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism - while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation"* (Latour, 2004: 229).

being at the beginning and the end of the food chain, analyzing our behavior before it even takes place, or: cybernetic *angst*.



*The evolution of Man?*

**WARNING**

This document was prepared by scholars who advocate Marxism and admire Hegel and his conceptual descendents. It is replete with intellectual dishonesty. If you are not experienced in the identification and rejection of toxic memes, you are *strongly* advised to delay exposure until you have gained the requisite experience.

Links:

- [Background of the Red Feather Institute](#)
- The Institute's [Transforming Sociology Series](#)

*Warning found on a conspiracy website.*

## A Conspiracy of Art?

As said in the introduction, and by way of hypothesis, the 'guiding logic' of both art and media culture seem to be moving formally and socio-economically towards each other, even towards the point of actually cancelling each other out.<sup>42</sup> This thematic, which takes on many guises, is remarkably prominent in Baudrillards' sociological work on aesthetics. One of his main propositions is that art – as a concrete field, containing actors, conventions and institutions – is able to maintain its apparent autonomy and cultural distinction only through a *conspiracy*. This conspiracy is somewhat of a placebo, put in place so that the art world can reproduce itself and continue pretending that the boundary between art and mediatized culture, as well as the boundary between the artist-figure and the 'creative entrepreneur,' remains unproblematic and can still be maintained; but because of this 'placebo-effect', as in social or cultural affairs, the distinction between art and media culture is therefore also *actual*; it *exists through practices of distinction*, in the same way a placebo *actually* works. Thus empirically, it does not make sense to pronounce, as so many have done, the 'end of art.' Nor has this closing-in anything to do with the 'death of the author,' the 'loss of aura,' the 'moral deficits of contemporary culture', or the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. Although all these topics are obviously related to it in some way, I want to lay special emphasis on the growing political and socio-economic importance of *design* in general, the integration of linguistic and communication practices into capital through ICT, the increasingly aesthetic character of social relations and the 'cultural' self-articulation of the multitude, the revaluation of values such as self-expression, uniqueness, originality and creativity into core values of ludic capitalism, as well as the latter's relation to 'postmodern culture' which has been so influential in the arts. This process has been going on for decades and has culminated (for now) in the 'fertile nexus' called the Internet, which has enabled millions of users to take on their role as producers, or: paid (during the working day) and free (during 'leisure') providers of data, that make sure that every event is instantly 'mediatized' and absorbed in the circulation and commodification of information. But, ironically, culture is aestheticized and mediatized at the same time as art strives towards negating itself as 'artificiality' and forces itself into the real, i.e. the political, revolutionary, public, social,

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<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that this cancelling out of art is *actually* executed or ever *executable*, it says only that *if* its autonomous position *appears* unproblematic, this is conditioned by at least some fetishization of art as an idea or set of object-ive forms, in order to maintain the distinction. In that sense: "*We are still able to go through the motions of a critical avant-garde, but is not the spirit gone?*" (Latour, 2004: 226). This discrepancy between the 'spirit' and the 'motions' is precisely the gap that is closed by the conspiracy of art. Something inconsistent with the present, can still haunt it, and will continue to exist.

etcetera.<sup>43</sup> This moving towards each other obviously cannot be explained away as if this were a spontaneous co-incidence: both are to a certain extent an effect of each other. But the fundamental paradox of contemporary art is that the very possibility of, and drive towards this transgressing itself as art, is conditioned by the positing of its autonomy vis-à-vis media culture. Any attempt to *conspire* against this paradox by trying to re-legitimate the autonomy of art will therefore fail. Any conspiracy that is threatened from the outside will ultimately retreat into self-referentiality; it will start to eat itself, which in turn forces itself to expand its spheres of (self)reference (modernist and postmodernist art respectively). The fear is that if the artistic context (and the set of artistic forms adequate to it) is transgressed - the utopia of art becoming life - art won't be able to generate any meaningful 'field of signification' and will just dissolve into the vulgar and mainstream media landscape, where any form of poetic significance is immediately eradicated, absorbed or remains totally invisible.<sup>44</sup> As much as contemporary art flirts with the mainstream media imaginary, it can only 'tolerate' the acquired material by paranoically immunizing itself through traditional aesthetic strategies of abstraction.

In this chapter I want to shortly delineate the broader conditions of this apparent antinomy, as well as argue against (1) the idea of a 'conspiracy of art' as an adequate solution to this problem, a solution which ends in a masochistic and guilty art that is stuck in the self-referentiality mentioned above, and ultimately retreats to a marriage between a modernist aesthetic tradition focused on 'the medium,' going hand in hand with a techno-fetishism, becoming the rather mute avant-gardists (or: 'Baudelaires') of a neo-liberal techno-politics, prophets of the gadgets of the future. They forestall the more profound alienations and alternations produced by network media, by displacing the medium or interface and its context *itself*, rendering impossible the real involvement of *any* public, a public reduced to contemplating enigmatic objects, that they hope to understand from unfortunately even stranger plaques of text on the adjacent walls.<sup>45</sup> The total absence of questioning or even recognizing the immense suspensions of disbeliefs and social alienation inherent to most exhibitions (especially 'interactive' works), is one of the Great Taboos of this *conspiracy of art*. But when this over-lapping of art and media culture - and the antinomy and subsequent

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<sup>43</sup> A good example of this is the rise of 'data visualization' that is presented in a 'progressive' artistic context, where indeed, "*it can be hard to tell the latest art project from the latest startup*" (Varnelis, online).

<sup>44</sup> What if a work would exist in the cracks of the Network, secretly multiplying, switching positions, transforming itself, feeding off global platforms: would it therefore be complicit with the general functions and activities of these platforms? I don't see why this is necessarily the case. Here, credit where credit is due: the Internet indeed reduces the role of the neutralizing appropriations of Mass Media channels; although it often pays a heavy price: invisibility, or hostile take over.

<sup>45</sup> Jozef Fruchtl, head of the philosophy department at the University of Amsterdam, once described contemporary art as "*philosophy very cleverly disguised as cultural objects*." This description nicely shows the antinomies of this type of 'analytical' art.

conspiracy of art that results from this overlap – is indeed recognized by Baudrillard to be a fatal strategy, he retreats into a nostalgia for a ‘simple joy in illusion and seduction’ (those phenomena that have disappeared by the ‘simulation’ of everything), *as if* this historically specific *mode* of art is necessarily all that art can or will ever be: a trivial mirroring of the commodity by an impotent pseudo avant-garde. However, other alternatives that do indeed depart from the recognition of the unsatisfactory nature and even fatality of a ‘conspiracy of art’ become possible.

In order to understand if or under what conditions it is possible to envision a way out of the paradoxical make-up of contemporary art sketched out above, i.e. what the consequences are for critical art strategies discussed in the following, it is necessary to continuously refer artistic practice to their broader (and thus extra-artistic) technical and socio-economic conditions of possibility, its self-positioning with regard to the broader networks in which art is embedded. In the case of *media* art a ‘contextual’ approach or productive relation to its outside is even more pertinent: more than traditional art forms, it functions at the threshold of this closing-in, simply because it employs precisely those media technologies typical of the aesthetization or objective structuring of everyday life, the implosion of politics into communication, environmental management and design, and so on.

In that sense, we cannot be ‘paranoid’ enough when it comes to trying to integrate the extra-artistic conditions and form-problems of new media (and the often neo-liberal discourses through which they are articulated) into the form-problems of art itself, especially media art, as a *productive* reflexivity (or feedback loop), i.e. with regard to “*the question of interactions with the apparatus surrounding art production: the parameters for reception [...] and the potential and limitations for communication in different spheres.*” (Sheikh, 2004: 1). More than ever, these constitute the essential parameters of a truly contextual design. The idea that the quality of an artwork is proportional to the ammount of interpretations it can provide, has always been used to appease its ‘message.’ Now however, it is forced to take a position, by limiting possible interpretations through its internal organization.<sup>46</sup>

## Ideological axes of new media art

If, as a ‘regulative fiction’, one would imagine all of human praxis (discursive and non-discursive) to constitute a network following a power law, a system of transmission and exchange, containing an infinite number of (combinations of) ideologemes, art would constitute a hub with a rather small amount of nodes (relative to all the others), but with many unstable and highly distributed edges, positioned on axes that run through it and that originate in bigger hubs, those of

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<sup>46</sup> There exists a concept similar what I try to hint at: ‘strategic essentialism,’ coined originally by Hungarian feminist Gayatri Spivak.

