Human and Unhuman

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McKenzie Wark. *Gamer Theory.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 240 pp., 8 b/w ills. $19.95

Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 256 pp., no ills. $57, $18.95 paper

Defrocked Situationist Ralph Rumney: "It is now sport, not painting or sculpture, which defies the limits of the human, which offers a sense or image of wholeness, of a physical idea, which no honest art can now repeat." Nor, need one add, can writing.
— McKenzie Wark

It should come as no surprise that a theory of gaming and a theory of networks were written at the height of a war without ends. Especially since, as Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker point out, the United States military increasingly deploys networks of infowar to fight so-called terrorist networks, and it fashions new games for the training of soldiers and managers alike. Here and now, as McKenzie Wark proposes, "The game is an exercise in negotiating protocols to gain access to more and more of the network" (W, 139; Wark's book is unpaginated; the number here and in further citations from his book indicates paragraph number rather than page). These two media, which we have seen grafted together in the past ten or so years, are the sites through which our current social, technical, and biotechnological relations are performed.

Wark's *Gamer Theory* and Galloway and Thacker's *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* are thus synchronized to the present moment. For not only do they analyze the specific formal operations of networks and digital games as distinct media of our time, but they also examine these forms' theoretical underpinnings—what *The Exploit* authors refer to as their "political ontology." Each book considers what Wark calls the "military entertainment complex," or what Galloway and Thacker call the "networked sovereign"—the strangely "unhuman" identity that presently rules and makes rules. And each explores the limits of subjectivity, agency, and being within an "algorithmic," networked-gaming culture where control is distributed among protocols and passwords. Most important, in spite of the seemingly abstract, "atopic" quality of their objects, which otherwise occupy a "placeless, senseless realm" (W, 21), each book addresses the lived effects of those network-game spaces. Rather than rely on by-now-shopworn definitions of cybernetics as metaphysical systems, these authors address the enactment of gamespace battle in a free-market society (or in the streets of Baghdad); networks are analyzed as "life forms" that are at once "social, cultural, economic, and genetic" (G&T, 127).

Addressing the potential political efficacy of new media structures, each book rigorously questions all suggestions that "horizontal distributions" or even the concept of "play" are necessarily democratic or, as some art-world people might still hope, vestiges of Dada-like alterity.[1] According to Wark's *Gamer Theory*, which updates a situationist critique of spectacle for a world run by gaming, "Play is no longer counter to work. . . . The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life" (W, 16). In *The Exploit*, which extends and challenges Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's controversial diagnosis of modern forms of power, Galloway and Thacker insist that "because both empire and the multitude employ the distributed network form . . . a decision has to be made: we're tired of rhizomes" (G&T, 153).[2] Neither the distributed network form nor the realm of free play necessarily equals freedom. In making these points, both books aim to reevaluate the efficacy of everything from critical to postmodern theory for a global-political practice today.

Despite the striking similarities of content and their proximity in publication dates, it would nevertheless be imprudent to equate these two books.[3] There are differences, and they primarily involve the question of method as a function of *style*. Wark's *Gamer Theory* is written as a set of somewhat tangential musings or storylike reflections on his experience of playing digital games and playing theory, whereas *The Exploit* bears a strangely nonhuman voice, with each passage shaped like a set of algorithmic codes for analysis and action: "Today, to write theory means writing code" (G&T, 118). One cannot begin to discuss these two books without commenting on the unorthodox styles of their writing, which are more than byproducts of or framing devices for their arguments. What *The Exploit* stages is a questioning not only of the ontology of networks but of subjects and agency: the human and the "unhuman" or the "unhuman within the human" (G&T, 154). Although its authors use "we" throughout the text, they propose that the named subject may have little to do with the network's power. By contrast, Wark's theory of gaming is presented from the perspective of the *subject-gamer*—or rather, the "gamer as theorist," who, in gaming, makes theory. Wark may draw attention to the loss of disciplinary spaces like sculpture or painting, but he nevertheless writes from within a modern paradigm of subjects and subjectivity, where gamer-actors are social beings who enact certain gestures with their thumbs. As we'll see, the different approaches to subjectivity bear crucial consequences for thinking anew about both global-political practice and whatever remains of an avant-garde artistic practice.

