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The Information War

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Humanity has always invested heavily in any scheme that offers escape from the body. And why not? Material reality is such a mess. Some of the earliest “religious” artefacts, such as Neanderthal ochre burials, already suggest a belief in immortality. All modern (i.e. post-paleolithic) religions contain the “Gnostic trace” of distrust or even outright hostility to the body and the “created” world. Contemporary “primitive” tribes and even peasant-pagans have a concept of immortality and of going-outside-the-body (ecstasy) without necessarily exhibiting any excessive body-hatred. The Gnostic Trace accumulates very gradually (like mercury poisoning) till eventually it turns pathological. Gnostic dualism exemplifies the extreme position of this disgust by shifting all value from body to “spirit”. This idea characterizes what we call “civilization”. A similar trajectory can be traced through the phenomenon of “war”. Hunter/gatherers practised (and still practise, as amongst the Yanomamo) a kind of ritualized brawl (think of the Plains Indian custom of “counting coup”). “Real” war is a continuation of religion and economics (i.e. politics) by other means, and thus only begins historically with the priestly invention of “scarcity” in the Neolithic, and the emergence of a “warrior caste”. (I categorically
reject the theory that “war” is a prolongation of “hunting”). WWII seems to have been the last “real” war. Hyperreal war began in Vietnam, with the involvement of television, and recently reached full obscene revelation in the “Gulf War” of 1991. Hyperreal war is no longer “economic”, no longer “the health of the state”. The Ritual Brawl is voluntary and hon-hierarchic (war chiefs are always temporary); real war is compulsory and hierarchic; hyperreal war is imagistic and psychologically interiorized (“Pure War”). In the first the body is risked; in the second, the body is sacrificed; in the third, the body has disappeared. (See P. Clastres on War, in Archaeology of Violence.) Modern science also incorporates an anti-materialist bias, the dialectical outcome of its war against Religion — it has in some sense become Religion. Science as knowledge of material reality paradoxically decomposes the materiality of the real. Science has always been a species of priestcraft, a branch of cosmology; and an ideology, a justification of “the way things are.” The deconstruction of the “real” in post-classical physics mirrors the vacuum of irreality which constitutes “the state”. Once the image of Heaven on Earth, the state now consists of no more than the management of images. It is no longer a “force” but a disembodied patterning of information. But just as Babylonian cosmology justified Babylonian power, so too does the “finality” of modern science serve the ends of the Terminal State, the post-nuclear state, the “information state”. Or so the New Paradigm would have it. And “everyone” accepts the axiomatic premises of the new paradigm. The new paradigm is very spiritual.

Even the New Age with its gnostic tendencies embraces the New Science and its increasing etherealization as a source of proof-texts for its spiritualist world view. Meditation and cybernetics go hand in hand. Of course the “information state” somehow requires the support of a police force and prison system that would have stunned Nebuchadnezzar and reduced all the priests of Moloch to paroxysms of awe. And “modern science” still can’t weasel out of
its complicity in the very-nearly-successful “conquest of Nature”. Civilization’s greatest triumph over the body.

But who cares? It’s all “relative” isn’t it? I guess we’ll just have to “evolve” beyond the body. Maybe we can do it in a “quantum leap.” Meanwhile the excessive mediation of the Social, which is carried out through the machinery of the Media, increases the intensity of our alienation from the body by fixating the flow of attention on information rather than direct experience. In this sense the Media serves a religious or priestly role, appearing to offer us a way out of the body by re-defining spirit as information. The essence of information is the Image, the sacral and iconic data-complex which usurps the primacy of the “material bodily principle” as the vehicle of incarnation, replacing it with a fleshless ecstasis beyond corruption. Consciousness becomes something which can be “downloaded”, excized from the matrix of animality and immortalized as information. No longer “ghost-in-the-machine”, but machine-as-ghost, machine as Holy Ghost, ultimate mediator, which will translate us from our mayfly-corpses to a pleroma of Light. Virtual Reality as CyberGnosis. Jack in, leave Mother Earth behind forever. All science proposes a paradigmatic universalism — as in science, so in the social. Classical physics played midwife to Capitalism, Communism, Fascism and other Modern ideologies.

