



connected

*or what it means
to live in the
network society*

steven shaviro

Connected,

or What It Means to Live
in the Network Society

Electronic Mediations

Katherine Hayles, Mark Poster, and Samuel Weber
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or What It Means to Live in the Network Society
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The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.

—DONNA HARAWAY

Each portion of matter may be conceived as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fish. But every branch of each plant, every member of each animal, and every drop of their liquid parts is itself likewise a similar garden or pond.

—G. W. LEIBNIZ

Angels are like eagles or tigers. They have no mercy, just a cold brilliance and glittering eyes watching for prey.

—MISHA

Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is.

—JOHN ASHBERY

The bell is the connection—which is more than junky-talk.

—JACK SPICER

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Preface

Donna Haraway writes that in a world marked by rapid, startling innovations in information technology, electronic communications, and biological engineering, “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (149). Our lives are increasingly transformed in ways, and by devices, that seem to have come out of the pages of speculative fiction. At the same time, the largest tendency of these changes seems to be to transform the world itself into science fiction, or at least into a virtual-reality game. As Jean Baudrillard, among others, has remarked, under the reign of mass media and long-distance communications, reality itself has been turned into “its own pure simulacrum” (2001, 173). One need not share Baudrillard’s Manichaeism or his nostalgia for a supposedly lost Real in order to appreciate the cogency of his observations. Today, the technosphere, or the mediascape, is the only “nature” we know.

In this book, I try to write cultural theory as science fiction to come to grips with a world that itself seems on the verge of being absorbed into the play of science fiction novels and films. I have several precedents for this approach. In *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze suggests that philosophy ought to be seen, in part, as “a kind of science fiction” (xx). This is because philosophy, like science fiction, can “make present the approach of a coherence that is no longer ours,” no longer that of our familiar humanistic certainties. Philosophy is like science fiction in that it deals with concepts that have not yet been worked out; both genres work “at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance, and transforms the one into the other” (xxi). Or, as Michel Foucault similarly writes, the

greatest reward and highest justification for intellectual work comes when this work results, “in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself” (1986b, 8).

In a different way, Carl Freedman argues, in his book *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, that “theory” and “science fiction” have a privileged relationship. Both of these sorts of writing seek to grasp the social world not by representing it mimetically but by performing a kind of “cognitive estrangement” upon it (a term that Freedman borrows from Darko Suvin), so that the structures and assumptions that we take for granted, and that undergird our own social reality, may be seen in their full contingency and historicity. This means that science fiction is the privileged genre (literary, cinematic, televisual, and digital) for contemporary critical theory, in much the same way that the nineteenth-century realist novel was the privileged genre for the early-twentieth-century Marxist criticism of Georg Lukács and others. In addition, Freedman argues that critical theory and science fiction crucially share “certain *structural* affinities” (23) in the ways that they engage with late capitalist society. Science fiction and critical theory alike are engaged in the task of what Fredric Jameson calls the “cognitive mapping” of postmodern space: an effort that “seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system,” given that this system is unrepresentable by traditional mimetic means (54).

Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society is a book about cyberculture, or about what Manuel Castells (2000b) calls the “network society.” It is not an empirical study but rather a speculative exercise in cultural theory. As such, it is a work of science fiction in a way that I hope is consonant with both Deleuze and Freedman. Throughout this book I look at cultural practices, especially those involving digital media, both as they are described in sci-

ence fiction novels and films and as they are being enacted today on the Internet. I do not distinguish between these two sorts of sources. My aim, like that of any other science fiction writer, is to discern the changes that are transforming our world into a very different place from the one into which I was born. Science fiction does not claim to predict what will happen ten, a hundred, or a thousand years from now; what distinguishes the genre is its linguistic and temporal orientation. Science fiction is always written in the future tense—conceptually, if not grammatically. Not only is it about what has not yet happened, but its very structure is that of the not-yet-happened. It addresses events in their potentiality, which is something vaster and more mysterious—more perturbingly *other*—than any actual outcome could ever be. Science fiction is about strange metamorphoses and venturesome, unpredictable results. It is a practice of continual experimentation, just as science and technology themselves are. In this way, science fiction conjures the invisible forces—technological, social, economic, affective, and political—that surround us. It makes those forces visible and palpable, and brings us face to face with them, however frightening and untoward they may be. It is only by writing cultural theory as science fiction that I can hope for my work to be (in Lenin's famous phrase) "as radical as reality itself."