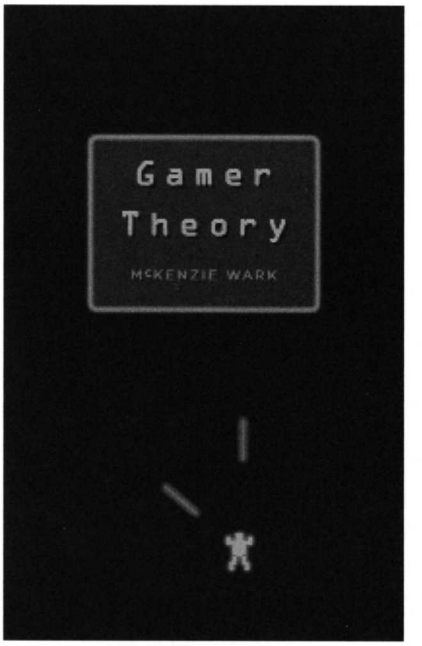
Before I fully plunge into the theoretical ramifications of their arguments, it seems only fair to provide details about these rich and provocative texts. For both books are invaluable resources for those reconsidering the topicality and viability of artistic practice and artistic subjectivity within contemporary culture, newly understood as shot through with the vectors of networks and games. As Wark proclaims: "The artist is now the insider who finds a new style of trifling with [rather than playing] the game. The artist as outsider is dead, for there is no outside from which to signal back across the border" (W, 98). If the artist as a human, named subject-actor still exists, it may only be as the manager of networks, the owner of copyrights and patents, or as the one who "trifles" with or exploits the rules of the game.

Each chapter of Wark's *Gamer Theory* provides a well-crafted set of paragraph-length notations or aphorisms on a range of video games (from *The Cave*™ to *SimEarth*) as allegories for philosophical categories or moments of thought. Each of the nine chapters, all with twenty-five paragraphs each, is

based on a careful analysis of the specific operations of a game and at the same time finds within each game a specific theoretical thread. His chapter on *The Sims*, for instance, addresses and updates Walter Benjamin's articulation of allegory for a gamespace society; his chapter on *Civilization III* takes a journey through different models of media history. His chapter titled "Atopia (*Vice City*)" attempts to define the limits and parameters of an atopic realm after its predecessors, modern utopia and postmodern heterotopia, have lost their topical ground. His chapter about *The Cave*™ and the classical Greek agon (the dramatic struggle between characters) is also about tangible agony: the "soldier whose inadequate armor failed him, shot dead in an alley by a sniper, has his death, like his life, managed by a computer in a blip of logistics" (W, 10).

Originally solicited by and produced in collaboration with the Institute for the Future of the Book, *Gamer Theory* was written first in stages as an online website, GAM3R 7H3ORY, which elicited responses from a gamut of theorists, bloggers, and gamers alike.[4] The project was designed to give Web readers a sense of the process of writing a book. Thus, the book *Gamer Theory* is set forth in Wark's "trademark aphoristic style (reminiscent of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*)," according to the publicity material by Harvard University Press, but it also strives to remind the reader of its original, Web-based form. Rather than develop a dialectically progressive argument, multiple syntheses may burst forth from within a single aphorism. A paragraph of Wark's text may open onto Plato, Ferdinand de Saussure, Karl Marx, Guy Debord, Georg Lukács, and Martin Heidegger all at once, in some strange, amalgamated space of (game) theory, even as each chapter would otherwise represent a specific model of or set of questions in philosophical thought.

In this way, Wark's decidedly non-scholarly, paraliterary approach to gaming-as-theory might appear rather arrogant, particularly when he appropriates ideas or textbites, remixes them like DJ Spooky (or better yet, DJ Rupture), and then sets them into play without necessarily citing sources or evaluating his connections. All reader comments from the former GAM3R 7H3ORY website as well as printed citations of textual references are somewhat recklessly collapsed into a final section titled "Cuts (Endnotes)," and he never directly grapples with nor seems to acknowledge the arguments set forth by other gaming theorists. For example, Galloway's 2006 book, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, which significantly theorized gaming as a medium of action



rather than representation and set out to consider games as allegories of our contemporary algorithmic culture, is given only a few off-hand nods.[5] Wark, who is known as a master of wordplay and "remixological style," seamlessly appropriates Galloway's neologism "allegorithm" (a composite of allegory and algorithm).[6] So while Wark creates connections among theories that would otherwise, in more traditional essays, remain segregated, this creativity comes at a price, which is that others' arguments are somewhat lost in the remix.

