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SUCK ON THIS, PLANET OF NOISE!

Arguably, the last thing a critical theory of culture ought to have anything to do with is electronic art. It is not popular. It is not cheap. It is not influential. No matter how much well-meaning people talk about how new technologies can empower people, it is still mostly white Americans who have their finger on the trigger. Yet there is something critically useful about electronic art, even if it does not always recognise this itself. Electronic artists negotiate between the dead hand of traditional, institutionalised aesthetic discourses and the organic, emergent forms of social communication.

Electronic art is an experimental laboratory, not so much for new technologies as for new social relations of communication. This is why electronic art matters to critical theories of culture, be they the Frankfurt school or, in my case, the Birmingham school of cultural studies.

Moreover, a confrontation with electronic art might have some salutary effects on criticism, which sometimes lapses in spite of itself into moral and conservative homilies. When confronted by technologies – the tools of rapid change – criticism gives in to Burkean urges to conserve 'cultural difference' from what it imagines to be the entirely negative and homogenising effects of change. This moral reaction forecloses debate on the necessity and desirability of change. Some dynamics in culture cannot be halted. Some may be positively beneficial. A dialogue with experimental electronic media may help keep these questions open for a criticism which all too often forgets its own history – and forgets how to think historically. This Burkean criticism imagines that it is *this* technology, *this* epoch of change that ushers in 'the fall' from grace, from an organic and unified culture. Everything from the newspaper and the illustrated magazine to cinema and television, and now Nintendo and CNN are imagined to be the last straw that hurls us out of Eden. As Simon Penny notes, 'this all creeps up on us while we're asleep anyway: who worries about our dependence on the global computerised telephone network, or that because of pocket calculators nobody can do mental arithmetic any more?' (Penny 1988).

While uncritical faith in the liberatory potential of technology may in the main be the principle ideology to combat, uncritical fear of it is also debilitating. The convergence of the critical tradition with new technology seems to me to be a dialectic with potential to raise both to a new level of cultural and political salience.

Given a will to think historically about cultural change and to use electronic art as a foil, two problems arise in thinking about the emergent, global forms of culture. One is the problem of access to knowledge about new techniques. The other is the problem of generalising from specific experiences. In other words, we confront a limit to what we know of time and of space. We know least about what is nearest in time – the emergent present, and what is most distant in space – the forms of culture of our antipodean others. What compounds the issue is that the thing we want to critically examine – new media – is precisely what appears to overcome these problems for us. This is a problem which calls, in short, for art and for theory; for intuitive visualisation and speculative conceptualisation.

No matter how global and how abstract the analysis wants to be, it can never extract itself from its quite specific cultural origins. Hence

this writing takes the form of an essay and asks the essay's classic question: 'What do I know?'. I want to begin with my own experience of this planet of noise we now live on. The result is a very abstract essay, but also a very self-consciously partial one, tied to quite particular experiences. Here, want to I rephrase Montaigne's self questioning from 'What do I know?' to the more suitably antipodean: 'From where am I interpolated?' (de Certeau 1986).

To the vector the spoils

For a long time Australian culture has manifested a desperate attempt to fix a few things in consciousness between two great abstract terrains of movement. The first is the sea, which, as Hegel says, 'gives us the idea of the indefinite, the unlimited, and infinite: and in feeling his own infinite in that Infinite, man is stimulated and emboldened to stretch beyond the limited: the sea invites man to conquest and to piratical plunder, but also to honest gain and to commerce' (Hegel 1991, 90). Thus, ambivalently, did this first regime of the vector traverse the globe.

The cultures that invaded Australia did so using a naval technology. This technology turned the space of nautical dangers into an abstract space of movement, migration, trade and above all, of strategy. This history was one of the transformation of the space of the oceans into a universal space of movement. The project of transforming the antipodes through invasion and settlement presupposes a world of material flows. The 'conquest' of nature and the creation of the *second nature* of built environments presupposes this abstract space of flows. From the first fleet to the fast clippers, its development is central to the project of *modernity*.