Post-classical science also proposes a set of ideas meant to be applied to the social: Relativity, Quantum “unreality”, cybernetics, information theory, etc. With some exceptions, the post-classical tendency is towards ever greater etherealization. Some proponents of Black Hole theory, for example, talk like pure Pauline theologians, while some of the information theorists are beginning to sound like virtual Manichaeans.¹ On the level of the social these

¹ The new “life” sciences offer some dialectical opposition here, or could do so if they worked and through certain paradigms. Chaos theory seems to deal with the material world in positive ways, as does Gaia theory, morphogenetic theory, and various other “soft” and “neo-hermetic” disciplines. Elsewhere I’ve attempted to incorporate these philosophical implications into a “festal” synthesis.
paradigms give rise to a rhetoric of bodylessness quite worthy of a third century desert monk or a 17th century New England Puritan — but expressed in a language of post-Industrial post-Modern feel-good consumer frenzy. Our every conversation is infected with certain paradigmatic assumptions which are really no more than bald assertions, but which we take for the very fabric or urgrund of Reality itself. For instance, since we now assume that computers represent a real step toward "artificial intelligence", we also assume that buying a computer makes us more intelligent. In my own field I’ve met dozens of writers who sincerely believe that owning a PC has made them better (not “more efficient”, but better) writers. This is amusing — but the same feeling about computers when applied to a trillion dollar military budget, churns out Star Wars, killer robots, etc. (See Manuel de Landa’s War in the Age of Intelligent Machines on AI in modern weaponry). An important part of this rhetoric involves the concept of an “information economy”. The post-Industrial world is now thought to be giving birth to this new economy. One of the clearest examples of the concept can be found in a recent book by a man who is a Libertarian, the Bishop of a Gnostic Dualist Church in California, and a learned and respected writer for Gnosis magazine: The industry of the past phase of civilization (sometimes called “low technology”) was big industry, and bigness always implies oppressiveness. The new high technology, however, is not big in the same way. While the old technology produced and distributed material resources, the new technology produces and disseminates information. The resources marketed

The point is not to abandon all thought about the material world, but to realize that all science has philosophical and political implications, and that science is a way of thinking, not a dogmatic structure of incontrovertible Truth. Of course quantum, relativity, and information theory are all “true” in some way and can be given a positive interpretation. I’ve already done that in several essays. Now I want to explore the negative aspects.
God appeared as a burning bush. (Information as the catastrophic
decorporealization of “brute” matter). We would now like to pro-
pose the identification of self with body. We’re not denying that
“the body is also spirit”, but we wish to restore some balance to the
historical equation. We calculate all body-hatred and world-slander
as our “evil”. We insist on the revival (and mutation) of “pagan” val-
ues concerning the relation of body and spirit. We fail to feel any
great enthusiasm for the “information economy” because we see it
as yet another mask for body-hatred. We can’t quite believe in the
“information war”, since it also hyposatizes information but labels
it “evil”. In this sense, “information” would appear to be neutral.
But we also distrust this third position as a lukewarm cop-out and
a failure of theoretical vision. Every “fact” takes different meanings
as we run it through our dialectical prism and study its gleam
and shadows. The “fact” is never inert or “neutral”, but it can be
both “good” and “evil” (or beyond them) in countless variations
and combinations. We, finally, are the artists of this immeasurable
discourse. We create values. We do this because we are alive. Infor-

11 A proposal: the new theory of taoist dialectics. Think of the yin/yang disc,
with a spot of black in the white lozenge, and vice versa — separated not by a
straight line but an S-curve. Amiri Baraka says that dialectics is just “separating
out the good from the bad” — but the taoist is “beyond good and evil”. The dialec-
tic is supple, but the taoist dialectic is downright sinuous. For example, making
use of the taoist dialectic, we can re-evaluate Gnosis once again. True, it presents
a negative view of the body and of becoming. But also true that it has played
the role of the eternal rebel against all orthodoxy, and this makes it interesting.
In its libertine and revolutionary manifestations the Gnosis possesses many se-
crets, some of which are actually worth knowing. The organizational forms of
Gnosis — the crackpot cult, the secret society — seem pregnant with possibilities
for the TAZ/Immediatist project. Of course, as I’ve pointed out elsewhere, not all
gnosis is Dualistic. There also exists a monist gnostic tradition, which sometimes
borrows heavily from Dualism and is often confused with it. Monist gnosis is anti-
eschatological, using religious language to describe this world, not Heaven or the
Gnostic Pleroma. Shamanism, certain “crazy” forms of Taoism and Tantra and
Zen, heterodox sufism and Ismailism, Christian antinomians such as the Ranters,
etc. — share a conviction of the holiness of the “inner spirit”, and of the actually
real, the “world”. These are our “spiritual ancestors.”