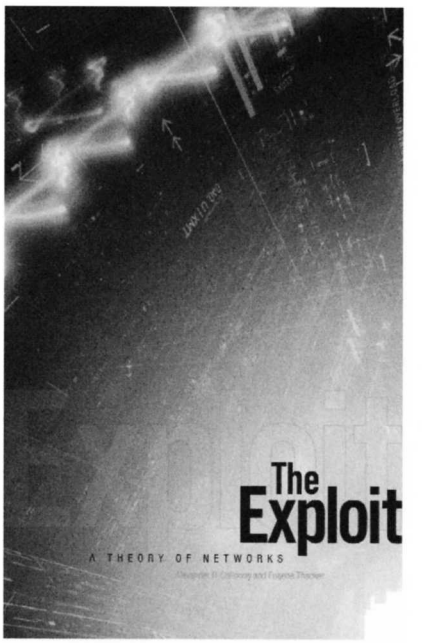
To Wark's credit, *Gamer Theory* does perform a significant action, and that is to turn the reader into something of a gamer—one who is forced to decode and actively synthesize a particular (game) space of theory-signs in order to proceed to the next step, or in some cases, to return to the previous paragraph or level in order to make sense of the present paragraph or task at hand. In his third chapter, while discussing the functioning of *Civilization III*, which is an "allegorithm for gamespace itself," Wark specifies a method for reading both the game and his book: "Perhaps it is best to approach it in its own style, as a series of levels, each of which appears to the gamer only after you've battled through to the end of the previous one. If you're defeated, you start over. . . . You may need to attempt it more than once" (W, 51). Which is to say, what is extraordinary about Wark's text is that it *shows* how gaming itself can be an *act* of making and reading theory, and vice versa. So we, as gamer-readers, begin to empathize with Tetsuya Mitsuguchi's psychedelic shooter in the game *Rez*, who, according to Wark, "is always battling otherness, in an unstable relation to alterity, to blurry edges and fuzzy boundaries that threaten to overwhelm the self" amidst the thumping beat of techno. This approach to theory and writing, as expressed in the closing paragraph of his book, has everything to do with the question of being: "The form of the digital game is an allegory for the form of being. Games are our contemporaries, the form in which the present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through. From this vantage point, the whole of cultural history can be rethought. It is not a question of adding games as the tail end of a history of forms but of rethinking the whole of cultural history after the digital game. Play may be unthinkable, but it nevertheless has a history, and that history traverses both cultural forms and the historical form of being itself. To approach it, to think this unthinkable category of play, is to play in and against language. Gamer theory calls for concepts that make the now rather familiar world of the digital game strange again" (W, 225).

The question of being as a problem of social being in *Gamer Theory* has to be considered in reference to its predecessor, *A Hacker Manifesto* of 2004. In that book, Wark analyzes what he identifies as the new class system of a "vectoral" society wherein property increasingly abstracts itself. He focuses on the hacking work of the hacker class against the hegemonic power of the "vectoralists"—that class of corporate CEOs that owns and controls the "vectors of communication." In an era in which information has become a commodity under the legal domain of intellectual property (copyright, but especially patents), the hacker replaces the proletarian and the vectoralist becomes the new capitalist. The struggle that ensues between these

classes in the present day is not over the abstraction of land (into property) or the abstraction of the body's work (as labor), but over the abstraction of abstractions (information). In this system, according to Wark, the only way to undermine the vectoralist's power is to hack information, that is, to "re-code the vectors of information."