'the new economy,' bio-politics (or perception management), culture, technology and of course the aesthetic tradition itself. It is potentially parasitic on those hubs, and can act as a relay, a way in. As said in the introduction, the autonomy of media art seems relatively low. This low level of autonomy constitutes the danger as well as the critical potential of media art, in that in its nomadic and parasitic existence over multiple axes, *"it can act as a cross-field, and intermediary between different fields, modes of perception and thinking, as well as between different positions and subjectivities."* (Sheikh, 2009: 5). In that sense, the media artist operates similar to a 'conspiracy theorist,' disturbing - by connecting *and* displacing - objects and disciplines that generally *appear* as autonomous or self-sufficient systems.<sup>47</sup> This self-reification of the different fields in relation to each other, a reification which paradoxically preconditions their inter-communicability in generalized exchange, can be said to constitute one side of modern society's double pull between hyperspeed and, in this case, hyper-inertia - much like the narrative process of conspiracy theories themselves, starting from a rigid suspicion to a dispersion of clues, a rhizomatic network. One of the questions concerning strategies adequate to this low level of autonomy of media art, *if* it decides to reject the fatal strategies of described above, i.e. by either producing itself out of an idea of forms adequate to art, or by fetishizing the technological object, is under what conditions, *"treading water in the pool of liquid power need not be an image of acquiescence and complicity."* (Critical Art Ensemble, 2009: online)

We are all at least dimly aware that computerized media do not arise 'out of the blue', but that they have a specific set of *functions* within broader socio-economic developments.<sup>48</sup> If media theory does not conceptually confront these diverse and highly concrete functions of media within socio-economic systems of exchange and control, even if its claims seem to be limited to a purely formal-technological expose (if there can be such a thing), it ends up, unwillingly, participating in a questionable practice, and employing technical means of which it does not know what side it is on (despite best intentions). In the Fine arts, there is no such 'sliding scale.' Leaving the question of hierarchy or genesis aside, neither current systems of exchange nor computerized media can exist without the other; although it is important to note that the latter are never fully reducible to their *actual* application as vehicles of exchange (opening the space for alternative appropriations). Nevertheless, they are highly integrated, i.e. they exhibit some significant structural similarities:

The introduction of the new electronic-technologies and the informatization of the production cycle, opened the way to the creation of a global network of info-production, de-territorialized, de-localized,

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<sup>47</sup> Both are part of a parapolitical project: *"particular parallel formations of a minor or even subordinate character where other or oppositional discourses and practices can be formulated and circulated."* (Sheikh, 2004: 2)

<sup>48</sup> Although this sounds almost *too* obvious, there seems to be a certain transcendent or ephemeral quality inherent to the 'self-presentation' of media which makes its 'user' tacitly assume otherwise.

de-personalized. The subject of work can be increasingly identified with the global network in info-production. (Berardi: 2003, 3)

Thus network technologies are crucial (as themselves commodity or as precondition of their circulation) for the coming-into-being and functioning of the socio-economic proceedings of today's world-system.<sup>49</sup>

The latter can be described from several theoretical perspectives. *Economically*, these developments are often conceptualized as the passage from an industrial society (typically operating through a logic of standardization, massification and unification) towards a post-Fordist, or late-capitalistic society, signifying a fundamental transformation of the mode of production and forms of labour.<sup>50</sup> The latter is mostly associated with processes of globalization, the flexibilisation and immaterialization of labour, informatization of capital and commodity, and the subsumption of communication and social interaction under capital.<sup>51</sup> *(Bio)-politically*, these developments are conceptualized as the passage from a *disciplinary* society towards a *control* society.<sup>52</sup> *Culturally*, these developments are conceptualized as a passage from a model of passive reception and consumer manipulation towards a cybernetic model based on exchange between free 'prosumers'; conceptually expressed through notions of 'interactivity' and 'participation,' 'self-expression,' and 'social production'. This discourse splits up into (1) a 'neo-liberalist' celebration of the supposed coming-into-existence of 'universal values' such as transparency, self-expression, freedom and democracy as well as a more conservative skepticism of the former and (2) a more 'critical' approach, mostly academics of the continental tradition, that operate from within a more neo- or post-Marxist perspective. *Technically*, these transformations are

<sup>49</sup> It remains a question in how far we can speak of 'today's world-system', and in how far this already a construction specific to the ideology outlined as 'late capitalism', i.e. the 'worldliness' of the world, as an *inter-connected totality*.

<sup>50</sup> There is a canon of literature that takes this development (in one form or another) as its central thesis. Notable examples are: Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, as well as several books written by Paul Virilio and the Autonomist Marxists, such as Maurizio Lazzarato. There exist applications of this theory in relation to art, which I will be able to shortly discuss at the end of this chapter.

<sup>51</sup> It is important to note that it is obviously false to assume that industrial labour is now a thing of the past, as some of the information-age ideologues would want us to believe; it is merely displaced geographically and historically, to low-wage areas with almost no regulations. The information economy is not so much a replacement or transcendence of material labour, but an addition, a solution to the need for continuous expansion of possible value-spheres, the colonization of social production.

<sup>52</sup> Examples of this approach are: the famous text *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, by Gilles Deleuze, where he contends that "*the disciplinary man was a discontinuous producer of energy, but the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network.*" (Deleuze, online). He proposes a 'socio-technical study' of these new mechanisms of control (primarily computers embedded within networks, i.e. what became the Internet). In their theory of networks, Galloway and Thacker adopt this stance and shift the focus to the technical aspects of digital information networks, as the fundamental vehicle of expression' of control societies: "*If the body in disciplinary societies is predominantly anatomical and physiological [...] in control societies, bodies are consonant with more distributed modes of individuation that enable their infinite variation (informatic records, databases, consumer profiles, genetic codes, identity shopping, workplace biometrics)*" (Galloway & Thacker, 2007: 41).



visible in the passage from 'one-way media', like radio and television, to 'network' or 'interactive' media, most noticeably the combination of personal computers that are interconnected via the WWW. *Aesthetically*, there is said to be a causal or at least structural complicity between the value-systems and practical models of different regions of the art-world (especially the avant-gardists of the sixties and seventies art scene, but also in nineties net.art) and the move towards late capitalist conceptions of production, Net culture, and agency. The theoretical expressions of the logic of post-modernity (or: the critique of modernity) play an important intermediary role here, and have been very influential in the art-world: artists and art-theorists appropriate these theoretical discourses to reflect on, construct and legitimate their work and the work of others, respectively.

The five aspects or 'ideological axes' (economic, bio-political, cultural, technical & aesthetic) along which media art travels, could be said to share a certain structural logic: let's call it a 'postmodern' *episteme*. It is not my intention to elaborate on the rise of such an episteme as an *historical* or *ontological* claim. They are a set of regulative ideas that provide a conceptual framework from which to assess the relations between media art and the extra-artistic systems in which it is embedded. I have tried to include as much literature on this topic in the footnotes, for those who have become interested in the broader significance of this thematic.



*A web-designer temporarily unemployed, until the next bubble.*

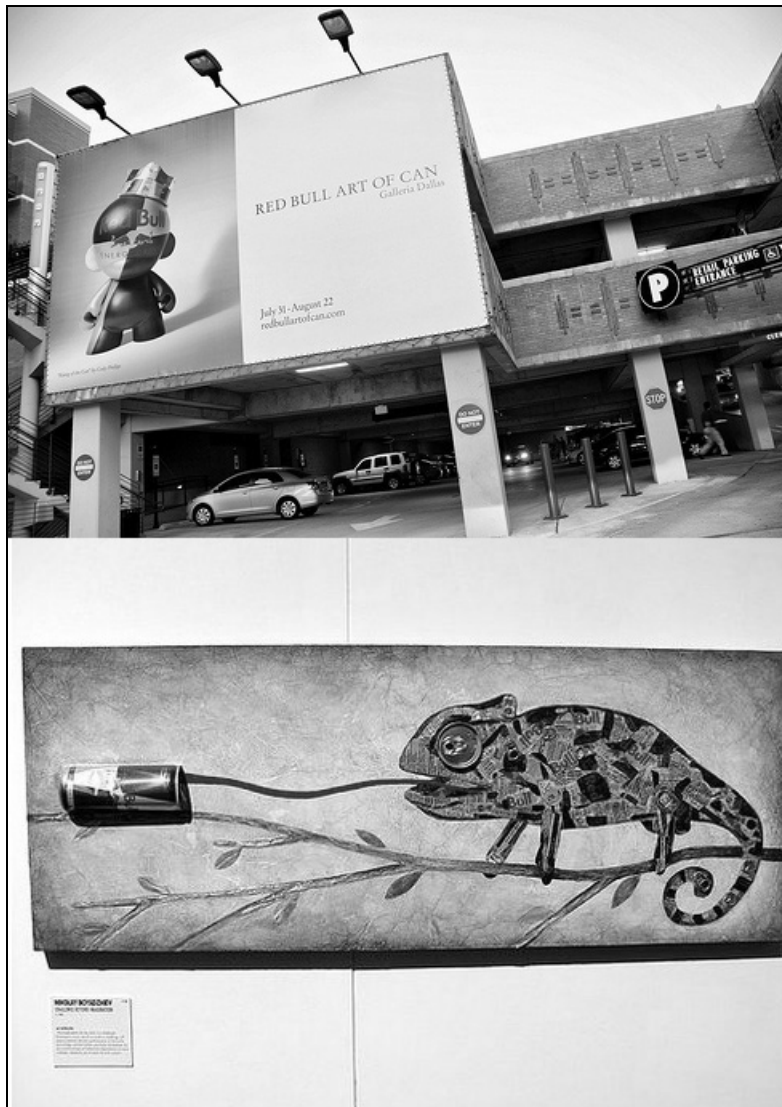
## The transformations of the context of critical art

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the spirit of the 1968 uprisings, the image of the 'critical artist' (which almost became a pleonasm from then on) has been that of someone who rejected the identity-logic of modernity - its

instrumental rationality, the reification of consciousness, the colonization of the life world and the eradication of cultural differences, its apparatuses of discipline and repression, the distinction between high and low culture, etcetera. Obviously, this art was critical in so far as its alternatives were fuelled by the historical actuality of its opposite, i.e. by the absence in society of difference, equality, respect for and witness to 'the Other,' creativity and self-expression. So, the 'criticality' of art is dependent on how far it *actually negates* and subverts the values and practices of modern society, through the construction of alternatives. The essential characteristics of these critical strategies, referred to as 'political' or 'engaged' art, still define the artistic models of today. The question is in how far the 'object' of that critical strategy (society, capitalism, the culture industry, etc.) has transformed itself so as to incorporate or mirror its critique in such a way that a rethinking of this set of critical strategies is required. The importance of such a re-evaluation (in theory as well as in art, especially in the field of new media), in relation to the structural transformations of capital and the *cultural logic* that emanates from it, is more generally described in Negri and Hardt's critique of 'Empire':