Modern neo-Gnosticism usually plays down the old Manichean
attack on the body for a gentler greener rhetoric. Bishop Hoeller
for instance stresses the importance of ecology and environment
(because we don’t want to “foul our nest”, the Earth) — but in his
chapter on Native American spirituality he implies that a cult of the
Earth is clearly inferior to the pure Gnostic spirit of bodylessness:

But we must not forget that the nest is not the same
as the bird. The exoteric and esoteric traditions declare
that earth is not the only home for human beings, that
we did not grow like weeds from the soil. While our
bodies indeed may have originated on this earth, our
inner essence did not. To think otherwise puts us out-
side of all of the known spiritual traditions and sepa-
rates us from the wisdom of the seers and sages of ev-
ery age. Though wise in their own ways, Native Ameri-
cans have small connection with this rich spiritual her-
itage.

In such terms, (the body = the “savage”), the Bishop’s hatred and
disdain for the flesh illuminate every page of his book. In his en-
thusiasm for a truly religious economy, he forgets that one cannot

2 Freedom: Alchemy for a Voluntary Society, Stephan A. Hoeller
3 Ibid., p. 164.
eat “information”. “Real wealth” can never become immaterial until humanity achieves the final etherealization of downloaded consciousness. Information in the form of culture can be called wealth metaphorically because it is useful and desirable — but it can never be wealth in precisely the same basic way that oysters and cream, or wheat and water, are wealth in themselves. Information is always only information about some thing. Like money, information is not the thing itself. Over time we can come to think of money as wealth (as in a delightful Taoist ritual which refers to “Water and Money” as the two most vital principles in the universe), but in truth this is sloppy abstract thinking. It has allowed its focus of attention to wander from the bun to the penny which symbolizes the bun. In effect we’ve had an “information economy” ever since we invented money. But we still haven’t learned to digest copper. The Aesopian crudity of these truisms embarrasses me, but I must perforce play the stupid lazy yokel plowing a crooked furrow when all the straight thinkers around me appear to be hallucinating.

Americans and other “First World” types seem particularly susceptible to the rhetoric of a “metaphysical economy” because we can no longer see (or feel or smell) around us very much evidence of a physical world. Our architecture has become symbolic, we have enclosed ourselves in the manifestations of abstract thought (cars, apartments, offices, schools), we work at “service” or information-related jobs, helping in our little way to move disembodied symbols of wealth around an abstract grid of Capital, and we spend our leisure largely engrossed in Media rather than in direct experience of material reality. The material world for us has come to symbolize catastrophe, as in our amazingly hysterical reaction to storms and hurricanes (proof that we’ve failed to “conquer Nature” entirely), or our neo-Puritan fear of sexual otherness, or our taste for bland and denatured (almost abstract) food. And yet, this “First World” vulgar “dialectical materialists”. Body and spirit together make life. If either pole is missing, the result is death. This constitutes a fairly simple set of values, assuming we prefer life to death. Obviously I’m avoiding any strict definitions of either body or spirit. I’m speaking of “empirical” everyday experiences. We experience “spirit” when we dream or create; we experience “body” when we eat or shit (or maybe vice versa); we experience both at once when we make love. I’m not proposing metaphysical categories here. We’re still drifting and these are ad-hoc points of reference, nothing more. We needn’t be mystics to propose this version of “one reality”. We need only point out that no other reality has yet appeared within the context of our knowable experience. For all practical purposes, the “world” is “one”. Historically however, the “body” half of this unity has always received the insults, bad press, scriptural condemnation, and economic persecution of the “spirit”-half. The self-appointed representatives of the spirit have called almost all the tunes in known history, leaving the body only a pre-history of primitive disappearance, and a few spasms of failed insurrectionary futility.

