

ORGANIZED INNOCENCE AND WAR IN THE NEW EUROPE:

ON ELECTRONIC SOLITUDE AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Adilkno's analysis of late
20th century European Media Culture

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Nietzsche would be laughing about Europe. He wouldn't be complaining about the impending loss of national identity or the power of the Brussels bureaucracy. He would look down disdainfully at the bumbling, pompous Euro-citizens who, confused and without Witz or Idea, are trying to sidestep their own history. Europeans have the greatest difficulty putting into words the current dialectic of construction and demolition which manifests itself around them. The last intellectuals are still doing their best to characterize the post-1989 juncture, but they are not succeeding. The amalgam of the war in former Yugoslavia, the strange new media, capitalism without an enemy, the Tigers in Asia, grassroots neo-liberalism, the Shell's oil platform The Brent Spar and French nuclear tests, foreigners and refugees, the devastation of Chechnya — it's all impossible to grasp anymore. One group believes it's arrived in the 21st century, as others are catapulted back a couple of centuries. What one sees as progress spells sheer destruction for another. We observe developments with worry, but can no longer associate them with conclusions. But that's no longer necessary, for what occupies Europeans, most of all is the development of one's own lifestyle. And no one is laughing at the little worries of the middle classes.

In my talk at ISEA 94 I introduced the work of "Adilkno," the Dutch group I belong to. Adilkno, the Foundation for the Advancement of Illegal Knowledge, is an association of non-academic theorists who bumped into each other in the early eighties, in what were then the autonomist movements. In 1994 a first English translation appeared: *Cracking the Movement* (Autonome Media, New York 1994) — a book about the Amsterdam squatters' movement and their dealings with the media. Although Adilkno has been writing about the media since 1984, this theme has become increasingly important since 1989. The result is the book whose working title is *The Media Archive*. After five years of devoting ourselves with great pleasure and abandon to speculative media theory and potential media figures such as the data dandy, lately we act as if the media have lost their dynamism. To begin with, the introductory phase, "the short summer of the media", now lies behind us. The commercialization of the new

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media brings with it a relapse into old, familiar patterns. The rapid expansion of the info-universe leads to an implosion of the power of imagination. The media are once again "the others."

While hordes of young business people lap up the "digital revolution" and chase visions of a utopian world full of communication, the cultural situation in fact looks very different. Apart from the aggressive information elite (Arthur Kroker's "virtual class"), the intellectual climate has taken on a defensive character. People are preparing for "Cold War II," (or Jeltzin's "Cold Peace") and secretly looking forward to a new period of stability. They are prepared to accept its accompanying stagnation as part of the bargain. In retrospect, 1989 turns out not to have been a moment of liberation. For Westerners, Glasnost ultimately became synonymous with the deadly radioactive cloud of Chernobyl, solely out to destroy the health of Western Europeans. At the fall of the Berlin Wall, emotions were conspicuously scarce. Skepticism and disbelief prevailed, and the Eastern neighbors met with a cool reception. Romanians' certainty in early 1990 that everything would stay the same could not be refuted, and is now generally accepted, even in the West. The old officers returned to the political stage as neo-communists, nationalists or Thatcherites. Their transformation caused decreased income, the breakdown of social services, unemployment, radical privatization to the point of simple robbery, war, genocide and hatred. What is going on in the East in an extreme form (and at an increased speed) is happening on a similar scale in Western Europe too. But it is not resulting in resistance or protest. An anti-war movement, as in the Vietnam era, a solidarity movement like the one for Nicaragua, or a peace movement like the one against nuclear weapons in the early eighties, once again seem light-years removed from us, thus unimaginable. In a strictly medial sense, Western citizens remain observers, letting in information from the Wild East according to a voracious ecological media appetite, so as not to be further numbed. Even the viewers see themselves as victims—if not of events, of information, which has been set before them every day for years. Everyone is in the race for the most-favored-victim status.

