FCJMesh-003 On Networked Utopias and Speculative Futures 3/3

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This is the third of three in a series of rejoinders commissioned from the Authors of FCJ Issue 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 and FCJ.

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Rowen is the author of FCJ-146 Mannheims Paradox – Ideology, Utopia, Media Technologies and the Arab Spring.

He also contributed to FCJ Issue 6 on Mobility as author of FCJ-036 From Stabilitas Loci to Mobilitas Loci: Networked Mobility and the Transformation of Place.

I want to acknowledge all those involved in the production of the 'Utopias and Speculative Futures' special issue of *The Fibreculture Journal* – the issue editors (Su Ballard, Lizzie Muller, and Zita Joyce), the general editor (Andrew Murphie), the other contributors, and others behinds the scenes – for making it such a strong and rich issue. I also wish to thank the issue editors for organising this event (which, unfortunately, I can't make), and for the invitation to reflect on the articles contained in it.

As someone with a PhD in architectural theory, who now works primarily on mobile and locative media, who is also involved in a number of projects looking at the Australian National Broadband Network (NBN) and its associated "substrate networks", and who has written for this issue on social media and the 'Arab Spring', this particular issue of *the Fibreculture Journal* holds a great deal of interest for me. What I offer below, then, are my initial thoughts and reflections on (as opposed to detailed critical engagements with) four articles contained in this issue – those by Ulises Mejias, Rachel O'Dwyer and Linda Boyle, Laura Watts, and Dan Frodsham.

1.

I thought the sequencing in this issue, with my article preceding that by Ulises Mejias, was apt, for his picks up in key respects from where mine leaves off by examining an issue that I touched on towards the end of my piece, but was unable to develop in any detail: the issue of power. This, of course, is a consideration of central concern to those with an interest in political economic analyses of the media. Mejias writes: "Liberation technology does not seem very interested in questioning the roles and structures of the institutions that own and control social media networks." In his critique of this lack of interest and the implications of "communications capitalism", I was struck by two things: 1. his astute observation regarding self/Other dynamics: "Liberation technology thus functions as a form of self-focused empathy in which an Other is imagined who is nothing more than a projection that validates our own desires…";
2. the rich lines of critical analysis he opens up in his exploration of

"nodocentric filters" (an important step, I think, in bringing greater nuance to, and avoiding the flattening effects that seem to accompany, the sorts of analyses that go under the banner of 'Social Network Analysis') and "monopsony". It is this balancing of political economic analysis and critique of the discourse/rhetoric of "liberation technologies" that make for some interesting connections between Mejias's work, and that of Rachel O'Dwyer and Linda Boyle.

2.

Very briefly, O'Dwyer and Doyle develop what is, to my mind at least, a very elegantly crafted political economic analysis of the "effusive rhetoric of the 'networked information economy'. A real strength of this article is the way that it details the complex entanglements and discursive discrepancies that exist between the political economy of network cultures and the (always shifting) substrate networks that support and enable them.

For me, both these articles – that by Mejias and that by O'Dwyer and Doyle – make important contributions to what is still a rather scant literature on the political economy of 'new media'.

3.

The threads connecting the above two articles are continued in the next that I wish to mention, Laura Watts' poetic work of ethnography, 'Sand14′. As with the above authors, she, too, is concerned with critiquing technological visions of future transformation. One form this takes in the context of her article is the mobile media industry's "dream of ubiquitous access". It has been an interesting experience reading this article as I did so at the same time as I have been reading Parikka's *What is Media Archaeology?*As Parikka explains in the intro this his book, media-archaeological methods are both backward and forward looking, concerned with past practice and history and the future – a two-way form of vision he advocates in order to be able to "tackle past and present media cultures in parallel lines" (14). This, I think, is what is most impressive about Watts' article: its attentiveness to what has been (eg. the mobile telecoms industry's "lack of enduring memory"), its awareness of the present (the same industry's "lack of sensitivity to future locality"), and her preparedness to engage with the future by speculating on possible alternative futures that respond to these industry 'aporias'.

4.

This same backward-forward looking dynamic is also strongly evident as well in Dan Frodsham's piece. Reading it brought to mind a range of past (and largely speculative) architectural projects that sought to use the technologies of their to serve, in Frodsham's words, "as a dynamic mechanism for radical social transformation". For examaple, his description of 'Utopic Spatial Practice' as something that would "conspire to bring about a confrontation between *different* realities, strategically creating incongruity, rather than seamless user experiences, to prise open a space between worlds in which social, political and personal transformation might be achieved" reminded me of Lebbeus Woods' exploration of some of these themes in his proposal for a kind of 'liminal' architecture developed as part of his 'Sarajevo Project'. Frodsham is right, I think, to draw a direct connection between contemporary interest in locative media and earlier forms of architectural and urban experimentation. As an example of the latter, he cites Constant's 'New Babylon' project (later manifestations of which, significantly, began to incorporate electronic circuitry). There is also the very rich work of Cedric Price (Rowen also mentions Price here -ed), and others during the 1960s and 1970s in particular (such as Archigram, Ant Farm, and many, many more) – all of whom, as Peter Cook observes, were interested in establishing a "basic dialogue between movement, structure, and the possible transfer of events and their location within the structure" (Cook, 1970: 101) and which took, as an underlying consideration, "questions of place, facility, equipment and the idiosyncrasies of the users" (122). Put another, to use Anne Galloway's words, these were projects that were interested in creating temporary flexible architectures in order to explore temporary flexible politics. For me, the importance of this essay lies in the way it attempts to historicise contemporary locative media practice, and, in the spirit of these earlier projects, to mobilise the "utopian impulse" and the "utopian imagination" in order to to formulate "strategic responses to power".

I thank the editors again for the special issue and the opportunity to comment on it. I hope these (admittedly all too brief and rather hastily composed) remarks are useful.

References

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