Hakim Bey vs. Enzo23: An Interview

Hakim Bey

E23: Hey, Hakim. How are you doing?

HB: Good.

E23: Is this a good time for you?

HB: Sure.

E23: Let start with one simple question. One thing that I've noticed about your writing in particular is that it seems to stay outside of one particular space, namely space inside of colleges. Some of the literary figures you speak of in your writing (Burroughs, Thoreau, Sade, Oscar Wilde) have been gentrified and incorporated into society. Do you fear that type of assimilation or perhaps mediation of your writing?

HB: You mean for myself and my writing?

E23: Yes. For your philosophies and your writing.

HB: Yes. Obviously that is the paradox when you write books telling society to distrust the media your books are already a medium. There is no way out of that particular bind, that I've discovered. You either communicate or you don't communicate. I suppose that I could have taken a vow never to write anything but only speak to individual human beings. This I suppose would have been the ideal but I am a writer so I write. If media have a certain kind of maligned magic that makes them take the place of real experience in people hearts and minds then that's the paradox of my work. It's one that results in unpleasantly in the sense that people look to the book then instead of to themselves for judgment about behavior and attitude. I did not intend for the books or myself to become some sort of guru. It's happened before with a message that human beings should be free and make their own decisions. People take that message or that messenger as being valuable in itself. I never believed that was what I was doing so I take that as a failure on my part.

E23: I guess there are 2 ways of looking at your previous response. During the 50's the role of government in society was to replicate itself in society. Let me complete that thought. What I mean is that children more closely resembled their parents who resembled the government. Ideals at times seemed to run parallel on many levels. The rebellion factor was a bit lower key. With the advent of 1960's counter culture movement, much more introspection occurred. The offspring no longer seemed to want to perpetuate the status quo.

Today, we have the popularization of the global Internet which is almost a new catalyst if no a second generation electronic drug. Since your books are being distributed/published on

the Internet, perhaps your philosophies can transcend the control systems that are in place. For example, scholars read your books then regurgitate a filtered synopsis of your intent. This is the McDonaldization of literature that has been occurring for centuries. Can the integrity of what you are saying be preserved through the Internet?

HB: That is an interesting question. I would say that the Internet is not something new in this case. Each new medium as it appears has a tendency to tyrannize and to absorb all discourse. You can see for example when the US took over the postal system there was a big exciting political event that made everyone focus their attention on this new administration of old technology. Even when the telegraph net came into existence about the same time and added instantaneity, ultra speed to the medium making it very exciting and magical. People's attention focused on it but at the same time repression focused on it. You see a character like Anthony Comstock who appointed himself and was accepted by the government to the post of censor and chief of US mails. He had gone through people's mail looking for obscenity which in his mind was birth control. So in the early 20th century you had people going to jail for sending birth control information through the mail. Naturally the liberals squawked about freedom of speech and the radicals complained about repression. It some became apparent the government had this right to snoop into anybody's mail. Same with the telephone, when it appeared. Printing was a terrible blow to the powers that be. As a matter of fact brought about the Protestant reformation when the bible and other religious works were brought into the vernacular. Multiple copies allowed for wide distribution.

So each medium does this as it comes along. It stirs the shit and then has to be brought under control some way or another. So far this process has worked out with historical regularity. So if we are to relate social behavior to the media, which certainly can be done to a certain extent, we don't want to make a single all-encompassing explanation for all social behavior out of the media. Nevertheless there is a relation, this much is clear. So as each of the generations meet up with whatever the latest medium is, all sorts of strange sociological things transpire. I guess for my generation it was television and for yours it is the Internet. In the early 50's television began to creep in and somehow by the late 50's early 60's there was some kind of strange relationship going on between that medium and a whole new generation of people that we exposed to it. My generation.

I think that this is because each new medium despite what it is planned to do actually potentially creates…. Now how can I say this … now if I say freedoms I don't want to imply that they are positive they are just releases of energy. So television comes along and releases a great deal of energy on the imagination level on the level of images and the imagination. At the same time we have the historical paradox of LSD and other psychedelics are discovered on a social level. Perhaps you can even look on that as a medium. Those things combine and produced a heady period which I can remember in the early 60's when people actually escaped mediation to the extent of creating a sub -culture on their own without actual direction from the media. It was an act of resistance that was spread out over the whole society. It was not very politically conscious. If in America we could have combined the energy of the psychedelic revolution with the political sophistication of what was going on in Europe at the time who knows, maybe we would have gotten somewhere.