In Adilkno's recent writings, the concept of media is no longer used as a dumpster where all fantasies are deposited and retrieved. We now see media more as a part of broader cultural phenomena, like tourism, shopping, sport, commerce and sex. For Europeans the abstract media sphere is not merely a consumable product. Though the ideology of the market is raging, the media remain part of a metaphysical terrain, where Western 'culture' is thought to be located. However, in contrast to the (still?) open concept of 'media', which (if we follow Kittler) has mainly a technical connotation, the concept of "culture" plays a crucial role in the dominant ideology of the West, which is gaining in importance, and in which rightist-elitist notions are mainstreamed into a collision of tele-evangelism and tele-communion. The West German pop theorist Mark Terkessidis,

formerly of the monthly SPEX, shows in his book *Kulturkampf* (Cultural Struggles, Cologne 1995) that the oft-cited "swing to the right" is playing out mainly in the sphere of "culture." According to media-makers and intellectuals, social conflicts are determined no longer economically or ideologically, but culturally. As in American conservative Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993), the West must defend itself as a "minority." The supposed "cultural hegemony" of the left-liberal '68 generation in the media, in schools and in universities must be broken, especially in the area of (national) culture. There is a harkening back, says Terkessidis, to the late 18th century German romantic Herder, who defined culture in defensive terms, as an ethnic identity which only really fulfills itself in the exclusion of others. As blacks rediscover their own culture, Europeans must rediscover their "Eurocentrism." "The ideology of culture," with its "blend of symbolization, lifestyle and ethnicity, offers the perfect paradigm for exclusion." And that is what "purified ethnocentrism" seeks: protection from Third World refugees, immigrants, Islam, and last but not least, the first full-scale war in Europe since 1945, in which everything revolves around the definition of ethnicity. Terkessides sees it as a mistake to consider culture as an issue of power, as was done in the seventies and eighties. He even suspects a "deal" between the establishment and its erstwhile critics: "If you'll let us govern in peace and stop bringing up the power question, then you can have culture." The result of this transformation of politics into cultural lifestyles was that "cultures" were no longer seen in their social context.

Even "subversion" and "autonomy" ran aground in the early nineties. The strategy of "confusion, ambiguity and spectacle" still works, but political content is no longer discernible in it, as is the case with techno, ambient and jungle. "Independent" thought has ended in "self-satisfaction, stripped of any consequence." Postmodern strategies of difference, heterogeneity and complexity resulted in a "transformation of culture, of which one no longer knows what direction it is taking."

Behind slogans like "Not right, not left, just culture," Terkessides sees a very nearly fascist *weltanschauung* lurking, and reconstructs its intellectual history. He considers it necessary to place contemporary media culture in a "materialistic perspective," so that struggles on the terrain of culture, in music, multimedia, computer networks, and so on, are again placed in a social, political and economic context, without relinquishing culture's autonomy. What is happening is clear: with no successors to Guattari and Foucault, and with Parisian intellectuals getting more conservative c.q. simplistic by the day, there is a retrieval of neo-marxism and its attempts in the seventies to foreground "ideology critique." Since the mid-eighties, we have been seeing a return to precisely the kind of leftist theorizing which the "Parisians" tried to leave behind. Foucault's "non-fascistic practice" is no longer discussed. Derrida's project to save philosophy has run aground in an interminable defense of Heidegger. Virilio is seen as an anti-media, worried deacon, who

has ended up in his own "raging stillness". People find his radical critique of cyberspace and the Net merely excessive. They see the Net as an enrichment and can only imagine what Virilio meant by a "disturbance in the perception of what is reality." And if the Gulf War did not take place, then Jean Baudrillard no longer exists either (After B.'s "No reprieve with Sarajevo", there is "No reprieve with Paris"). Terkessides identifies a "void in which people seem to consent to everything." It is precisely this empty space which Adilkno wishes to investigate. It is tempting to suspect an extreme-right, reactionary body of thought behind this void, in which "culture" has replaced "race." Terkessides dwells at elaborate length on the anti-parliamentarist legal philosopher Carl Schmitt and his influence on the contemporary conservative elite in Germany. Adilkno makes do for the moment without such a constructed, imaginary enemy, such as "new right" thinkers. We concern ourselves at present with the following artifacts: almost-engagement, advanced disinterest, touching vagueness, cold passions, the fun of meaninglessness, advanced confusion, the colors of boredom, the out-of-context, electronic solitude, IKEA as cultural ideal and collective forms of disappointment. We see an ascending ideal of a society without ideas, with a "Net without qualities." Here, "comfort" has become a human right and one delegates as much as possible to professionals in order to be rid of bother. There was amateurism enough in the twentieth century! The split between success and failure has arrived in the social sciences and cultural criticism, as is apparent in the following fragment from Adilkno's ode to the Parisian media theorist Guy Debord.

