ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY, EUGENE THACKER, MCKENZIE WARK (2014) *EXCOMMUNICATION: THREE INQUIRIES IN MEDIA AND MEDIATION.* CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. ISBN: 978-0-226-92522-6.

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Excommunication is a strange book, if anything because its agile and crystalline prose often runs into the very limit of what philosophy can and should be able to communicate. The third in the University of Chicago Press Trios series, *Excommunication* is a three-pronged probe into the aporia of excommunication—the perfomative anti-message that terminating all communications 'evokes the *impossibility* of communication' (16). Make no mistake, Galloway, Thacker, and Wark are not interested in revisiting the deconstructive axiom for which the conditions of possibility of a system ultimately coincide with its conditions of impossibility. Nor do they seem concerned with resuming a version of the Lacanian Real—the foreign, inaccessible, and traumatic dimension that traces the boundaries of the symbolic order.

Rather, the essays that make up the book examine philosophical problems that are both much older and much newer than the linguistic turn. They are older in that, as the authors note in the introduction, the question of the conditions of possibility of communication already surfaces in the *Phaedrus* as the disciple's threat to Socrates of withdrawing from the discussion becomes instrumental to the continuation of philosophy. And they are much newer as the three New York-based media theorists shun a Socratic and anthropocentric legacy of thinking about communication as presence, interpretation, and discourse in favor of recent philosophical developments such as posthumanism and object-oriented ontology. And yet the authors' shared objective of pursuing a 'non-media condition' that may allow for 'a glimpse into the realm of the nonhuman' (21) is more a statement of purpose than a fully

accomplished task. In fact, and especially in the chapter authored by McKenzie Wark, the political question of who has the power to excommunicate whom—that is, to set the boundaries of legitimate communication and interpretation—seems all too human to be inscribed under the register of a nonhuman political philosophy.

To be sure, the book format does not require the authors to find a synthesis—only to approach the same subject matter from different angles. In the opening chapter, Galloway examines four gods and goddesses of the Greek Pantheon (Hermes, Iris, the Furies, and Aphrodite) as distinct figures of mediation—none of which has a privileged relation with excommunication. His taxonomy is fruitfully used by Thacker and Wark to formulate different theoretical approaches to (ex)communication. Drawing from Galloway's discussion of Iris as a figure of immediacy, Thacker focuses on forms of mediation that tend to efface themselves as they approach that which is by definition incommunicable. And in the closing chapter, Wark uses the archetype of the Furies to reflect upon the proliferation of heretical theories and practices whose excommunication negatively defines the boundaries of acceptable communication. In other words, *Excommunication* is a book that traces two distinct trajectories: a theological-mystical trajectory and a political trajectory. Following the former, its authors theorize excommunication as an experience of the limit of that which can be communicated. Following the latter, they examine excommunication as 'a question of community, belonging, and judgment before the law' (15). In this review, I will begin from the political reading advanced by Wark to move then to the mystical acceptation of the term discussed by Thacker and the four modes of mediation elaborated by Galloway. Reading in reverse will allow me to conclude with a discussion of how the theory of excommunication may pertain to contemporary networked media.

Wark's secondary reading of ancient, medieval and high-modern heresies—mostly through the work of Belgian Situationist Raoul Vaneigem—is primarily aimed at discovering contiguities between heretical faith and unorthodox Marxism that trace the contours of a subterranean rebellion that resists systematization. While this rebellion expresses a 'will to live, which speaks no recognised language,' as Vaneigem (1983: 47) put it, Wark still sees a function for theory. To be sure, this is a 'tactical media theory' that prefers to bridge gaps between radical thought and revolutionary modes of living to prescription and axiomatic structures. Modern capitalism is in fact an axiomatic system that 'puts everything in communication

with everything else' through 'the endless separation of the world into exchange values' (202).

