

# A Network is a Network is a Network: Reflections on the Computational and the Societies of Control

**David M. Berry**

University of Sussex

**Alexander R. Galloway**

New York University

## Abstract

In this wide-ranging conversation, Berry and Galloway explore the implications of undertaking media theoretical work for critiquing the digital in a time when networks proliferate and, as Galloway claims, we need to ‘forget Deleuze’. Through the lens of Galloway’s new book, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, the potential of a ‘non-philosophy’ for media is probed. From the import of the allegorical method from excommunication to the question of networks, they discuss Galloway’s recent work and reflect on the implications of computation for media theory, thinking about media objects, and critical theory.

## Keywords

computation, control society, critical theory, Laruelle, media theory, networks, non-philosophy

The ‘network’ has become a key concept for understanding an increasingly postdigital age, sedimented in contemporary understandings of the specificity of digital technologies within social life. In a number of fields, attempts to study and interpret the digital have been refracted through a ‘network’ lens, an optic that has increasingly been subject to important critiques but which has remained remarkably consistent as an explanatory framework. Galloway’s recent approach to media, which incorporates Laruelle’s non-philosophy (Galloway, 2014), problematizes this taken-for-grantedness of the network and seeks to explore the

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**Corresponding author:** David M. Berry. Email: [d.m.berry@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:d.m.berry@sussex.ac.uk)

**Extra material:** <http://theoryculturesociety.org/>

‘specificities and vicissitudes of computers and other digital machines’, using what we might call a method of exploring ‘non-media’ towards a critical re-reading of the digital. This is a rigorous non-philosophical knowledge of the ‘kernel’ of (digital) media, to investigate the deterministic causality found in an ontology of media that stresses its unidirectional causality and ultimate status as the ground of possibility. That is, to contest and explore a set of realist claims using Laruelle’s rigorously non-philosophical tradition, especially those that seek to get at the core of media, at the ‘thing in itself’. But Galloway also deploys Laruelle to rethink philosophy and media in a computational milieu, arguing that ‘it is impossible to think philosophy without thinking digitality. It is impossible to think philosophy without interrogating the zero, the one, the two, the multiple, and the distinctions made among these terms’ (Galloway, 2014: 219).

If we take seriously the claims of François Laruelle that it is possible to undertake what he calls a ‘non-philosophy’ – a project that seeks out a ‘non-philosophical kernel’ within a philosophical system – then what would be the implications of what we are here calling a method of ‘non-media’? Laruelle himself undertook a similar project in relation to Marxism in *Introduction au non-marxisme* (2000), where he seeks to ‘philosophically impoverish’ Marxism, with the goal of ‘universalizing’ it through a ‘scientific mode of universalization’. Laruelle, in Galloway’s interpretation, sought to develop ‘an ontological platform that, while leaving room for certain kinds of causality and relation, radically denies exchange in any form whatsoever’ (Galloway, 2012: 194). For example, in seeking a ‘non-Euclidean’ Marxism, Laruelle argues that we could uncover, in some sense, the non-philosophical ‘ingredient’, as Galloway has called it. Finding the non-Marxist ‘kernel’ serves as the starting point, both as ‘symptom and model’, for undertaking systematic enquiry.

In this wide-ranging conversation, Berry and Galloway explore the implications of the symptom and model that Galloway draws from Laruelle in his new book, *Against the Digital* (Galloway, 2014), and the allegorical methods introduced in the co-written book, *Excommunication* (Galloway et al., 2013). The aim is to uncover the implications of undertaking media theoretical writing and (non)thinking of the digital at a time when digital networks proliferate and, as Galloway claims, it is urgent that we ‘forget Deleuze’. Berry and Galloway reflect on the implications for media theory, thinking about media objects and the implications of Galloway’s turn against the digital.<sup>1</sup>

*David M. Berry:* In my own work I am interested in the ways in which we can further develop a post-foundational and decentred critical theory in relation to our contemporary computational society (Berry, 2014). Do you see the argument developed in your work as intersecting with such a project, or do you see it as different to it?

*Alexander R. Galloway:* I view things like decentralization and anti-foundationalism as perhaps having a tactical utility, but lacking a more durable use. Let's not forget that bourgeois capitalism is the greatest proponent of anti-foundationalism and decentralization. 'All that is solid melts into air.' Nothing wants to destroy essences and sovereign bodies more than big business. There is no better example of decentralized sovereignty than global empire. I'm much too paranoid to subscribe to any of that. This is why I'm a materialist.

I'm what you might call a 'weak foundationalist'. As I see it, weak foundationalism means: 'I have no dogma, except...'. Or to put it more verbosely: 'I am anti-dogmatic and have no dogma (except for this one small scrap of dogma-x).' Dogma-x refers to any kind of coherent image of things. It may be observational or methodological, provisional or total, small or large. To claim 'all is water' is to articulate some dogma-x. To say 'everything is material' is a dogma-x. So too are the great mantras of modern criticality: 'think freely', 'always historicize', or the 'conditions of possibility' of thought.

Even sceptics, pragmatists, and empiricists – those anti-dogmatic heroes – have their own kinds of dogma-x: for the sceptic, the notion that knowledge is fallible; for the pragmatist, the commitment to practical application; for the empiricist, the religion of sense experience. And even the most intrepid anti-essentialist positions, such as poststructuralism or deconstruction, have their own versions of dogma-x: 'there is nothing outside of the text' or 'all rationality contains a play of supplementarity'. Dogma-x is a claim, a claim formulated as a picture of the world. Weak foundationalism means that, irrespective of the anti-dogmatic or critical nature of any particular knowledge claims, all such knowledge claims are claims, and thus as claims embody some kind of dogma-x, no matter how minimal. It would take longer to demonstrate, but in essence I believe that all philosophical positions, when fully articulated, are weak foundationalist (at the very least; they may be strong foundationalist too).

*DMB:* How do you deploy such a materialist 'weak-foundational' approach?