The Society of the Debacle

After a fascination with Evil in the 1980s, we are now in the midst of an interest in Failure. We no longer read about Seduction, Simulation, Perfection, Glamour and Passion as pure self-expression. Evil had to snuff out all the Good of the 1960s, and it succeeded smashingly (cf. the breakthroughs of 1989). But then something else happened. The triumph of the dialectic, the historical synthesis of market and democracy, did not occur, and not even a new anti-thesis could be found. Good Socialism rightly gave way to the Capitalism of Failure. The system and its slaves underwent a revaluation of all values, and meanwhile nothing has changed. An indefinable situation in which nobody bothers any longer to put into words the World or the own Ego (or anything related to these). Chaos rules, and this does not lend itself to unlawful visualization. Timeless struggle takes place in the form of destructive private enterprise amid rotting cement and bankrupt government structures. The heroic radiance of the declaimed end of history is missing. The society of the spectacle has plunged us unexpectedly into the Society of the Debacle. We can learn from Guy Debord.

A heathen faith in new media, project management, surveillance, flexible scheduling, retraining, improvisation, image, and identity is the tried and true method of introducing new technologies. In the beginning there is amazement that all the strange machines and concepts function. But once they start to

become widespread and really work, attention shifts to the moments at which the technologies fail, and they are written off. Once grounded in the realm of normalcy, any cybertechnology loses its sparkle and has to be routinely usable. Once hard- and software begin to fail, the consumer's rage turns against the Machine and its makers. How lovely to unleash your Rage and throw all the malfunctioning machines out the window into the street en masse! Grunge and generation X have mobilized the authenticity of elementary failure against the lycra sheen of revoked success. The breakthrough of stagnation is the surprising turn history has taken since 1989. As long as the end of progress was being announced, nothing happened. But Fukuyama the liberation philosopher couldn't foresee that bungling would get the upper hand. To be sure, self-organizing principles like chaos, artificial life, fractals, the Internet, complexity, Biosphere II, and turbulence are moving optimistically forward, but they will get stuck in their advertising hype. No consequential cancerous metastasis will be achieved — these things will remain models. Failure, on the contrary, is in principle not a model, nor a strategy. In this respect it distinguishes itself from everything that the 80s provided in the way of ideas. Failure is not a fate: fate approaches from outside, while fiasco comes from within, impossible to program in advance. The inherent disappointment which unfolds is not a bug that can be removed from the program. In the age of overorganization and a social surplus of experience, success-thinking has got bogged down in flop prevention. They tried to redefine failure as an educative moment, but Intel's Pentium chip, Microsoft Windows 5.1, the Philips CD-i, nuclear power, the hasty reunification of Germany, peace in Europe... they were all strong concepts, lacking nothing in persuasive power, and yet they went nowhere.

In order to survive one dons a mental armor. No longer a sexual armor, as described by Klaus Theweleit in "Male Fantasies", but an inconspicuous set of behaviors and precepts bent on avoiding all warm passions; a refined method and technique for dealing with "reality overload." In a recent Adilkno essay we call this "organized innocence": a phenomenon mirroring "organized crime," and one which just as invisibly embodies modern-day Evil.

Organized Innocence

With the emergence of the privileged middle class, innocent existence came within everyone's reach. The middle was no longer a class which strove for an historic goal, such as revolution or fascism; it had arrived in a cold period, henceforth to be without passions. While outside it stormed and change followed change with alarming speed, one put one's own life in "park." Without regard to history, fashion, politics, sex and the media, time could take its course. The innocent caused no problems, indeed they hated problems. "Just let things take their course." Regular folks considered themselves cogs in a larger whole, and all in all they were unashamed of it. They made sure the trains ran on time and turned homeward in the evening for a hot meal. In place of old barriers like caste, sex and religion,