Yet overlayed on this second nature of material flows there is now another abstract space which produces another feeling of the unlimited – the terrain of the media vector. The passage from modernity to postmodernity seems to me to involve the passage from one form of abstraction to another – from the second nature of abstract social spaces created by sea and rail transport to the abstract communicational spaces created by the telegraph, telephone, television and telecommunications. These are the techniques of telaesthesia, of perception at a distance. Since the telegraph, the time of communications has run at a faster speed to the time of transport, and indeed these two synonymous terms begin to diverge in meaning as they diverge as terrains of abstraction (Carey 1989).

Put somewhat more theoretically, second nature emerges out of the struggle to wrest freedom from necessity. It is an overcoming of the tyranny of nature, achieved through the social organisation of labour. As we know only too well, the process of creating second nature creates new tyrannies as well. Freedom from nature becomes the elimination of nature. The social organisation of second nature is, among other things, a class relation. The division of labour makes every function – including art – partial and fetishised (Taylor 1991, 535ff).

An artist who I think quite graphically maps most of the predicament of second nature is Stelarc, who makes of the surfaces of his body a theatre of second nature. In his performances, his skin becomes the point of interface for relations to the technical. He appears strapped and wired to any and every device. Some are devices he controls through the movement of his muscles. Some are devices which control him, triggering involuntary parabolas and disconcerting jerks. Here is the body exactly as second nature made it and maintains it: in a state of permanent dependence and symbiosis with what video artist Peter Callas calls technology as territory.

The decline of modernity is in many respects a loss of faith in second nature. The division of labour brings with it fragmentation, anomie; the compulsions of discipline and the anarchy of the market. The redemptive vision of second nature withered in both its Marxist and bourgeois forms. Yet this does not stop the projection of the fantasy of redemption onto third nature. In both the cool and the nerdy techno literature, in both *Mondo 2000* and *PC Monthly*, redemption is always around the corner in virtual reality, hypertext, cyberspace. Although the terrain is different, the projection of a vectoral field of total communication extends and completes the projection of a vectoral field of extraction and production. With an extra 10 megabytes I can finally RAM down the doors of data heaven! Such is the new fantasy of wresting

freedom from necessity – for those at least who are at the very heart of the relations of power that constitute third nature.

From second nature to third nature

When we can go to the antipodes and back in an instant, what will become of us? Perhaps, among other things, we start making and appreciating art like the Photoshop collages of Robyn Stacey. Stacey's work keys into this expanded terrain that the media vector creates. She has grasped and exploited the radically new protocols of third nature as a space of perception and relation. A space which is not void of rules and conventions of historicity, appropriateness, genre and scale, but a space where such rules are in a constant state of evolution. Unanchored from the space of places and cast into the space of flows, images become polyvalent, revealing a visual poetics which the surrealists could only imagine but which the vector has now rendered as a philosophy made concrete. While art can map and display an image of this new space of vectoral relations, it cannot theorise it. Both art and theory need to look into the experience of everyday life – that elusive reservoir of tactics and ethics – for the practical foundations of a critique of this new terrain, our 'third nature'.

The development of third nature overlaps with the development of second nature – hence the difficulties of periodising the modern and postmodern. The salient point for me is the development of the telegraph. What is distinctive about the telegraph is that it begins a regime of communication where information can travel faster than people or things. When information can move faster and more freely than people or things, its relation to those other movements and to space itself changes. No longer a space of places, we move on to a space of flows.

If there is a qualitative change in the social relations of culture which deserves the name of postmodern, perhaps this is it. Or perhaps we could call this state of affairs third nature. Second nature, which appears to us as the geography of cities and roads and harbours and wool stores is progressively overlayed with a third nature of information flows, creating an information landscape which almost entirely covers the old territories. While this process has been going on since the telegraph, it reaches critical mass in the late 1970s. 'Postmodern' is a catalogue of its symptoms. 'Cyberspace' is a description of its subjective effects. Both postmodernism in theory and cyberspace in literature are explorations of the landscape of third nature.