*ARG:* The most sensible use of dogma-x, and the best way to mitigate its dangers, is always to side with the generic or the common. If we are fated to have one small scrap of dogma-x, the best use of dogma – call it a fundamentalism if you like – is in the form of an insufficient materialism. And note that such a weak foundationalism is weak two times over. The dogma-x itself is the most minimal scrap. It does not occupy the role of a Prime Mover or absolute cause, but rather determines 'in the last instance', as Althusser and Laruelle liked to say. And likewise, an insufficient generic materialism is, if you like, a 'philosophy of

impoverishment'. I view such a move as absolutely essential to any kind of political or ethical project today.

The key, therefore, is to select this dogma-x with the utmost care. Huge swaths of contemporary thought are either oblivious to their own dogma-x or, when conscious of it, have constructed their dogma-x in dubious ways. Consider what I call reticular pessimists. Their dogma-x? 'Everything is a network.' That strikes me as a rather questionable form of foundationalism for a number of reasons. First, it's way too presentist to pass the 'straight face' test. (I suppose in 1860 they would have said 'everything is a steam engine'? Puff puff!) Blinded by such presentism, the claim is simply incorrect in a lot of ways; think of all the things that aren't networks. And third, their claim crashes directly into contemporary forms of network power, and in doing so misses a wonderful opportunity to contest them.

*DMB:* By 'weak foundationalism' are you referring to a minimal ontology guiding your work?

*ARG:* Yes, and we urgently need more cogent theories of this 'minimal' condition itself, the condition of the weak. You might say I'm something of a reverse Nietzschean. A muscular subject who wilfully overcomes the bankruptcy of the world might have been a radical subject position at some point in the past. But today the most radical gesture is to withhold the sufficiency of power. To withhold sufficiency itself. (Such is Laruelle's project in a nutshell.) We need this strategy to combat empire, to combat patriarchy, to combat fascism, both micro and macro.

*DMB:* How do you understand this notion of 'minimal ontology'?

*ARG:* Consider the age-old difference between philosophy and science. Philosophy is the thing that is transcendental vis-à-vis the real. Generic science, by contrast, is the thing that is immanent vis-à-vis the real. Philosophy uses the *as-structure*, science the *in-structure*. From an existential point of view, philosophy asks the same question over and over, 'what is x?', or what is the identity of anything whatsoever? And from an ontological point of view the inquiry is similar, 'all is x', or All as the principle of unity that subtends anything whatsoever.

Generic science does it differently. Contra philosophy's approach ('what is x?'), the existential question of generic science is 'x is what?', or how is anything whatsoever an instance of identity? Likewise the generic's ontological inquiry is 'x is all', or the anything whatsoever as the principle of unity.

On this score the pre-Socratics are much more interesting than everything that came after. Still, the goal is not so much to proffer explanatory rubrics like 'water is all' or 'fire is all'. Instead, we ought to begin with 'all is water' or 'all is fire' and continue from there. Ultimately the

generic question is not ‘what is x?’ but ‘what is all?’. What is the All? What is the one? What is the unary tendency of all being? And how can we withdraw from being in order to discover the one within the unary tendency?

The aforementioned dogma-x now comes full circle. The dogma-x should be subjected to a principle of insufficiency. This forces the dogma in the direction of the generic, and away from traps like essentialism or liberal universalism. (Despite their overall incompatibility, Badiou and Laruelle synchronize somewhat on this point: Badiou (2007, 185) says void, but Laruelle’s generic is as impoverished and unencumbered as something can get without vanishing into nothing. The generic is ‘on the edge of the void’ as Badiou likes to say.) Forcing the dogma-x in the direction of the generic results in an insufficient and generic weak foundation upon which the normal forms of anti-dogmatic critique can best arise.

What Laruelle calls ‘generic science’ also comes under another name: no longer philosophy, but ‘theory’. Philosophy is always inflationary and maximalist. Even the most hard-nosed sceptics are philosophical because they remain sufficient unto themselves – scepticism as ‘adequate’ for thinking. By contrast, theory creates a minimalism in thought. Theory is a rigorous science of the inadequacy of material life.

*DMB:* In my own work I am interested in exploring how theoretical work is aesthetically theoretical, and here I mean in terms of a method informed by aesthetic or mimetic reason, and theoretically aesthetic, such that it remains concerned with the object mediating structures constitutive of socio-historical reality. Does your work explore similar themes?

*ARG:* What a fascinating question. Certainly ‘first philosophy’ has always been closely linked with things like representation or mimesis. From the Book of Genesis to Pygmalion and Plato, the existence of things in the world has often been bound up with notions of creativity, art, and expression. It’s no exaggeration to say that Plato’s theory of art is a theory of being, and vice versa. I love when these connections are made explicit: Deleuze labelling Leibniz a Baroque philosopher, and so on. Perhaps we ought to learn from this and more clearly describe thinkers according to the aesthetic yearnings they exhibit. Or the reverse, do more to characterize art as pure rationality.

As regards the ‘object mediating structures’ in your question, I read recently that the architect Frank Gehry was enlisted to design an expansion to the Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, California. Facebook’s existing site is the spot of the old Sun Microsystems building, and they have already renovated Sun’s old hierarchical floor plan to a more open and emergent ethos. It’s the great fable of the information age: structured hierarchy surpassed by emergent horizontality. Even Sun is over the hill, vulnerable to the new upstarts.

But why Gehry for 'Facebook East', the new expansion building? Isn't this a bit incongruous? Now, at 83 years old, Gehry is the quintessential Los Angeles deconstructivist, the indisputable king of the old guard. A baby boomer if not by birth then by spirit, Gehry designed a building in Seattle that looks like how a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo is supposed to sound, and on the MIT campus he designed a building that 'looks like a party of drunken robots got together to celebrate'. On the other hand there's Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, the most emblematic of the new dot-com executives, young, fiery, and filthy rich. A 28-year-old multi-billionaire, he forged his riches online. Unlike the great moguls of the past, he doesn't exploit steel or shipping or oil or banking, he exploits interpersonal relationships. Facebook operates not in the sphere of work but in the sphere of leisure, not in commodities or manufacturing but in friends (and friends of friends).