The structures and logics of power in the contemporary world are intimately immune to the 'liberatory' weapons of the postmodern politics of difference. In fact, Empire too is bent on doing away with those modern forms of sovereignty and on setting differences to play across boundaries. Despite the best intentions then, the postmodern politics of difference not only is ineffective against but can even coincide with and support the functions and practices of imperial rule. (Negri & Hardt, 2001: 142)

I quoted this passage at length for it follows from it that *if* the transformation from the second to the third stage of capitalist society - and the central function of computerized media therein sketched out above - is even remotely adequate, and if the former has indeed been able to integrate (or, for those less conspiratorial at least 'spontaneously assume') the values that I described as those typical of 'engaged art,' then the critical effectiveness of the latter becomes problematic: *"because the new spirit of capitalism incorporated much of the artistic critique that flourished at the end of the 1960s, the accusations formerly leveled at capitalism out of a desire for liberation, autonomy and authenticity no longer seem to be soundly based."* (Boltanski, 2005: 419) This doesn't mean that this form of critique is now totally redundant (especially in non-Western contexts), nor that its outlook and liberatory intentions ever actually coincided with their application in the 'new economy' ideology - in cases like these, there is obviously always a process of qualitative transformation - but that at least in the Western context the relation of this outlook to its object must be re-evaluated.



Two images used in the 2010 Red Bull "Art of Can" advertisement campaign.

With the rise of an industry of communication, *"the artist-figure (as well as the curator) is a role model for contemporary production, rather than a counter model"* (Sheikh, 2009: 3). Some go even so far as to assume that *"the modern art world has been a social laboratory for immaterial labour, and thus for post-Fordism"* (Gielen: 25). The institutional embodiment of this way of thinking about the role of art as 'knowledge production' can be seen in the proliferation of institutional spaces for 'Artistic Research,' that employ the normative weight of the term 'research' in order to legitimate artistic practice as a genuine part of the new 'knowledge economy.' The 'politics of difference' also plays an important legitimating role in this: the necessity of constructing 'alternative knowledges' that challenge the totalitarian Master code of science and with its supposed methodological disdain for personal and lived experience - a critique which I think is already a

commonplace in science itself. The result is that a struggle for the content and scope of the term 'research' has erupted, continuing reminiscent of the feminist and racial struggles for representation prevalent in the seventies and eighties (Klein, 2010). However, reflexivity as to the socio-economic developments conditioning the current valorization of something like artistic research is often missing from the artistic researchers' repertoire, a basic methodological problem for any discipline which perceives itself to be self-critically oriented.

"Well, for critics like you, nothing is ever good enough! It seems that you are just trying to find something to be skeptical about! Look at the positive side!" Still, there is something interesting in the idea that 'critical art', with its politics of difference, or its 'unmasking of the medium' by displacing it, is fighting enemies long gone. Played out - like a prostitute on a pension, unwanted but still going strong - as there exists a fatal co-incidence between the logic of late capitalism (prominent in most web 2.0 industries) and the liberatory critique of its modernist (and retro-actively, quite primitive) forms of governance; we don't need *more* representation, *more* deconstruction, *more* irony, *more* difference, *more* production; it's all already there, or will be; the truth of postmodernism is post-office; "everybody is an artist!" "Be free, be creative, be critical, express yourself!" When both the master narratives as well as any significant link between thought and action have supposed to been destroyed - the popularized credo of postmodernism - only conspiracy theories persist, the cynical and paranoid mumbling of middle-aged internet addicts, in between games, some serious play. The hermeneutic impulse keeps ravaging on where nothing is to be interpreted; elaborating plots, hidden powers, a contingent collection of perverse teleology's.

Ironically then, the end of the unconscious (the end of depth, of metaphor) is the beginning of its re-appearance; to speak psycho-analytically, we are in a situation in which, through conspiracy theories, the absence of the unconscious itself is repressed by the positing of its persistence. A man is interviewed: he is asked whether he is in favor or against security cameras in the public domain. "I have nothing to hide," he answers. The Critic's impulse would be to reply: "of course you have something to hide! You just don't know it! Another clear case of ideological manipulation!" But can we consider another answer, altogether strange: yes, he is actually right, he has nothing to hide? Does the critic presuppose a state of the world that is as old and outdated as his system of interpretation?

Of course this is al a bit overstated, paranoid; perhaps even somewhat of a parody. Most media art is, both in form and content, quite incommensurable with the goals and practices of what I call - for lack of a better term - 'late capitalism.' However the terms design and art are definitely less and less anti-thetical - and again - this closing-in shouldn't be analyzed according to the traditional distinctions between an 'autonomous' or non-functional art that must shield itself from the vulgarity of the culture industry, but by tracing the broader conditions under which this closing-in was made possible in the first place, through which it

becomes clear that the essential divide, as well as possible solutions, must be sought elsewhere. This closing-in can be seen not only in the emergence of something like 'Artistic Research,' but in the paradoxical make-up of the study in the context of which I am writing this text: *Interaction Design and Unstable Media*. The name of the study already signifies the ambiguity and 'unstability' of the project itself, whose essence is its being continuously tortured by its outside, potentially flowing throughout all the axes mentioned above. I have seen roughly three dispositions with regard to this unstability. First, there is a hyper-awareness of the minefield that is new media art. It is no accident that a severe form of paranoia is constitutive of this disposition. Second there is an uncritical embrace of the marriage between the 'the new economy' (design) and art. These are the gents that back in primary school immediately chose the side of the class Tyrant, because they sensed that they might be next. They seem to suffer from a severe case of the Stockholm syndrom. And third, a continuation – in good or bad faith – of the modernist tradition with updated means (sensors, beamers, etc.). Let's leave them in peace. The first two 'dispositions' at least share the contention that "things cannot really go on like this," but obviously offer completely different solutions.



Screen capture of a PowerPoint presentation given by one of my teachers. It says: "Creativity = Capital."

## Towards an Art of Conspiracy

How do you critique the Great Texts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (say those of Hegel)? By writing another Great Text, by appropriating the Grand Dialectic and turning it upside down. One must first adopt the medium of one's adversary, in order to make the latter *experience* himself. Seeing himself this way, he will overcome himself towards something he could not himself have anticipated, being caught in its own headlights (could be a line from Sun-Tzu's *Art of War*?). The dominant 'ideological apparatuses' of today are becoming less and less textual or 'ideological,' nor are they merely executed through disciplinary institutions or democratic politics: they are practical, machinic and affective modulations of everyday life, the programming and re-programming of environments through software, a definite parapolitics. In re-designing the conditional parameters of human existence and experience, they will attach themselves not only to man's cognitive faculty but to all of its 'media' (even up to the genetic level), whilst being themselves fragmented in a way beyond representation. So, a critique of this fundamentally practical make-up must be practical as well, operating on all levels; if ideology is primarily enacted today as 'environmental' *design*, its critique must also be enacted *through* design – which does not mean that this cannot be a *critique of* or a *reflection on* design.<sup>53</sup> This, for me at least, legitimizes the practice of new media art (qua practical intervention) vis-à-vis other forms of articulation, such as academic reflection: a surplus of a different kind. The joint venture between new media art and political activism is thus no surprise. Since power is displacing itself more and more from traditional political discourses and institutions towards the immanent developments of media, new media art, employing the same methods and operating on the same terrains, may well be one of the appropriate forms of activism for these new modes of governance, a form that, because it isn't immediately sucked into reified political oppositions, can afford itself a more ludic and experimental approach to these issues, freeing up the terrains on, and parameters with which these struggles take place, without however relativizing or ironizing the issues at stake.

In Critical Theory, there is a long standing suspicion of and debate about, the relation between art and new media, i.e. as to the theoretical and practical consequences to be extracted from their shared place in the 'aesthetic realm' - ranging from utopian thinking about the possibilities of a total synergy between art, media and design, liberating art from its guilt of being elitist or 'useless,' to its apocalyptic obverse (not opposite): the dissolving of art into the vulgarity of the media spectacle. These two stances toward the possible 'destinies' of media

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<sup>53</sup> To take a dangerously obvious and prostituted example: in *The Matrix*, ideology is no longer enacted by manipulating the belief-structures of individuals or groups, but becomes computational, an environmental simulation: here ideology (integrating people into the procedures of the powers that be) is completely enacted through *software* (Chun, 2006: 19).

culture are already clearly at stake in the aesthetic debates between Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, in the beginning of the 20th century.

