

Telesthesia and Uncoding the Digital

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Wark, M. (2012). *Telesthesia: Communication, Culture and Class*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. viii + 241 pages.

Savat, D. (2012). *Uncoding the Digital: Technology, Subjectivity and Action in the Control Society*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. ix + 256 pages.

While it is no longer debatable that in order to comprehend contemporary politics one must first understand digital media, the work of theorizing the political dynamics of the digital age is still very much in its infancy—in fact, one might even say such theoretical work is still in an embryonic stage, given that so many of the commonly cited works on the topic predate popular adoption of the World Wide Web (let alone the emergence of smartphones). However, two recent books, McKenzie Wark's *Telesthesia* and David Savat's *Uncoding the Digital*, set about the pressing task of historically situating the recent explosion of digital technologies and the new political conditions of the digitally mediated lives we now lead.

The books, though forward-looking in their subject matter, reject the sort of late/post-modern fatalism that so often accompanies discussion of the social and economic relations afforded by digital technologies. Rather than dismissing these shifts as footnotes to a history whose logic is total and whose movement has ended, Wark and Savat construct old-fashioned grand narratives that position digitally mediated action and interaction as constituting a new historical moment with open possibilities. By no means are the authors naively techno-Utopian, but they do believe that the new or newly intensified networked relations emerging from these socio-technical shifts create opportunities for meaningful political action, and they attempt to imagine what such action might look like.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that both authors are rooted in Australia, which Wark himself suggests does not occupy simple position (e.g., core or periphery) in

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relation to the rest of the world but is at the intersection of many global vectors. In this way, Australia itself seems analogous to the trans-spatial politics of the digital, which, "is neither here nor there." But the two authors conceptualize the relation between digital information and spatiality somewhat differently and, as a result, their framing of the possibilities for political action also differ.

Wark describes digital information as "third nature" which overlays second nature (i.e., built forms, architecture) and first nature (i.e., the raw/residual materiality from which second and third nature are extracted). Importantly, all three natures are coextensive, and, in the case of so-called "weird media events" (such as Occupy or the Arab Spring), we even see reciprocal exchanges between second and third nature as they unfold in real time. But, there is a significant disjunction between physical space and digital information: namely, speed. With the invention of the telegraph, the speed of communication first outstripped the pace at which material goods could be transported. This rapid exchange of information facilitated action across great distances, and it is this phenomenon of information moving faster than people or things that Wark terms "telesthesia." (Sci-fi geeks might recognize this as the concept behind Ursula K. Le Guin's "ansible" [1974], though, surprisingly, Wark never draws that parallel.)

While digital technologies are not the first to have telesthetic properties, they make communication flow faster and become ever more accessible. As the scope and influence of digital information over the organization of people and things grows, the ruling class (which he says is no longer capitalist but "vectoral") seeks to enclose the flows of such information and reconstitute it as property from which they can extract rent. Wark (p. 144) argues "intellectual property is the tendency to turn socially negotiable rights into private property rights." This privatization of information through copyrights, patents, etc. is the basis of a burgeoning class conflict between "hackers" who, through their own creative capacities, generate valuable information and vectoralists who seek to exploit hackers (less through control over the means of production as capitalists did and more through control over the flow of information). Hackers are defined by their ability to generate ideas that are qualitatively distinct from what already exists (ideas that may thus be constituted as intellectual property), but this also defines their potential as a class to undermine the control of the vectoralists by imagining alternate possibilities.

This hope for the emergence of a new class consciousness and subsequent solidarity may feel a tad bit Utopian, but Wark's somewhat paradoxical brand of cynical optimism may be just what a generation of underemployed post-ironic hipsters (myself included) needs.

Savat starts by examining the changing configurations of power that have emerged alongside social media. Like so many commentators on the politics of digital technology, Savat endeavors to flesh out the conceptual framework in Gilles Deleuze's (1992) rather skeletal "Postscript on Societies of Control." But to Savat's credit, he is able to avoid the jargon-heavy and circular argumentation that so often plagues writers invested in Deleuze.