In fact Gehry and Zuckerberg are an excellent pairing because they synchronize almost identically on the question of object mediating structures. Consider the old mantra of modernist design: form follows function. Modernism embodies the virtues of industrial standardization, and geometric regularity, taking advantage of new materials like steel and glass. Or consider the principle of minimalism: how objects elicit theatricality. Minimalism embodies a different set of virtues: the necessary involvement of the viewer who must complete the work; the shift from painting to sculpture; or a dematerialization further into performance, installation, happenings, and experiences. But today we have a new dominant, the realists, the vitalists, the environmentalists, those whose chief concern is the expressivity of matter. Today's new virtues include flatness over hierarchy, liberation over discipline, openness over structure, improvisation over repetition, play over work – all of which are designed to liberate affect as much as possible, to make flourish a vast plane of machinic expression. 'Form follows function' is more true today than it ever has been, only today 'function' has been understood in strictly mathematical or algorithmic terms (function as subroutine, method, black box, etc.), not mechanical function as it was for modernist design 50 or 100 years ago.

From one perspective Gehry and Zuckerberg are slightly mismatched, but from another perspective they are nearly identical. They are both 'environmental activists', that is, they both assume that the most important things in the universe are systems, ecologies, networks, assemblages, environments; and likewise they both assume that such environments have a single responsibility, to express themselves, to produce affective responses, to create value, to be active. Sure, they are environmental activists in a rather silly, mundane way, green rooftops and all that, but they are also environmental activists because they believe quite militantly that the world consists of vital systems. This is the problem of reticular pessimism.

*DMB*: How can we understand this notion of ‘reticular pessimism’?

*ARG*: Today we are trapped in a sort of ‘networked’ or ‘reticular’ pessimism. And here I’m taking a cue from the notion of ‘Afro-pessimism’ in critical race theory. Just as Afro-pessimism refers to the trap in which Afro-American identity is only ever defined via the fetters of its own historical evolution, *reticular pessimism* claims, in essence, that there is no escape from the fetters of the network. There is no way to think in, through, or beyond networks except in terms of networks themselves. According to reticular pessimism, responses to networked power are only able to be conceived in terms of other network forms. (And thus to fight Google and the NSA we need ecologies, assemblages, or multiplicities.)

*DMB*: Are there identifiable trends in thinking or commentators that you think are emblematic of this form of thinking?

*ARG*: Yes, a new pantheon of dot-com philosophers reigns supreme today, ready to proclaim at every turn that ‘everything is a network’. Mark Zuckerberg: people are networks. Donald Rumsfeld: the battlefield is a network. Bruno Latour: ontology is a network. Franco Moretti: *Hamlet* is a network. David Joselit: art is a network. Guy Debord: the post-capitalist city is a network. John Von Neumann: computation is a network. Konrad Wachsmann: architecture is a network.

*DMB*: Are there political implications that stem from this position?

*ARG*: Postmodernism is definitively over; we have a new meta-narrative to guide us – reticular empiricism. Welcome to the new dark age! By offering no alternative to the network form, reticular pessimism is deeply cynical because it forecloses any kind of utopian thinking that might entail an alternative to our many pervasive and invasive networks. And all of this is often under the aegis of ‘Deleuze’ – our once dear Deleuze!

*DMB*: It seems to me that tackling the importance of a non-oppressive mediation between critical theory and contemporary society is needed in our theoretical work, and here I am thinking of the way in which one might harmonize the method of study and the object of study without doing violence to the complexity of historical and social relations. In your approach, what do you think are the ways forward for doing this?

*ARG*: We must forget Deleuze. It’s troubling to admit, given how influential Deleuze has been on my own thinking. But it’s imperative today that we forget Deleuzianism in all its many guises.

First, we must forget the Google Deleuzians, those who see the world as a vital assemblage, proffering untold bounties of knowledge – and riches. From clouds, to humans, to molluscs, to molecules, the world is nothing but systems. Lines of flight slice through assemblages, creating

new living landscapes. Systems are open, dynamic, and robust. Networks produce value. These are some of the many mantras of the Google Deleuzians.

We must also forget the Carl Sagan Deleuzians. Remember Carl Sagan and his awestruck odes to the ‘billions and billions of stars’? Carl Sagan Deleuzians are those who think that ontology is about producing a sense of sublime grandeur in the mind of the thinker. These kinds of Deleuzians assume that ‘nature’ and ‘human nature’ coincide, and that the world is there ‘for us’ or, more specifically, to ‘impress’ us. For the Carl Sagan Deleuzians ontology means awesome-ology.

Finally, we must forget the Wet Diaper Deleuzians, or those who, in an endless restaging of the 1960s, think that being political means liberating one’s desires. (Let’s not forget that Facebook’s entire business plan is based on the liberation of desire.) For the Wet Diaper Deleuzians, everything is a desiring machine driven by an endless reserve of polymorphous perversity. They giggle and cry, suckle and shit, fall down and get back up. The world is a giant sandbox, filled with toys. Everyone they meet is a potential Father or Master that might threaten their desire, someone to be dethroned, debased, even killed. Each act becomes a doll house revolution – off with their heads!

*DMB:* If we are to cut off Deleuze’s head, in a paradoxical attempt to stop the ‘dethroned’ Deleuzian flavours of theory and practice, with what would we replace this theoretical work? Or do you have in mind some other register for thinking about a post-Deleuzian world?