Nonetheless, by connecting previously unrelated practices and ideas, radical theory tries to pose a challenge to capitalism's universals. In *A Hacker Manifesto,* Wark had opened up this space by changing the connotation of Marx's 'abstraction' from a term negatively associated with the capitalist valorization of labor to a keyword positively associated with the inventiveness of an emerging hacker class. 'To abstract is to construct a plane upon which otherwise different and unrelated matters may be brought into many possible relations,' writes Wark (2004: ¶08)—suggesting that exchange is essential to the production of difference. The question of *what kind* of planes can be constructed and what kind of exchanges can be actualized without becoming mere apparatuses of capture remains an open one. To this problem—which the Situationists identified as the problem of capitalist recuperation—Wark has dedicated part of his recent work on the history of the Situationist International. This preoccupation seems to have produced a return to a more traditional Marxian lexicon as he notes that labor-power produces something that retains its difference precisely because it *cannot* be exchanged and communicated. 'Whatever one calls it, and whatever it is, it isn't exchangeable, by either capitalism or philosophy,' he writes (202), taking a cue from the work of French philosopher François Laruelle (202).

Excommunication seeks a way out of the alliance between capitalism and the philosophical claim that the real exists only to be interpreted and communicated by looking for a theory of mediation that cannot be communicated. In this sense, Laruelle's non-philosophical project becomes a common reference for the three authors as it posits the existence of an undivided reality that being utterly indifferent to conceptual transcendence preempts the philosopher's claim to be a messenger of the Truth. As Galloway notes,

> Laruelle defines the world in terms of the mediative relation. There can be no world that is not already a world of mediation. As he writes, the real is what is communicated and the communicated is what is real. Thus to dwell on excommunication as the impossibility of communication will require a wholesale elimination of the world as we know it. In other words, Laruelle's theory of mediation requires a

> non-world. It requires what he calls a non-standard reality in which there is no reciprocity, no correlation, and no mediation in the normal sense. (52)

Approaching a non-standard, incommunicable reality means that the sensorial and linguistic coordinates whereby human beings ordinarily map (or, in Laruelle's terms, make) the world enter into crisis. This can be a mysterious and terrifying experience that nevertheless finds expression in specific cultural forms. By bringing together the unlikely pair of Christian mysticism and horror film, Thacker's essay reflects on forms of mediation—what he calls 'dark media'—that tend to efface themselves as they approach that which is by definition incommunicable. In Christian mysticism, the attempt to establish communication with the divine takes two alternative paths—a *via affermativa* and a *via negativa*. Drawing from the work of Dionysus the Aeropagite and Meister Eckhart, Thacker focuses on the latter, that is, on a tradition of negative theology (or apophatic mysticism) for which the divine cannot be described through any positive attribute. If the *via negativa* implies a failure of language and logic to grasp the essence of God, the fact that mystical thinkers have developed a discourse to address this ineffability suggests that there exists a need to try and communicate (with) the incommunicable. This paradox prompts Thacker to advance his own definition of excommunication as '*a double movement in which the communicational imperative is expressed, and expressed as the impossibility of communication*' (80).

Thacker argues that in the twentieth century the concerns of apophatic mysticism are taken up by the genre of horror film. Without explaining why this might be the case, he discusses the plot of several films in which media function as technical prostheses of the human nervous system by accessing and recording a reality that would be otherwise inaccessible to the senses. As 'cameras reveal images of ghosts, sound recording devices capture the sounds of spirits, and video images depict the invisible presence of the dead,' electronic media successfully establish 'a connection between two different ontological orders (natural-supernatural, earthly-divine, life-afterlife)' (132 and 131). Yet by opening a passageway with the supernatural, these *haunted media* seem to be endowed with positive qualities of their own. In other words, they work 'too well' to be a simple extension of the ineffable mediation pursued by negative mysticism.

Technologies that are uncannily efficient carry with themselves a certain surplus. Because they enable an immediate experience of that which lies beyond human communication, they can throw the subject out of its stasis (*ek-stasis*). In his elegant and inspiring essay, Galloway notes that in Greek mythology the *ecstatic mode of mediation* is associated with Iris, messenger of the gods and goddess of iridescence. Thus, while Thacker associates dark media to the terrifying experience of a beyond that shatters our cognitive apparatus, the iridescent mode of mediation dissolves our fears by shedding light on the unknown: 'Iris's characteristics include an *immediacy* in time and space, a physical *immanence* with itself, and absolute *certainty* as regards what is to be known' (41). A vector of transparency, Iris allows us to experience things for what they are. This is why her motto could be '*to the things themselves*!' (48) and her twin contemporary philosophy is phenomenology—or the study of how phenomena are given to human consciousness in their immediacy.

