

Interview of Peter Lamborn Wilson

János Sugár

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Peter Lamborn Wilson is an editor at Autonomedia, which publishes the magazine *Semiotext(e)*. He is also a writer, teacher and New York radio personality, as well as a longtime student of the history of religion. János Sugár is a media artist, filmmaker, and a founding member of the Media Research Foundation, which organizes the Metaforum conference series in Budapest. The international series is dedicated to the examination of both the theoretical and practical impacts of technology on culture.

JS: Could you tell us a few words about your own writings?

PLW: Well, as I said I come out of the history of religions, specializing in Sophism, esoteric or mystical Islam. I've also written about communications theory and media ecology. Somehow or other I've become involved with going to these sort of conferences on the internet even though I'm not a computer programmer, in fact, I don't even own a computer.

I'm probably the only person at this conference that's not on-line. In a way this serves a useful function, for I watch the net and I watch communications and media in general, but I keep to the side of things, and that gives me an outsider's view which I think can be useful, especially since I come at it from the history of religion point of view.

JS: That's exactly what I wanted to ask you about, what do you think the relationship between the history of religions and the so-called new media is?

PLW: Well, we could talk about that from a hundred different angles, but there are two things in particular which interest me. One is the question of the mind-body split — if I can put it into such a simple term — this split begins in the very human condition itself. Otherwise we're animals, for as soon as we have consciousness, there's a split between the mind and the body, and religion comes to deal with that split, and try to heal it.

In the area of the split is where technology appears, and language then, in a sense, is the first technology because it's language that wants to heal that wound, to close that split. In that sense, writing becomes the first technology, it's the *techne* of the logos, the machine of the word. Then the internet and the computer, in this sense, is just another stage in the development of writing. First you have pictures, then you have pictography, then a phonetic alphabet, which is actually still based on pictures, and finally with computers, you have language reduced to yes and no, a plus and a minus. This is still language though and it is still writing, and the computer is essentially a conscription machine.

So we're dealing with consciousness — it's a kind of technology that is especially clear to the fact that we're dealing with consciousness — if we're talking about a hammer or a saw it's not so clear anymore that these are in fact a prosthesis of consciousness, but of course they are. With a computer it's very easy to see how it is a prosthesis of consciousness or a metathesis even. So then the religious problem of split consciousness becomes very acute in the realm of communications technology. We see this in the idea that as each technology comes and replaces older technology, it is reified — to use an old Marxist term — it becomes a thing, an autonomous thing. People think that society is the creation of technology, not that technology is the creation of society, and in this sense the computer and the net and cyberspace and all this type of thinking lead to what I call a false transcendence — the idea that we will transcend the body, we will arrive at a heaven of pure information in which immortality essentially of consciousness will be achieved. I know that your familiar with these sort of people, extropians, cybernetfreaks and technomaniacs who truly believe, in a true religious sense, that the computer is the final frontier of human consciousness. I'm just not convinced, I don't see any way the body is being transcended, it is still sitting in front of the keyboard, the eyes are still looking at the screen. William Gibson has a wonderful image of the hacker plugged in to the computer and dying while his consciousness is still living on in cyberspace.

This is the fantasy that we can download consciousness and somehow achieve immortality inside the machine — at best I would say that this is a very hypothetical supposition, at worst it could turn out to be a total falsehood. If it is a total falsehood, then what we are looking at here is a bad parody of religion, a parodic consciousness or a conciseness which is simply a parody of itself, this I think is where the danger lies.

We can talk about the net as a military space and that is my second point, if we understand that the net is still a military space or a militarized space this also gives us an interesting approach to the religious problem. The internet was created for struggle and if there is a struggle now inside the net, then it's no accident in history, for it's exactly what had to happen. What the military did was to create a space, a virtual space that could not be destroyed by an atomic bomb, very simple, but in doing this they made a very interesting mistake and the only way to describe this mistake is to make a comparison between primitive and modern warfare. Primitive warfare, and here I'm quoting the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres, is completely different from classical warfare in that in primitive societies warfare disestablishes or deconstructs power, it's what he called the "centripetal effect," a fleeing out from the center. Whereas modern warfare, in complete contrast, is a "centrifical effect," it's a concentration of power. If you look at primitive and hunter gather societies you'll see that there is no class structure, no permanent leadership, the pyramid is not there. Every act of war in that situation is to prevent that pyramid from appearing, the war chief, as soon as he's finished, is out of a job, he does not become the paramount chief and in fact in hunter gather societies the war chief is always a suspicious character. So the primitive warrior has glory, he has adventure, but he has no power. On the contrary, the classical warrior is very interested in power, he wants a centralization of power.

Now if we analyze the net from this point of view, we'll actually see that the net is a space for primitive warfare, it's a space where power is going to be decentralized, in fact that is the way it was designed. So I think an interesting historical error was made by the military, in that when they designed this system they didn't realize it wasn't a classical system, that it was in fact a pre or post classical system.