Savat argues that the digital age is characterized by a new form of power that he calls “modulatory power.” Unlike disciplinary power (described by Michel Foucault, 1975/1995), which aims to mold subjects into socially useful individuals by observing and correcting behavior through reward or punishment, modulatory power profiles, traces, and anticipates behavior so that it is encouraged or prevented before it ever happens. In other words, modulatory power employs pattern recognition to preempt and influence future actions. Rather than conforming the subject to a universal norm, modulatory power evaluates which norms one does or does not conform to, then sorts into categories that allow or deny access, or targets one for certain types of messaging.

Importantly, Savat argues that disciplinary power and modulatory power are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the digital age and its subjects are defined by the interaction of both forms of power. Whereas “individuals” are the exclusive product of disciplinary power, so-called “dividuals” are the product of a tension between disciplinary power and modulatory power. This tension is internalized by the dividual, who is “in one and the same moment, both produced as whole, as a distinct and solid form, while on the other hand is always multiple, always more than one, an infinite dispersal of patterns or flow lines of code” (p. 58).

In the second section of the book, Savat turns to focus on being, which he believes can never be separated out from the technology that is co-present in a given milieu. Humans and technology form an assemblage, and it is their interaction that determines what thoughts and actions are possible. Similar to Wark, Savat argues that industrialization and its chief technologies (the steam engine and railroads) transformed space and spatial relationships. While the waterwheel confined production to disparate locales dotting the countryside, steam-driven factories clustered in cities and rail collapsed the perceived distance between these cities.

But while being with such industrial machines is still spatially oriented and labor with them deeply embodied, we experience being with digital technology temporally rather than spatially. Digital technology is not characterized by the movement of solid objects but by the speed of flows. Flows do not move but vary internally. Savat continuously returns to the example of the computer screen—“screen reality” as he calls it—to reinforce his argument that digital information is divorced from spatiality. Monitors seldom shift position in space but constantly vary (often, even when a subject is not present to view them). The idea that computer monitors are the definitive experience of digital technology is debatable, given the ubiquity of spatially mobile smart phones and the emergence of technologies like Apple’s Siri or augmented reality devices that eliminate the need for a screen in some cases. But, focusing on immobile screens allows Savat to claim bodies engaged with digital technologies are immobile bodies, and, from there, he (p. 127) makes a more questionable leap of logic:

there is no space in the digital ensemble. So when one connects to digital machines, the body ceases to function as a marker of an inside, which is me, and an outside, which is other than me.

Later, he adds (p. 135):

The body has no function in the digital ensemble. More precisely, the body has no function because it ceases to exist in the context of the interface.

To recognize the problem with Savat's assertion here about the erasure of the body, we need only to remember that Trayvon Martin was staring at the screen of his phone when he was profiled as a suspicious Black body in a White suburban neighborhood and subsequently murdered. Similarly, Gamergate reminds us that simply inhabiting a female body while playing online video games is sufficient to incite rape and death threats. The early 1990s rhetoric of the Web often imagined that we would transcend our bodies and enter a flow of pure information; it was also rife with dangerously naïve post-racial and post-gender fantasies. We should be careful not to repeat that pattern. To be fair to Savat, he does walk back some of these strong assertions regarding corporeal erasure throughout the book, but, ultimately, his final section framing political action in the age of digital media argues that we need to stop thinking in terms of bodies.

With that said, I think Savat has identified and made a commendable attempt to address what is a (or maybe the) key issue that needs to be worked out in understanding the politics of the digital: How do we understand subjectivity that is simultaneously mediated by flesh as well as by a vast assemblage of digital devices and profiles, and what sorts of action does this subjectivity enable? The impressive scope, rigor, and overall accessibility of both these books puts us in a much better position to start answering that question.

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