

# Against Connectivity

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*in/between: cultures of connectivity*: NECS European Network for Cinema and Media Studies 2016 Conference: Potsdam, Germany, 28–30 July 2016

Around the 55 minute mark in George Roy Hill's 1969 film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, fleeing a robbery gone wrong, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid leap into the Animas River gorge in Colorado. The pursuing posse want them to pay their debt to society which, this being a Western, probably means lynching. The beautiful homosocial friendship that can never be consummated will lead to the final, fatal shoot out prefigured in the gamble of the leap: death or freedom, the freedom of the outlaw which, this being a Western, means perpetual pursuit. The global cinema industry generates fantastic satisfactions for needs we often don't even know we have, like the need for flight, or for friendship, and, in popular cinema in particular, the contradictions they produce. Such needs are at the heart of connectivity.

In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations.

Thus Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*. We who have grown up with networks have grown inured to a discourse of networks. The reaction against canon-formation and cultural capital gave us first 'resistance' and 'subversion' as our measure of quality. Since the 1990s, those negative and defensive virtues have been increasingly replaced by the more positive terms 'connectivity', 'network' and 'entanglement'. Deleuze and Guattari proposed the idea that a rhizome is always better than a root, little guessing that by the time their book was translated, rhizomes would have become the management model of choice for vanguard transnationals like IBM and Toyota. In the heady days of the early 1990s when the internet made its first steps towards becoming a mass medium, the network seemed to be everything that the inherited structures of **centre-out** hierarchies of film production and broadcast media were not, and for a while that felt like what it actually was: open, democratic, radical, a practical **anarchy**. Today however the network condition is site of a profound, even existential **unhappiness**. Replacing one-to-many broadcasting with many-to-many was intended as a

liberation, but today we experience it as many-to-one communication, and not surprisingly the one crumbles under its assault.

If we listen again to the *Communist Manifesto*, we can hear an account of **network connectivity** already at work in the foundations of capital. In place of old wants, capital manufactured new needs that required, for their satisfaction, colonialism, imperialism and the ongoing violence of accumulation by expropriation. Our new need for a newer smartphone still depends for its satisfaction on the global architecture of mining, fabrication, logistics, transport, retail and finance. In place of an old self-sufficiency, we have universal connection by trade, but a connection which is also a disconnection from the old locale. Networks of identity and lifestyle, peers and professions, trading partners and fandom overwrite social connections of locality. Connection is also disconnection.

New needs are written over old desires. The connected individual is no longer herself, where "self" is a state where desire is shaped by social repression. Network capital prefers a non-self without socially and locally formed desire but with needs, needs which are not repressed but plugged into an unstemmable offer of tailor-made satisfactions, none of which speak to anything but the needs which capital has produced. The self is *ab origine* alienated by repression. The consumerist non-self is doubly alienated: first as the repressed, desiring self, and second from the social whose repressions construct desire. Rather than freeing some original desire, the new need is constructed on this double alienation, as a satisfaction external not only to the self but to the social. The repression that forms desire in its image is itself repressed in favour of a compulsory *jouissance* in the consumption of commodities. It is no surprise that this deracinated and doubly-alienated non-self yearns for and validates the very connectivity that has created it and its demand for networks.

What then are these networks that we long to be connected with? The many-to-many constellation cannot take the place of community. We imagine instead smaller, more enclosed networks of parties and holidays, friendships and love-affairs, in a community of the like-minded we catch glimpses of in adverts and celebrity lifestyle reportage. We want to be connected to a place where people who would really appreciate *me* are already connected and waiting for me to join them. That is the fantasy. In reality, networks are immense technological infrastructures of optic fibre, server farms, satellites and transoceanic cables

whose environmental implications are breathtaking. The internet, increasingly integrated with microwave links and cellphone networks, RFID tags and barcodes, credit and loyalty cards, is a network where machine-to-machine communication has already outstripped human-to-human, and which is incapable of distinguishing between them; a network whose governance falls between public sphere, treaty, governmental and commercial models, but which is physically built, owned and operated almost universally by corporations. The information superhighway realises Marx's fantasia on the construction of roads in which he perceives

**the extent to which** the socially posited needs of the individual, i.e. those which he consumes and feels not as a single individual in society, but communally with others – whose mode of consumption is social by the nature of the thing – are ... not only consumed but also produced through exchange, individual exchange. (*Grundrisse*, 532, courtesy Roberto Mozzachiodi)

The peak moment of capital can be recognised when all social needs are fulfilled neither by communities nor by states but by capital. Roads are a social need, but they are also vital to capital when the falling rate of profit forces acceleration and massification not only of production but distribution, and by the same token demands intense speed-up of the physical act of exchange. All those minerals and sub-assemblies in our computers and phones, all the talent locked up in a completed movie, are nothing but costs to capital until they have been sold: the faster they are converted back into money, the better. Therefore, Marx argued, capital would eventually take over infrastructural projects like roads, railways and canals; and in our time communication networks. Needless to say, having paid the piper, capital calls the tune: networks which serve its needs are the highest priority.