So immediately a struggle for this system began, it wasn't a safe space for the military, and the struggle which is going on now is between centrifugality and centripetality. Will the net centralize power or will the net disperse power, that is the question. If we don't understand that this is the question we can never hope to use the net for freedom, for self expression, or for autonomy.

Kevin Kelly says that the net is out of control, this is true if you look only inside the net, if you look outside the net you can see that there are many ways in which the net can be controlled. The primary way would be terror, and what I mean by that is very simple, if you can't control what someone is doing electronically you can come into their house and beat them up, smash their computer, take out their phone and make them pay thousands of dollars to go to court and prove that they're innocent, by the time they're finished, they might as well be dead. That kind of control of the net is very possible, if the technology is out of control, politics is not out of control, if the technology is out of control, corporate capital is not out of control. Between the government and the corporations the possibility exists that in one or two years the net will not be a space of freedom at all, but will once again be a completely military zone.

So far the resistance to this is coming from within, not outside, the net has been what I call virtual resistance. It's all very well to talk about freedom of information, but how do you have free information and an information economy at the same time? The problem is that the only resistance comes from within the net, there is no organization outside the net, from a political point of view on the one hand or an economic point of view on the other. In this way those people who are trying to preserve the net are in a primitive warfare zone, where power is disestablished — they are fighting a losing battle because they're only fighting from within the space, and unfortunately the primitive warrior always loses against the classical. The classical warrior always has a bigger gun.

JS: One of your recent writings has the title "Against Multi-Culturism." I would like to ask about this, especially as many people say that we are currently living in a multi-cultural environment. Here in Hungary it is a very different experience for us, this multi-cultural experience, the multi-cultural environment. At the same time we see Japanese boys with dreadlocks there are a few, or unfortunately not a few, religious wars going on especially in this the post-socialist, post-communist area. Why are you against multi-culturism?

PLW: Because I'm in favor of what I call a 'radical tolerance' — which is not a multi-culturism. Multi-culturism — or at least in America for I can not say what political resonance such a term will have in Hungary or anywhere else for that matter — is a false spectacle of tolerance. In other words, society says yes you can have your little local culture, in fact it looks good decorating my living room, you can have your little folk art, your little language, your little this and little that, but all this multi-business are like the spokes of a wheel, arranged around a center or hub which is the main stream consensus dialogue.

What I'm interested in is the possibility of creating a chaotic situation, a creative chaos in which there is no center, but in which there is a multitude of relations between more or less equal powers. But to be included on this condescending level into a pluralistic society which has no intention of honoring your true values, but only the secondary decor of your culture, where the center of the culture is going to remain militaristic, chauvinistic, capitalistic, communistic or whatever ideology is using multi-culturism as an excuse to placate the natural rebellion against the center.

Now there is an important point about communism — which is since 1989 there has only been only one world according to the winners of the cold war, its called the global market, it's called the new world order, by whatever name you want to call it they claim that ideology is finished, that it's the end of the social, that it's the end of history. Now in order to resist this false unification there must be true diversity, what I call non-hegemonic particularism. We can look at the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, where there are people who are saying, look we are Mayan Indians, we want to be Mayan Indians and have our own culture, our own personality, our own personhood, we want our own language taught in our own schools, we don't want to become Mexicans or North Americans, we want to be Mayans, but we're not telling you to be a Mayan, we want the freedom to be who we are, we're not telling you that you have to be like us. That's what I call non-hegemonic particularism, and I don't see anything wrong with it. Communism proposed a single world, a single ideology, a single culture, and now communism is gone and in its place we have a new hypothesis of a single world, a single culture, a single economics. Always this purity, this simplicity has to be challenged.

Any kind of false unity is a false transcendence, what we want is a real imminence in which to oppose any false transcendence — so from this point of view, even ethnic particularism to me does not seem to be an evil thing, what is evil is to try and impose it on other people. This is very simple, it's not a very complicated idea, I don't know why people have trouble with this idea. If in America, as radicals we have had contact with the Native American groups, we sympathize with their struggle, we can even hopefully help them in their struggle, but it's not a struggle to have them become us, it's not a struggle for them to become like white Americans, it's a struggle to say we have a real culture, we are a real people, we even have our own faith, our own spirituality about nature, and so on. We white Americans have a lot to learn from these people, but we don't have to become Indians and they don't have to become us, why can't people become free and different, I don't see where the problem is. I know I'm being falsely naive, of course I see where the problem is, the problem is that hegemonic forces will always misinterpret, will always create a false pluralism in order to placate peoples desire, for I don't know what, let's say — their desire for their own favorite chocolate desert, or their own folkloric dance. These are only secondary aspects, the real issue is to be yourself, that's to be free.

JS: What are the chances of this radical tolerance in a media rich or a global medium — a global communication network?