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Acknowledgments

I started working on this book because Jose Bragana de Miranda and Maria Teresa Cruz asked me to write something about networks for a conference they were organizing in Porto, Portugal, in 2001. The manuscript grew into far more than they originally asked for, but I must thank them for the initial impetus to gather together my eclectic thoughts and readings into a book.

Several people read portions of the manuscript as it was being written and offered me valuable feedback: Leo Daugherty, Lee Graham, Roddey Reid, Dominic Pettman, Richard Doyle, Carl Freedman, China Miéville, Samuel R. Delany, and above all Jacalyn Harden. When I presented parts of the book as talks, I received helpful comments from Doug Rice and his students at California State University at Sacramento, and from Friedrich Kittler.

I especially would like to thank Brian Massumi and Mark Poster for their warm encouragement of this project.

I finished writing this book just when my daughter, Adah Mozelle Shaviro, was born. This book about the uncertain future is for her.

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Only Connect. The word *connect* is an obscenity in the world of K. W. Jeter's science fiction novel *Noir*. People are always saying things like "connect you, mother-connector" (27) or "connect that" (192) or "get the connect outta here" (200). In short, if you're connected, you're fucked. Reach out and touch someone? It's the worst thing that could happen to you. Every connection has its price; the one thing you can be sure of is that, sooner or later, you will have to pay. The big problem today, we are told, is how to get everybody connected, how to get everybody onto the network. Our task is to overcome the digital divide, so that the wireless Internet is available to anyone, anywhere, at any time. This is supposed to be supremely democratic, not to mention an excellent marketing opportunity. But what do we really expect from such an intensive, twenty-four/seven connection? What is it that we really want? Jeter is not sanguine on this point. Every connection in *Noir* seems to lead back to the ubiquitous DynaZauber corporation. As Harrisch, a high-level DynaZauber executive, puts it: "In the marketplace, at least, rape is the natural order of things. And remarkably popular, too, on both sides of the exchange. People hand over their money, their lives, to DynaZauber or any other corporation, they know what they're getting. They want to get connected; the customers are always bottoms looking to get topped, the harder and bloodier, the better. That's the dirty little secret that corporations know" (314–15).

Song of the Jungle. Today, we are inclined to see nearly everything in terms of connections and networks. The network is the computer, we like to say. We think that intelligence is a distributed, networked phenomenon. A rain forest is an ecological network, according to both popular and scientific opinion. And, as Paulina Borsook points out, the technolibertarians of Silicon Valley and Redmond tend to regard the capitalist economy as a natural, organic network,

just like the rain forest (29ff). It's almost too perfect a metaphor. The high-tech industry gets to have things both ways. On one hand, the rain forest is a place of life-and-death, Darwinian struggle. This is the famous vision of nature "red in tooth and claw," rape as the natural order of things, a warrant for cutthroat capitalist competition. On the other hand, and at the very same time, the rain forest is a complex, self-regulating ecosystem. It exhibits spontaneous, self-generated order. All its pieces fit seamlessly together, and each problem receives an optimal solution. Everything converges, as the New Economy evangelist Kevin Kelly puts it, into a universal, corporate "hive mind." The economy, like the rain forest, thus miraculously embodies both the New Age ideal of harmony and balance, and the workings of Adam Smith's invisible hand. All is for the best, in this best of all possible worlds, as long as nobody intervenes to limit corporate power. The economy as rain forest is a myth, in the precise sense defined by Lévi-Strauss: "a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)" (229). Such is the soft fascism of the corporate network: it reconciles the conflicting imperatives of aggressive predation on one hand, and unquestioning obedience and conformity on the other.