Roughly speaking, Adorno contends that the level of criticality of art is determined by the level of its radical Otherness or Externality in relation to its object - society and its injustices, the culture industry and its media, and so on. In order to critically incorporate society into its fabric, it must *retreat* into an autonomous zone of expression. So here, paradoxically, the lack of *involvement* of art is the precondition of its *engagement*, its critical or subversive potential. By constructing alternative aesthetic forms that resist the regression of bourgeois culture into hype, society is exposed to its own contingencies and injustices. In order to safeguard this transcendence and critical function of art (which ideally is supposed to force society into a fatal self-referential feedback loop), art must completely retreat from modern technology and mass media: new media, like radio, will *always* automatically reproduce the repressive and normalizing functions of the culture industry. New media art necessarily functions as yet another legitimization of a bourgeois culture in decline, a culture which is slowly dismantling its own emancipatory principles.<sup>54</sup>

Benjamin however did not equate the new media with their actual application as a normalizing and homogenizing apparatus, solely dedicated to the production of docile consumers. Although not naive, i.e. believing that the ideological function of new media is determined solely by their normative content or 'use', he understood that the dominant 'message' that energizes the medium can nevertheless fall short of confiscating the latter's functions and effects entirely. This means that technology is always *underdetermined*; it is always potentially more than it was designed to do, i.e. what its inventors imagined it *could* do, as well as the way it is currently used.<sup>55</sup> Thus, following Benjamin, the artistic appropriations of new technologies do not necessarily implicate their complicity with their default application in society, without being completely remote and disinterested with regard to these 'default settings'. But his claim can be put even stronger: art's 'engagement' is enhanced or even conditioned by the way in which it *really appropriates new technologies*, and the strategies through which they are socially implemented, i.e. as they become the dominant vehicles of expression of a certain culture. Old media (or a traditional use of new media!) can neither

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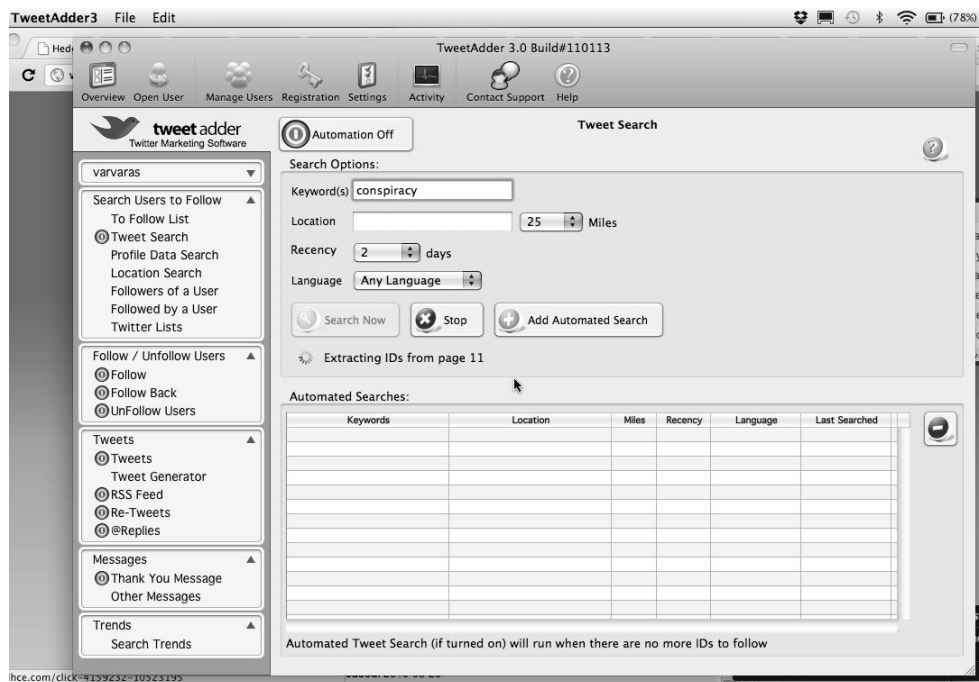
<sup>54</sup> Although Adorno wouldn't be himself if he didn't also dialectically relativize the critical adequacy of modernist art, freeing himself from the necessity of taking a position. This quote says it all: "*Both the dialectic of the highest and the lowest [modernism and mass-culture] bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change .... Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up.*" (Adorno, 1977: 120). We must not forget that this antinomy is haunted by the ghost of the cold war: on the one hand, American advertising, on the other, totalitarian propaganda machines. Now, I think we could be a less afraid of totalitarian regressions when discussing modernist forms of art.

<sup>55</sup> A great example of this can be found in the evolution of the computer. In the forties and fifties, computer engineers still thought one 'fast' computer to be enough for the whole world, since it would only be used for helping scientists with solving some mathematical equations. The idea of a 'personal computer' did not cross their mind. They would probably think this to be a rather ridiculous idea.

adequately address the newly arisen form-problems nor the social and cultural effects these new technologies augment or (re)produce. This we know. So, the artistic critique of society can only be executed by an autonomous appropriation of *its* modes of expression, its use of media, its technologies:

Once a corporate entity such as Google is raised upon the automation of search and then is fed by the technologies of knowledge discovery such as data mining, net critique and a critical generative networked aesthetics must also consider and play with such automatism. (Munster, online)

In this sense the Adornian outlook (that of Modernism) has proven completely impotent, merely creating a formal niche for art in which it can experiment with trivial questions, indifferent to the world 'outside' it. Again, a large part of new media art seems to be stuck in the reenactment of this tradition, 'going through its motions,' albeit with updated means - touch screens, sensors, video-tracking, buttons, beamers and so on. Then, Discourse then enters center stage, in order to transform these trivialities into 'subversive counter-appropriations of media.'



*Screenshot of a Twitter advertising tool. This software targets people relevant to the product.*



## Conspiring Networks

Confronted with the modern challenge of commodity, art should not seek its salvation in critical denial (because then it would only be art for art's sake, the derisory and powerless mirror of capitalism and the inevitability of commodity), but it should go farther in formal and fetishized abstraction, in the fantasy of exchange value – become more commoditized than commodities. More than use value, but escaping exchange value by radicalizing it. (Baudrillard: 2005, 99)

Literacy and the communications revolution have empowered conspirators with new means to conspire, increasing the speed of accuracy of the their interactions and thereby the maximum size a conspiracy may achieve before it breaks down. (Assange: 2006, 6)

The *other* Great Aesthetic Polemic of the day took place between Adorno – a defender of Modernism – and the German-Russian avant-garde artists (most notably Brecht, never completely at ease with his eastern friends), a defender of an engaged and pedagogic form of social realism. (*Aesthetics and Politics*, 1980) The question is whether the proliferation of ICT and social media – increasingly a significant force in the everyday lives of millions of people,<sup>56</sup> recording their every move, complemented by the tendency of art towards self-negation as described above – would benefit a revaluation or reinvention of a new form of ‘realism’, by which I mean the establishment of artistic pathways that open up to the mediatized underground. I’m obviously not thinking about the social realism of Communist Russia, which was always more about propaganda, or the plays of Brecht, but more about what is designated in art as a sort of ‘documentary turn’ – not a serious attempt to represent reality ‘as it really is,’ but the designation<sup>57</sup> of a semi-fictional grid that is able to render the *reality* of reality – *in reality*<sup>58</sup> (so not merely condensing it into an external and fictionally perceived artifice, which consumes large amounts of ‘suspension of disbelief’ and ‘suspension of unease’ on the side of the viewer). Conspiracy theories are exactly such devices: they gather elements scattered in time and (server) space, in order to render their interrelations (or lack thereof) intelligible. This idea, of dialectically transforming or *realizing* the mediatized everyday through its fictionalization – instead of merely ‘veridically reflecting’ it, was already present in the early days of new media, when the fate or the ‘paradigmatic’ use of these media was still relatively undecided. In other words, the tension between art and the newly arisen mediascape was still very much on the surface: *“they return us to a critical juncture in*

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<sup>56</sup> “Information technologies allow us to trace the associations in a way that was impossible before [...] they make visible what was before only present virtually.” (Latour, 2005: 207)

<sup>57</sup> For once, an etymological reference seems instructive. From an online etymological dictionary: “*designation*, late 14c., “action of pointing out,” from O.Fr. *designacion* or directly from L. *designationem* (nom. *designatio*) “a marking out, specification,” noun of action from *pp. stem* of *designare* (see *design*).”

<sup>58</sup> This may seem quite megalomaniac; however I will only be concerned with that part of reality which is media culture (or more precisely, the Internet).

*the development of spectacle society and point out a path that was not taken*" (Fore, online).

This idea was articulated through what Sergei Tretyakov in the 1920s termed 'factography,' "*an intersection of strata [...] located at the point of contact between artistic literature and the newspaper.*" Factography is distinct from documentary, precisely in so far as it focuses on the *actual con-fusion* of the 'immediated real'<sup>59</sup> and fiction (or artistic device), i.e. the operation of transforming and displacing the Media Imaginary *itself* instead of constructing closed spaces where the cognitive stances of social agents *towards* that reality can be re-calibrated through strategies of *Verfremdung*, etcetera (a sort of pedagogic catharsis, i.e. what I refer to as a typically Modernist strategy). One is reminded not only of white cubes, but also of novels, as being such closed spaces, and whose reception is artistic *per se*. This distinguished the Western-European avant-gardists from their Soviet comrades:

While most western European photomontage remains on the level of the unique, fabricated image - paradoxically folding into the singularity of this object fragments of a multitude of technically reproduced photographic images from mass-cultural sources - the strategies of the Soviet avant-garde seem rather rapidly to have shifted away from a reenactment of that historical paradox. The productivist artists realized that in order to address a new audience not only did the techniques of production have to be changed, but the forms of distribution and institutions of dissemination and reception had to be transformed as well. (Buchloh, 1984: 99)

In most contemporary new media art practices, the same 'historical paradox' inherent to the modernist project, is reenacted. But since we do not share the imagined utopian futures of the productivists - in that we must presuppose the context of late capitalist commodity and IT networks as they currently exist, the similarities between the Russian productivists and today's 'documentary art' breaks down at some point. When applied to this context, from the factographic point of view, artistic spaces are perhaps not so much 'blatantly redundant' as actually quite necessary, in so far as they function as a site of distinction and contemplation of the factographic project, as it - by definition - cannot render this contemplative distance without dissolving into a conspiracy of art or becoming info-commodity. However it does indicate a shift away from seeing these spaces as self-sufficient constructions, and a focus on art as one organization or mediation of the material among others.

