

Critique of Information, by S. Lash. London: Sage Publications, 2002. xii + 234 pp. \$37.95. ISBN 0-7619-5269-1.

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Critique of Information is an important book of social theory that deserves a wide audience among students of media and society, although its dense conceptual structure and style of argument may challenge readers. It will certainly send them reaching for their copies of earlier work by McLuhan, Bell, Habermas, Giddens, Luhmann, Deleuze and Guattari, Lefebvre, Latour, Haraway, Poster, Luke, and a half dozen more; here, Scott Lash has attempted a major feat of theoretical synthesis, and to a great extent succeeds.

Unlike more skeptical observers such as Frank Webster, Lash takes the phrase “information society” seriously, even literally. He identifies what he considers to be the key characteristics of information in a technologically-saturated media environment (embeddedness, nonlinearity, flow, space/time compression, real-time circulation and use) and then argues that because contemporary society itself is intrinsically informational, it too has these same characteristics. Crucially, information is not *in* society or related *to* society; information *is* society, and vice versa. This development has been facilitated by the spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs), so that all aspects of social life are, to echo Bruno Latour, sociotechnical, with social action and technical infrastructure inextricably tied in codetermining networks of people and things.

The centerpiece of Lash’s argument is his departure from critical theory of both the “German dialectic[s] and French post-structural aporetic[s]” schools (p. 8) to contend that today there is no longer any transcendental, objective, or privileged position from which critique or social analysis can be undertaken. If society is intrinsically informational, and the analyst is inescapably part of the society, so too must the analyst and the analysis be informational, as tied up with and characterized by the nature of information as every other social entity or phenomenon. As Lash repeatedly insists, “The critique of information is in the information itself” (p. 220); “Information critique must be critique without transcendentals” (p. 9).

By the same token, fundamental social phenomena like power, capital, sociality, and so on are also essentially informational and share the same character. Lash makes the case that in such an environment power is exercised not so much as exploitation of certain classes, groups or regions by others, but (following Castells) by exclusion from the flows and means of communication: “Previously exploited, semi-skilled and ethnic minority working classes become increasingly irrelevant to informational-accumulation, which now takes place not on their backs but behind their backs” (p. 5). Therefore, Lash believes, the resistance or response to power must be informational too—real-time, nonlinear, a matter of navigation through networks and flows.

Overall, Lash draws from an extraordinary range of contemporary social theories to contend that there must be a new form and practice of social analysis and critique. Due to the sheer velocity, constant flow, and succession of information (bits, images, text, sounds, etc.), social critics and analysts no longer have the luxury of holding variables constant, of suspending action in principle in order to make abstract comparisons, of focusing narrowly on a single phenomenon or relationship at a time. Conventional causal models must be replaced by “additive” models or theories where “and” is the central operator rather than “because.” (This would also imply that *subtractivity* is a corollary; if the propelling dynamic of networks and flows is cumulative, there would also seem to be a counterdynamic of breakdown and loss that permits further accumulation to occur. Lash doesn’t state this explicitly, but it is suggested by his claims about power exercised as exclusion; social groups have “spaces to dis-identify as well as re-identify” [p. 5].)

The intriguing possibility he suggests is a move away from conventional forms of social analysis and critique and toward conceptual art as the new critical practice, or perhaps a merger of art and critique. Given the recent fixation of contemporary artists on new media forms and production techniques, and the centrality of social criticism

and commentary in contemporary conceptual art, Lash is endorsing what may already be a movement-in-progress (for example, the shows *Art and Money Online* at the Tate Britain, and *010101: Art in Technological Times* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, both in 2001). In the last few years, and especially since the popularizing splash of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, contemporary media artists and designers have “discovered” the complex social, economic, psychological, and political issues associated with new technologies that social scientists and critics have been studying for decades.

There is no question that social theory and research that focus on new media technologies and social processes would benefit from a broader familiarity with contemporary, digital-media-based conceptual art. But this works both ways: If social scientists and scholars remain largely uninformed about new conceptual art and artists, so have artists and designers failed to engage with social research on new media, in their eagerness to master the technical details of writing code, designing databases and information structures and interfaces. The romance of contemporary media art and design with engineering, technical production, and system building should be complemented by more familiarity with the economics, political economy, law, sociology, and social psychology of new media.

At the end of the day, Lash’s proposal for a new mode of critique is very appealing. But it is difficult to accept precisely because of the nonlinear nature of power that he so urgently argues. It is not clear that contemporary conceptual artists, or their digital-media-based projects, have made (or are any time soon likely to make) an effective response that balances, or is even acknowledged by, the power embodied in systems of intellectual property,

security and surveillance, control of global-scale media infrastructures, or the technical forms of organization, retrieval, design, and disposition of information itself. At the moment contemporary media artists and designers remain regrettably marginal voices in the ongoing “flows.”

At the same time, it is instructive that some technologists themselves are beginning to make art as a means of insuring their First Amendment speech and privacy rights against the incursions of recent legislation like the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act and the 2001 Patriot Act. For example, artworks have been created and exhibited that depict DVD decryption code, whose online and print publication has been prohibited under the DMCA (<http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~dst/DeCSS/Gallery>). Artist/technologist Michael Naimark uses laser pointers to temporarily disable surveillance cameras, while the Surveillance Camera Players publish online maps of the surveillance cameras in an area and then stage performances in view of those cameras (Markoff, 2002).

Perhaps these types of works are what Lash has in mind. And perhaps the effectiveness of art as social analysis and critique would improve if more social analysts and critics made art, collaborated with contemporary artists, or even attempted to understand contemporary conceptual art. But Lash, in the end, does not suggest just how conceptual art and design will influence the exercise of power, regardless of who is wielding it. Another chapter elaborating such a strategy would have been an empowering addition.

REFERENCE

- Markoff, J. 2002. Protesting the Big Brother lens, little brother turns an eye blind. *New York Times* 7 October, pp. C1, C3.