In the first part of the chapter, Galloway contrasts Iris' immediacy and transparency to the opacity of Hermes—an elusive, deceiving messenger who travels to distant lands. It is no accident that the hermeneutic tradition is named after him. 'As in Hermes's voyages abroad, hermeneutics assumes that the work is itself a foreign land that must be visited' (37). Whereas Iris privileges the immediacy of the image, Hermes' favorite format is the text, which the hermeneutician understands as a *problem* that must be interpreted and deciphered (46). This critical approach to the text is intensified as modern criticism offers symptomatic readings that look for clues so as to reveal contradictions and drives that may lie beneath a text's surface. The crisis of these 'depth models'—as Fredric Jameson (1991: 12) referred to Marxism, structuralism and psychoanalysis—that begins with postmodernism bespeaks for Galloway a more general crisis of hermeneutics, which has its counterpart in the crisis of phenomenology. Thus Iris and Hermes are no longer the figures of mediation whereby the present world can be properly apprehended.

Galloway contends that ascending in their place is a third mode of mediation, which is represented in Greek mythology by the Erinynes (the Furies for the Romans). Indeterminate in number, the Furies are an expression of the de-individuated self, a figure of the swarm and the pack of animals that bring divine retribution to the humans. Thus, if the Irenic mode embodies the ecstatic surplus of imaginal communication, and hermeneutics is the art of textual

interpretation, the Furies' mode of mediation is a *system* that preempts individual agency and will. Galloway identifies these 'nonhuman' features of the Furies with the 'network form [that] has eclipsed all the others as the new master signifier' (62). To say that the Furies are a figure of distributed connectivity does not specify whether such connectivity is that of a swarm of bees, a packet-switching network, or a multitude of social agents. In fact, as Thacker (2004) points out, connectivity is a condition for collectivity but does not necessarily constitute it as the latter presupposes a common intentionality. Put differently, defining the network as a *form* says little about its function and thus about its politics.

To complicate things further, the three modes of mediation isolated by Galloway often overlap. For example, what is the Internet if not a distributed network that relays data in the form of electronic images? And for all their immediacy, do not these image-data still need to be machinically processed and humanly interpreted? Perhaps this is the reason why to the three divine mediators Galloway adds a fourth one: Aphrodite, who borrows 'the mediatory promiscuity of mixing' from Hermes, a 'somatic immediacy' from Iris, and a 'generic commonality, resulting in non-reproductive sexual desires' from the Furies (64). Thus, as a figure of *pure mediation*, Aphrodite seems to encompass and transcend all other modes of mediation. In this sense, the goddess of love might entertain a special relation with digital networks and in particular with Friedrich Kittler's mournful prediction that 'a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium' (1999: 2) as the digitazion of preexisting information technologies obliterates many of their functional and aesthetic differences. Is Aphrodite a figure of this universal, undifferentiated and somehow frictionless mode of mediation? Or does her promiscuous sexuality hints instead at a subtraction from the pervasiveness of networked media towards a more embodied mode of mediation?

Even though Galloway ends his essay with an ode to erotic love, it is difficult to read his conclusion as an allegory of a political program. Likewise, Thacker's compelling comparison between negative mysticism and horror film and Wark's original treatment of heretical thought do not offer an explicit political reading of contemporary networked media and relative processes of subjectivation. This reluctance can be partly explained with the three authors' programmatic refusal to consider new media as an object of study that can be separated from old media and to be consequently

confined to the ghetto of 'new media theory' (1-3). If the skepticism towards 'new media' is shared by many, it is surprising that authors of notable and influential books about digital culture and network politics such as *A Hacker Manifesto* (Wark, 2004), *Biomedia* (Thacker, 2004), *Protocol* (Galloway, 2006), *The Exploit* (Galloway and Thacker, 2007), *The Interface Effect* (Galloway, 2012) and *Telesthesia* (Wark, 2012) are hesitant to discuss how their theory of excommunication may pertain to digital media.

For example, one of the defining characteristics of modern computers is their universality, or, as Alan Turing (1936-7) pointed out, their ability to simulate the operations of any other machine. From this angle, what is the relation between excommunication and simulation? A postmodern philosopher like Jean Baudrillard famously argued that simulative technologies such as real-time video and computer networks erase the difference between map and territory, sign and referent, giving rise to a hyperreal 'generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (1994: 1). Rather than mourning the loss of the real, however, Baudrillard embraces the 'ecstasy of communication' that derives from the unceasing, pervasive, and enlightening performance of media. To the media's communicational imperative, Baudrillard (1993) opposes a nihilistic strategy of refusal to signify—a strategy of 'symbolic death' that being tautological and meaningless resists analysis and incorporation within a simulated model. In this respect, Baudrillard may be seen as an Irenic thinker of excommunication as for him the ecstasy of (hyper)communication ultimately coincides with the impossibility of communication.