A form of 'new media realism' contains more of an empathic gesture, a traversing of the different axes described in the fourth chapter, without being determined - in its very form - as specifically *artistic* artifice (although it could well be in need

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<sup>59</sup> Varnelis describes the 'immediated real' as "a condition in which mediation is given," in which any distinction between the real and the constructed is 'in erasure.' A situation that according to him calls for a 'poetics of reality.'

of such a contextualization). Paradoxically then, the artistic context can be thought of as a catalytic and *realizing* device, precisely because of its 'artificial' methods:

The ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic experience which yet lays claim to a binding relationship with the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis which had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic. (Jameson, 1995: 198)

"To talk of realism today, now I have seen it all, are you crazy?! What about the simulacrum, haven't you seen The Matrix? Isn't everything fake nowadays? And we all know about the fascist and ideological character of hierarchical narrative, the totalitarian pretensions of representation, the authoritarianism of the author and his 'closed text'!?" All these responses are part of a postmodern (and rather paranoid) politics of difference (or: *differance*, whatever). In that sense, I'm quite tired of being tired of trees. Because by rejecting realism in this way, one throws out the baby with the bath water, and stimulates – in art – an endlessly miniscule and quite boring masochistic exercise of measuring and recording 'the message' of the medium as well as the material, the 'reality effect' and the 'always conditioned' intentions of the artist, institutions and discourses. Today's new media art – employing modernist methods such as estrangement, coupled with an aesthetic of novelty – is ultimately still only a paranoid or self-referential feedback loop: no wonder that if you're not *in it*, no one *gets it*. Hence the conspiracy of art.

To back up a bit: in the good ol' days, there was no question as to the differentiation of 'aesthetic experience' and everyday reality: both were of an other order completely. Now, we're obviously not so sure:<sup>60</sup> hence the hyper-consciousness of the *rules and conventions* specific to the artistic field. The negotiation of this tension – between the (Immediated) Real and fiction or artistic device, the relationship with the real *as an aesthetic experience* – has always been an essential form-problem of art. Serbian-Hungarian writer Danilo Kiš describes his unease with a literature that does not integrate the two realms 'in erasure' into its own stylistic strategies:

"Even as a reader, I have trouble with purely imaginative fiction: I see through its artifices and am left with a mist or void. The other danger is to give the reader nothing but records or testimonials, to become a historian or memoirist. I gambol between the two perils." (Meade, online)

Now more than ever, a large part of historical reality itself is produced out of this tension, as 'immediate reality' is increasingly 'reflexively' absorbed and (re)produced in what Brian Holmes calls a 'second planetary skin.' To take an example from computer science: it is the process of getting from hardware

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<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Rancière notices that in what he calls the 'aesthetic regime,' that "*writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth.*" (Rancière, 2006: 38). It would perhaps be interesting to connect this specific destabilization of the distinction between the realm of history and fiction to the rise of media technologies, a connection he does not touch upon.

voltages and machine language to an 'aesthetic experience' (GUI). The conditions of representation, memory/storage, circulation and so on, are already an integral part of immediatized reality itself, in no need for any serious hermeneutic work or abstraction: representation now often conditions presentation, (the map preceding the territory).

The image shows two screenshots of Twitter search results. The top screenshot is for the search term '#goodnight site:twitter.com'. It displays a list of tweets from users like AzeonHardstyle and newton1642, along with a timeline graph showing activity from 6:00 AM to 12:00 AM. The bottom screenshot is for the search term '#yawn site:twitter.com', showing tweets from users like Simplee\_Jelly and GhadeerE, with a similar timeline graph.

The image shows the Google Netherlands homepage. The search bar contains the text 'what is'. Below the search bar, a list of suggestions is displayed: 'what is my ip', 'what is a g6', 'what is love', 'what is my ip address', 'what is wikileaks', 'what is 3g', 'what is twitter', 'what is sap', 'what is a good credit score', and 'what is the tea party'. To the right of the suggestions, there are links for 'Advanced search' and 'Language tools'. At the bottom of the suggestions box, there are buttons for 'Google Search' and 'I'm Feeling Lucky'.

*Google's autosuggestions and real-time search reveal certain cultural trends. The search engine becomes an index of (a large part of) the general intellect.*

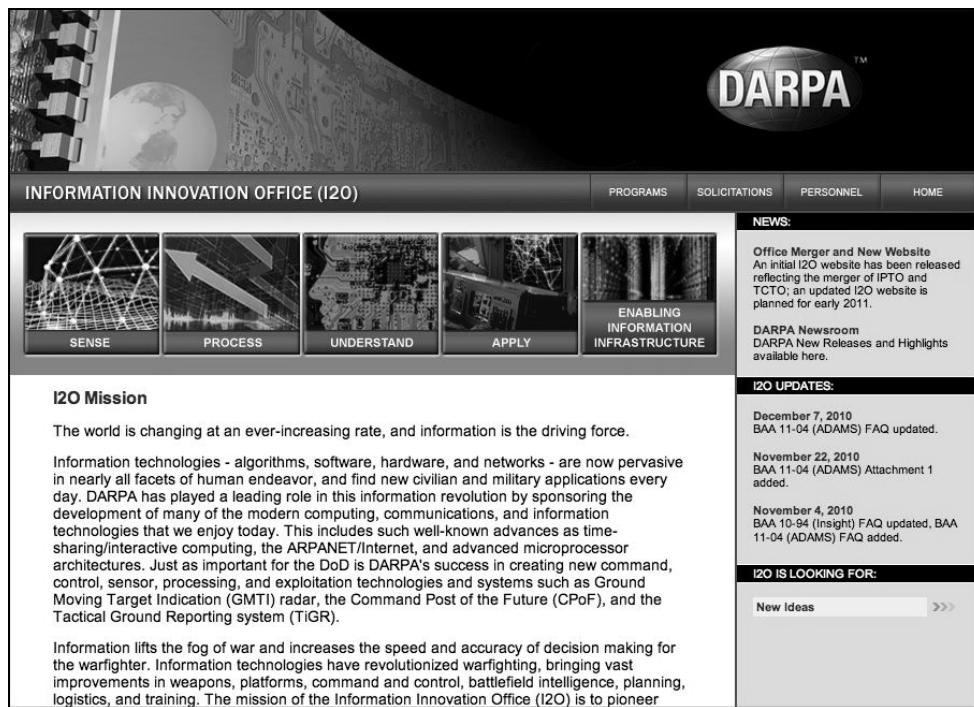
When applied to the Internet, the factographic strategy implies that:

The Net (the austere context) + art (the poetic impulse) must be forced together. What is crucial here is this question of force; force as a relational energy that pulls things away from each other or brings them into proximity. (Munster, online).

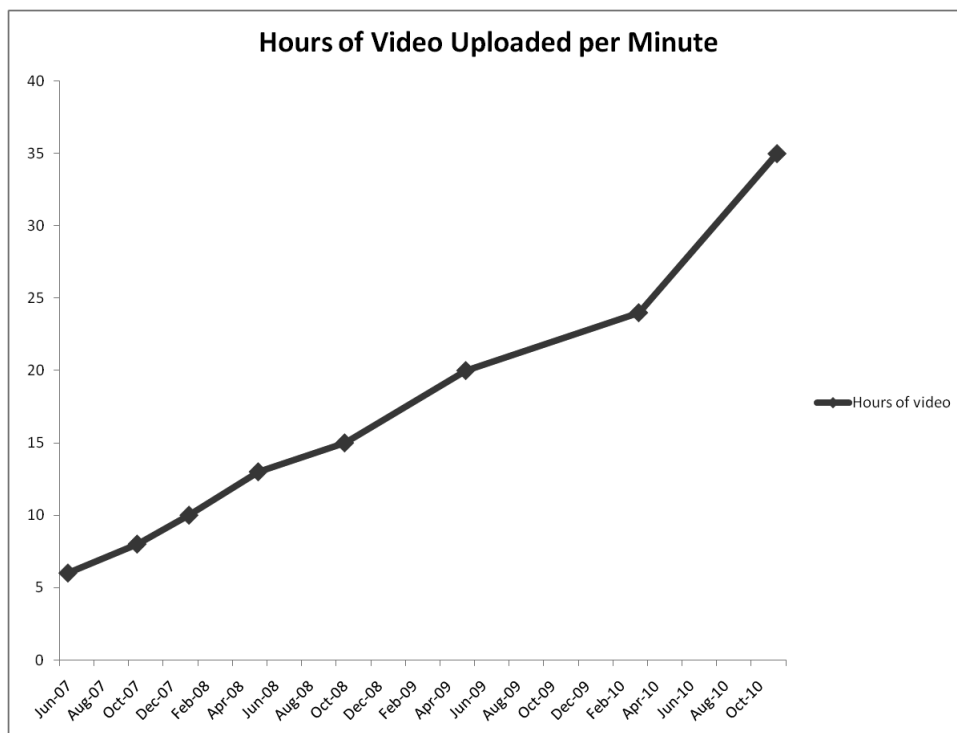
Perhaps the artistic procedure is not so much the poetic impulse itself as the relational force that pulls together different regimes or levels of representation. Anyway, there is clearly a levelling of the 'raw material' of art and the latter's 'artificial' methods of representation: the formerly minor 'aesthetic realm' (not necessarily artistic) is being integrated into the pores of reality through media technologies at an unimaginable rate, establishing forms of seemingly 'direct' access in real-time (a directness that is of paradoxically highly mediated). In this scenario indeed:

The key thing is how to get taken up in the motion of a big wave, a column of rising air, to "get into something" instead of being the origin of an effort. [...] Just as it's not enough to make moving shadows on the wall, you have to construct images that can move by themselves. (Deleuze, 1990: 121,122)

The artist thus no longer has to travel great distances in order to 'get a grip' on his material, like translating time-space to a flat surface in painting, reconstructing the human body with clay, or even finding an 'original' interface to the material (another strategy of distinction). It is all already there, in pretty good shape – a video, subtitled, and with pretty headers. Paradoxically however, the latter's technical conditions are extremely elusive, they resist representation even more than traditional media. So it is a question, not so much about the 'pretence to reality' of representation, but rather "*whether representation can draw directly, in some new way, on the distinctive technology of capitalism's third stage, whose video- and computer-based furniture and object-world are markedly less photogenic than the media and transportation technology of the second.*" (Jameson, 1995: 16) The design shifts from the object or material to its organization and function.



