



Hackers and the Digital Sublime
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In *The Digital Sublime* (2004), Vincent Mosco begins the work of collecting the interdisciplinary fragments that enable an understanding of the digital sublime, a phenomenon predicated on information and communication technologies (ICT) and what Manuel Castells calls Informationalism; a networked information society. The topic of this essay is the mythic trickster character in cyberspace—aka the hacker—which Mosco so briefly mentions.

Digital Myths, Digital Sublime

Mosco outlines three dominant myths about cyberspace: the end of geography, the end of time, and the end of politics as usual.

The death of geography can be variously approached, but perhaps the best way is through consideration of the noosphere. Initially posited by Vladimir Verdansky and later

fleshed out by the catholic geologist Teilhard de Chardin, the noosphere denotes the realm of thought and ideas. De Chardin perceived that amidst the geologic layers, the biosphere and the atmospheric strati was a new thing, an immaterial echelon: the sphere of thought enabled by the higher order cognition in humans; the noosphere. De Chardin (1882-1955) lived to see the first telecommunications networks span the globe and by the time of McLuhan (1911-1980), satellites had enmeshed the planet in an ever-more complex web of wired pulses and cacophonous waves carrying facsimiles of human communication and thought objects. The migration towards this new sphere can be understood as a return to pre-Enlightenment dualism, a kind of medieval preference for the spiritual/immaterial second space (Mosco: 96 and Margret Werthheim 1999).

Geography becomes flimsy as we live out our lives in the noosphere where Cartesian and Newtonian space dynamics begin to fail. Indeed, it seem as though Quantum dynamics, with its lessons about non-locality and entanglement are better tools for understanding the phenomenology of cyberspace, which is build on hyperlinks and the folding structure of databases. Objects (websites, search daemons, identities) in cyberspace are at once everywhere and nowhere, like a particle superimposed in the quantum waveform. And if, according to the mythologists like Ray Kurzweil, we reach an abiological future in which consciousness is transferable into computers/networks, the non-spatial shift will be all the more complete.

The death of time is a closely associated notion. We can see it branch off of the ageographic hypothesis insofar as human notions of time are deeply connected to space—the time it takes to go to market is defined by the space to be covered at a certain velocity. Once objects become delocalized, ‘fetching’ them becomes instantaneous and the old

space-time metric crumbles. At a deeper and more important level, the death of time is about the end of history. Myths of radical change frequently include provisions about the beginning of the new era, as in the case of the French Revolution and its exuberant implementation of the French Republican Calendar. On the other hand, ICT suggests the very opposite as well—a flood of overwhelming historical data in which our ability to archive greater volumes of denser data becomes an economic and psychological burden on humanity. Carolyn Guertin (2003) has argued however that ICT is actually a fairly poor archival system due to digital obsolescence; the emerging trend since the digital era of rapid technological change to quickly make media formats obsolete and inaccessible.¹ Guertin, among others, have explored the notion of the “digital dark age,” another darker form histories demise.

The end of politics as usual is a broad notion about ways of being amidst Informationalism. Cyberspace, with its ability to connect individuals from across the globe in instantaneous communication, seems like an obvious game changer for democratic society. But more than the other two themes, the end of politics demands reflection on similar predictions made about previous technological leaps and marvels such as the telegraph, the telephone, the locomotive, the TV and so on, all of which were accompanied by would-be prophets heralding new dimensions of direct democracy and civil participation. Keeping in mind the lesson that we tend to mythologize technology, we can still perceive the range of new vectors of participation as well as the possibility of deep changes in the motivation of actors themselves as we become an increasingly informational, noospheric species. Perhaps the highest form of this theme is McLuhan’s

¹ More generally, Guertin argues that ICT is best suited to short term transactions and emotionally energetic, rather than deep and penetrating, experience.

‘Global Village,’ a utopian vision of neo-tribal direct democracy meets e-government. Mosco prefers to look at these myths as alive or dead, rather than true or false.

Mosco touches briefly on the character of the mythic trickster—characters like Loki, Hermes, Kitsune the Japanese fox, the native American coyote—an archetype bound up in paradox, ambiguity, sin and redemption. The manifestation of this mode in cyberspace is, clearly, the hacker.

Hackers are, perhaps unsurprisingly, bound up in a great deal of myth generated as much by outsiders as by the hackers themselves. Indeed, the hacker is, according to Brian Harvey (1985), deeply rooted in aesthetic considerations that trend towards the pursuit of sophisticated perfection and spectacle. From here on, my thesis is simple: hackers, as the pioneers of the new technology and first recipients of the digital sublime, are an important compass to watch as we continue our mythic migration out of time, space, and traditional society.

Hackers

In *Abstract Hactivism*, Palmås and von Busch give a helpful account of hacking.

Hacking as a modifying culture has always been around but became a broader technological activity with amateur radio and car modding in the 1920s. It is rooted with classic Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture but became “hacking” first with the introduction of computers. (Palmås and von Busch 2006)

Specifying the connection to computers and ICT is as important for hacking as it is for Castells' Informationalism.