This kind of excommunication is quite different from that of negative mysticism or horror film. Rather than connecting two different ontological orders, simulations and simulacra put for Baudrillard an end to all processes of exchange and mediation *within* this world. With the precession of simulacra, the inaccessible great beyond or the unknowable thing-in-itself are liquidated as theological and ontological problems by the perfect circularity of a model that preempts and engenders the real. The NSA's surveillance program PRISM may be in this respect the ultimate Baudrillardian simulacrum. The mirror of an entire society's communications, PRISM epitomizes the governmental achievement of a total control over networked communications whose Irenic immediacy only amplifies the problem of human interpretation. From this angle, devising or cracking the code of a *networked* system, producing a synoptic *image* of a society, and interpreting it as *text* may be

perfectly integrated modes of mediation—at least from the perspective of sovereign power. The old-fashioned hermeneutical work of interpreting a text is in fact essential to anchor and stabilize the radical uncertainty of the image (Barthes, 1977). And a networked system that has been designed to be controlled—as Galloway (2004) argues of the Internet—may ultimately not be as indeterminate as the archetype of the Furies may indicate.

The massive NSA data centers that store all world communications in remote locations hold the promise of abolishing the secret and the invisible. If we would leave them to themselves—bracketing for a moment their political function—they would be monuments to a society that has become completely transparent to itself. If this reflexive mediation can only result 'in an absolute impasse, in the strange non-knowledge of the impossibility of mediation,' as Thacker puts it (133), the very existence of this omniscient observer has reality effects. In other words, the NSA revelations *fix* the subject position of the monitored with panoptical certainty. As Geert Lovink has pointed out in a review of *Excommunication*, the surveilled's awareness has consequences that should not be underestimated. Combined with the pervasive commodification of online communities, the NSA revelations may well mark the beginning of a new age of radical disillusionment with the emancipatory potential of the Internet. 'We are not excluded from the communion of believers. Rather, we excommunicate ourselves because the consensual thrill has dried up,' writes Lovink (2014). This means that a theory of excommunication should not be separated from an analysis of the libidinal economy that drives the adoption of digital technologies and inevitably marks their decline as users migrate to the next platform—or disconnect altogether.

As previously noted, *Excommunication* traces a theological-mystical trajectory and a political trajectory, which explore and police the boundaries of that which can be communicated, respectively. In the final chapter, Wark tries to bring these two trajectories together by introducing the notion of *xenocommunication*—an inhuman or alien mode of communication that is nonetheless 'legible, at least to those within the sphere of communication' (161). Through a lexical inversion, excommunication becomes the performative utterance that banishes 'the forms of xenocommunication that point to something other than communication as ordered by the powers of the day' (Ibid). If the church claims to control the portal between this world and the infinite, life and after-life, psychoanalysis exerts control over the portal between conscious and unconscious, and

phenomenology between subject and object (164). From this angle, disciplines like cryptography and cryptanalysis or autodidactic practices like hacking control the portal between visible and invisible communication, public and secret knowledge.

The question that *Excommunication* leaves unattended is what happens when media and mediation reach the limit of what they can mediate not because of the ineffability of an imagined outside but because they are made entirely transparent to themselves. If this society remains for now a (dystopian) hypothesis it is certainly not because of technological limitations. Rather, those who control access to private communications and sensitive information draw their power from the existence of technologies and protocols that allow for varying degrees of privacy. The question is whether those who struggle to keep information in common—to use Wark's elegant definition of the hacker class—are fully aware that the struggle against intellectual property and the state secret may also entail a radically new definition of the relationship between the private and the public. While notable CEOs of Internet companies have repeatedly declared the end of privacy none of them has declared the end of private property over users' data. Requesting the democratization of access to these data—as Evgeny Morozov (2013) has recently done in relation to the NSA's databases—may entail nothing less than the end of excommunication as judgment before the law—i.e. the end of the institutional power to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate forms of communication. But it would also entail the rise of a transparent mode of communication that by shifting judgment of what is to be excommunicated from the few to the many would also forge a new relationship between the I, the We, and the They.

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