innocence brought in conversation-killers* like tolerance, openness and harmony. Positivism became a way of life. Positive criticism served the reconstruction of politics and culture. One enjoyed oneself, was dynamically busy and had plenty of work to do. The picture of reality was simple and clear. The innocents did not embody the Good, they simply had no plan, but nor did they lack a sense of values. They never got around to crime either. And so they unintentionally became the object for strategies of Good and Evil. We speak here of a life without drama, urgency, *Entscheidung. There will never be a close race. There need never be a decision. You needn't break away just to be yourself. As the Dutch say: act normal, that's crazy enough. Innocents thrive on the rituals of everyday; these make them happy. A broken washing machine can drive a person crazy: the thing should just work. The complaint against things is that they break down, falter, fall apart, act strange, and cannot be unobtrusively replaced. The promise of undisturbed consumption is that nothing will ever happen again. In this unproblematic existence comfort is so taken for granted that it goes unnoticed. The innocent consciousness is characterized by a narrow, small-scale thinking which calls forth a universe where personal irritations erupt at the least little thing: stoplights, traffic jams, late trains, red tape, bad weather, construction noise, illness, accidents, unexpected guests and events are a repeated assault on the innocent existence. One becomes involved nonetheless in matters which one had not been expecting. This disturbance-hating mentality, which devotes itself to work and career, shuts out all risk and has elevated practicality as its sole criterion. The ideal of a wrinkle-free, spotless life presumes, touchingly, that literally everyone is pursuing it. Innocence is under continuous treatment by the doctor, the therapist, the beauty specialist, the acupuncturist, the garage manager. Innocence likes to be tinkered with. It sees it as a duty to develop itself, and restrain itself if need be. One takes a course, attends a lecture, visits the theatre, concert hall and exhibition, reads a book, follows the arrows on a walk in the woods, engages in muscle sports. Innocence is a universal human right which extends to animals, plants, buildings, landscapes and cultures. This is the condition under which the planet can finally still be saved: neither utopian nor fatalistic, but functioning normally. You can lose your innocence by committing murder, indulging in a little S/M, joining a motorcycle club, choosing art, or going undercover, but the entertainment underworld offers no solace. Only the crossing over to war and genocide is still an option that we hear much about. Yet there's no escaping the agglomeration and its dictates. Mountain bikes, cool t-shirts, clever children's clothes, computer games, graffiti, bumper stickers, sloppy sportswear, brightly colored backpacks, hair gel: these are the "objets nomades" of Jacques Attali's Europe, on its way to a stylized uniformity. Innocence cannot be neutralized or counterbalanced by its opposite. The only thing it cannot stand is the spoiling of the atmosphere. This rotting process within normalcy offers no alternative, commits no resistance and performs no act. And innocence finds it exhausting. One can't always be fresh and cheerful and sweep away the fog with constructive thinking.

Innocence is in no danger of being wiped out by revolution or reaction. It can only decline, sink into poverty and slowly disappear from the picture. In a stagnating relationship one drags up a trash container, dumps the accumulated innocence in it, rebuilds the interior and makes a fresh, wild new start. The politicization of the private a generation ago managed to clear out some of the innocence, but it has regrouped stronger than before, grungies, generation X'ers, trancers and other young people search in vain for a footing that sets themselves apart in a format other than fashion or media, the new organizational forms of innocence. The Dutch government itself seems the most anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-fascist, anti-housing-shortage, anti-everything that a well-intentioned rebel could be against. The only thing innocent new generations can unleash their rage upon is organized innocence itself, in all its forms. Material enough to start a massive social movement and get to work in countless spheres, and then discover that all those disparate groups have something in common. "Boycott all forms of insurance, storm the stores full of obnoxious baby clothes, set fire to all those superfluous cute gift shops—there's a whole consumer paradise to destroy!" But let's not get excited. We will let innocence ebb away, grow silent, we won't talk about it anymore.

Innocent Europe and the Third Balkan War

So this is the Europe of Bosnian genocide. Even in Zagreb, Sarajevo, Tuzla and Belgrade people bravely try to join in and desperately keep believing that they are part of "Europe." "Bosnians imagined that the fact they were Europeans would protect them from the horrors of war," writes David Rieff in his book "Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West" (New York, 1995). For the Bosnians, Europe "was a continent on which the cosmopolitan values they stood for had become the norm." The Bosnians believed the end of communism would be succeeded by a "dull and pacifying age of consumerism." According to Rieff this led to a "cognitive dissonance", a "misunderstanding of their historical situation", a mental state that obtained for Sarajevo in 1992 and that still goes for the rest of Europe. The citizens of former Yugoslavia could not believe that the "CNN effect" would not occur in their case. They waited in vain for a live broadcast of the arrival of a rapid intervention force, come to set them free. Rieff: "People routinely speak of information and knowledge as if they were the same thing. Worse, they console themselves with the thought that once they have relevant information, they will act." Instead, "the sound bites and 'visual bites' culled bred casuistry and indifference." Rieff acknowledges that the debate is long over now. "The West chose to do anything but intervene." It chose, on the contrary, "to contain the crisis," anticipating the Cold War II paradigm that an imposed stagnation produces some positive effect. The West did not want to save the Bosnian Muslims. After he has witnessed a genocide, Europe is for Rieff no longer a "civilized place." "The defeat is total, the disgrace complete." The question is, why does even this message fail to get through, 50 years after Hiroshima and Auschwitz? For the first time the mental armor of the Europeans triumphed over the daily bombardment

of information. According to Slavoj Zizek, the Balkans are “a new projection for Western phantasies,” based on the “nature of the Balkans.” They are an imaginary glaxis for the defense of a culture, full of communication and global dreams. They* reveal the end of the age of the media, the accompanying games of perception included.