Stop the World, I Want to Get Off. For Jeter, the problem is not how to get onto the network, but how to get off. This is far more difficult than it might seem. For instance, you will never get television out of your life simply by turning it off and throwing away your set. It will follow you anyway, because the entire world exists only in order to be televised. A similar logic applies to the Internet. In an increasingly networked world, escape is nearly impossible. No matter what position you seek to occupy, that position will be located somewhere on the network's grid. No matter

what words you utter, those words will have been anticipated somewhere in the chains of discourse. As Burroughs reminds us, "To speak is to lie — To live is to collaborate —." There is no place of indemnity that would somehow be free of these constraints. Nonetheless, Burroughs continues, "there are degrees of lying collaboration and cowardice — . . . It is precisely a question of regulation —" (1992b, 7). You cannot opt out of the network entirely, but at the very least, you can try to be connected a little less. You can provide your own negative feedback. You can regulate your own contributions to the system that is regulating you. What's needed for this, no doubt, is a kind of ironically distanced, self-conscious asceticism. The insidious thing about electronic networks is that they are always there, whether you pay attention to them or not. Indeed, they assume, and even require, a kind of distracted inattention on your part. You can never directly confront the network, stare it straight in the eye. For it is always somewhere else from wherever you may be looking. But such enforced distraction can also be cultivated for its own sake. And in this way, perhaps, distraction might become a space in which to breathe.

Medium Cool. Marshall McLuhan famously argued that television is a cool medium (1994, 22–32 and 308–37). It does not try to shock and overwhelm us, the way that movies seen in theaters do. Rather, TV is laid back and low intensity. It's not a visual medium, McLuhan says, so much as an aural-tactile one. The TV image "is not photo in any sense, but a ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger . . . the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture" (313). In television, Michel Chion similarly points out, "sound, mainly the sound of speech, is always foremost," and the image is just "something extra" (157–59). Voices provide continuity, while the images continually change. This is the opposite

situation from film, which is anchored in the image. TV, unlike cinema, is intimate and close range. It is really just part of the furniture. Often we leave it on in the background, as we go about our daily chores. But even when we pay it close attention, it does not stupefy us and make us passive. To the contrary, it invites our participation. We channel surf, we make snide remarks, we yell back at the set. It's silly to think that anyone is brainwashed by TV. It doesn't constrain us, or perpetrate violence upon us. Much more subtly and insidiously, TV draws us into discourse, absorbs us into the network. It colonizes us obliquely, by distraction. It allures us, willy-nilly, into getting connected. We may say of television what Foucault says more generally about postmodern power: it doesn't constrain us or repress us, so much as "it incites, it induces, it seduces" (1983, 220). It persuades us or cajoles us into doing the work of policing ourselves. As Harrisch explains toward the end of *Noir*, the true purpose of the network is "the translation into reality of all those Foucauldian theories of self-surveillance. The brain watches itself and administers its own stimuli and rewards, with DynaZauber as the beneficiary" (463).

The Body and the Screen. The Internet is even cooler than television. That is to say, it is even lower definition than TV and, consequently, even more involving. The World Wide Web offers possibilities so vast, and yet so tantalizingly incomplete, that I must get involved with it in depth. I am drawn in, I can't help myself. This is why the Net is an interactive, many-to-many medium, whereas TV is only one-to-many. Television addresses my ears and eyes, but the Net solicits my entire body. Web surfing is a tactile, physical experience. In the first place, it requires the correct posture. I must sit upright, directly in front of the screen, without slouching, and with my arms horizontal and my hands en-

gaged. I must also remain much closer to the screen than ever is the case with TV, close enough to read the small print and to watch the jerky video clips that run in postage-stamp-sized windows. Meanwhile my fingers are running across the keyboard. My right hand keeps busy moving and clicking the mouse. In this way, the hand becomes an extension of the eye: I reach right into the screen and travel through its iconic, hyperlinked space. Cyberspace is what Deleuze and Guattari call a "haptic" space, as opposed to an optical one: a space of "pure connection," accessible only to "close-range vision," and having to be navigated "step by step. . . . One never sees from a distance in a space of this kind, nor does one see it from a distance" (1987, 492–93). No panoramic view is possible, for the space is always folding, dividing, expanding, and contracting. Time is flexible on the Net as well; things happen at different speeds. Sometimes I must read and type extremely fast to keep up with rapid-fire chat room conversations. Other times I have to hold myself back as I wait for pages or files to download. What's more, these multiple speeds, times, and spaces overlap. Enveloped in the network, I am continually being distracted. I can no longer concentrate on just one thing at a time. My body is pulled in several directions at once, dancing to many distinct rhythms. My attention fragments and multiplies as I shift among the many windows on my screen. Being online always means multitasking.

