

Networks and subjectivity in contemporary french philosophy¹

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Abstract

This article presents three different perspectives on networks in contemporary French philosophy, in particular the thinking of Paul Virilio, Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour. What we call transformative networks, in line with Bruno Latour, are socio-technical mediations which are altering the conditions of the experience and producing new forms of subjectivity. Networks are empirical figures of the ontology of the present, figures which permit us to think about the field of communication as a contemporary structural problem.

Keywords

Network, new technologies, Communication, Philosophy, cyberspace

Introduction

Networks are all too real. To check the extent of our dependence on networks all we need to do is imagine a trip to a remote place where everything that makes up the tangled universe of networks and services feeding our mobile and immobile ecosystems will be in short supply: water, food, electricity, media, means of transportation, and so on.

Networks have always had the power to produce subjectivity and thought. But it was as if the networks were dominated by a social hierarchy which prevented us from thinking in a rhizomatic way. With the weakening of the order of books (CHARTIER, 1994) and the contemporary state in the face of the interests of international capital, and the emergence of the individual and of communication devices, a reciprocity

between networks and subjectivities emerges here and there as if, by withdrawing, the social hierarchy allowed us to see not just a plurality of thoughts but the fact that to think is to think in a network.

Networks have become simultaneously a kind of paradigm and the main protagonist of the changes underway just at the moment when information and communication technologies have come to play a structuring role in the new world order. Society, capital, the market, work, art and war are today defined in terms of networks. Nothing seems to escape networks, not even space, time and subjectivity. Contemporary French philosophy has been making an enormous contribution to thinking about networks, and it is not for nothing that they occupy a key place in the book *Tramas da Rede* [*The meshes in the web*] (PARENTE, 2005).

The point is not to explain the concepts of the great contemporary French philosophers, nor even to show any connection between them, but rather to demonstrate that some of their concepts – the rhizome (DELEUZE et al., 1995), the aesthetics of disappearance (BAUDRILLARD, 1991; VIRILIO), the ultimate vehicle (VIRILIO), transformative networks (LATOURET et al., 2004), heterotopia (FOUCAULT, 1994) and pantopia (SERRES, 1998) – form a conceptual field which can be used to found a true theory of new technologies as a network of biopolitical communication. One day, communication theorists and historians will realize that networked thinking does not just mean thinking about networks, which still refers to the idea of the social or the idea of the system, but rather that it is, above all, thinking about communication as a place of innovation and happening, of that which escapes representation. On that day, communication will have gone beyond its technologies to become a foundation.

In France, interest in network representation emerged in the 1960s in philosophy and the human sciences, in work which established a complex and variable relationship with structuralism. The reticular thinking which resulted gave one wave to the sources or general structures (more than they imposed themselves as an a priori form) and another to radical empiricism.

In actual fact, many of the contemporary French philosophers and theorists agree with the idea that infocommunicational machines are engendering deep transformations in devices for the production of subjectivities.

The ultimate vehicle

VIRILIO produced a series of essays on space and its relationship with the speed of transportation vehicles and audiovisual vehicles. Mobile and audiovisual vehicles have radically transformed our relations with space. On the one hand, he said that space was being transformed due to the appearance of new means of transportation and communication. We experience space differently if we travel by horse, by car or by airplane, if we use writing or telecommunications. Everything happens as if the space of enclosure was giving way to cyberspace which, according to VIRILIO, means the end of space, its annulment: if the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century saw the advent of rail, road and air-based vehicles, the end of the 20th century has seen massive changes with the arrival of the audiovisual vehicle and telepresence vehicles: television, videoconferencing, telematic networks, cyberspace.

Space, events, information and people are increasingly conditioned by telecommunication, just as the transparency of the space of our journeys tends to be replaced by the connections of the audiovisual vehicle, the ultimate horizon of our trajectories, whose most perfect model is cyberspace. According to Virilio,

we will reach a point when tennis courts will give way to virtual courts; bicycle rides will give way to exercises on a home-trainer; wars will give way to videogames; astronauts will give way to telerobots: space will extend no further. Inertia will follow continuous displacement on the day when all displacements will be concentrated on a single fixed point, in an immobility which is no longer that of non-movement, but rather that of potential ubiquity, of absolute mobility which annuls its own space because it has made it so transparent. Virilio even went as far to create a conceptual character, inspired by Benjamin's *flâneur* – the technologized para- or quadriplegic, hit by the polar inertia of cyberspace vehicles.

For us, cyberspace is just the newest playground for humanity, which heralds a new architecture, the information architecture. According to Walter Benjamin, if each society has its own kind of machines, it is because they are the correlation of the social expressions capable of making them come about and making use of them as true organs of the emerging reality.