Screenshot of the DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) website



Some YouTube statistics.

Merely drawing a colored graph of IP connections won't do the trick. We must dare to leave the comfortable cartographic gaze prevalent in today's 'data visualizations,' and enter into the concrete involvements of today's mediatized social body (see last section of chapter 3).<sup>61</sup> We're in a situation where an erroneous video edit can render reality more genuinely than the original unedited material. Fiction, Parody and pastiche generate a nexus that destabilizes the dense inertia of each individual practice, the reciprocal alienation existing between them, be it art, theory, media culture, commerce etcetera. Take the Yes Men for example. Instead of explicating the injustices and inequalities of the global economy through critical analysis, they *show* these injustices by performing them, *in the very spheres where these injustices normally take place or are legitimated*: business conferences, major news outlets, and so on. They do not only criticize these processes by abstracting from or transferring them to the adequate spaces necessary for their 'disinterested' reception (a text, a gallery). They intervene in those processes themselves, after which, in order to explicate what they wanted to show – the hypocrisy and absurdity of these normally invisible practices – they set up a documentary of what they have done. Here, the segmentation or separation of the intervention and its (artistic) reception or documentation is essential. This split in the artistic playing field creates a form-problem for traditional forms of exhibition. For example:

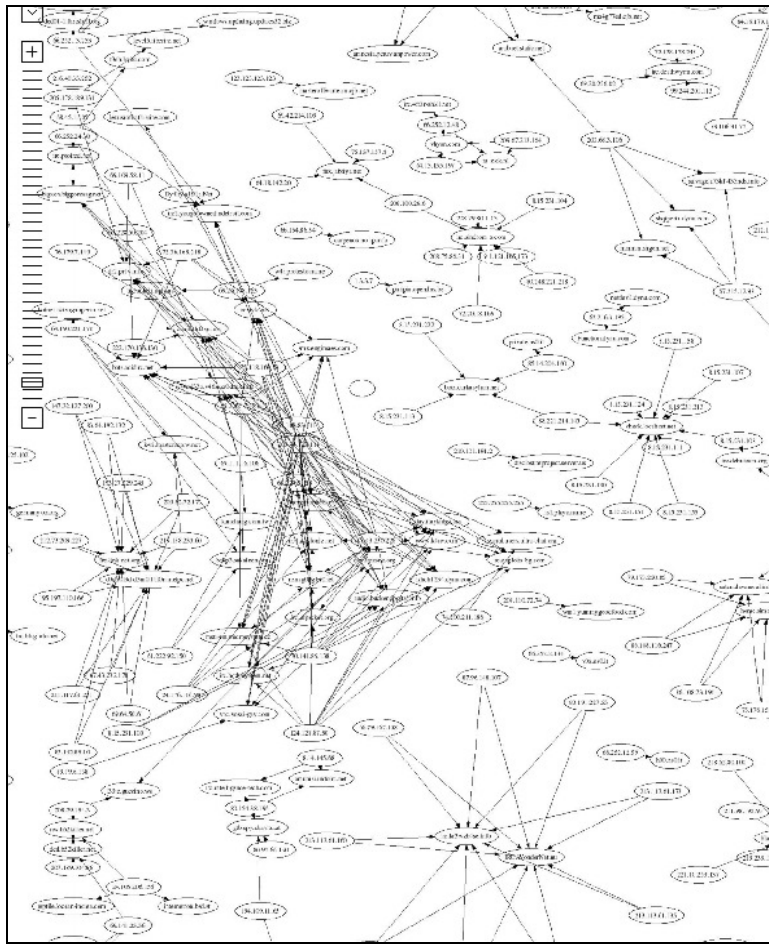
Imagine an art exhibit of computer viruses. How would one curate such a show? Would the exhibition consist of documentation of known viruses, or of viruses roaming live in situ? Would it be more like an archive or more like a zoo? (Galloway & Thacker, *the exploit*, p105)

As a Facebook CEO could have said: we now have unmediated access to the self-articulations and intimate communications of the inner beliefs, desires and anxieties of the multitude (almost unmediated, because they are already mediated). Before us lay *the products of* (note nuance) their intricate involvements. Our role? The augmentation, alteration and remediation of the Network Imaginary, preferably in real-time.<sup>62</sup> It is up to us, the non-community (artists, programmers, activists,) to match these kinds of megalomania, i.e. *"to enter headlong, but at the same time knowingly, into the sticky webs and precarious voids that comprise just such interconnected topologies"* (Munster, online).

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<sup>61</sup> the works of net.art or telematic art in the nineties started from this idea: but it was mainly produced out of a *notion* of the *potential* of new forms of communication, collaboration and interaction made possible by ICT. It could only hint at a reality in the making (only a small and select group of people was actually 'online' at that time). The focus was therefore on the technology itself, on the novities of these new media and their distribution. Now that this technology has rapidly become part of everyday life we can focus more on (an artistic collaboration with) the actual qualities or contents of the intra-terrestrial contacts that occur.

<sup>62</sup> Artist couple Thompson and Craighead explore the potential of real-time data as an artistic material. (<http://www.thomson-craighead.net/>)



Data visualization of a botnet, <http://bit.ly/jOvtd2>

*Realizing* reality through fiction (or 'realizing the unreal') is not the same as claiming the overall *irreality* of reality. It doesn't imply that 'reality is just an illusion,' or 'there is no absolute truth,' or 'everyone has his own truth,' or 'everything is fake.' Quite the opposite! It does not deny the fundamental premise or 'ideality' of truth: that it is differentiated from 'the untrue.' Only a creature from a post-logical universe or sophist could deny such a distinction.<sup>63</sup> The point is that *reality as well as fiction can exist at either side of this differentiation*. Reality often becomes 'unreal,' in the sense that people who just witnessed a disaster or terrorist attack in person say: "I can not believe it. It's unreal." Or: "it was like I was in a movie." Similarly, in Marx's *Das Kapital*, the commodity is from the very first chapter designated as a *fetish*: a creature both real and unreal, the essence of appearance, social relation and abstract value, completely in-between two modes

<sup>63</sup> This popularized 'theory of relativity' (or: what they think is what postmodernism is about) merely negatively repeats the myths of a 'nature', apart from being self-referentially inconsistent. Richard Rorty for example rejects the claim that pragmatism is a form of relativism, simply by asking: "*relative TO WHAT?*"



of being, haunted even. A fetish plays with these pro- and regressions of the 'really really real'. The crux is to find the loci where reality tends to tip over into unreality or fiction, and vice versa, because this 'unstable nexus' is what media are all about. To say that if conspiracy theories *realize* reality through fiction or narrative, this amounts to the same as proving them wrong, is completely irrelevant.

The artist is often conceived of as being a maker of dreams. Currently however, scientists and businessmen are the makers and tweakers of dreams, while artists now feel obliged to *realize* the formers rhizomatic enterprises, as they have extended themselves into an infinite space of possibilities. The supposed *raison d'être* of modern science – formalizing in concepts the essence of things (in philosophy) or explicating the laws of nature (in physics) – has, through its *very own* procedures, flipped over into its opposite, the positing of the irreality of everything, a radical and cynical constructivism.<sup>64</sup> Because of this, we come to suspect that this was never actually the function or goal of science, and that it proceeds more by (p)owning the real through its irrealization. Ironically, this text increasingly begins to look like an exposition of mere *wordplay*: "unreality is something else than irreality" etcetera. In other words, the very thing it tries to evade reappears center stage. But then again, this is of course precisely it.

## Final remarks

By researching conspiracy culture on the WWW, I've tried to outline a strategy based on the recognition that artistic practices and the socio-economic context in which they are embedded and to which they necessarily relate (most notably the Internet), are increasingly over-lapping. With the rise of the 'new economy' (or what Jameson calls the *cultural* logic of late capitalism) the role and place of art is displaced. Something is indeed 'out there,' and a *conspiracy of art* seems ill adapted to face the challenge that this 'out there' poses for media art in particular. On a theoretical level, we already understand this very well. But this understanding doesn't yet seem to significantly influence or transform the way we think about and develop artistic *formats*, the conditions of their reception and the way they relate to the mediatized other.

With the rise of the Internet, a special realm of being has exploded and taken on enormous proportions. Between the mass-medial hermeneutic machine and the sub-medial is now another world-historical playing field: below the thresholds of newspapers and television stations, but broadly distributed and encoded through visual formats nonetheless: a self-replicating and self-distributing of the General Intellect and social life in general, including the infectious diseases that torture it. We are all potential witnesses to what is going on anywhere, anytime, *or so it*

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<sup>64</sup> In the documentary *Das Netz* (2003), influential German scientist Heinz von mocks his interviewer's 'naïve' reference to such a thing as the 'reality' or relation to reality of his scientific theories. In physics and mathematics, reality is increasingly left out of the equation altogether.