We can see now, very clearly, what the terminal state of third nature would be. Deleuze and Guattari ask provocatively and more than once: 'Perhaps we have not become abstract enough?' (1984, 321). What would it mean to become more abstract, ever more abstracted from the boundedness of territory and subjectivity? One can imagine a delirious future, beyond cyberspace. Not the future of Marx's communism: from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs. Rather it is the future of the rhizome made concrete; where every trajectory is potentially connected to every other trajectory, and there all trajectories are equal and equally rootless; where we no longer have origins, we have terminals.

This fantasy appears in different guises: among the Californian techno-freaks, the postmodern wing of the green movement, in the corporate improvisations of Rupert Murdoch and among the high frontier hegemonists in the Pentagon (Shawcross 1992; de Landa 1991). The struggle over the relations of communication and the making of third nature are every bit as intense as the struggles over the relations of production and the shaping of third nature – but many of the old rules no longer apply.

Autonomy versus antipodality

The perception of postmodernism, cyberspace, third nature – call it what you will – differs from place to place, and it is high time to start breaking down these rather ethnocentric concepts. One way to do so is to try to discover the relations of antipodality lurking within them. Antipodality is the feeling of being neither here nor there. It is an experience of identity in relation to the other in which the relation always appears more strongly to consciousness than either the identity it founds or the other it projects.

Experiencing antipodality is always very unsettling, sometimes a little schizophrenic. There is nothing uniquely Australian about it, although it is a very common anxiety in Australian culture (Gibson 1992). This is a

place which is always in a relation to an elsewhere, which is always defined by its relation to a powerful other. First the British came and colonised. Then the Americans came and coca-colonised. We are no-one, whoever we are, always oscillating in antipodality with elsewheres.

I think that these days the anxiety of antipodality is growing ever more common. The globalisation of trade flows and cultural flows made possible by information technology re-opens the old wounds of identity, breaking the skin at unexpected places. The volume and velocity of cultural product in circulation on the planet of noise keeps rising. Popular music, cinema and television, the raw materials of popular culture, are increasingly sold into global markets in accordance with transnational financing and marketing plans. Suddenly cultural identity looks like it is in flux. The relations and the flows are more clearly in view than the sources or destinations. Cultural differences are no longer so tied to the experience of the particularities of place. These 'vertical' differences, of locality, ethnicity, nation are doubled by 'horizontal' differences, determined not by being rooted in a particular place but by being plugged into a particular circuit. We vainly try to preserve forms of difference that are rapidly reorganising themselves along another axis (Robertson 1992).

This new experience of difference is an experience of an active trajectory between places, identities, formations, rather than a drawing of borders, be they of the self or of place. This is antipodality – the cultural difference created by the vector. The acceleration of the vectors of transnational communication will make the antipodean experience more common. With CNN beaming into every part of the globe that can afford it, many people are experiencing 'antipodality', the feeling of being caught in a network of cultural trajectories beyond their control.

In the overdeveloped world, both the culture of everyday life and the culture of scholarly thinking about the present seem to me to betray traces of unease if not downright paranoia about antipodality. Yet it is undoubtably the emergent axis of technocultural struggle. At present, antipodality exists in the politics of third nature in two forms. On the one hand, it leads to attempts to shore up identity against the flux. Black nationalism and born-again Christianity seem to me to have elements of this reactive return to an imagined core of immutable identity and community. On the other hand, the kind of coalition building involved in queer politics or the politics of affinity Haraway (1991) speaks about in contemporary feminism, seems to me to treat antipodality more as a fact of life than as a threat to identity.

Now, the point about this is that any attempt to create communities of resistance of necessity excludes something or someone. Community only exists dialectically, as a struggle against something other, be it nature, other communities or the vector. While struggles still of course take place in relation to nature and second nature, they now have an added dimension: the struggle, not for natural space, not for social space but for information space. Every community 'de-informates' certain spaces within itself and creates certain barriers to the flow of information from without. Every community, by definition, requires some degree of 'correctness' from would-be members. Hence I want to signal a certain moral ambiguity about the concept of community and identity. They are necessary, perhaps, but as intellectuals we need to keep a critical distance.