Spirit has ruled — hence we scarcely even know how to speak the language of the body. When we use the word “information” we reify it because we have always reified abstractions — ever since

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10 “The ‘World’ is ‘one’” can be and has been used to justify a totality, a metaphysical ordering of “reality” with a “center” or “apex” : one God, one King, etc., etc. This is the monism of orthodoxy, which naturally opposes Dualism and its other source of power (“evil”) — orthodoxy also presupposes that the One occupies a higher ontological position than the Many, that transcendence takes precedence over immanence. What I call radical (or heretical) monism demands unity of one and Many on the level of immanence; hence it is seen by Orthodoxy as a turning-upside-down or saturnalia which proposes that every “one” is equally “divine”. Radical monism is “on the side of” the Many — which explains why it seems to lie at the heart of pagan polytheism and shamanism, as well as extreme forms of monothelism such as Ismailism or Ranterism, based on “inner light” teachings. “All is one”, therefore, can be spoken by any kind of monist or anti-dualist and can mean many different things.
kind of Manichaean view of Good and Evil, but can’t agree on which is which. The critical theorist swims in a sea of facts. We like to imagine it also as our maquis, with ourselves as the “guerilla ontologists” of its datascape. Since the 19th century the ever-mutating “social sciences” have unearthed a vast hoard of information on everything from shamanism to semiotics. Each “discovery” feeds back into “social science” and changes it. We drift. We fish for poetic facts, data which will intensify and mutate our experience of the real. We invent new hybrid “sciences” as tools for this process: ethnopharmacology, ethnohistory, cognitive studies, history of ideas, subjective anthropology (anthropological poetics or ethno-poetics), “dada epistemology”, etc. We look on all this knowledge not as “good” in itself, but valuable only inasmuch as it helps us to seize or to construct our own happiness. In this sense we do know of “information as wealth”; nevertheless we continue to desire wealth itself and not merely its abstract representation as information. At the same time we also know of “information as war”; nevertheless, we have not decided to embrace ignorance just because “facts” can be used like a poison gas. Ignorance is not even an adequate defense, much less a useful weapon in this war. We attempt neither to fetishize nor demonize “information”. Instead we try to establish a set of values by which information can be measured and assessed. Our standard in this process can only be the body. According to certain mystics, spirit and body are “one”. Certainly spirit has lost its ontological solidity (since Nietzsche, anyway), while body’s claim to “reality” has been undermined by modern science to the point of vanishing in a cloud of “pure energy”. So why not assume that spirit and body are one, after all, and that they are twin (or dyadic) aspects of the same underlying and inexpressible real? No body without spirit, no spirit without body. The Gnostic Dualists are wrong, as are the...
has a private income and a fanaticism bordering on insanity. Universities and “think tanks” make pathetic attempts to monopolize information — they too are dazzled by the notion of an information economy — but their conspiracies are laughable. Information may not always be “free”, but there’s a great deal more of it available than any one person could ever possibly use. Books on every conceivable subject can actually still be found through inter-library loan. Meanwhile someone still has to grow pears and cobble shoes. Or, even if these “industries” can be completely mechanized, someone still has to eat pears and wear shoes. The body is still the basis of wealth. The idea of Images as wealth is a “spectacular delusion”. Even a radical critique of “information” can still give rise to an overvaluation of abstraction and data. In a pro-situ zine from England called NO, the following message was scrawled messily across the back cover of a recent issue:

As you read these words, the Information Age explodes ... inside and around you — with the Misinformation Missiles and Propaganda bombs of outright Information Warfare.
Traditionally, war has been fought for territory/economic gain. Information Wars are fought for the acquisition of territory indigenous to the Information Age, i.e. the human mind itself ... In particular, it is the faculty of the imagination that is under the direct threat of extinction from the onslaughts of multi-media overload ... DANGER — YOUR IMAGINATION MAY NOT BE YOUR OWN ... As a culture sophisticates, it deepens its reliance on its images, icons and symbols as a way of defining itself and communicating with other cultures. As the accumulating mix of a culture’s images floats around in its collective psyche, certain isomorphic icons coalesce to produce and to project an “illusion” of reality. Fads, fashions, artistic trends. U KNOW THE SCORE. “I can take their images for reality because I believe in the reality of their images (their image of reality).” WHOEVER CONTROLS THE METAPHOR GOVERNS THE MIND.

I find myself very much in sympathy with the author’s critique of media here, yet I also feel that a demonization of “information” has been proposed which consists of nothing more than the mirror-image of information-as-salvation. Again Baudrillard’s vision of the Commtech Universe is evoked, but this time as Hell rather than as the Gnostic Hereafter. Bishop Hoeller wants everybody jacked-in and down-loaded — the anonymous post-situationist ranter wants you to smash your telly — but both of them believe in the mystic power of information. One proposes the pax technologica, the other declares “war”. Both exude a