*ARG:* I’m poking fun of course. The problem is less with Deleuze himself than with a certain kind of Deleuzian School that has arisen since his death. We must forget Deleuze, but only a limited and somewhat perverted interpretation of Deleuze. In fact there are two Deleuzes, the Deleuze of 1972 and the Deleuze of 1990. The ’72 Deleuze is the thinker of machinic subjectivity and differential systematicity. The ’90 Deleuze is the thinker of control and historical transformation. Unfortunately, the first Deleuze is so commonplace today that it has essentially become a TED talk. I see the ’90 Deleuze as the more radical voice. For example, the reticular pessimists champion the Deleuze of 1972 while ignoring the Deleuze of 1990. The legacy of May 1968, and all that it represents, plays a large role. I’m thinking of the Maude character in the film *Harold and Maude*, and the weary notion that liberation means running stoplights in a fast car.

But while we forget Deleuze we should also remember him. We should remember Deleuze the anti-fascist. We should remember Deleuze the thinker of materialism and immanence. We should remember Deleuze the communist.

*DMB*: In thinking about the reticular, I am also interested in your critique of what you have called the ‘reticular empiricists’. How does (non-)philosophical critique assist us in thinking about the infrastructural base and deploying a material and ideological critique?

*ARG*: Ten years ago in *Protocol* I wrote that protocols and networks are ‘against interpretation’. At that time I was trying to describe the qualities of this new reticular infrastructure. One of the key issues was the way in which computers are very weak interpreters – they are in very literal terms anti-hermeneutic. So it comes as no surprise that, with a change in the mode of production since the early 1970s, we have a change in the ideology of how knowledge is produced. The reticular empiricists are more or less dominant today. From Nate Silver to Franco Moretti, the hard-nosed empiricism of big data is triumphing over more interpretive or normative approaches. To be a knowledge worker today, one must affect a kind of sober pragmatism and deal with the world empirically. In a certain sense we’ve all become glorified journalists, or at best social scientists, expected simply to observe and describe the world. Bruno Latour confirms this recently in his *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*: we all ought to be, like William James, radical empiricists; we all ought to move beyond ‘common sense’ to ‘good sense’. In fact Deleuze, bless his heart, is the consummate reticular empiricist. Deleuze is affirmative, non-dialectical, network-centric, and might be said to be one of the great proponents of a radical empiricism.

Shall we resist such empiricism? What a silly notion, of course not. Empiricism is essential. But it’s also totally banal. Empiricism is something akin to respiration. We all must breathe air in order to remain alive. But the spirit of humanity does not float on the breath.

Badiou’s work in *Logics of Worlds* is an important critique of such reticular empiricism. I’m thinking of his phrase ‘only bodies and languages’ from the opening passages of the book. Asserting that there exist ‘only bodies and languages’ is the key danger of contemporary life, because it suggests that nothing exists except for entities and the symbolic structures that organize them. Later in the book he uses the concept of an ‘atonal’ world to evoke something similar. Atonal worlds are lifeless worlds, flat worlds, worlds that have no topography. Atonal worlds claim that there are only bodies and languages – in other words, that there are only objects in the world and the various relations that combine and organize objects. For Badiou this is the utmost in cynicism, for it denies the event. Atonal worlds have being, but nothing else. They have being without event.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the reticular empiricists make the same claim: being without event. For example, in Latour nothing can ever really change because there is nothing in his work that goes beyond a series of descriptive frameworks for bodies and languages. Latour is very Deleuzian in this sense because he embeds difference (along with change,

process, transformation, etc.) inside the reticular infrastructure. For example, events are relatively banal in Deleuze, whereas they are extraordinary in Badiou. Cells dividing... versus the storming of the Winter Palace. (Badiou is the DeMille of philosophy: it's all about the Big Event.) Because of this, many have accused Latour of promoting a more or less neoliberal, market-driven ontology in which all things are actors who meet on equal footing in order to exchange, translate, arbitrate, and indeed flesh out their very existence. To these accusers Latour's chief flaw is a political one, for at best he abstains from the political question by naturalizing it, and at worst he unwittingly assists the dominant ideology by endorsing and recapitulating it. I'll admit I'm persuaded by such accusations, and find Latour's work shallow because of them.

Latour still believes the old myth that 'networks are enough'. He still believes that bazaars are better than cathedrals, that systems are enough to disrupt hierarchies, that networks corrode the power of the sovereign, that markets are the most natural, most democratic, and most scientifically accurate heuristic for redistributing and indeed defining knowledge. Such claims are often necessary to make, and are often true within a certain limited arena. Yet Latour is unable or unwilling to move beyond them, to take the ultimate step and acknowledge the historicity of networks. Such a step requires a number of things, but most importantly it requires that we acknowledge the special relationship between networks and the industrial infrastructure, a relationship that began in the middle of the 20th century and has become dominant now at the turn of the millennium. Latour has little interest in the contingency of systematicity. He would not agree with me that there is an historical phase 'after decentralization' has taken place. And even if we might convince him of such an historical periodization, he would not likely agree that this new infrastructure should itself be the target of criticism.

*DMB:* Latour asserted that critique is running out of steam, arguing, somewhat unconvincingly, that 'critical theory died away long ago' (Latour, 2004: 248). Are you gesturing to another kind of post-ideological approach, perhaps as a (reconfigured) Laruellean 'real'?

*ARG:* Critique only runs out of steam if thinking becomes the hand-maiden of its natural surroundings, only if the world of networks is taken to be the one and only network-world. Latour ultimately eschews both the Kantian and Marxian modes of critique: denying Kant, he shuns the kind of inquiry that would plumb the conditions of possibility undergirding the present state of affairs, in the hopes of auto-position via better self-clarification; denying Marx, he shuns the kind of inquiry that superimposes a two-structure of antagonism onto the state of affairs, in the hopes of destroying and preserving the world in a higher form. In

other words, Latour enacts a kind of ‘reticular decision’ in which markets, networks, and other kinds of economic exchange are deemed sufficient to describe any situation whatsoever. To avoid the Latourian trap one must withdraw from the reticular decision, refusing to decide in favour of the network, and ultimately discovering the network’s generic insufficiency. (This is how to arrive at the ‘Laruellean real’ evoked in your question.)

*DMB:* If we withdraw from the ‘reticular decision’, what approach comes ‘after’?