Distraction. Bruce Sterling's science fiction novel *Distraction* deals with, among other things, the phenomenology of multitasking. Oscar Valparaiso, the protagonist, is infected with a virus that multiplies his awareness. It modifies his brain in such a way that he develops two separate centers of consciousness. He is able to pay attention to two different things at once, instead of having to move sequentially between one and the other. Oscar has "two windows open

on the screen behind his eyes," so that he is literally "multitasking, but with his own brain" (438). Such a double consciousness is inherently paradoxical. There is more than one subject in Oscar's mind that says "I." Yet these are not multiple personalities, since Oscar is the same person for both. Nor do they reflect a primordial split, as with the Freudian unconscious or the Lacanian Other. For both centers are entirely self-present and conscious. Oscar experiences no lack; if anything, his brain is full to bursting: "Oscar could actually feel the sensation, somatically. It was as if his over-tight skull had a pair of bladders stuffed inside, liquid and squashy, like a pair of nested yin-yangs" (496–97). No Cartesian dualism here: thought is a visceral experience. Oscar also finds that he is always murmuring to himself; this is how his attention centers inform each other of what they are doing. When consciousness multiplies in this manner, there can be no problem of "other minds" or of what Wittgenstein called "private languages." For everything is intelligible, and nothing is hidden. Oscar's brain is an open network, with massively parallel processing. Such mental networking is the source of what we commonly call intuition and creativity; as someone tells Oscar, "when you're really bearing down, and you're thinking two things at once—ideas bleed over. They mix. They flavor each other. They cook down real rich and fine. That's inspiration. It's the finest mental sensation you'll ever have" (513). But Oscar pays a price for such mental agility: he finds that he suffers from "poor impulse control" (513). The problem is, he can't hold anything back. The ideas come thick and fast, and they demand immediate expression. The clamor in his brain leaks out into the world. When attention is so magnified, multiplied, and multitasked, the result is indistinguishable from complete distraction. It's like having every available television channel on at the same time.

Come to Daddy. Chris Cunningham renders the creepy terror of the network in his music video for the song "Come to Daddy" by Aphex Twin, aka Richard D. James. The song is a piss-take on heavy metal: five and a half minutes of screaming Satanic fury ("I want your soul"), set against synthesized guitar fuzz, electronic bleeps, and an energetic drum 'n' bass backbeat. The sound is heavy and violent, but at the same time static and synthetic. The identity of visceral intensity and ostentatious fakeness is, of course, the point of James's joke. The video is a miniature horror film, set in a ravaged urban landscape in front of a row of high-rise slums. Feral children run wild in the streets. They bang on fences, smash cars, hurl garbage cans, and terrorize passersby. Even more disturbingly, these children, regardless of gender, all have James's obscenely grinning face. A TV set abandoned in the gutter suddenly comes to life when a dog pisses on it. A demon screams and snarls on the tube. Eventually, the demon oozes out of the set and materializes on the street, in a scene cribbed from David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. The image becomes physical. Cunningham's editing matches the music's stuttering rhythms, alternately stretching and compressing time. The video cuts back and forth between close-ups and long shots, as between images on the television screen itself, and images of the wasteland in which the set was found. Patterns of shot and reverse shot do not map out consistent spatial relations; rather they work as relays, creating a dense network that, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, "connects any point to any other point" (1987, 21). The video refuses to distinguish between physical space and screen space, or between actual objects and their virtual, fictive representations. Everything is both body and image, and every body/image has the same ontological status. There is no privileged spectatorial perspective and no distance between the

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