*seems*. To tap into, inhabit and record the events that take place in these phantasmagorical universes; to *realize* the *immediated* everyday that networked media facilitate and produce, as they proliferate through and nest themselves in the different life worlds; to particularize and *show* the precise intersections at which the abstract and globally organized commodity and communication networks somehow enter the dreams and phantasms of the conspiracy theorists, or parapoliticians, which we all are; to find the networked other; to encounters of the  $n^{\text{th}}$  kind. Towards a concrete understanding and *exposition* of complex systems.

## *Appendix: Wikileaks & the Myth of Transparency*

Having leaks can be very costly if there are not fixed in time and properly because they can cause damage to surrounding material leaving you with the possibility that you much have to do much more work than repairing lines. ([www.gashplumbing.com](http://www.gashplumbing.com))

No matter what your political bent is, no one can disagree with the proposition that ‘information is good.’ (Michael Mann, Office of International Affairs at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission)

What if all the activities of governments and multinationals would become completely transparent for ‘the public,’ as all relevant documents are available to everyone: will this trigger a process that reduces the amount of ‘unjust’ wars, corruption, malicious decisions and manipulation of ‘the people’ by THE institutions? Would this cry for openness ultimately constitute a more democratic, rational and just basis for this particular form of indirect representation? Will governments be forced to transform their modes of governance in compliance with the needs of their electorate? Can corporations be forced in similar ways? These progressions are tacitly assumed when the ideal of transparency is posited. But how will governments and companies react to their online exposure? How will suspicious citizens self-organize in order to put pressure on the former?<sup>65</sup> Actually: what kind of ‘public’ does this whole schema presuppose? And does this transparency affect the affairs of companies and big business only, or does it imply that *we* also need to become transparent *for* the government and 2.0.coms through ‘participation’ and ‘interaction’? How sound is WL’s analysis of the workings of the current ‘situation’, and how does this affect its suggested strategies and solutions. Could it be that the ideal of ‘transparency’ ultimately rests on some ill-conceived or old-fashioned presuppositions about the workings of power and ideology in the contemporary world? These are questions that come to mind following the glorious entrance of Wikileaks (WL) on the ‘World Stage.’

To answer these questions, we should investigate the actual strategies and aims of WL as articulated in blog-posts by Julian Assange himself. Most people seem to think that their desired goal (which is increasingly Assange’s) is merely to force government to become transparent: governments and multinationals can continue as they do, except if what they do is incompatible with ‘publicity.’ If all of this were true, it has become utterly clear that the recent leaks contributed only to more paranoid security measures on the side of government and big business. It seems that WL has only reinforced their conspiratorial activities, and thus

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<sup>65</sup> In the nineties such a movement developed, only to be swept away by the attacks on the World Trade Center, after which one was “either with us or against us” (Klein, 2010: introduction)

failed to meet its own goals. However, if one examines Assange's post *Conspiracy as Governance*, it becomes clear that the publication of governmental and corporate documents is a *means* to force governments to become heavily guarded strongholds. Forced to seal it off from the outside, the government conspiracy becomes less and less successful in functioning *as a conspiracy*, i.e. as what he calls a 'cognitive device'; it becomes unable to communicate internally, as well as process environmental input in any flexible way, thus becoming unable to function according to its own principle: governing something, somebody. At a certain threshold it will collapse from its own externally imposed weight. This will force a stronger 'second-order' transparency (different from the mere visibility and availability of diplomatic documents). It forces governments to transform - in a fundamental way - their mode of governance, toward non-conspiratorial forms (perhaps abandoning hierarchical 'representation' as such).

The current increase in protective measures is in that sense all 'according to plan.' The question then is not whether governments are *transparent enough*, but in how far 'publicity' actually forces governments to become the dysfunctional and self-destructive machines, as is predicted in *Conspiracy and Governance*. The public must self-organize into a swarm of hackers raiding the Global Servers of Power until the latter melts down, a *tsunami* of information.

But another scenario is conceivable: what if governments would opt for a different strategy altogether - a strategy of absorption and integration - one that focuses on procuring the aforementioned 'shallow' transparency, thereby circumventing the more fundamental transparency: throw everything out in to the open, create sites of citizen participation and negotiation, but in so doing obtain yet another hold on the populace by recording their political empathy. The publics' input combined with statistics and planning would also constitute the wet-dream of a planetary social engineering. This would require no *fundamental* transformations in modes of governance and corporate enterprise, and would even create new sites of control, i.e. what some call a 'participatory panopticon.' Part of this in-decidability derives from the question as to how 'the public' and the psychology of its parts are actually constituted, and how their relation to each other and to national or global entities is premediated and premeditated through ICT. The paranoid *rationale* of conspiracy culture hints at the 'action-model' of the average Net community.

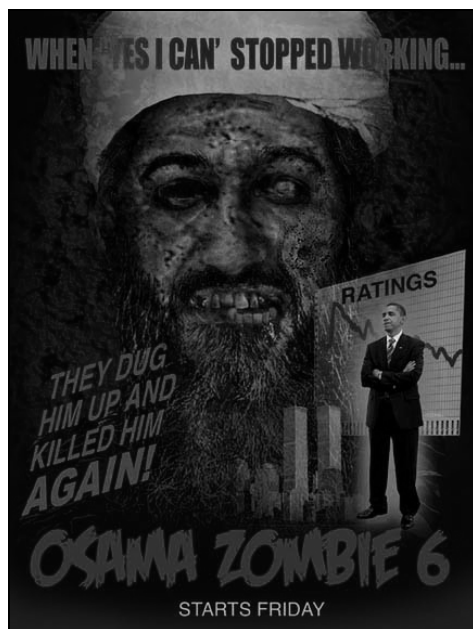
## What public? Cynicism versus kynicism

We seem to already *know* very well that the U.S. is involved in dirty wars, justified by made-up arguments and the spreading of fear amongst its citizens. We already *know* that secret services operate secretly across national borders. We know companies sell over-priced gadgets produced in dehumanizing sweatshops on the other side of the world. Still we live on, uncertain and unable to co-ordinate our position and our practical relation to this 'knowledge.' Hence the

problem of ‘cynicism’ occurs. According to Sloterdijk, Marx’s famous statement about the false consciousness of his time: “*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es,*” must be adjusted for contemporary (Western) consciousness, as: “*they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.*” If this historical claim has even the slightest validity, it weakens the idea of transparency as an emancipatory force, which is at the center of the WL ‘ideology’.<sup>66</sup>

Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it. (Zizek: 1989)

Unmasking ideologies does not necessarily mean a decrease of their practical effectiveness *in reality*. In some cases, transparency will actually strengthen it, in that, through its make-up it can pre-shape the conditions of its reception. But WL no longer operates within the tradition of *Ideologiekritik*: a hermeneutic activity, slowly separating the appearances from the essences, from the super-structure to the base. Instead it operates through pure visibility and availability – the absence of hermeneutic or editorial bias is even made into a principle (Domscheit-Berg, 2011). Because of this, the danger exists that the critique of governance remains stuck in attacking their lack of openness - whilst taking pleasure in ‘leakage’ - instead of focusing on the problematic *nature* of the modes of governance apparently *in need of* cover-ups. This deepening of the WL project is attempted in *Conspiracy as Governance*.



*Mock movie poster commenting on the killing of O(b)(s)ama*

<sup>66</sup> Although it focuses more on the internal functioning of the state conspiracies instead of a critical praxis of a ‘critical public’ the latter is obviously presupposed.

In so far as WL is confronted with a cynical public, it has also re-awakened the energies of what Sloterdijk calls 'kynicism,' typical of hacker as well as conspiracy culture (Sloterdijk: 1987):

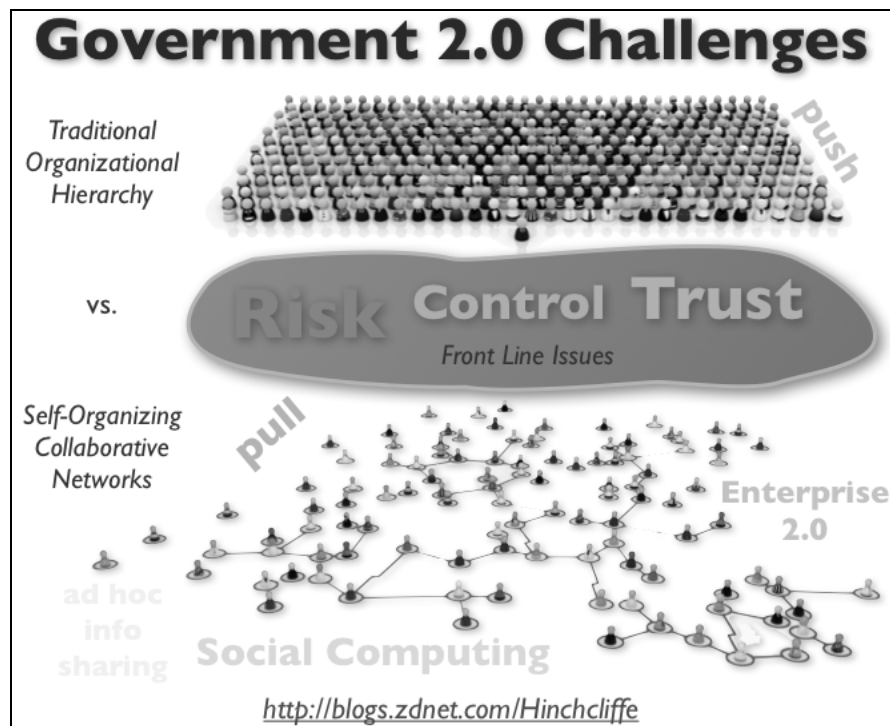
Kynicism represents the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm: the classical kynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology — its solemn, grave tonality — with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing behind the sublime noblesse of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. (Zizek: 1989)