*ARG:* ‘After’ is a useful way to think about historical periodization and other kinds of diachronic phenomena. For example, I’ve been tremendously influenced by Deleuze’s short essay ‘Postscript on Control Societies’ in which he describes a historical period, dubbed control society, that comes after what Foucault called the disciplinary and sovereign societies.

*DMB:* Deleuze’s (1992) article remains a key, albeit provocatively ambiguous, description of an emergent ‘control’ society that relies heavily on computation and digital networks. Could you explain what you think lies ‘after’ networks and how Laruelle is helpful for thinking through the control society?

*ARG:* In the case of networks, prepositions like ‘after’ are perhaps less useful. I realize that sounds pedantic, but we should be aware how such prepositions indicate – even sculpt – our thinking. Much of critical thought still clings to a canonical set of relational structures: meta, post, or after. But these all imply some kind of development, exchange, reversibility, representation, combination, negation, or synthesis. Such structures remain thoroughly metaphysical.

Laruelle’s question is not so much what lies after networks, but what is ‘in’ networks. Or to put it another way: What is the immanent identity of networks? As I previously mentioned, transcendental philosophy tends toward the *as-structure*. Something appears ‘as’ something else. By contrast, materialist science tends toward the *in-structure*. Something remains ‘in’ whatsoever it is. The former is what Marx called the ‘form-of-appearance’. The latter comes under many names: Deleuze was partial to ‘univocity’ or ‘speaking in one’; Laruelle uses terms like ‘in-One’ or ‘in-person’.

I find the in-structure to be much more useful for theoretical investigation, for it withdraws rather definitively from the legacy of transcendental philosophy. I see this as the chief task of any materialism. Or at the very least it shows a way to augment the classic ‘historical’ form of materialism (Marx *qua* Marx) with a rigorously synchronic form of materialism (Laruelle’s generic one).

The stakes for me are thoroughly utopian, and unabashedly so. We urgently need to think utopia in the here and now! The difficult thing is determining how utopian thinking actually works. Along with Meillassoux, Laruelle is perhaps the most utopian of the so-called speculative realist thinkers, for he is the one who sidelines the correlationist scenario most definitively. The case of Graham Harman is more difficult as regards utopia, because he does not surpass correlationism. On the contrary, Harman is the Johnny Appleseed of correlation; he strides through the world assigning the as-structure to all entities in sight. Harman borrows the basic world structure from Heidegger and then asserts that every object constructs its own world or place. In this sense Harman is something like a pan-correlationist. His ontology is a vast democratization of correlation that extends above and beyond the bounds of the human. Consider how Harman and Laruelle contrast on the theme of withdrawal: for Harman reality is rooted in the withdrawal of the object, but for Laruelle reality is discovered via the withdrawal from the philosophical decision. The withdrawal of the object creates a world, but the withdrawal from philosophy creates a non-world. Thus while Harman is a disseminator of worlds, Laruelle is the consummate thinker of the non-world, a non-place (a utopia) in parallel with this one. I see Laruelle as the chief utopian thinker of our times.

*DMB:* It is certainly the case that we need to historicize ‘networks’ and place them within a specific historical constellation of ideas and practices. How do you think the question of networks relates to collaboration in the humanities, and here I am thinking of digital humanities, etc.?

*ARG:* What librarians used to call ‘humanities computing’ has reinvented itself under the meme ‘digital humanities’. I see this as a web 2.0 phenomenon; in other words, it’s part of the real subsumption of networks. The vanguard of the late ’90s – people like Knowbotic Research or Etoy – were participating in the formal subsumption phase, during which real exploration and transformation was possible. But now it’s the real subsumption phase: send out the bots to gather and valorize data.

Digital humanities faces a number of challenges. First and foremost it has defined itself as a community of tool users favouring empirical and positivistic methods. This has the dual advantage of both bringing more scholars into the fold and endowing them with powerful new technologies. But at the same time it exacerbates what we might call the *Zuhandenheit* problem: tools get used unconsciously and without critical reflection. With this waning in critical reflection, and as the digital humanities expands, the ideological infrastructure will become more emboldened.

As a colleague of mine likes to joke: digital humanities is for old professors who don’t understand computers, and for young ones who don’t understand hermeneutics. Of course we need computation and

hermeneutics at the same time. But that's nothing new. A much more challenging question has to do with the precise relationship between computation and hermeneutics. Why do we see these two terms as different in the first place? What do they have to say to each another? Can we have a hermeneutics of computation? Or a computation of hermeneutics?

*DMB:* My own work has called for a specific attention to the materiality and specificity of computation in relation to the humanities as a task for the digital humanities (Berry, 2012). How should we understand the digital humanities in relation to your recent work?

*ARG:* *Excommunication* doesn't directly answer such questions, but it does provide a broader frame of reference for both critics and poets, as well as engineers – or in my language, Hermes, Iris, and the Furies. In other books, I've used allegory as the chief method for connecting computers and hermeneutics. The problem with digital methods, such as n-grams, is that they often don't tell you much. I argue that allegory is a much more powerful investigative method for thinking about the nonhuman, objects or networks.

*DMB:* You have suggested that *Excommunication* is about taking a heretical position on 'mass communication-style communication theory'. Indeed, the use of figuration and allegory as a means of talking about media objects seems to move away from critique. Could you explain your approach?

*ARG:* I wouldn't want to overstate our stance, or construe it as some sort of quixotic opposition to the discipline. It's not that. And in many ways my chapter on 'the middle' is very traditional, even slightly old fashioned. Media studies is still a very young field. A number of the most basic questions are still available for further exploration.