PLW: If we take the net as a metaphor for that global society then it's inevitable that Coca-Cola and Disney World will take over. Because that is the one world — if the net retains its anarchic quality, its egalitarianism, its horizontal structure, as opposed to its pyramidal structure, then a plurality of different personhoods are possible. True communicativeness, not so much communication as communicativeness, a quality of communication not just a spectacle of communication, with a deep heart to heart or what Sufi called a 'breast to breast.' It's possible the net could be a tool for this, and that is why I have retained some interest in it, though I have become more and more cynical and pessimistic. In as much that the net will be taken over by the Coca-Cola culture, it's just going to be another medium like all other media. If the net can resist the centralization of capital and the centralization of militarism then it could fight against false globalism for a real solidarity of peoples, but is this going to happen I don't know.

JS: The internet is based basically on the immediate response, a sort of textural conversation, so you find mainly contemporary texts, you cannot find classical text, especially religious texts,

but there are some initiatives in certain religions and churches to put classical religious texts onto the net.

PLW: This is going to work very well for them — I'm not saying its going to be a good thing — for instance right now there's an interesting phenomenon going on in America, where tribal groups, Indians who ten years ago had 70% alcoholism, 90% unemployment, were suddenly able to have gambling casinos and they made a lot of money, and they're using this money to go on-line, they're getting web pages, they're computerizing languages that were never even written. They're skipping over a vast leap of industrial society, and getting to some -I don't know let's say some sort of post-industrial thing — and the tribes are plugging in. This has happened with the Zapatistas who're fairly well plugged in. Anything that's spiritual is going to work very well on the net, because the net as I said is a religious space, also the net is ideal for gnosticism, for anything that makes that mind-body split — so if Christian crazy groups that everyone is afraid of, or if nazis, if Islamic countries get onto the net, don't forget if it hadn't been for cassette recorders there would have been no Iranian revolution in 1978, something could very easily happen with the internet. I think it almost happened in Mexico, and next time who knows.

JS: Aren't you skeptical of this professional use of the net by churches?

PLW: I didn't say that this was a good thing, I just said that they were going to be successful. Yes, for sure we're not going to like it, on the other hand let a thousand flowers bloom, why not. What I would like to see is a philosophy which reestablishes what Bakhtin called the "interior bodily principle," as a spiritual teaching I would like to see this Rabelaisian celebration of the body as a counter weight to all this "gnostic escape and hatred of the body," if I can use Nietzsche's term. For example the net could be used to trade real goods outside of the money economy, that's the most obvious and logical thing, why isn't someone doing this.

If I have something that I produce and you have something you produce, we can skip money, we can skip governments if we had a real barter network on the net. Why doesn't this arise, why hasn't this happened, it's a very interesting question, the reason in my view is false transcendence.

People don't think about the body on the net, they don't think about desire, they don't think about pleasure, it's all a mental game, and as long as it remains a mental game there is no true resistance against oppression. Because only the body truly resists against oppression, this is the final battlefield, this is the terminal.

JS: Another characteristic of the network is the huge amount of appropriation, so if something appears on the net it is immediately available for millions of users — hypothetically for every person in the world.

PLW: Hypothetically is the correct word there.

JS: You also are publishing under the pseudonym of Hakim Bey and you're writings are available on the net, free for all translators. What's your personal opinion on copyright and intellectual property?

PLW: I don't have a clear opinion, what happened with that material is that we put it out with an anti-copyright, we called it an anarchist anti-copyright, and the idea was that this was my free gift. I encouraged people to copy it and put it on the net. Other books I do copyright, as far as I know I've never made a single dollar from the copyright laws, but some publishers like to do it and I'm not an ideologue about this. I thought it was an interesting experiment, I wanted to see what would happen, and here is what happened, the book sold very well. We actually made more money without the copyright than if we had the copyright. What happened is that people

opened the book and said cool anti-copyright, I'll buy three and give them to friends, and they published zines, and they reproduce it and they put it onto the net, and it actually turned out to be good business. This is what the old fashioned types can't understand, who think of intellectual property as something that you can build a castle wall around and defend. What they don't realize is that this is actually irrelevant even from a capitalist point of view — you can actually make more money without copyright. So I don't know, I'm actually in a state of confusion, but my experience is that getting away from copyright works very well, it doesn't stop you from any level of success. Ask any writer here if they ever made 50 bucks from the copyright law, I'll bet you that nobody here has. It's just an outdated law, it's irrelevant and yet people are fighting huge battles over it for what, I suppose that when you're talking about a piece of software that's potentially worth six billion dollars there's something to really fight about, but I only wrote a book.

JS: Just recently Bill Gates visited Hungary before launching Windows 95, do you think the whole strategy has a religious aspect or can it be analyzed from a religious perspective.

PLW: I haven't tried this, but my hypothesis is that everything, especially attached to technology, can be so analyzed. There's something religious about snake oil which is what essentially Bill Gates is selling, if you believe in it, it actually works, it has a psychosomatic or placebo effect, a lot of shamanism is based on this, so there's always a religious analysis. In this case though, we're looking at religion in the cause of making Bill Gates the richest and most powerful man in the world, it's as if the pope has started to sell indulgences again. If you want a religious analysis of windows 95 — it's that the pope is selling indulgences.

JS: So peter, thank you for the interview.

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