At the same time, the single most desperate need of the a-social subject of consumerism is for a community to connect to. When capital took over the provision of social goods, it was not only infrastructures like railways and telecommunications that were commodified but access to them. We purchase communication, which once was social good, as a commodity. Connectivity moves from social good to goods and chattels. Society itself, becomes just one of those needs that 'are satisfied through the exchange form'. Today the very possibility of society, having been shattered by consumerist individualism, can only be reconstituted through commodity exchange.

We find ourselves faced with an unpleasant conclusion: connection is not good in and of itself. In production, the connectivity of logistical supply chains tends towards intensification of hierarchies between different tiers of labour, more – and more militarised – expropriation and extraction of minerals and energy, more – and more repressive – sweatshop conditions in offshore and outsourced fabrication and sub-assembly plants, and an increasingly profligate use of fuel in global business-to-business and business-to-retail transportation. On the one hand this places disowned first peoples and sweatshop workers on a par with land, oceans and atmosphere as economic externalities that can be exploited to the point of collapse. In perverse manner, it therefore fulfils a certain transcendentalist tradition in environmental politics that seeks the end of the nature/humanity distinction. On the other it increases the disconnection between moments in the supply chain, most of all between the moment of consumption and any of the previous (or indeed later) moments in the product lifecycle.

At the same time, as we are all aware by now, the transition of film, television and streaming video services to online consumption brings with it a new form of exploitation, developed from attention value, in which our choices become marketable data and our creations unpaid content for social media platforms. In this process, the hierarchy of the South-North split can be better described as one between factory discipline and consumer discipline. One of the most intense sites of consumer discipline is connection to the internet, which in the capitalisation of the World Wide Web since 2001 and the rise of app culture now shapes all interactions as commodities. Connectivity under these circumstances is no longer a need or a pleasure but an obligation.

The numerous connectivities of audiovisual culture we have discussed here in Potsdam all take place, alongside the phenomena they study, in the context of, and to a great degree enabled by, a period of intense change which is anything but purely technological. It would be absurd to ignore the formal, aesthetic and ethical challenges posed by the move from analog to digital tools in production, but even more so to set aside the network condition that frames moving image media and structures the modes of thought involved in their analysis.

Neither tools nor networks spring pure-born from the forehead of Zeus. They are shaped by the same forces that accelerate the transition from investment to profit in the fabrication of

consumer digital devices. This is why I find myself, thinking through the title of our conference, considering whether we are dealing not with *cultures of connectivity* but connectivity *against* culture. If, after our long decades of contemporary cultural studies, we still return to Raymond Williams' thesis of culture as 'a whole way of life', network connectivity should surely constitute the global village where that wholeness pervades the whole species, or at least show some signs of drifting towards it. Instead we have the universal foundation of the commodity form. The resulting formation does not constitute a culture and its universality is anything but whole.

The constitution of the world as a concatenation of exchangeable objects depends on an **ontology of objects** which can be unpicked by demonstrating the non-identity of objects with themselves, most of all under the division between use and exchange value, sign or attention value, and their environmental implications. The ongoing financial crisis demonstrates that the economic concept of value is split by the hyperreality of derivatives. The simultaneous abstraction of behaviours and data from affects and relationships gives a glimpse into the formal subsumption of once-cultural forms into commodities in a market whose motive energy derives from price differentials, and which reduces all other differences to the universal medium of exchange. The electronic public sphere of the 1990s turned into a marketplace of lifestyles, where white supremacists and TED talk aficionados never speak to one another, and the self is displaced by serial identities that never have to articulate, even within a single consumer. Coteries and connoisseurs – of fine wines or *recherché* pop culture – form the imagined ideal readers of blogposts and tweets. As recently as Getino and Solanas' manifesto of Third Cinema, it was possible to aspire to address 'the people'. Woe betide the academic or politician who speaks that way now. The work of connectivity is to proliferate differences: to replace the social and its repressions, which produce both norms and the refusal and perversion of norms, with an indifferent climate where every need is normative. The unity-in-difference of The People is no longer possible under these conditions. Connectivity substitutes for the sociable working of culture a market in acquaintance.