The idea that the horizon of our trajectories is cyberspace, the ultimate vehicle, connected in a network and able to see and act from a distance, the focal point of all the space annulled by absolute ubiquity is, at the very least, a technological utopia or a historical and cultural absurdity. It is a technological utopia which assumes that technical differences and media may merge into an increasingly transparent interface, which would represent a convergence of all interfaces. In addition, it is to disregard the history of technology, since the entire history of technology – from the invention of fire to the invention of the wheel, including the chair, the car, the elevator and the escalator – leads to increased sedentariness of the body.

It is cultural absurdity which assumes that culture can exist without nature and without technology. What kind of intelligence would be only associated with our brains, without also being associated with our languages or the luminescence of the universe? Where is nature, culture, technology here? Where is the real, or rather, the virtual, when they say that the universe is written in the language of geometry? Where is the virtual, or rather the real, when they say that our eyesight is produced by the sunlight? How to reconcile geometry (that which is intelligible) and color (that which is sensitive) in this image which has not stopped algebraizing itself, or rather, temporalizing itself, since Brunelleschi's *Tavoletta*?

The question that comes up here is: where are the phenomena? Outside the networks, the realists would say. Within the networks and languages, the idealists would say. As Latour said in his article: "Unfortunately, the phenomena circulate through the whole that makes up the networks, and it is only their circulation that allows us to verify them, guarantee them, validate them".

Space: heterotopia and pantopia

Obviously cyberspace or the space of information does not mean the annulment of space, just the technological realization of the topological space, the space of juxtaposition of that which is near and that which is far, the simultaneous. In other words, with cyberspace, we will increasingly experience space as being the space of relations of proximity, a space of connections, both heterotopic and pantopic.

In a lecture entitled "Of Other Spaces", FOUCAULT (1994), provided a brief history of space in the West, in order to situate the questions being posed once again by the secularization process of contemporary space, the space of information, of stochastic memories and networks. According to him, contrary to what it might seem, we live in an era obsessed by space: we live in an era of simultaneity, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far.

FOUCAULT (1994) describes three types of space. In the Middle Ages, the space of location was a set of hierarchical places. This space goes into crisis with Galileo and modern science. Galileo's most important discovery was not that the earth rotated around the sun, but the fact that he established an infinitely open space. In other words, the locations of things represent only points in their movement. Space as an extension replaces location. In our times, space has become topological: it comes to be defined by the relations of proximity between points and elements, and forms series, meshes, graphs, diagrams and networks.

For SERRES (1998), the relationship of mixture and connection created by the network forms a pantopia: all places are in a single place and each place is in all places. The idea of a pantopia is very close to that of a heterotopic space, which indicates the desire to gather all places in a single place, like in a natural history museum, which exhibits birds from different places and times side-by-side. It is exactly this place of accumulation of the same as other which leads us to say, when we are networked, that we are here and there at the same time, and this is a characteristic of post-modern heterotopia. Heterotopia is a long way from being threatened by the space of hypermedia and the network, whose logic is the same: topological co-presence, meshes of the networks.

If the experience of cyberspace is destined to truly transform us, it is not because it will replace reality with a cybernetic reality, a simulated reality, but because cyberspace puts into practice and strengthens the heterotopia process described by FOUCAULT (1994).

Transformative networks

Let us take as an example the image of the network suggested by Latour: a collection of stuffed birds in a case at a natural history museum produces a heterotopia which allows the researcher to compare and analyze them far from the confusion of the natural ecosystems where they were found. The collection is like the center, the node, the gravitational

field which produces a new arrangement between the near and the far: "local" birds are juxtaposed with birds of the same species brought from all over the world. Compared to the original situation, in which each of them lived in their own ecosystem, this is a loss and an enormous reduction, because it would be impossible to reproduce that reality. But, if compared to the confusion of a tropical forest, from where it would be hard to deduce new knowledge, what an extraordinary amplification! In actual fact, as we will see below, this museum case is not just the heterotopia which expresses the topology of networks – whether more or less focused, more or less fast-moving, more or less wide – which computers and telematic networks will strengthen (the computer's decentralization does not break the heterotopic logic, since it is only an effect of its speed), but also the logic of fractal algorithms, intermediary dimensions or hybrids between singular landscapes and scientific models.

The work of Latour and Callon, more than that of LÉVY (1993), leads us to realize that information and communication technologies can be understood as intelligence technologies not so much because they project or exteriorize the richness and the complexity of cognitive processes but rather because they reveal how much their complexity is derived not only from the richness of our feelings and faculties, but also from objects, supports, devices and technologies which surround us and make up a socio-technical network of great complexity. What is at stake is less the prosthetic function of technology – which often actually serves as an extension of assumed cognitive skills (a prosthesis which extends and strengthens our thoughts and their information processing and transmission processes) – and more a continuous process of delegating and distributing cognitive activities which form a network with the various non-human devices.