With whom could the average Westerner identify? With no broad anti-war movement, oppositional culture in former Yugoslavia is completely left to itself. The only thing that counts anymore is survival. In the long absence of political confrontations, the rage against the war machine expresses itself in a vital, ironic, high-grade cynicism. Not a nonchalant indifference; rather a form of stylized despair. The survival artists in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb are averse to purism and every expression of political correctness comes across as foolish pettiness. It is not a protest which begs for sympathy or solidarity. The help offered by international organizations causes consolidation rather than breakthrough, and offers no prospect of liberation from oppressive and dismal nationalism. In a situation in which all parties define themselves as victims, it makes no sense to identify with this or that group. Once involved one automatically arrives in a gray zone. One becomes part of the black market, smokes homegrown pot, sells relief goods, is ruined by cheap heroin, or finally manage to escape to Paris, London, New York or Amsterdam. On the scene we become acquainted with the techno-existentialism of the few who have stayed behind. They no longer need bid farewell to modernism, as Western postmodernism has believed for decades it must do. The dominant discourse is indifferent to attempts at deconstruction and merely leaves the intellectuals to muddle on. Their supposed power is an ancient history. The minuscule opposition, which maintains itself under the yoke of repressive tolerance in the shadow of power, expresses itself in a number of so-called “independent media.” By this is meant merely that they are not property of the state or under direct influence of the governing party, which in the former Eastern Bloc is already quite a feat. Just as in Western Europe, the subculture has its own radio stations and weeklies, organizes techno parties, makes videos, posters, rock and roll and theater, and communicates via faxes and computer networks. Technologically speaking, the lag behind the West is remarkably small. New hard- and software get around with lightning speed, and in this respect there is scarcely a difference anymore in Europe between a Western center and a periphery in the South and East. An example of the is the Zamir computer network, with almost 2000 users, which has been providing e-mail contact between cities like Prestina, Belgrade, Zagreb, Tuzla and Ljubljana since 1992. Mail is sent and received several times a day. Network traffic runs through Germany. Five hundred users reach nearby capitals and the rest of the world from Sarajevo by e-mail, and anti-war groups from Zagreb and Belgrade maintain contact through the network.

The underground magazine ARKZIN is published in Zagreb; there are several free radio stations in Skopje; the weekly VREME and the radio station B-92 are based in Belgrade; Radio ZID broadcasts the sounds of the opposition in Sarajevo (and criticizes the Bosnian government); and the independent Albanian weekly KOHA is published in Prestina, despite heavy Serbian repression of the Albanian majority in the province of Kosovo. Here, in “Old Serbia”, President Milosevic’s media campaign began in 1989 — a stroke of propaganda many see as the fatal beginning of the war. Milosevic still controls the state media and manipulates them to stay in power. These include several influential newspapers and the national radio and TV channels, which can be received everywhere, especially in the backward countryside, in contrast to the independent media with their inadequate distribution. In Croatia the situation is the same, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, too, the party of Izetbegovic has authority over radio and television. Even the heroic daily paper Oslobodenje cannot be spoken of as independent. The war will only be over when the warlords and their small armies have laid down their weapons and the war profiteers who are now in power are voted out in a democratic manner. But the anti-nationalist, non-communist opposition is still too weak to take the helm (as is the case in other Eastern European countries). To support such an opposition from the West, it is first of all necessary, as Zizek says, to make one’s own power analysis of the Balkans, one which is based on history and which views the role of the media in correct proportions. It will also be necessary to make a clean sweep of the UN’s quasi-neutrality and the Europeans’ humanitarian aid, the slow non-intervention force. One would also have to ridicule the 19th-century diplomacy and the half-hearted support of one of the warring sides.

Now that the war has acquired its own dynamic, we must not overestimate the power of the media. The so-called “independent media” cannot bring down the ruling tribe. At most, they are the germs of a democratic movement which has had enough of hatred, robbery and genocide. But they are no longer breeding grounds for dissidents with clear-cut principles. European innocence must be conquered, the crippling identity of victimhood pushed aside. If, as Kroker maintains, in the new Europe, with its new, invisible, electronic War, everything is about “the bitter division of the world into virtual flesh and surplus flesh,” then it is up to the independent media like Zamir, B-92 and ARKZIN to ridicule this split, and in an ironic, existential manner, to give shape to the universal technological desire, cyberspace.

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(Translated by Laura Martz)

Information about the independent media in former Yugoslavia can be found (among other places) on the New York-based WWW site MediaFilter.
<http://MediaFilter.org/MFF/warzone>