In that sense, one finds the true *cynicism* on the side of that ruling class conspiracy: a form of supreme dishonesty, fully aware of the 'ludic' character of politics and business, but 'doing it anyway' and accustomed to an 'ontology of the enemy' (Galison, 1994).<sup>67</sup> A heightened awareness of this kind of cynicism on the part of companies and governments, has once again surfaced through the WL publications (as well as the Financial Crisis of 2008). Let's hope it may awaken anew a form of 'engaged kynicism,' with regard to governments as well as WL itself, as it is being appeased through projects like 'Open Government' and the like. In how far this integration of WL into 'Bread & Games' strategies of companies and governments is due to WL's commitment to a myth of transparency, is something I tried to hint at in this appendix.<sup>68</sup> That indeed Assange is committed to this philosophical tradition that conceptualizes 'knowledge' as transparency and certainty, and attributes to this knowledge revolutionary and emancipatory powers, becomes clear when he quotes Solzhenitsyn, who has once said that "one word of truth outweighs the whole world." This seemingly naive belief in the power of truth seems strange for a man who thinks of governments as cognitive devices, or simply: computer networks, with as its opponents 'hacker insurgents.' Perhaps indeed the WL strategy isn't so much about the quality or 'propositional content' of the leaked documents itself, but more a means to arrive at a (quantitative) 'DDos' effect, delaying and distorting government response times, instead of naïvely believing that if 'we' only knew 'the truth' about government's proceedings, all would be fine. This is however how must mainstream media have interpreted the recent Leaks.

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<sup>67</sup> There is even a story about Wallstreet stock brokers reading *Das Kapital*, obviously a supreme form of irony, or for some: blasphemy.

<sup>68</sup> More often than not, these forms of interactivity and openness are a complete farce. Take for example this press statement from the CIA: "*The improved CIA.gov homepage also includes a new "CIA Interactive" section that highlights some of our most popular, fun, and educational interactive content. Visitors who regularly use this content will find it much more accessible. In addition, the CIA added new photos on the homepage, broadening the public's glimpse into the Agency.*"



Governments are 'catching up.'



A Transparent government?

### ***Case-study: Obama's birth certificate***

In May 2011, Obama released his birth certificate, hoping to finally put to rest the wild conspiracies about his supposed non-American place of birth, stories that had been circulating on the Web since his election in 2008. Immediately after releasing the certificate however, videos surfaced on YouTube questioning the authenticity of the document. How? By downloading the PDF from the White House website and deconstructing it in Photoshop, searching for hidden layers, zooming in and out, and so forth. What this shows is that *more information, more transparency* does not necessarily leads to a restoration of common sense, to a calming down of the civil sentiment and of their paranoid impulses; it worsens it, because it has been thrown a new bone to feed on. Before the release, the conspiracy minded had almost nothing but vague accusations. Now, they have a document that they can read, touch, dissect, distribute and interpret. In this case, *more* leaked information revealing the governments 'plots' only triggers a new wave of conspiracy theories on the side of the 'little man' and more spastic protective measures on the side of the state, instead of producing the transparent public sphere based on increasing communicational rationality dreamed of by the Habermasians, social-democrats and CNN anchors all over the world.<sup>69</sup> The latter still seem to believe in the old Platonic credo that Knowledge = Good – the more you know and share, the stronger the basis for democracy, the more rational society becomes, making sure that we all 'get along.' Ironically, conspiracy culture represents the most extreme continuation of this tradition, both in aim and method. However, the media landscape was never about some worn out notion like 'truth' or 'knowledge' (and maybe we should be glad that it is not!). It was and still is all about circulation, multiplication, seduction – no moral outrage will ever touch it, and those who still do are betting on the wrong horse. But the flag-holders of free culture – ranging from the Michael Mann's of this world to bearded Portugese anarchists – all demand that everything becomes 'Open,' so that the light of democracy and the voice of everyone can shine on all and everything – Information is good no matter what – an ideology that may be discovered to be equally unable to generate a perspective from which to understand the paradoxical situation of Obama releasing his birth certificate.

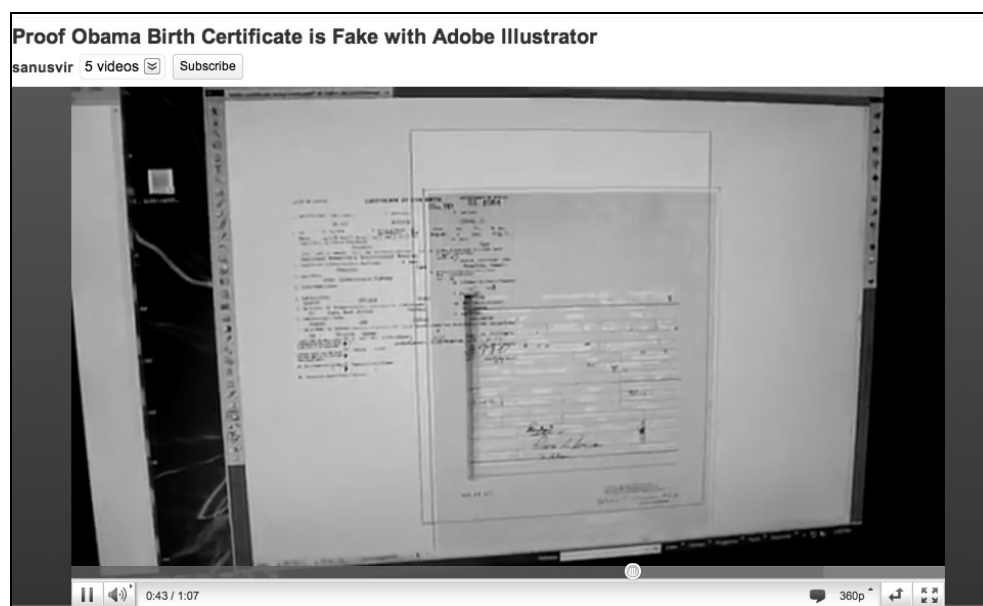
Anthony Giddens identified trust as one of the main aspects constitutive of modernity: trust in the operations of institutions whose operations we can neither directly control nor follow. Supposedly, transparency is the strategy through which this trust can be attained. But when a large percentage of Americans, Europeans and the like no longer take president Obama's word for it, when he brings the news that Osama Bin Laden has been killed and subsequently frantically demands evidence (photos or videos); and all over Europe populist parties that feed on bottom-up suspicions about the role and function of governments, gain

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<sup>69</sup> However, as the case of Osama Bin Laden's death has proven, withholding evidence does not help much either.



momentum, *as part of parliamentary politics*, it becomes clear that a reciprocal *mistrust* is perhaps a more adequate term to describe the tension typical of Modernity (Negri & Hardt, 2001). On the one hand, the state cynically mistrusts a potentially self-organizing multitude and legitimates its monopoly on violence and control by continuously either playing the 'chaos' or 'terrorism' card until everyone tacitly assumes that state control is as necessary as say gravity.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand is a public either completely disinterested and skeptical, unable to align their knowledge with meaningful forms of praxis, desperate for a confirmation of their suspicions, or even outright hostile to the New World Order and its institutions.



Screenshot taken from <http://bit.ly/mvXh7A>

On the one hand, the proliferation of conspiracies signifies the failure of the ideal of the Internet as space for the development of a communicative rationality, of the promises of the global village, etcetera. On the other hand, conspiracy theorists, however unlikely or unsatisfactory their attempts may seem, at least still represent a kynic power of the associative imagination fitting 'the circumstances,' where indeed everything seems to lead to another, if one takes the effort to track them down, and dare to arrive at conclusions. For conspiracy theorists at least, the stakes are still relatively high: they put themselves on the line to generate perspectives other than the official Reuters version. We could be less sure about our own faculty of distinction, as to what is actual and what is merely possible or probable: in media environments, the two tend to self-conflate, swarming into an amorphous carpet bombing of messages and perspectives. Businessmen also have

<sup>70</sup> Both 'cards' are currently again very hip among Middle-Eastern dictators, where the legitimacy of the state is currently less obvious.

very 'developed' associative imaginations - because they seem to believe that the whole world is their playing ground. They connect Icelandic bank accounts to construction sites in Greece, the rent of which is channeled to Chinese Venture Capitalists who invest in Ethiopian iron mines, and who you subsequently bump into on your way to the cafeteria of Madurodam (which must be one of their all time favorite venues):

The cyberelite is now a transcendent entity that can only be imagined. Whether they have integrated programmed motives is unknown. Perhaps so, or perhaps their predatory actions fragment their solidarity, leaving shared electronic pathways and stores of information as the only basis of unity. The paranoia of imagination is the foundation for a thousand conspiracy theories—all of which are true. Roll the dice. (Critical Art Ensemble, 2009)

Why should we then hold our horses at the moment an association becomes too speculative, reaches too far, starts a life of its own? Financial *speculation, association* of derivatives - some serious play by the Mongols of our 'global village.'

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