The work of VNS Matrix plays on antipodality to the extent that this group of women artists continually draw a connecting line between phallocentric and technological culture. They play off, play on and play up to the antipodal position women are supposed to occupy in relation to the male techne. 'We are the virus of the new world disorder' they casually announce (VNS Manifesto 1992, 66).

VNS are not afraid to take on board the threat to traditional notions of female identity posed by the relentless development of the masculinist technology of second nature and the phallocentric image repertoire of third nature. Their project, as in the 1992 work *All New Gen*, is to create new and open *relations* of subjectivity. There is a sense of closure in the process of creating these works: VNS Matrix is an all-women collective. That closure makes possible a radical openness to

the flow. VNS take the most incorrigibly gendered imagery of Nintendo and imagine it otherwise: as a feminised space.

The virtues of moral ambivalence

For every set of oppositions within a given culture, there is always a trajectory along which one can bypass the fixed speaking positions that identities prescribe. One must try not to occupy either the position of domination in an antipodal relation, nor reactively take up the minor position. As 'petit-bourgeois' intellectuals, we are always shuttling in between (Morris 1988). I'm reminded here of the use video artist Peter Callas has made of the images from a Japanese card game which is like the western children's game of scissors-paper-stone. Unlike conventional cards but like the children's game, each of the three terms is superior to one of the other terms and inferior to the other. There is no fixed hierarchy, and while every relation involves a difference, each is contingent on which cards turn up. That seems to me to be a diagram of antipodality.

When one knows what it's like to always be both the major and the minor pole of these ambivalent relationships of flow – to be scissors one minute relative to paper but stone the next – then one can begin to think about the problem of cultural diversity and the information vector with some subtlety. This moral ambivalence to antipodality is, I think, very common in Australia, and something to be capitalised on methodologically rather than deplored or ignored. In relation to American culture and economic power, Australia is always on the receiving end of antipodality. Very briefly: as the tyranny of distance gives way to the vector, new defensive mechanisms have been required at the level of the nation. On the terrain of cultural flows, a twofold process has occurred. The integration of the space of the continent into one media market has only taken place quite recently, via satellite technology. At one and the same time broadcasters have integrated the national broadcasting space and hooked it up to the global satellite feeds (O'Regan 1988).

Until recently, this tendency towards antipodality was countered by local content rules in television broadcasting. As with local content rules in radio, these were successful in promoting the production of high quality, popular media products, which in turn were successfully marketed overseas. Australian TV programming now has a global audience, and Australia is a successful supplier of recorded music to the world market. In all, these policies balanced some degree of autonomy with a cosmopolitan media flow. The combined effect of lunatic 'free market' policies and pressure from American program producers to have services, including cultural ones, included under GATT agreements are steadily leading to an erosion of autonomous Australian cultural intervention into the global flow (Cunningham 1992).

On the other hand, there is very little room for moralising or playing the 'victim' in mainstream Australian culture. 'We' may be no-one, but 'we' were also colonisers, enslavers. The imposition of second nature on this continent, as on continental America, was at the expense of indigenous people. The imposition of third nature, via satellite distributed TV, has only just begun (Michaels 1987).

Becoming abstract

It has taken a long time for white Australians to wake up to the extraordinary cultural forms Aboriginal people have relied upon to survive the 200 years since invasion. Putting side by side the mechanisms of cultural autonomy deployed by traditional Aboriginal Australians confronted by white Australians, and white Australians confronted with global cultural flows illustrates that the problem of sustaining autonomy and cultural diversity on the cultural landscape of third nature is a problem which involves diverse solutions and quite a number of different scales, from that of the individual and community to that of the nation. In thinking about new media tools and the new vectoral trajectories they may open up, we could do worse than look at historical examples of particular strategies of survival. We need to think tactically about every form of communication, new and old. Like rocks, paper and scissors, media are never simply good or evil; they are always contingent.