In *Gamer Theory*, Wark returns to the figure of the hacker in his chapter on the conspiracy-theory game *Deus Ex*. His discussion of the hacker as the alternative to the gamer in contemporary society is built on an axis that reflects the former juxtaposition of the worker with the player. It is here that the question of subjectivity as an overt reiteration of an old paradigm begins to feel anachronistic. Citing his earlier book, Wark produces a romantic image of the hacker much like that of the romantic artist: "We are the hackers of abstractions. We produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data. Whatever code we hack, be it programming language, poetic language, math or music, curves or colorings, we are the abstracters of new worlds."[7] Wark ultimately proposes as the political counterpractice for today the artist in the form of a hacker, who "hacks for hacking's sake," by which the gamer-player is the hacker-worker's alter ego. Wark's reassessment of the social being as a gamer being is, as I mentioned earlier, wedded to a sense of the gamer-subject as a discrete human actor. Ego is still key for Wark. As we will see, this is not at all the case for Galloway and Thacker.[8]

Written as a series of propositions, queries, and provisional answers, *The Exploit* can be read through its italicized paragraphs, which interpolate the flow of the book, or it can be read more slowly through juicy elaborations that back them up with examples. This cacophonous style is linked to the method of its production. The text was e-mailed back and forth between the authors, who added, edited, and reworked it gradually before arriving at version 15 (the one for publication). As a result, it reads a bit like code that has been worked and reworked in order to set new ideas into play and watch them precipitate unexpected results. This technique can make comprehending the text somewhat difficult, but the repetition of seemingly disjointed ideas throughout eventually allows those disjunctions to coalesce into a complex web that has no beginning or end—or, rather, that continually starts and stops. The questions posed and seemingly answered become part of the networklike structure of the book, which can be read by flipping through the pages while concentrating only on italicized propositions, but also



can be read linearly for the layers—as the text comes at ideas from slightly different angles. The text is so successful at ridding itself of a clear, authorial voice that the cacophony effect begins to make increasing sense in light of the programmatic suggestions to evacuate identity. Though one hears Galloway's voice from *Gaming* and *Protocol* and Thacker's work on *The Global Genome* and *Biomedia*, the overall tone is significantly collective, even anonymous.[9]

Galloway and Thacker establish the dialogic tone of the book at the outset, beginning the prolegomenon to their book with reference to an e-mail exchange between them and the Dutch cyber-critic Geert Lovink.[10] Lovink states: "In the end, G. W. Bush is [running the world]. Not John Postel," the longtime editor of the Internet protocols (G&T, 1). Galloway and Thacker ponderously respond to Lovink's assertion with a series of queries: "How could there be a global system of distributed control if there also exists a single superpower? At the same time that there emerges a global world network, one also sees actions taken by the United States that seem to be . . . the expression of a new sovereignty in the face of networks" (G&T, 4). The answer might be that "*the juncture between sovereignty and networks* is the place where the apparent contradictions in which we live can best be understood" (G&T, 5, italics in orig.). Given that networks exercise novel forms of distributed, rather than centralized, control through protocols, then it can also be said that networks don't threaten American power; rather, they are "the medium through which America derives its sovereignty" (G&T, 20–21). The sovereignty of the nation state is only further made possible by a protocol logic whereby operations or agents are "anonymous and nonhuman." According to this analysis, governmental power (the Pentagon or the Center for Disease Control) and Microsoft security updates function similarly against the threat of other networks like Al Qaeda and virus pandemics through controls like passwords and passports.[11]

As a consequence, they warn, it is impossible to regard networks as horizontal distributions of power enabling critiques from every recess of the citizenry. The lack of a centralized human agency is not a fault in the control that networks assert; rather, it is evidence that they work all too well. This is apparent in discussions ranging from HTML code to biomedia, from cyberviruses to biological ones.

Key theoretical questions involve the network's form and political ontology. Despite the codelike style of the book, the authors carefully engage in dialogues with a wide range of philosophers from Aquinas, Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt to Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben. They point out that "if networks are in some fundamental sense 'unhuman,' then this means that any attempt to think about networks will have to confront the horizon of thinking itself" (G&T, 180, n. 14). They thereby analyze the ontological form of networks through questions about protocol as a mode of control, the new role of sovereignty today, and the import of biopolitics in a world framed by the biotechnology of DNA codes.