The community video and video arts movements of the late 1970s and 1980s lacked a distribution medium. In the 1990s there arrived, in the form of the world wide web, a distribution medium of immense power which had almost no barriers to entry barring easily acquired HTML coding skills. The utopian moment of the early 1990s combined cheap video

with the publishing, distributive and interactive capabilities of the web. Only after the shake-out of the dot.com crash in 2001 did it become apparent that a handful of net-native companies, notably Google, Amazon and Ebay, had begun to create business models derived not from magazines and broadcasting but from the net itself. Those models – user-tracking and recommendations – provided the basis for social media through simple but monopolistic platforms. The result has been a landscape of tribes, as Maffesoli called them almost two decades ago, a fragmentary terrain of (often ephemeral) groupings around celebrities, catchphrases and brands, to which we donate our attention and creations, not only unpaid but self-funding consumers of a panoply of instantly obsolescent machinery and indifferent differences.

We disciplined consumers pay to consume connectivity. But do we pay enough? **Low voltages and currents in electronics** require high conductivity at connection points (switches, connecting wires and strips, relays and plug-and-socket connectors). To reduce tarnishing and decay at these connections, gold is the favoured material. In August 2015 Environmental Protection Agency officials trying to secure a tailings dam at the Gold King Mine in Colorado, last productive in 1917, released three million gallons of mustard-colored water loaded with heavy metals, including arsenic, mercury, lead, beryllium, zinc, iron, copper, aluminum and cadmium into rivers flowing through and providing the major water source for the Navajo Nation. The leak, the toxic minerals released into the watershed, and slower but significant leaks from other abandoned gold mines in San Juan County are, a year later, still political footballs. It is impossible to trace the gold that came from the King Gold Mine over its fifty-year career, or to know whether any ended up in the electronics in our pockets today via long chains of pawn shops and deceased estates. Perhaps, as it plays on streaming servers and DVD, King Mine gold is implicated in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, who leapt into the Animas River forty six years ago. All the meanings of gold robbery haunt the location – filmed in the brief gap between Gold Rush setting of the movie, last year's calamity, and digital playback.

Perhaps these pictures of the Animas River, *Butch Cassidy* from 1968, the NBC shot from 2015, carry an ethical imperative, but perhaps they only evoke a generic blame but not responsibility. To watch the Animas in *Butch Cassidy* today is to trace an intricate pavanne through intricate golden forms of debt, some of which are ethical responsibilities.

Alternatively, as the most communicated of metals, the most storied, and among the most essential to communications technologies, gold has trajectories through history and the world that are almost impossible to picture. Would we be better served then by employing graphs, diagrams and animated infographics? Data visualisations are not just increasingly current elements in media and media arts, but the dominant visual form of our dominant media – the media of domination in government and finance: spreadsheets, databases and geographic information systems. In professional and workplace media, data visualisation is a new symbolic form, Panofsky's term for a universal grammar of visual statements. The question is whether data visualisations can carry the ethical messages of pictures. Josh On and futurefarmers' 2004 online work *theyrule.net* is a much-applauded example showing the links between boards of directors and government in the USA. Recall, if you will, meanwhile, because I don't want to show them, the images from **Abu Ghraib**. The reason I don't show the Abu Ghraib images is because I am sufficiently persuaded by Susan Sontag's arguments in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that the images act as continuations of the torture. The images are complicit in what they represent. This is not a question of indexicality but of act and action. The images place us under an ethical obligation to end the torture, which in this instance also means not continuing it by showing the images again. My question is whether the network diagram places us, or could place us, under any similar ethical or political obligation.

The answer depends greatly on how we conceptualise networks, since the kind of network diagram I'm showing, like Aldhous and Seife's *Spies in the Skies* is itself a product of real-time data-mining of the network, and is in that sense at least as indexical of the network as a photograph is of the event it depicts, and at least as complicit in the operations it describes. 'Is it possible to differentiate between dominant and oppositional networks, for example? Or are they all so inextricably tied that even an analytical separation of them becomes useless': so asks Arturo Escobar (2008: 11). His questions raises others. Is there one network or many? As network of networks, the internet has a claim to be a single and universal connectivity, even though there are other nets operating on other protocols, and even though large areas of the net are closed, not only by criminality and copyright but in the sequestered data syphoned from the net for proprietorial exploitation and governmental oversight. If we take the depressing but all too persuasive view that the internet's connectivity is an apparatus for the capture and sequestration of data, is it possible to make network art or activism or

scholarship that is not already complicit in its own exploitation? Or is the self-defining universality of the internet in fact flawed, incomplete, self-contradictory or porous, and therefore yields, despite itself, the grounds for its critique? Alternatively, is there a case to be made that the network was from its beginnings a commons, that it has been enclosed in a characteristic act of accumulation by dispossession, and that this dispossession has never been complete, hence leaving open the place from which critique of the network can base itself inside the network? I ask because I am genuinely unsure whether a network, real-time map of torture would be less complicit in torture than an image of torture.