The growth of an abstract space of third nature, covering the whole globe, is in no sense an unambiguously good thing. The enlightenment mythology of the unalloyed good of knowledge and information can mask a very damaging antipodality, in which

powerful centres create and control vectors of information. Anglo-Celtic Australians know only too well what it is like to live in the shadow of the powerful flow of the American media. Unlike Europeans, we have neither a strong tradition nor an autonomous language with which to maintain a communion of identity. The historical trajectory of the vector puts white Australia in an ironically similar predicament to Aboriginal communities, which have great cultural resources for resistance but have been systematically denied the material resources for cultural survival. These situations are however quite different, and have to be approached tactically in their particularities.

At this point we can return to Deleuze's question: 'what if we have not become abstract enough?'. Out of the course of this analysis, some answers begin to suggest themselves. Whether we like it or not, cultural differences cannot be preserved from the impact of media vectors. New forms of difference are emerging out of the struggle with the vector, others succumb and become extinct. The abstraction of social relations from identity and place is not something that technologies achieve of their own accord. It results from the dialectic between communities and the technical regime of the media vector. Innovative forms of autonomous communication give the planet of noise, so to speak, something to suck on. The dialectic of autonomy and antipodality structures an emerging politics of relationality and flow rather than of identity and locality. Our communicational interventions (for that is what both art and criticism are) have to be rethought for this world of third nature we have made, which is very rapidly remaking us.

New technology cannot be used to *preserve* cultural differences. Traditional culture reified as museum interactives – even if they are virtual reality – does not constitute preservation so much as mummification. New technology can be used to create new differences and new forms of autonomy and community, but it cannot be used to 'preserve' old differences in any meaningful sense. Traditional forms of cultural difference are not independent of the techniques used to maintain them. The work of Eric Michaels and Francis Jupurrurla in the Warlpiri Aboriginal community is interesting precisely because Michaels thought video could be used to *create* a viable community which would grow organically out of traditional information practices (Michaels 1987) – even though, as Tim Rowse points out, Warlpiri social organisation does not traditionally take the form of anything remotely like 'community' at all (Rowse 1990).

This was not preservation, it was a creative process. It was not ethnography, it was art. Naturally, it was a far more morally ambivalent project than simply preserving a form of communication assumed to have always been there. Michaels thought that only by becoming abstract – by incorporating the information managing relations of third nature – could the constraints on knowledge so vital to the oral information economy of the Warlpiri be developed and sustained. Such are the order of problems for a critical *practice* of electronic media art.

The ends of art

This is, of course, a rather sweeping and world-historical way of framing criticism. I see no reason to relinquish the point of view of the totality to conservative interpreters of Hegel and Kojève such as Francis Fukuyama (1992). While we may be more inclined to agree with Deleuze that the 'only universal history is the history of contingency' (Deleuze & Guattari 1984, 224), there is something heuristically useful and perhaps even tactically necessary in framing the critical or creative act in such a way that it appears as an instant within a much wider and intelligible process. If anything, such a perspective makes us more humble about the possibilities of art and criticism, yet none the less cognisant of the significance of what is at stake. The point of this particular rewriting of the trajectory of cultural history is to insist that there is considerably more to struggle for and to struggle against than Fukuyama's rather smug picture of the completion of liberal democracy as the completion of universal history. When viewed from the antipodes rather than from the centre, things appear otherwise. Both art and criticism can make a claim to imagine a particular vision of the totality. This seems to me entirely preferable to the folly, which begins with Hegel, of imagining a total vision which encompasses all particulars. As Adorno warns, 'the whole is the false'

(Adorno 1973, 50). Our imaginings of what is at stake in the transformation of the space of the globe by third nature are still only that: imaginings.

Nevertheless, electronic art is a practice which cannot help but raise issues of the totality, for it works with the tools that are themselves transforming the totality of social relations into the domain of third nature. Electronic artists cannot help but use the material of transformation itself, although they do not always choose to work critically on the issues involved in this transformation itself. The artists mentioned in this essay – Peter Callas, Robyn Stacey, Stelarc, VNS Matrix, Eric Michaels and Francis Jupurrurla – do, in my opinion. They have made use of the interzone of antipodal relations, of their status as 'no-one' marooned between the channels of third nature, to produce critical work in Australia but of a wider provenance.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Cultural Studies: Pluralism and Theory, University of Melbourne, 11-13 December 1992.

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