Palmås and von Busch go on to enumerate the central commitments of hackers:

- Access to a technology and knowledge about it; transparency.
- Empowering users.
- Decentralized Control.
- Creating beauty and exceeding limitations.

Hackers are at work in many telling places in society. As nerds they contribute to (computer) science, helping to develop and test the technology of next Christmas and the next decade. As information junkies they make massive contributions to the ongoing infrastructure effort to build and fill the Internet with tools, content, and code. As activists they fight for information freedom, transparency, open source software, and to educational through improves resources and technologies. Sometimes, they battle governments and corporations directly, as in the case of Wikileaks. As artists they explore the horizons of 3D plastics printing and other hardware hacking as well as digital multi media, beautiful code—and, should we grant it artistic status, the art of networks. As ironic mystics, hackers have organized groups like Cult of the Dead Cow. As gangsters, hackers have formed groups like The Masters of Deception, Legion of Doom, and SoldierX.² And as malevolent 'crackers' they may commit computer crimes and

² Masters of Deception and Lords of Doom fought what is known as the Great Hacker War in 1990-1991, called by some the end of the Golden Age of Hacking.

information vandalism, sometime for the learning experience, or for fun, for activism ('hacktivism') or for profit.³

But hackers are really romantics. Harvey sees hackers as aesthetes in the Kiekegaardian sense insofar as they are not persuaded to act ethically, choosing instead a life of exploration and experimentation on a complex aesthetic spectrum (Harvey 1985). In addition to their often obsessive practices, trickster-mythology and general misunderstanding by society to suggest romantic themes, there is always the media.

In the mainstream news, hackers are categorically described as young anti-social males 'acting out,' breaking laws, and invading privacy. Often, their exploits are characterized as petulant and ineffective, or if they are effective, they are a hazard and a nuisance to proper civil society. Whether pirates or revolutionaries or starving artists, the mainstream news media has never liked romantic characters—at least not until their book begins to sell. The ill treatment of hackers at the hands of the mainstream media corroborates the romantic narrative.

In Hollywood and Tokyo, the opposite treatment is given. Hackers are portrayed as all-power beings living in ratty apartments, reluctant heroes eating ramen noodles, and ex-all-star cyber-cowboys who land a shot at a comeback. From *Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984) to *Ghost In the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* (2002), from *Snow Crash* (Stephenson 1992) to *Swordfish* (2001), from *Wargames* (1983) to *Hackers* (1995) from *Tron* (1982) to *Tron: Legacy* (2010) the differential portrayal of hackers by the mainstream and fictional media suggests romantic themes with almost monotonous clarity. So let us

³ Profit coming in two primary forms: working for the mafia or working for big business and government as security specialists and penetration testers.

consider some of the finer points of the connection between the romantic character archetype and hackers.

Identity and names are a good start. In many cyber-localities, you choose your name, not to mention your entire identity by breaking from the phenotypic and social histories attached to your physical body. Hackers take re-naming to an extreme by adopting nicknames or 'handles' that they use to claim credit for exploits and on forums and chatrooms where they interact with peers. Frequently, these names are references to power and capability, as a survey of the famous hacker database at soldierx.com will show, names like: Acid Phreak, Captain Crunch⁴, Datastream Cowboy, Emmanuel Goldstein⁵, Mendax⁶, and Lord Digital.⁷ More often, however, hackers simply remain anonymous, as in the case of the hacker collective, Anonymous. In thinking about the significance of naming, namelessness, and identity, the character of Feraud from *The Duellists* (1977) comes to mind. Feraud is the romantic foil for the film's enlightenment protagonist, D'Hubert. At the end of the film, Feraud is stripped of his name and we might find this to be, in fact, his greatest achievement: loss of identity, expulsion from society, a kind of sublime identity reboot via namelessness.

Another relevant characteristic of Feraud is, for lack of a better term, his foulness. Feraud is possessed of a violent temper, obsessive tendencies, brutish sexuality, and a

⁴ Learned about telephone phreaking from deaf kids, popularizing the use of the captain crunch cereal whistle, which apparently emitted 2600Mgz, to hack/phreak Bell telephone lines.

⁵ A reference to George Orwell's *1984*.

⁶ The handle of the young Julian Assange before his arrest and conviction on numerous counts of cybercrime, Latin, from Horace; *splendid mendax* or "nobly untruthful," which really is terribly ironic all things considered.

⁷ One may discover that the handles of less famous hackers are significantly less cool and marginally more boastful.

foul mouth. In comparison, Anonymous bears all of these traits to an unimaginable extreme that we will presently explore. To quote Anonymous' self description:

We are Anonymous.
We are Legion.
We do not forgive.
We do not forget.
Expect us.

