FCJMesh-001 On Networked Utopias and Speculative Futures 1/3

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This is the first of three in a series of rejoinders commissioned from the Authors of FC-20 Networked Utopias and Speculative Futures ahead of a launch and workshop based on the issue, the forthcoming 'Trolls CFP', and the future of publishing.

***This rejoinder is written by Heather Davis of Concordia University**.*

Heather co-authored of FCJ-143 Ouvert/Open: Common Utopias with Nathalie Casemajor Loustau.

What strikes me when reviewing this collection of articles is the complicated relations of power that reside within software and hardware, in the everyday spaces of our lives that are now permeated by various kinds of technological apparatus, to the way in which this added layer poses new problems and new creative tactics of resistance to contemporary global capitalism. Although some of the articles are hopeful in their outlook, many share the astute comment made by Rachel O'Dwyer and Linda Doyle when they say, "We can therefore understand the idealised peer-to-peer economy as a gesture that is always subsumed before its politico-economic potential can be realised." In other words, throughout these articles is an insistence upon recognizing the material and political complications of technologies within activist contexts, ones that often seem to be overwritten by neoliberal policies before we can even get our hands on them. The question then seems to be how to develop an activist practice that is both responsive to our current economic and political realities without falling into the trap of simply responding. In other words, how can we create an activist practice of the future while recognizing that this gesture is immediately foreshortened by the limitations of the past-present? Speculative thinking aids in this endeavour as it attempts not to impose a unified system of thought or analysis on a given situation, but as Alfred North Whitehead asserts, to "frame, a coherent, logical, necessary system of ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted." What this means is to account for the intricacies and complexities of experience that herald in new ways of living through the present, and which can signal new ways of occupying the political. By recognizing the very tangled meshes of power that insert themselves before and after activist practice, we can develop more realistic approaches to how media technologies shape our lives, and how these are dependent upon rigid structures that already exist. Recognizing these entangled frameworks can help to assert the way that the 'network' can be used for social justice by evaluating its place in a more realistic manner. 'Speculative' here then functions not as the stand-in for what could be, but to try to account for the very complicated realities that we are working through.

In the particular context thatNathalie and I have been working, the gesture to try to re-imagine the creative space of the city was already foreclosed by current legislative and ownership problems, and it seems that the more we struggled against these regimes, the greater their hold became. In fact, the tracks that we speak of in the article are more heavily fenced now than at any other time that I know of. I can't imagine how much all of this must have cost the railway company CP who owns the property, both in terms of the amount of wages spent for police to guard the tracks and the amount of money to build and re-build fencing. Choosing to look the other way while people make their way across the city in a clandestine fashion would have been much cheaper and easier. I think this example clearly shows the way in which neoliberal arguments that often rest upon notions of austerity measures and cut-backs, are often in contradiction with economic logic. Instead, it is about re-asserting private ownership rights and the power structures that accompany them. What is highlighted in these articles is the way in which it is necessary to see these larger structures as determining how various activist strategies can work, both on- and off-line, without giving in to a deadening determinist logic.

References

Whitehead A.N 1979 Process and Reality, Simon and Schuster.

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