Why transform the world into information? Because information allows us to solve the problem of presence and absence in one place in a practical way – through selection, extraction, reduction and inscription. Information establishes a material interaction between the center and the periphery, which should be constructed so that the action carried out on it from a distance is more effective. As Latour says in his article:

Ever since information has enjoyed the advantages of the inscription of calculation, of classification, of superimposition, of that which can be inspected with the eye, it has become commensurable with the other inscriptions which belong to realities which were strangers to each other until then. Today we understand this phenomenon better, because we make use of all the computers and hypertextual networks which allow us to combine, translate and integrate designs, texts, photographs and graphics, previously separated by time and space (LATOUR, 2004).

The network is therefore the immobility which is necessary to gather together what should flow in it. Let us consider the special topology of these networks.

Transformative networks deliver an increasingly larger amount of information to the centers of calculations, through a series of dislocations. The computer initially emerged as a tool to help humans process the exponential increase in information which needed to be processed. Imagine the job we would have today if we did not have the computer to calculate economic and sociocultural indicators.

Information circulates, mobilizing the entire network of intermediaries which extends from the center to the periphery, and by doing so, it creates a kind of tension which keeps the network cohesive. This tension is one of the parameters of the network, alongside flow, speed and intensity. It is only when we follow the traces of the circulation of information, according to an article by Latour, that we overcome the usual distinction between signs and reality: “we do not navigate only through the world, but also through the different matters of expression”.

For Latour, science and technology are a heterogeneous mega-network which mobilizes humans and things and creates a field of tensions and forces which hybridizes them. It is impossible to understand any network without getting to know the institutions, the material vehicles and the actors which intermediate the relationship between the periphery and the center of networks. The body of transformative networks and their centers endow those which dominate them with a massive advantage, to the extent that they are simultaneously distanced from places and interconnected to phenomena through a reversible series of transformations. The centers of the network are nothing more than the spaces where the heterotopic intensity is maximized and can be capitalized on like so many potential actions in the world.

To understand how certain visions of the world impose themselves and become dominant, and how we become attached to things, to procedures, to certain ways of behaving, we must analyze the process of transforming the world into information, which takes place in networks, whichever ones they may be. Truths about God, nature, or a certain artistic tendency do not exist outside of the networks in which they circulate, as if they were phenomena which could speak for themselves.

Science is not applied based on the ideas of its geniuses. Like social life, science multiplies but huge investments are necessary for this to happen. It is true that technologies simply give more visibility to the network infrastructure of science:

When we measure information in bits and bauds, when we subscribe to a database, when, in order to act and think, we connect to a communication network, it is more difficult to continue to see scientific thought as a spirit floating on the water. Today reason, which has nothing natural about it, is much more like to a communication network, or a telematic network, than to Platonic ideas (LATOUR, 2004).

From the rhizome to autopoiesis: network and subjectivity

As Virginia Kastrup (KASTRUP, 2004) showed very well, Latour’s transformative networks are an empirical and updated version of the rhizome which helps us to think about the creation of hybrids. In fact, for Latour, hybrids emerge from the network as intermediaries between the heterogeneous elements - objective and subjective, social and technological, knowledge and things, intelligences and interests - in which the matters and subjectivities are worked on, forged and merged without the control of the so-called objective methods of science.

The concept of the rhizome created by Deleuze and Guattari is a fractal concept, which leads us to think of an intermediary dimension which helps us to overcome the dichotomies of the intelligent and the sensitive, the discursive and the extra-discursive, the subject and the object.

The concept of the rhizome was created by Deleuze based on Barthes’ understanding of the book, and was used by LÉVY (1993) as a new paradigm for understanding hypertextual networks and dynamic computer interfaces.

The description that BARTHES (1992) provides of the text in *S/Z* is the description which contains all of the fundamental principles of hypertext: the network does not have organic unity; there are many networks within it which act without any one of them imposing itself on the others; it is a kind of mutating universe, with different means of access, without it being possible to describe any one of them as the main one; the codes it mobilizes spread as far as the eye can see, and are indeterminable.

These characteristics of networks can be applied to organisms, to technologies, to devices, but also to subjectivity. We are a network of networks (multiplicity) and each network refers to other diverse networks (heterogenesis) in a self-referent process (autopoiesis).

The subject is an autopoietic system, and like any autopoietic system defined by Varela and Maturana, it organizes itself as a self-referent network, which continuously regenerates the network which produced it through its interactions and transformations, and constitutes itself as a concrete system or unit in the space where it exists, specifying the topological domain in which it exists as a network. Like cognition, subjectivity is the coming, the emergence (enacting) of a feeling and a world based on its actions in the world.

Thinking about subjectivity as autopoiesis leads us to describe knowledge, reason, cognition and intelligence not as the powers of a subject, since they are dimensions which co-emerge with social universes. On the other hand, these “capacities” which co-emerge with the individual in a process of self-invention cannot be linked only to the brain, but must also be linked to the body, which far surpasses its outer covering and extends as far as its socio-technical networks, its habits, its emotions.

Notes

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