Anonymous is like a meta-memetic, multi-user identity. No person is anonymous, and yet people act through Anonymous and refer to one another as anonymous or 'anon.' Anonymous has a written history spread across various wikis all over the web.⁸ Anonymous has create crushing volumes of visual media from photo-shopped images ranging from cats (lolcats), to political threats, to porn created to satisfy one of their central tenets:

Rules of the Internet:

Rule 34: If it exists, there is porn of it. No Exceptions.⁹

Anonymous does not call one cyber-locality home, but does pass much of its memetic identity through the image board 4chan.com. 4chan, to be perfectly clear, is nothing less than the festering stink-hole of the Internet, brimming with bigotry, sexism, bestiality, and even child pornography, which is the only thing not allowed on the website.¹⁰ 4chan and Anonymous exist within a recursive spiral of unending degradation of every social more and taboo in existence, ridiculing all points of view and in many

⁸ Until recently, eyclopediadramatic.com functioned as cannon until it was scoured and removed. Partyvan.info has much of the same lore although it is expressive of a more radical faction of anon.

⁹ See: http://ohinternet.com/Rules_of_the_Internet

¹⁰ which may or may not simply be because it's a federal crime.

ways attempting to reduce all dialogue to drivel. This is evident in their practice of ‘trolling’ which denotes sidetracking legitimate discussion using any means necessary, often inflammatory remarks. As with trolling, it is not even clear that much of the bigotry and sexism expressed on the chans is even the genuine opinion of the commenter. They just like using bad words. This may, however, serve a socio-memetic function. The constant recycling of filth and mind numbing idiocy may help to ‘purify’ the cyber-community of outsiders. 4chan is doubtlessly the single biggest contributor of memes to the greater Internet.

Perhaps one of the most interesting points about Anonymous is the token currency of their meta-ethical good: lulz. “Lulz” is a corruption of the internet slang term “lol” which, in turn, means “laugh out loud.” Actions are taken “for the lulz.” But lulz are not only the end goal and result, they are the event itself and the action taken to produce the intended effect. Lulz make lulz from lulz, and they are the only worthwhile goal according to canonical Anonymous philosophy.

In 2006, Anonymous set their sights on the Church of Scientology, self-professedly “for the lulz” and, according to cyber-anthropologist Gabriella Coleman, because the church represented the perfect antithesis to Anonymous’ liberal hacker commitments to informational transparency and decentralizing power. This was not the first time Anonymous or other e-communities have acted as vigilantes. In China, ‘flesh searching’ is the practice of dishing out retribution to individuals accused of wrong-doing on the Net via such methods destruction of personal property, invasion of privacy, or physical violence. Flesh searching is when the wrath of the Internet arrives in the flesh.

Anonymous ‘trolled’ the church by sending them unpaid-for pizzas, faxes of black pages to drain their ink, by tying up phone lines, and generally bothered the church to no end.

This act of semi-activism became a meme itself and soon Anonymous began to set sights on larger targets, notably, PayPal and Bank of America. Anons preformed Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) Attacks on the websites of these companies, taking them down for several hours at a time. This was an act of retribution for denying service to and freezing the bank accounts of Wikileaks. Following those events, Anonymous got involved in the 2010-2011 revolutionary actions in the Middle East by DDoSing Iranian and Egyptian government networks. In an instant, Anonymous, the news media, and governments around the world realized what a bunch of social rejects that spend their time making mock beast-porn could do over the Internet using largely unskilled hacking tools. And when Anonymous brought out the big guns—anons with actual penetration and exploitation abilities ie ‘real hacking’—they completely decimated HB Gary, a cyber-warfare outfit contracted by the US government.¹¹

Anonymous is an interesting subject of inquiry—their methods of community cohesion, their complex identity philosophy, and their selection and execution of attacks on targets. They are not exactly hackers, but they are pioneers of new ways of being on the Net—namely advanced e-communities. Anonymous is part of a wider trend in increasingly complex and generative e-communities. These website—like Digg, Reddit, and Twitter—operate according to complex algorithms for generating what the user sees on the page by weighing a wide variety of first order (good, bad, old, irrelevant) and second order (trending, viral, possibly-spam) criteria.

¹¹ See Wired: <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2011/02/anonymous/all/1>

From their love-hate depictions by the media, their genuine character flaws, their commitments to Liberal ideals, aesthetic excellence and social change, and their sterling track record as technological pioneers, hackers are the romantic heroes of cyberspace. Anonymous is something else—a force of digital nature, a new way of being on the Internet. They exhibit an indispensable feature of truly generative systems: chaos. Chaos and stocasticity are at the heart of good programming, good art, and good AI. Terrible, cruel, hilarious, and beautiful, the chaotic Anonymous takes us one step closer to myths about the ‘hive mind.’

Conclusion

The sublime is a meta-narrative for transcendence, often rapture, and most importantly, the experience of coming abreast of the limits and looking back to see the world anew. The connection to boundary exploration is easily made to hackers, who are the colonists—but really more like the rugged fur trappers, cowboys, and outlaws—of the manifest destiny of cyberspace. It is they who will see the digital sublime in its purest, jaggedness form before it is simplified and aestheticized for future waves to ogle. It is there—emergence dynamics flowering out of networked e-communities, spontaneous generation and blindingly rapid evolution of memes, whole vast swaths of the unknown.. The myth lives and its pioneer is rewarded.

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