And I ask because I wish to know whether network dissemination of images makes those images network media. Network media distinguish themselves in that they are in the first instance distribution media, where mechanical and earlier electronic forebears were first and foremost production media. Producing an image may well have ethical consequences for those involved – artists and their models, news photographers and the people they image – but those consequences may perhaps be diminished if the image is kept hidden, like Courbet's *Source* and certain sacred images (of which Courbet's may well be an example). To have made the Abu Ghraib images made criminals of those who made them; what status then for those who distribute them? If the answer is that it is in some way a lesser thing to share than to produce, then the ethical power of network media to demand responsibility for both making and enjoying images is diminished. Or am I too squeamish? Is it okay to turn away, to say 'there are some images I never wish to see', and so absolve myself of accountability for pictorial violence on the grounds that I didn't look? To pose this back again to network graphics: is the diagram a technique for presenting truth without actually seeing it?

The inference for connectivity as principle and dilemma that I want to draw from this detour through infographics is that the network relation, which for me is best emblematised in diagrammatic rather than pictorial form, is that precisely because networks are self-documenting, they are also self-negating. A network node is a point of transit, not a terminus, even though, as nodes, each of us thinks of ourselves as terminal destination. Connectivity is entropic: in network topography, every point is equivalent and equidistant, like the cosmic dust which, the cosmologists tell us, the universe will ultimately become. In this condition, all differences are indifferent. To distribute images of degraded victims is to degrade them further; not to circulate makes clear that their degradation cannot be separated from that of



the immediate perpetrators, those who issued the orders, and the political regime that encouraged both the torture and the images of it. Abu Ghraib was already synonymous with torture under Saddam Hossain. The degradation is not specific to any one party. All humanity is degraded in this degradation; all humanity owes an unpayable debt to those who suffered at Abu Ghraib. Yet a dispassionate diagram of the images' circulation, under the guise of meta-commentary, denies the conditions of debt arising from both circulating and not circulating. The images are intolerable not only because of their prolongation of torture but because of the impossible ethical demand they place on us. The diagram is intolerable because it does not make that demand. Is it the case that the network condition of circulation in itself removes the ethical demand?

The same problem of non-identity I noted about objects is also the case with nodes, with the same ethical implications. Here is Michael Dieter's thumbnail description of a **smartphone**:

Here, interfacing can include a range of active relations such as tap detection, fingerprint identification, the operation of cameras, microphones, gyroscopes, accelerometers, vibration mechanisms, operating systems, location services (GPS), Bluetooth and, crucially, the oscillation of lithium ions as battery life (Berry-Dieter 166).

If to this we add the operation of software, apps and the actions of the human user, including their relation to the space, physical and social, where they interact with the device, it is clear that the network node is itself a network, indeed a network of networks that includes the user's biography, the environmental implications, and the supply chains that bring the various components together. Any concrete instance has always been the solid instantiation of an incalculable numbers of inputs. As network node, the **human-device interface** is also centrifugal, at best a momentary focal point through which biography and data flows draw themselves to a point in order to diffuse again in multiple directions. The non-identity of the network node is produced as a network effect, a point travelling through time, and necessarily ephemeral, a compound lens assembled and disassembled on the fly to focus, conform and retransmit. This pseudo-self, like Descartes' pineal gland, is a channel for assembling and mutating, whose task is to supply idiosyncratic combinations and inflections to a system which otherwise is too deeply standardised to provide its own. This is the role of disciplined consumption, where street cultures and lifestyle groupings reconfigure the symbols that claim their attention, now a form of labour, in order to renew the circulation of commodified affects.

In this role the non-self's value lies in the data it processes.

The work of disciplined consumption and prosumption is not only unpaid but demands investment in kit and connectivity. Here it performs the only truly terminal task of contemporary capital, and the last authentication of the historical self: to be the subject of debt. Debt is incurred by spending future earnings today. In the last instance, all debt must be repaid by the individuals that capital has created as its debtors, but the lonely hour of the last instance never comes. The moment when debts are finally reconciled, the moment when the commodified self will be finally realised, never arrives.