It is important to note here that Galloway and Thacker's use of ontology does not suggest a rooted being, essence, or form that is beyond history. For them,

ontology has become wedded to politics (as "political ontology"), and in this sense the *life* forms of networks always enfold a historical and political outside. So what is essential about networks is never pure, and their position within society always changes, much like Deleuze's reassessment of the function of philosophy or the prewar montage form in the time-image of the postwar cinematic field.[12] Indeed, Deleuze is the strongest touchstone for their methodology, even as his conclusions come under scrutiny. The authors point out, for instance, that Deleuze's notion of the control society (itself a replacement for Foucault's disciplinary society) may already be superseded by a future in which physics and "particle swarms" replace the "control diagram" of cybernetics and protocols, or "bioinformatics" replace the computer as the paradigmatic machine (G&T, 101).[13] But like Deleuze, they consider the degree to which networks, whose political ontology enfolds various military-virtual weapons or the communications systems of the CDC, have reshaped the limits of politics as a function of actions rather than human actors.

Thus in lieu of subjects and actions, *The Exploit* is organized around a discussion of the complex interaction of network "nodes" and "edges" (terms drawn from graph theory), which are also the two framing categories of the book. For example, although both computer networks and viruses are "life forms," they nevertheless bear an ontological "facelessness." The HIV-virus network, though "alive" as it mutates, does not rely on a sense of life as connected to humans per se. This is not simply because the virus can cross species. It is difficult if not impossible to really distinguish its DNA from its action of replication and mutation; the possessive form of the DNA's identity is the action of taking possession of cells. One of the most fascinating propositions in *The Exploit* involves a discussion of a hypothetical art exhibit of computer viruses and a series of questions on the best way to "curate that show": "Would it be more like an archive or more like a zoo" where one could observe the virus-animals in their natural habitat, i.e., a network (G&T, 105)?[14] In this way, the questions of personification and individuation are at the heart of their theory insofar as they recognize that network codes have increasingly overridden the human identities or names (either artists or theorists) to which those philosophical concepts can be attached.

In spite of portraying a landscape without subjects, Galloway and Thacker are not entirely pessimistic about the future possibilities of an avant-garde—only here, humans are out of the picture. They propose a "counterprotocological practice," which, like hacking, can ultimately exploit networks or games as controlled by corporate or governmental protocols. Two options for a new practice are (1) hypertrophy, newly defined to imply the excessive growth of any network's (again, cyber or bio) range or reach, and (2) nonexistence, or "the full assertion of the abandonment of representation," not as "absence, lack, invisibility, and nonbeing" but as a fully permeated disruption of "*representable* identity" (G&T, 136). This strategy is to counter the coded patenting of all creatures and spores even from the depths of the ocean, rain forest, or polar ice caps. For Galloway and Thacker, Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone and the Critical Art Ensemble are, perhaps, protomodels for this counterpractice, though even they fall short of abandoning representation, of making an "a-existence" (G&T, 38).

What both of these books accomplish—like the work of Paul Virilio or Jean Baudrillard—should once again give the artist and art critic or historian pause for reflection. Despite an avant-garde thread within the history of art that has sought radical transformations of artistic practice, the art world maintains a commitment to the nineteenth-century representation of the artist-subject as an individual—the human voice or vision that expresses, for instance, the concerns of humanity in any given moment. However radically some artistic practices may have uprooted the question of agency at various moments—Dada, Surrealism, Happenings, Minimalism—art criticism nevertheless remains dedicated to the artist, even if he or she is the progenitor of a critique of subjectivity and agency à la Marcel Duchamp. Art criticism can accommodate a critique of subjectivity as psychoanalytically decentered—the nonmaster of one's actions—but it still requires human actors to analyze. (This may explain some of the difficulty in analyzing anonymous or collective practices, such as Superflex, Bernadette Corporation/Reena Spaulings, or Critical Art Ensemble, which, as brand names, become conceptual quagmires for the questions of social responsibility and agency.)

Thus, the questions these authors wittingly and unwittingly pose is: How might avant-garde artistic practice (if we can still call it that) account for changes in a society whereby networks or games have, once and for all, made of the artist an uncanny ghost or praying mantis, which, cut off at the neck, continues to act as though alive even when dead? Is artistic practice doomed to remain, at some level, anthropomorphized and thus die along with its severed cortex, or can it proceed within and through an "unhuman" movement without a face? Agency and subjectivity are, so Galloway and Thacker argue, vexed conditions within a networked culture wherein swarming and pandemics necessarily threaten the "integrity of the human ego" (G&T, 5). Both of these books—through their forms and their arguments—interrogate the limits of practice and subjectivity in the contemporary world. But it seems that this time around the relevance of a cultural-studies investigation of subjectivity may paradoxically come less from the domains of anthropology or advertising than from the biotech industry.