My contribution to the book serves to map out a series of alternatives to the hermeneutic tradition, which I view as the dominant tradition in humanities scholarship, even as it might be losing its foothold today. I start from a very simple conceit: why does the term hermeneutics come from Hermes? Is Hermes the god of interpretation, or perhaps even the god of media? (I love when Derrida called Hermes 'the signifier god'.) And if Hermes is a god of media, are there other gods of media that we've overlooked? I use this exploration as a way to map out how intellectual work has shifted in the modern period. So we quickly discover the 'other' god of media, Iris, and the tradition of mediation she represents that is diametrically opposed to the Hermes model. Susan Sontag evoked this alternative in her famous essay 'Against Interpretation', a title more or less equivalent to 'Against Hermes'. But I show how it's not sufficient simply to amend hermeneutics with this alternative tradition of iridescent immediacy. This brings us to the

network form of mediation, a form that is as old as time. Indeed the Greeks had a robust sense of assemblages and multiplicity in the form of the Erinyes.

Some have a problem with ‘going back to Greece’. Indeed, after post-modernism ancient Greece presents a double bind: on the one hand post-modernism destroyed the notion that canonical literature still holds any authority over what we call culture today, and on the other hand post-modernism reframed the desire to return to Greece as a suspicious if not pernicious form of nostalgia. There is a tendency – particularly in German thought from Kittler to Heidegger and beyond – to use ancient Greece as a way to explore essences and origins. I’ll admit I don’t share the anxiety that often surrounds such a move. My tastes are more catholic. We need to have a grasp on both the ancient and modern worlds. We should be writing computer code and reading Homer at the same time.

In a very practical sense, going back to Greece is an attempt to expand the repertoire of what counts for media studies. John Durham Peters, for example, does this quite nicely in the opening chapters of his *Speaking into the Air*. The goal for me is to show that networks and network thinking are always already embedded in the very heart of western philosophy. Networks are ancient, not just postmodern. Networks are a mode of mediation, just like any other. They aren’t ‘more natural’ or ‘more real’, despite what many pundits and intellectuals try to claim.

*DMB*: Could you explain what you mean when you say you ‘don’t view Greek thought as literary; [you] view it as real’?

*ARG*: We have this trumped-up notion of Greek gods sitting astride thrones up on Mount Olympus, an image no doubt filtered through the cloud-city conception of a Christian heaven. But the Greeks viewed their spirits very differently. They viewed them as simply various aspects of the world. (Husserlian phenomenology, in fact, adopts this notion of aspect in very useful ways.) Recall how Hermes is the god of the threshold. When you open the door to step over a threshold, and you hear the squeak of the hinge on the door, that very squeak is Hermes. The squeak doesn’t merely refer to Hermes, nor is it caused by Hermes; it actually *is* Hermes. Gods don’t reside in a land beyond, but right here in these many aspects of the world. The Greeks even had a special name for squeaky Hermes: ‘Hermes Strophaios’ or ‘Hermes of the Turning Hinge’.

*DMB*: You said that you think media studies is a young field, but in many ways (depending where one stands) it seems to me that the field is going through something of a mid-life crisis as the certainties of the broadcast era give way to digital streams and networks. We cannot but notice the difficulties that media studies has in the encounter with the digital, which undermines not only its taken-for-granted disciplinary

divisions (TV, radio, print, film) but also its emphasis on representation and culture. What do you think is the way forward for media studies?

*ARG:* Young only in the scholastic sense! Media studies has taken an interesting turn over the last 10 or 20 years. During the 1980s and '90s – influenced greatly by poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and cultural Marxism – media studies tended to focus on the realm of the superstructure: subjects, texts, ideology, spectacle, language, and so on, whereas today the focus has shifted from the superstructure to the base. I'm thinking of the renaissance in more archival and historical approaches to media studies (dubbed media archaeology), or the trend in digital media toward more hard-nosed, machine-oriented methods (platform studies, software studies). Kittler said that in order to be literate today one must know at least one natural language and one computer language. And he was right.

*DMB:* But if not networks to analyse networks, what do you think will be the new theoretical and methodological innovations in the field?

*ARG:* To be clear, methodological innovation might not be the goal today. I'm afraid that the term innovation has been forever corrupted by the entrepreneurial ideology of the start-ups. Innovation is an ideological problem in contemporary life; it doesn't offer a solution. And here I might deviate from the view offered by Wark in his book *A Hacker Manifesto*. He defines the hacker in terms of novelty and innovation; hackers are those who 'produce new concepts, new perceptions, new sensations, hacked out of raw data'. By contrast I'm quite pessimistic about the new as a category, and instead am much more interested in concepts like repetition, withdrawal, collapse, extinction. Consider something like social justice. We don't need 'innovation' when it comes to social justice. We need enactment of social justice. Every child knows how to make a just society. We simply need the will to carry it out. Gramsci was right: pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

Badiou is inspiring here when he describes truth. For Badiou, truth is not a grand overarching absolute – and it's not a kind of perpetually cresting wave of intensification and machinic process as per the Deleuzian tradition. Rather, Badiou speaks in terms of the generic fidelity to truth furnished to all. 'What we know about inventive politics at least since 1793', Badiou wrote, 'is that it can only be egalitarian and non-Statist, tracing, in the historic and social thick, humanity's genericity, the deconstruction of strata, the ruin of differential or hierarchical representations and the assumption of a communism of singularities. [...] Philosophy today is the thinking of the generic as such.'

*DMB:* You have talked about your project as having a 'love of the middle'. What do you mean by this?

*ARG:* The most sophisticated work in media studies tends to follow a particular trend: looking at media objects is interesting but it only goes so far; what's really interesting are modes of mediation. Hence a gradual shift from objects to processes. Not just the telegraph but telepresence. Not just HTML but protocol. Not just the body but gesture. Not just 'the people' but a process of political realization. The term 'middle' is an attempt to identify these kinds of processes or modes of mediation. I see middle as a synonym for 'milieu' or 'mode of mediation'.

*DMB:* What are the conditions of possibility for this 'middle', and in what way is 'love' helpful as a concept for thinking through a standpoint in relation to it?