E23: But it appears to me that by the 70's there was a concerted effort by the media to redirect social actions and standards of interaction.

HB: Exactly what I was going to say. By the 1970's particularly the Vietnam war, the television medium had a chance to explore in a very practical way the relations between the media and social actions/reactions. The medium of television more or less perfected it's routine.

E23: The sound bite, trivialization and commercialization.

HB: Yes, it's basically the way we see it today. Basically what we are seeing now is the post-Vietnam war era medium of television which we saw in action during the gulf war. It was the perfect realization of all the lessons that were learned during the Vietnamese war. For example it was very apparent that there weren't going to be endless shots of body bags or dead prisoners and stuff like that which were assumed to cause revulsion in the American people.

By another paradox or joke of history the Internet comes along and more or less the same time that the older technology was perfected. The new tech is not perfected and whose controls are not discerned clearly by the powers that be or would be. It seems apparent that the net cannot be controlled technologically or from within the Net. However you can say the same for any medium. You can say that printing is not controllable or the telephone is not controllable the mail is not controllable because no one can open and inspect every letter. So this is nothing new in a sense that there should be this out -of-control aspect for the net. Each medium that comes into being has this illusion of being uncontrollable from within the medium. The post office can't control the mail.

To talk about the net specifically is to impose that control from outside the Net. The military designed the net in a very non-centered way to prevent any key data site being wiped out during a nuclear attack. So they designed this highly or perhaps even more uncontrollable medium that eventually got out of their hands. Big surprise. Suddenly the hackers and the surfers and eventually everybody got into it. Right now you are looking at a tech system that cannot be controlled from within because there is no way for the net to be redesigned, centralized and controlled.

However it is very easy to terrorize people into behaving properly. If you make an example, the more ludicrous the better. Take a guy who steals a 99 cent document from Bell Telephone (this actually happened). Well you smash the shit out of him and take away all of his computer equipment and put him in jail. You make a big thing out of it to let everyone know that this happened and guys guy who stole 99 cents worth of data is being persecuted to the max. Everyone then goes "Oops, I had better not do that."

This is terror. This is nothing other than terrorism. The state as everybody knows is the major purveyor of terror. The individual has no where near the resources to establish the level of terror that the state can. Plus, on top of that capitalism in the form of the media corporations that are eager to penetrate the net have the same goals which is to say social control of the net through terror on one hand and greed on the other. Two very powerful human emotions needless to say. We are now looking at the future of 600 channels where everyone will have something to watch to keep them inactivated. On the other hand, whatever quarters of tech possibilities for free exchange of information or freedom may still exist on the net just as it persists in other mediums will be reduced to an infinitesimal, ever receding aspect of the medium. This will come about through terror – through the control of people's behavior through terror.

E23: Is that your pessimistic take on the Internet?

HB: That is my pessimistic take on the net. There is also an optimistic take on the net which says that the people who are involved or value highly the potential for free exchange of information and ideas will somehow organize resistance within and outside the net. However, I don't

see much sign of this happening as you might expect. Resistance inside the net is virtual resistance, show of resistance, not the substance. People talk about free speech but it's all intellectual, abstract and virtual.

E23: How do we turn dreams of freedom into reality?

HB: What we need is a link up between the net and the real world. If I grow a crop of something and wanted to trade someone for some ham, why can't I do that through the net. Avoiding taxes, even the use of money thereby freeing myself from the particular medium. Money is a very mediating medium (laughter). I'm not some kind of nut who wants everybody to go back to the woods and trade. This could supplement our economic life somewhat to increase our free time.

E23: I remember reading TAZ, "Final transcendence of the body. Cybergnosis." That is perhaps why the digital world tends not to leak into the three-dimensional world. We are on a level trying to escape from the real world.

HB: You are correct. The medium itself encourages a disengagement from bodily reality. In some sense every medium has done that. By very definition a medium is a bridge that allows a connection. A bridge also serves a function of separating.

– End of round 1 – Round 2 to follow shortly – stay tuned –

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https://hermetic.com/bey/enzo23-interview