The self, perpetually deferred, is not identical with itself. But neither are networks. The networking experience is not an experience of network infrastructure, which today is characteristically hidden in bots and cookies. Facebook's social graph and Google's user profiles are encouraged by widespread ignorance of how the internet works, which is a function of 'user-friendly' design and the universal disguise of and blindness to the physical labyrinth of cable, switchers, routers, servers and server farms we disingenuously refer to as 'the Cloud'.

Connectivity, which appears to us in fantasies of belonging, depends on the interactions of a corporate network, whose economics, politics and cultural forms are structured by the commodification of the social good. It is premised on and constructs non-identical and atomised subjects, psychologically, economically and environmentally predestined to pay in the future for its operation, today. Connection is not a solution: in its current form, it is the problem.

At the same time it is vital not to confuse connectivity with implication. I have dropped the word 'implication' into my talk a few times already. Now it is time to define it. Latour argued in his Oxford lectures that networks are 'a tool to describe something, not what is described' (Latour 2005: 131). His statement was not a statement about the internet but about an ontology of the world as flux. The metaphor of networks took hold in the post-war Macy conferences. In its current form, it covers human artefacts like the internet, the *de facto* ontologies of the 21st century – ecological and quantum science – and the Market as quasi-natural emergent form underpinning all human relations and dominating contemporary

political life. Latour's comment makes clear that the application of a technical metaphor to non-human realities is just that: a metaphor. As metaphor, it is a translation, a communication of incommensurable terms between languages and across time. For cybernetics the translation problem would result in what Orit Halpern calls 'a statistical grammar of prediction' (51), of the kind that now dominates the day-to-day circulations of the internet. In engineering, however, metaphors and translations are performative. Connectivity translates a condition of statistical probability into the operating principle of packet-switching networks, which return the favour by providing a metaphor for themselves and for the financial trading which constitutes the larger part of internet communication today.

And yet there remains a 'something' that we are trying to describe with our network metaphor (and which the internet as performative metaphor might be defined as attempting to describe). Of the available terms (entanglement, enfoldment and many more) I like 'implication' because it catches at once the 'pli' of Deleuze's Leibniz and the remnants of causality, while at the same time evoking just that ethical sense which I have argued is disabled by current network communications. Non-identity is only a problem when identity is the *sine qua non* of many-to-one networks and of the architecture of debt, that is, when it emerges from the construction of capitalist individuality. Ethical demands produce a special angst when they arrive at the point of individual responsibility, when individuality, like the family institution before it, is in crisis. In connectivity there is no place for shared responsibility, which falls on the helpless shoulders of an individual self so constructed as not to be able to bear it. Implication indicates an alternative to this situation. Reversing debt's predetermination of an endlessly deferred but ineluctable future, we are all indebted to our ancestors and our planet, all implicated in one another.

Mediation implicates us not only in the doings of other humans but with the local and cosmic environment. Sunlight and rock, water and plants are media implicating us in the world. All the media we are implicated in implicate themselves in us. Historically the free and open internet of the early 1990s was built on an infrastructure that was anything but common. Enclosure of the digital commons was to that extent a foregone conclusion. But underlying the infrastructure of the internet lies an older, broader commons which combines physical processes with the accumulated technical know-how Marx called 'the general intellect', itself enclosed and privatised in technologies. These layers of commons and enclosure create the

internal contradictions which at once provide a critical foothold in the network and an escape route from the isolation of the network condition, through recognition of the implication of each human in every other, through the natural and technological processes which the political economy of the contemporary network excludes.

Moving image cultures are inhabited by the network condition as much as they inhabit it. Film and media studies' embrace of larger fields of making, sharing, viewing and using moving images enriches our understanding of the networks they inhabit and in many senses constitute. Precisely for this reason, critique of connectivity is becoming a pressing issue.

In this attempt, as a preliminary thesis, communion is the goal, and media are the means of a new politics, a universal inter-implication not of nations and products but of all our implications, human and beyond. We cannot go back to the historical self, but nor is it completely lost. Marx and Engels' *Manifesto* made communism the project for a new kind of self by the lights of the nineteenth century. In the twenty-first, we must abandon their human exclusivity and seek a self constructed in a new community embracing our integrated technologies and the physical world underpinning them. The connections between gold mining and gold robbery, the Animas River and Butch and Sundance, George Roy Hill's movie and the gold-plated HDMI socket I use to play it back demand nothing less.