*ARG:* Why love? Love means many things: a commitment to the generic (*agape*), a relation of intimacy (*Eros*), a romantic sublime, a mystical unknown, an affective sense of joy, and of course love may appear in any manner of compulsions, desires, or drives. In *Excommunication*, Aphrodite forms the connection between media and love, for she is named 'the one who is fond of the middle'. So love is a media concept, but let's not forget that it's also a political concept. Here I'm influenced greatly by my teacher Michael Hardt and his work on the relation between love and the political. Drawing on Spinoza, Hardt talks about love in terms of joy, or the 'mutual increase in power' contained in collective interaction. In *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri define love as 'the production of the common and the production of social life'. All of these concepts swirl together in my mind: an intimacy with the common; a commitment to the generic; media as middle; love as middle – they all go together.

*DMB:* How do you see the production of the common deployed in a political sense? Are there connections to civil society, and what are the implications for notions of solidarity?

*ARG:* Since Hegel, if not earlier, civil society has been understood as essentially synonymous with bourgeois society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*]. This is the realm of the market economy, of the citizen. Civil society forms a bulwark against the state of nature (and itself is subsumed by the state form).

Hardt wrote an important essay in 1995 called 'The Withering of Civil Society' in which he described how the various institutions of civil society 'have been displaced ... by a new configuration of apparatuses, deployments, and structures'. In other words, the old dichotomy between the social and the natural – civil society as refuge from the state of nature – has given way to a new scenario in which political technologies assume more influence than social structures.

Here Marx was correct: civil society is a barren wasteland filled with compromises, contradictions, and half-truths. We would be wise to do

away with this category – along with Hegel as well! – because the common cannot be found there. But as Hardt instructs, today's techno-centric infrastructure is no better. I think the problem is not so much with any of these categories as such but simply the ideological move that insinuates an elemental difference between the natural and the social, with technophilic 'control' dialectically synthesizing the first two and thus solving the problems they seem to invent. These three discursive moments are not an indication of a problem, they *are* the problem. The common is thus not found in some supposed resolution of the problem of the social but by undoing the representational structure that sustains it.

*DMB*: Collaboration, particularly collaborative writing, is difficult, hence my own interest in new forms of writing practice such as book sprints and hackathons. What was the writing process you developed with McKenzie Wark and Eugene Thacker for *Excommunication*?

*ARG*: Collaboration can be tricky indeed. Collaboration is one of the great demons haunting the humanities, although the sciences, by contrast, are much less skittish about it. Most humanities scholars do very little collaboration. Or when they do, collaboration is masked by certain obfuscatory infrastructures, such as graduate student labour, or the 'silent partnership' of the wife/girlfriend/secretary. I've done a few different kinds of collaboration in the past: a book translation, various kinds of co-authoring, a number of software projects that require teams of different sizes. Writing *Excommunication* was uncomplicated, though, since each chapter was a solo effort. There was much cross talk among the three of us, but ultimately each chapter was the expression of a single voice.

*DMB*: How did you conceive of this project and finish the writing process?

*ARG*: The idea grew out of a conversation Thacker had been having with his editor, and it quickly gelled after that. We wanted to explore the more theological wing of philosophical thought. Hence the crude chronology of the book. I focus on a series of archaic divinities, Thacker is inspired by the heretical monotheism of medieval mysticism, and Wark is working on a more modern and postsecular form of heresy. The concept of 'excommunication', with both its theological and media-theoretical connotations, seemed like a fitting framework. Since first starting to write *The Exploit* together, already several years ago now, Thacker and I have both been interested in the non-human. The coda to that book opens a door that we're only now fully exploring. All three of us quickly gravitated to the theme of excommunication, particularly the way in which it implies some sort of mediation with the radically non-human, what Thacker calls 'the world without us'.

*DMB*: In relation to the challenges raised with collaboration, I wondered if you felt that working with Thacker and Wark pushed your thinking in new or different directions.

*ARG*: Eugene Thacker has an impressive knowledge of mystical and esoteric philosophical texts, and McKenzie Wark's familiarity with the history of radical thinking is peerless. I'm always learning new things from both of them. They constantly reinvent themselves too, which I admire. Never the same thing twice.

Thacker's book *After Life* altered the course of my own thinking in measurable ways, particularly his treatment of concepts like the uncreature, equivocal inexistence, uncreated univocity, and dark pantheism. His use of apophatic reason has also been tremendously useful in my own understanding of Laruelle, not to reinforce some sort of transcendental, religious or otherwise, but to highlight how important denial is for contemporary methodology. In other words, while much contemporary thought operates through a logic of augmentation – more this, more that – I'm much more excited by a logic of subtraction. One example would be Badiou's theory of the event. We need a kind of anorexic philosophy, not an inflated one. Thinking is hamstrung by claims to transcendental sufficiency; thought is only liberated via the generic common. I see this as the key to unlocking the non-human.

*DMB*: McKenzie Wark recently stated on the Empyre mailing list that 'Excommunication is a \*structural condition\*, not something one chooses. Communication needs to excommunicate in order to communicate.' To what extent do you agree with him and what are the implications for thought and practice?

*ARG*: The question of a structural condition leads to a number of interesting places. One way to approach it is through the lens of post-structuralism, whereby the outside is a structuring ingredient in the inside. Here the notion of communicative immediacy is co-constituted with threats of disconnection, alienation or exile. We talk about this aspect a great deal in *Excommunication*, particularly in regard to critical thought in the last half of the 20th century.

But we also pursue another direction. I'm thinking again of what Thacker calls 'the world without us'. Post-structuralism is an incredibly powerful discourse, but it also diminishes certain approaches. Consider the 'return to truth' in a contemporary thinker like Badiou, or the 'return to the absolute' in Meillassoux. That's not exactly our approach, but we do try to look beyond a number of the post-structuralist prohibitions that conditioned so much of critical thinking for so long. *Excommunication*, therefore, is a way to think about things like anti- and post-humanism, the notion of an absolute outside, and the possibility for strictly unidirectional mediation.

*DMB:* Your new book, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*, appears provocatively located in relation to the contemporary mode of informational capitalism. Laruelle is explicitly cited as a key resource for thinking the provocation in this work. Could you outline your argument in the new book and how it connects with your previous work?