The epigraph is from the McKenzie Wark book under review, paragraph 112.

1. Much of this critical view of Internet network distribution was previously put forth in Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

2. Galloway and Thacker say with respect to Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) and *Multitudes: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004) that "what is missing" from their account of multitude "is any vision of a new future of asymmetry" after empire has taken on the formal characteristics of the distributed, grass-roots guerilla movement. They look to locate an asymmetry that evaluates the "unhuman" or "the unhuman within the human" (168–69).

3. Wark's book was released by Harvard University Press in May 2007, though it had an online life with *The Future of the Book* since 2006 as *GAM3R 7H30RY*, available online at www.futureofthebook.org/mckenziewark/gamertheory/. Galloway and Thacker's book was released by University of Minnesota Press in October 2007, but it had been written and developed over four years, beginning with their first collaborative essays on the topic, "Protocol and Counter-Protocol," in *Code: The Language of Our Time*, ed. Christine Schopf and Gerfried Stocker

(Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2003); and "Protocol, Control, and Networks," *Grey Room* 17 (Fall 2004). They have since published and distributed parts of the book in several volumes and on websites, such as Nettime.org. The present printed version of the entire text is "version 15."
4. See *GAM3R 7H30RY* website version 1.1, at URL in n. 3 above.
5. Wark cites "Alex Galloway" in three places: 30, 30n, and 129, but uses Galloway's terms throughout. For a further elaboration of Galloway's two arguments described here, see the chapters "Gamic Action, Four Moments" and "Allegories of Control" in Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Insofar as that book puts forth a theory of gaming around action and a definition of present-day culture as algorithmic, in many respects it provides a conceptual foundation for Wark's *Gamer Theory*. Another book of note in the development of a critical gaming theory is Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), which Galloway cites in *Gaming* and Wark reviewed in *Rhizome Digest* (January 5, 2004), available online at http://rhizome.org/editorial/digest/?msg=00095.
6. "Remixological style" is the term of Mark Amerika, author of *Meta/Data: A Digital Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), who is cited on the back cover of Wark's book. The term likely references Lev Manovich's 2002 essay "Generation Flash," available online at www.manovich.net.
7. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), section 2, cited in *Gamer Theory*, 198.
8. There are critical differences in their approach, yet it is nevertheless apparent that Galloway and Thacker have read and absorbed Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto*, which they cite (G&T, 151).
9. Eugene Thacker, *Biomedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Thacker, *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics, and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
10. See Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
11. Moreover, according to Galloway and Thacker, the political ontology of networks is historically rooted: If the period of high modernism, as found in cold-war politics, was based in an idealized "politics of symmetry" based on independent nation-states, and postmodernity introduced a "politics of asymmetry" whereby dispersed guerillas work against the logic of centralized superpowers, within current global politics, even the United States has assumed the form of the distributed network and so there is no longer a true asymmetry of power (G&T, 14).
12. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 41.
13. Nevertheless, Galloway and Thacker's approach to the evaluation of networks overtly echoes Deleuze's books on cinema, especially *Cinema 2*, which understands cinema, like philosophy, as a *practice* in thought that, in its essence or "specificity," is not discrete and eternally same, but contingent on the field outside that medium. According to Deleuze, if cinema's concepts—as found in the time-image—give rise to anything, it is the very breakdown of causal links between discrete entities: concepts or practices, discursive fields or the concrete social world. That is, cinema's essential contingency as a specific medium, characterized as an *en*folding of the postwar social world and *un*folding onto society and philosophy, also, ultimately, turns actors into "*voyants*" rather than "*actants*" or agents. If that folding of outside and inside was specifically cinematic, a similar Möbius strip may serve as a model for a theory of networks, the *Exploit* authors find.
14. It is here that the authors also examine the etymology of the word "curate" in *curare*, which simultaneously invokes the verbs "care" and "cure." In order to curate viruses, however, one would have to be "careless" (123–25).

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