*ARG:* Rather than offering a synopsis or critical annotation of Laruelle's work, the book aims to collide Laruelle's non-standard method with the concept of digitality. I say concept of digitality because the topic at hand is not exactly the web, computers, video games, or even binary numbers, but a principle that subtends and facilitates all of them. I define *digitality* as a process of distinction. Thus I see an immediate resemblance with Laruelle's notion of the 'philosophical decision'. Philosophy and digitality both require a fundamental act in which something is divided into two. For example, metaphysics requires the notion of a division between essences and instances. Or on a computer chip data is modelled and processed by means of voltage differentials. This fundamental action is important: distinction, division, decision, or discretization. Not so much the proverbial 'zero and one' of computer culture, I'm focused here on 'one and two', or what it means to move from one to two.

We know that thought can be understood digitally, that's the easy part. Philosophical rationality has worked that way since Plato, and so does a computer. (So-called digital philosophers like Stephen Wolfram merely state the obvious through a redundancy in terminology: there is no other philosophy than digital philosophy!) The hard part is to speculate about a withdrawal from the digital decision. In this sense the book is nothing but a massive thought experiment: is it possible to think non-digitally? My answer is the same answer given since time immemorial: Yes. We need immanence and materialism to accomplish it.

*DMB:* Critical theory argues that philosophy is a specific historical tradition bound up with the history of class thought. How is Laruelle useful in contributing to a general process of reflection on basic assumptions of which philosophy would be an example?

*ARG:* Laruelle gives a basic instruction, one that reveals the distinction between philosophy and theory – or 'science', as Laruelle, Althusser and others often prefer to call it. His instruction is that the best response to philosophy is not more philosophy. The best response to philosophy is to cease doing it.

Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach conveys a similar instruction. In that famous maxim, Marx suggests that philosophers ought to change the world, not simply interpret it. And elsewhere in the early writings, Marx delineates cleanly between speculative philosophy and the kind of theoretical intervention necessary for political action. Laruelle may be effectively read through a similar lens. The correct response to

interpretation (philosophy) is not more interpretation (not more philosophy). Marx's 'philosophers only interpret the world' is identical to what Laruelle calls the 'philosophical decision'. The point is not to continue enacting the decision but to articulate a rigorous and immanent theoretical science of it.

This is precisely what critical theory has always done. Whether it be through ideological demystification or experiments in radical practice, critical theory has always posed itself against the naturalizing powers of representational structures. For Laruelle, the goal is not so much to reflect on those structures, but to show how there is really only one structure, the generic commonality of the material base.

*DMB:* Do you feel that Snowden's NSA revelations have strengthened the conditions for a critique for the 'societies of control' and their material base?

*ARG:* I first started working on the problem of mass data surveillance with the 'Carnivore' project in early 2001. Launched during an earlier phase of mass government monitoring, Carnivore was essentially a packet sniffer wrapped up in an easy API so that artists and designers could visualize real-time network data with a minimum amount of coding knowledge. The project was partially pedagogical (get to know your data!) and partially tactical (start using encryption!). The recent Snowden revelations merely confirmed what everyone already knew. In my first book, *Protocol*, I wrote that, contra conventional wisdom around the seemingly chaotic or unorganizable nature of digital systems, the internet is in fact the mostly highly controlled mass media hitherto known.

Today we're witnessing the true potential of these kinds of systems, not only by the state but also in the commercial sector as well. A true ideological coup: cybernetics, which since its inception was defined as a technology of systemic control and management, was rolled out under the banner of individual freedom. The goal of critical thinking today, indeed the very definition of thought in the broadest sense, is to establish a relationship of the two vis-à-vis its object, a relation of difference, distinction, decision, or opposition.

*DMB:* More recently you have been using the notion of 'compression' as a concept for thinking philosophically. What are the implications of compression for activist tactics and strategies?

*ARG:* The work on compression – for which I'm greatly inspired by scholars like Jonathan Sterne and Jason R. LaRivière – is motivated by what you might call an anti-Baroque instinct. The Baroque has a tendency toward over-saturation, toward the accentuation of a manner. Deleuze's book on the Baroque shows how such an accentuation – or a 'fold', as he calls it – is in fact the genesis of the modern subject. This fold is a kind of compression, or at least a kind of sculpting

and inflecting of forces and energies. Much of modern life, thus, hinges on the relative compression or expansion of this vital milieu. Deleuze's work in particular hinges on this dynamic. No longer beholden to the highly compressed model of the Freudian subject, Deleuze opened up an uncompressed vital milieu, prizing expressive logics over compressive ones. Or think about the new social movements of the 1960s and the way in which political action revolved around the expansion or liberation of quotidian experience. Express yourself. Liberate your desire. Take back the streets.

All of these tactics are tremendously useful. Yet the world is different today, and thus we need to invent different tactics. We shouldn't expect that the tools from the 1960s will still work. This is part of why I'm drawn to generic compression as a tactic. It breaks the orthodox assumptions of Marxist critique, that one should avoid mystification and denaturalization. Yet in an age of mandated visibility, of high resolution, and high bandwidth, I wonder if a little bit of compression isn't tactically useful. I wonder if a cryptographic world isn't more attractive today than a world decompressed and fully legible to all (legible not just by the Big Other or the Father, but the NSA and Gmail). I wonder if a degraded image isn't better than a photorealistic one. Heidegger used phenomenology as an avenue for truth, phenomenology as the pursuit of 'that which shows itself'. But obfuscation might be the better paradigm today.

## Note

1. This text is a re-presentation of an email discussion between David M. Berry and Alexander R. Galloway, carried out between April and June 2014, which has been edited to clarify the argument and the dialogue. Questions and answers may have been merged or re-ordered from the original email exchange.

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**David M. Berry** is Reader in the School of Media, Film and Music at the University of Sussex.

**Alexander R. Galloway** is Professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University.